REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACES, SUBJECTS, AND TRAUMA IN WILLIAM FAULKNER, WALKER PERCY, BARRY HANNAH, AND RANDALL KENAN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines expressions of subjectivity and trauma as represented in some key southern texts. Specifically, I examine these expressions of subjectivity and trauma as participating in a dialectical relationship with the changing material spaces that characterize particular historical and spatial iterations of “the South.” Additionally, the thesis describes the movement toward a postmodern poetics in which narrative strategies such as simultaneity, time-space compression, and juxtaposition becomes the texture of some contemporary southern texts.

Keywords: trauma, southern, spatial
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INTRODUCTION

*I am the space where I am* – Noel Arnaud

In this thesis I investigate the relationships among representations of space and experiences of trauma in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*, Barry Hannah’s *Ray*, and Randall Kenan’s *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*. The critical frames of spatial theory and trauma studies inform this analysis, as do postmodern approaches to history and subjectivity. The connection between spatial theory and the historicized subject is succinctly addressed by Henri Lefebvre when he states, “all ‘subjects’ are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify” (35).

Each of the texts presented in this paper depicts this relationship between the subject and the material and cultural space in which s/he is situated. Read together, the texts exhibit a progression in the way some key southern modern and postmodern writers represent and engage the changing material, conceptual and cultural conditions within which characters create and are created.

The experience of trauma is a recurring motif in the texts that I examine that is intimately connected to how the texts render the spaces of the South. The first two chapters of the paper examine three texts in which a traumatic event experienced by the protagonist plays an integral role in the construction of the form and content of the narrative, as well as in the (re)construction of subjectivity. These traumatic episodes do not only address the subjective disorder of the protagonist, though; they are also inscribed within the spatial “text” of the narrative. In these contemporary southern fictions, the
concrete, material spaces that provide the topographical parameters for the narrative can themselves be read as sites of cultural and historic trauma as they are inscribed by antipodal cultural and historic narratives that are competing for preeminence within the region. Again, as Lefebvre states, “The preexistence of space conditions the subject’s presence, action and discourse” (57). In the case of the spatial construction of the “South,” some contemporary writers articulate its increasingly schizophrenic characteristics. The texts in this paper show how the subjects who must try to embody paradoxical discourses of their “space” experience ontological confusion. By representing the relationship between the production of space and the experience of trauma, these narratives evoke the textual, material, historic, and subjective disruptions that signal the turn toward a postmodern “image” of the South.

In Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Frederick Jameson describes the contemporary culture of the image as a space devoid of history. Texts dominate this space, and Jameson states that “it becomes difficult and even contradictory to organize an analysis and an interpretation around any single one of these fragments in flight. To select (a single text) and to discuss it in isolation is fatally to regenerate the illusion of the masterpiece or the canonical text and to reify the experience of total flow from which it was momentarily extracted” (78). Intertextuality, according to Jameson, is one condition of postmodern culture. Similarly, Brian McHale appends Jameson’s conception of postmodern intertextuality when he describes ontological stress as a kind of anarchism or “the refusal either to accept or to reject any of a plurality of available ontological orders” (McHale 37). McHale goes on to summarize the postmodern condition as an “anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural” (37). Noting the
fragmentation of ideological structures and grand narratives, Francois Lyotard writes that the experience of the postmodern condition is the experience of “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). Each of these theorists posits that the dominant contemporary cultural condition within Western society is one in which large scale legitimated narratives that order perception and experience have deteriorated and broken into a multiplicity of what Lyotard calls little narratives with more circumscribed claims to legitimacy.

Taking cues from Jameson, Lyotard and McHale, I approach the “southern” text as a braided landscape of “worlds in the plural.” Each of these worlds expresses a problematic relationship to history and place. And as Jameson asserts, these worlds are not independent, hermetic environments. Instead, the texts blend into one another. In this chapter I am interested in the intersections that the texts share. For instance, all of the texts that are discussed describe individuals and communities that are inscribed by the dynamic and volatile context of economic and political globalization. In this late capitalist transitional setting, material landscapes and subjective topographies can be read as contact zones where antiphonal cultural and historical narratives intersect. These intersections can be violent, and the results of these meetings become the amended contexts for further reconfigurations of context and subjectivity.

Jameson offers a springboard for conceiving textual constructions of history as “images” that provides the foundation for this paper’s definition of the postmodern. The South in the postmodern context is a function of the texts that figure and refigure its image. And while I employ Jameson’s conception of the primacy of the image in the postmodern text, I do not share his sentiment that the postmodern text can represent
history only as a weakened and ultimately depthless simulacrum. Instead, I agree with Linda Hutcheon when she states in her seminal work, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, that the “postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us...that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (89). The fictions included in this paper present a framework for examining the genealogy of the relationship between context and subject in the postmodern South.

The foundational image in this progression is sketched in the Agrarian polemic, published in 1930, *I’ll Take My Stand*, which casts the American South as a “living example of an agrarian society, the preservation of which is worth the most heroic effort that men can give in a time of crisis” (30). Poised against the encroachment of industry, Agrarian writers in this “time of crisis” created a vision of the South as an organic community intimately connected to the land. According to Louis Rubin, this image of the South stood as a “rebuke to materialism, a corrective to the worship of Progress, and a reaffirmation of man’s aesthetic and spiritual needs” (xiv). As a foundational image of the South, the Agrarians offered “a vision of what the good life can be” (xv).

Contemporary critiques of *I’ll Take My Stand* reject the idea of a South that can exist “as an object independent of [the] twelve southern intellects” (Kreyling 6). According to Martyn Bone, the Agrarian image of the South described in Louis Rubin’s introduction to the 1962 edition of *I’ll Take My Stand* elicits a “tension between image and history” (30) that is only resolved as history and place “melt … into image and metaphor” (31). The Agrarian image ironically becomes the very specter against which the Agrarians organized their collection of essays, the abstraction against which the
“twelve southerners” penned their manifesto. As a genteel Jeffersonian vision of pastoral community, the Agrarian conception of the region presents a possible world, an abstraction around which to develop a material culture, a South.

Responding to the constructedness of the Agrarian narrative, Michael Kreyling argues in his Inventing Southern Literature that “the Agrarians produced the South in the same way that all historically indigenous social elites produce ideological realities: out of strategies for seizing and retaining power (cultural, political, sexual, economic, and so on) that are then reproduced as ‘natural’” (6). Kreyling also posits that the South of the early twentieth century was a “period of culture wars perhaps as fierce as our own” (7) in which cultural groups, including the Agrarians, were attempting to establish ideological dominance in the region. Critics like Martyn Bone and Michael Kreyling convincingly argue that the South, whether conceived by the Nashville Agrarians or by Progressives such as W.J. Cash, who edited the collection of essays that comprise the humanist rebuttal to the arguments of the twelve southerners, is inevitably an abstraction that adheres to particular ideological concerns. In this sense the South is necessarily an image. It may be refracted and reflected by any number of narrative or discourse positions, but ultimately the place of the American South is an example of the postmodern space of the constructed image.

The first chapter in this analysis offers a reading of the relationship between two characters: William Faulkner’s Quentin Compson and Walker Percy’s Will Barrett. My intertextual reading develops from a statement that Walker Percy made during an interview that included questions regarding his novel, The Last Gentleman. In the interview Percy explained that he was interested in “a Quentin Compson who didn’t kill
himself” (Gulledge 300). Through the character of Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman*, Percy created one. Reading Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* in conjunction with the Quentin section of *The Sound and the Fury* provides a striking introduction to the movement toward the spatially dominated ontology of postmodern fiction. *The Last Gentleman* portrays an image of the South in which material spaces articulate the influence of finance capitalism that has become the dominant narrative in the region. At the same time, Percy’s protagonist struggles to negotiate a subjective orientation that can accommodate both this new late capitalist image of the South alongside the Agrarian image encapsulated by both Will Barrett’s father, as well as his textual forbear, Quentin Compson. The chapter argues that the progression from Quentin to Will also expresses a cultural progression, as depicted in the spatial narrative of *The Last Gentleman*, that represents the image of the South as a space of absence resulting from the subjective experience of colliding antipodal structuring metanarratives. Through this intertextual reading, the spatial frame of the South as articulated by Walker Percy is represented as a double exposure in which the region’s spatial problematic is simultaneously expressed by contradictory narratives, the experience of which displaces the southern subject. This chapter introduces the way that such subjective displacement is represented by experiences of trauma. Furthermore, these texts reveal how both individual and collective traumatic experiences are expressed in the dialectical relationship between subjects and spaces.

In the next chapter, the turn toward postmodern renderings of subjective experience is underscored. Barry Hannah’s *Ray* presents a compendium of historical spaces experienced simultaneously within the schizophrenic psyche of the protagonist. In
Ray, history (particularly the traumatic history of the Vietnam War) is re-inscribed upon the southern subject. Again, the traumatic experience of the subject signals a break with the dominant cultural narrative. In the case of Ray, his experience in Vietnam has caused a rupture in his adherence to the narrative of American exceptionalism. Like Will Barrett, Ray is displaced from the spatial and cultural narrative of his surroundings. In an attempt to situate himself within a substitute narrative, Ray writes himself into the Civil War narrative as a soldier dedicated to “the cause.” Still, the romantic image of the narrative deteriorates around Ray as he experiences the brutality of another (albeit imagined) war. Material space, in Ray, is subordinated to the psychic experience of the protagonist. This chapter explores the effects of what critic David Harvey refers to as time-space compression. In Ray, the reader is forced to navigate a textual landscape in which multiple orders of history are experienced within an environment of simultaneity. Like Barrett in The Last Gentleman, Ray emerges from the experience of displacement with a new sense of agency. Unlike Barrett, though, the new ground for Ray’s actions assumes a political trajectory. Loosening himself from narratives of cultural legitimacy, Ray proposes to build a new history upon the ruins of the old.

While the first two chapters explore the erosion of legitimacy in the structuring narratives of the southern spatial and cultural context, the final chapter is interested in the post-deconstructive representation of a southern space. This chapter analyzes the image of the South presented in Randall Kenan’s Let the Dead Bury Their Dead in which a particular southern community has experienced the kind of ideological fracture that Faulkner, Percy, and Hannah document. Contrary to these writers, though, Kenan represents the space in which grand narratives have eroded into a polyphony of discursive
voices instead of the ideological silence that follows the displacement of the southern subjectivities of Quentin Compson, Will Barrett, and Ray Forrest. Arranged as an ethnographic study of the fictional town of Tims Creek, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* presents a community populated by contradictory and competing discourses that establish the variegated texture of the narrative. Moving through the text, the reader is continually forced to shift discursive perspectives and adjust to new frameworks for apprehending the common event. In *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* the reader is introduced to the environment of spatial heteroglossia, and I argue in this chapter that Kenan creates a post-deconstructive landscape of southern narrative and community in which subjects and spaces are neither inscribed once and for all by the encompassing metanarrative nor are they liberated to author a wholly new narrative; instead the subject inscribed in Kenan’s spatial problematic can be read as a shifting site of potentiality that, at best, can discern her position in a field of discourses wishing to inscribe her.

In the conclusion, I reflect on some of the key issues that have arisen as I worked on this thesis, as well as on some future directions.
CHAPTER 1

In an interview with Jo Gulledge in 1984, Walker Percy explained his tendency to “steer away” from the traditional southern literary themes of “family sagas, epics, defeats, and the lost war” (299). Instead, Percy describes how his art explores the pressing issue of “how to live in the here and now” (299). For Percy, there are enough “backward looking ghosts” populating Southern literature, and he is interested in characters who, as he says, are “looking in the other direction; [they’re] not looking back” (299). However, Percy does not fully discount the southern literary heritage. Instead, he reads the “malaise” that characterizes life in the second half of twentieth century America against the “backdrop” of the southern literary tradition (299, 301). Percy acknowledges his affiliation with this tradition when he describes his “kinship” to the quintessential southern character – Quentin Compson – who, ironically, embodies all of the southern literary themes from which Percy is “steering away.” In the interview with Gulledge, Percy situates himself within a distinctly southern literary continuum when he says that “he [Percy] would like to think of starting where Faulkner left off, of starting with the Quentin Compson who didn’t commit suicide” (300). Walker Percy’s wish to “keep… Quentin Compson alive” (300) merits a close reading of the relationship between Will Barrett, Percy’s protagonist in his novel, _The Last Gentleman_, and Faulkner’s, Quentin Compson. In order to explore this relationship, I believe it is necessary to examine the changing spatial text of the South as it is represented by Faulkner and Percy. Doing so exhibits the way that characters are necessarily engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their material and historic contexts. David Harvey states that “Capitalism thereby builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image. It constructs a
distinctive geographical landscape, a produced space … that facilitates capital accumulation during one phase of its history only to have to be torn down and reconfigured to make way for further accumulation at a later stage” (SOH 54). Percy’s extension of the Quentin Compson character, then, can be seen as a representation of how changing spatial dynamics forged by developing configurations within capitalism can affect subjects who experience these transformations. Percy situates his “last gentleman” in a landscape that no longer adheres to the Agrarian and aristocratic codes associated with the myth of the genteel South. Reading Quentin and Will as embodiments of a textual and spatial progression reveals the entwinement among texts, spaces, and subjectivities that exist in a rapidly transforming material and cultural environment.

The tradition of critical literature dedicated to Quentin Compson and Will Barrett is an interestingly bifurcated one. While both characters have trouble constructing stable identities and relationships, critical responses to their situations tend to cluster around either representations of time (Quentin) or representations of space (Will). The valorization of temporal issues in the critical treatment of Quentin Compson commences early on when Jean-Paul Sartre, in his seminal essay, “On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of William Faulkner,” describes Faulkner’s metaphysics as a “metaphysics of time” (Faulkner 265). Accordingly, he argues, this metaphysics determines the technical and thematic structure of The Sound and the Fury. Sartre’s critique, published a decade after the novel, examines the importance of temporality in the novel as a whole, and in Quentin’s section in particular. More recent critics continue to develop nuanced responses to the Gordian entanglement of “past” time and “present” time that the novel
articulates. Gail Mortimer argues, in her book, *Faulkner’s Rhetoric of Loss*, that in Faulkner’s works “a clear implication emerges that all of the past is contained in every present moment, that everything is connected with everything else and boundaries have no meaning” (75). Moreover, critics including Sartre, Mortimer, Richard King, and May Cameron Brown all assert that Faulkner invariably considers time as a destructive force that results in experiences of loss and dissolution.

As noted above, much of the criticism of *The Sound and the Fury* and Quentin Compson is dominated by treatments of temporality and the way the novel blends “was” and “is” into a present time that is saturated in the history of family and region. Alternatively, the criticism of Walker Percy’s novel, *The Last Gentleman*, and his character, Will Barrett, seems preoccupied with an analysis of spatial relationships and the pathological absence of time, history, and identity in the subjective experience of the novel’s protagonist. For instance, critics including Brannon Costello and James Henry Brownlee see Percy’s novel as documenting a transitional cultural space, both physically and psychologically. These critics represent the dominant strain of Percy criticism by concentrating on the way that Percy’s novel presents a crisis of identity in the modern experience, particularly the modern southern experience. Brownlee conjoins language with identity in *The Last Gentleman* when he concludes that Will Barrett “uses his linguistic ear to determine the identity of others, yet his own identity is indeterminate precisely because he cannot define himself semiotically” (103). Ultimately, Will’s problems with language, identity, and history are examined through a spatial lens, and criticism abounds that explores Will Barrett’s complicated relationship with place. The critic Richard Pindell even describes Will as “the most place obsessed character in
Western literature” (70). If we look at Will Barrett as a “Quentin Compson who didn’t kill himself,” he seems to become an historically empty inversion of Faulkner’s character.

In this chapter I explore the relationship between Will Barrett, the protagonist in Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*, and Quentin Compson as presented in the second section of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. I argue that Will Barrett can be read as a spatially displaced mirror image, or double, of Quentin Compson. I agree with the critical summary presented above: that Quentin’s problematic is a temporal one, while Will Barrett’s pathology is experienced as a kind of spatial crisis. I first corroborate these positions by concentrating on a few formal and thematic aspects of both Faulkner’s representation of time and history in Quentin’s section of *The Sound and the Fury* and Percy’s representation of “spaces of absence” as they relate to Will Barrett’s characterization in *The Last Gentleman*. Reading the two characters together allows us to parse the distinct textual entanglements of space, history, subjectivity, and community in both novels.

Then this chapter brings Quentin and Will’s particular subjective predicaments into conversation with one another through the interpretive paradigm of trauma studies, and in doing so, the traumatic analysis likewise brings the two dominant strains of trauma theory – the punctual trauma and the collective trauma – into conversation as well. Through this analysis, I read Quentin and Will’s narratives as traumatic progressions toward experiences of suicide enacted by Quentin and suicide remembered by Will. Finally, I am interested in discovering what possibilities, if any, exists for a “Quentin Compson who doesn’t commit suicide.”
Quentin’s section of *The Sound and the Fury* opens by revealing two distinct orders of time that are experienced upon a seemingly neutral spatial backdrop. First, Quentin wakes into the present: “it was between seven and eight o’clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch” (Faulkner 48). Here, Quentin acknowledges the linear order of time signified by ticking clocks and gonging bells. Immediately following this acknowledgement, though, the second order of time remembered emerges in Quentin’s consciousness. Listening to the watch, hearing time, Quentin invokes the memory of his inherited watch, as his father described it, “the mausoleum of all hope and desire” that should be used to “forget [time] now and then for a moment” (48). Thus, the reader begins to follow Quentin through a landscape of temporally pliable present moments. In defiance of all the ticking clocks that imply progress and movement, Quentin remains intimately linked to the tragic Compson family dynamic, allowing layers of the past to continually emerge in his experience of the present.

The entire section employs the formal organization displayed in this first paragraph. The narration is organized (or disorganized) by the entwinement of past and present time in Quentin’s subjective experience. In this way, Quentin lives in a multiplicity of “presents” at once. This experience of temporal polyphony is dramatized when Quentin looks back toward the watch shop in Cambridge and muses on the experience of time: “There were about a dozen watches in the window, a dozen different hours and each with the same assertive and contradictory assurance that mine had, without any hands at all. Contradicting one another. I could hear mine, ticking away inside my pocket, even though it could tell nothing if anyone could” (54). Quentin’s section, as well as his psyche, is framed by the discord that resonates among this
multiplicity of temporal arrangements. Faulkner’s narrative technique of arranging a constellation of remembered experiences around the continually evolving present moment presents Quentin Compson’s consciousness as suffocated by a surfeit of history from which he cannot disentangle himself. Quentin is unable to move through the temporal and spatial organization of the present moment without traveling through a cluster of associated past times. The fragmented narrative style of the section mirrors Quentin’s psychological and temporal dislocation through its complicated entwinement of memory into the spatial order of the present.

The conclusion of Quentin’s section utilizes syntax and diction to underscore Quentin’s desire for an “apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh” (112). As Mortimer summarizes, “[Faulkner’s] sentences are paradigms for giving a sense of everything – past, present, future – happening at once, and their flowing together or momentum seemingly threatens to take over in some of his unpunctuated, uncapitalized passages” (76). Likewise, because Faulkner removes the punctuation from the imagined conversation between Quentin and his father, the reader struggles to apprehend which sentences belong to Quentin and which ones are said by his father. So, not only are multiple present times collapsing onto one another, but the boundaries between personas linked to historical eras are dissolving. What remains is the repetitive, incantatory response, “temporary” (Faulkner 112-13), that reverberates throughout the closing scene, conveying Quentin’s consuming desire to sacrifice himself, his future, and his past in order to suspend one static moment in perpetuity.

Reading Will Barrett, protagonist of Walker Percy’s, *The Last Gentleman*, as a “Quentin Compson who didn’t kill himself” produces a striking irony. While neither
character can engage meaningfully in a communal reality, Will Barrett is pathologized by a lack of tradition instead of an overabundance. In *The Last Gentleman*, Will is unable to accept the Agrarian ethos, unwilling to assume his father’s stance of ironic Stoicism, and, finally, devoid of a historical narrative capable of offering a legitimate framework for his thought and action. Instead of suffering from too much history, Will becomes anesthetized to his past. According to the narrator, Will lives like “a man who has just crawled out of a bombed building” where “everything looked strange” (Percy 11). In his rootless wandering, in his chameleon like assimilation into multiple communities, Will becomes an iconic everyman or nobody who has lost a fundamental place through which to interpret his experience.

Will’s inability to place himself in a shared spatial and historical narrative alienates him. This alienation is powerfully presented in the form of Will’s “nervous condition” (11) that results in the physiological “spells” of amnesia that punctuate Will’s peripatetic travels throughout the novel. While these occurrences are localized incidences, they are indicative of a more pervasive sense of absence. The narrator explains that “most of this young man’s life was a gap” (12), and I argue that these pervasive gaps are the central aspect of Will’s character, the only experience where his desire for identity is realized in its negation. Moreover, these temporal gaps are also inscribed in the spaces of the novel as a projection of Will’s amnesic desires. I am going to turn now to a few specific spatial organizations that Will constructs as psychological refuges from historical associations.

The opening of the novel is a perfect site from which to consider Will’s complicated relationships with space and subjectivity. We first meet the “young man” as
he “lay thinking in Central Park” (3). The central lack that resides at the center of Will’s character, the gaps and fugues that underscore his inability to create identity, his alienation: all of these characteristics are strikingly reflected in the opening space of the novel. Central Park is eight hundred acres of space that is representative of a hole at the center of the discursive landscape of the city. The dominant logic of the city - the networks of steel, concrete, and iron that stretch in all directions from this silent epicenter – creates the urban matrix, but it leaves a gap as a remainder at the center. In this sense Central Park is the absence upon which the urban texture rests.

We encounter Will in Central Park with his newly purchased Tetzlar telescope. His status as the consummate outsider is underscored by his relationship with the telescope. Will explains that things are “not as accessible as they used to be,” that “special measures [are] needed to recover them” (31). From his position in the hollow center of the urban spatial fabric, Will wants to recover the connection he has lost. The narrator states that “[Will] couldn’t help attributing magical properties to the telescope” because he believed that the “telescope penetrated to the heart of things” (29). The telescope seems to become a talisman through which Will searches for answers to his perennial questions: “Oh, where is this place? … Where am I bound and what is my name?” (293).

Ultimately, the Tetzlar is unable to help Will answer these questions, and although Will may see clearer through the telescope, the distance separating him from the surrounding society is underscored. As the city spreads out around Will, he searches in vain for a way to connect meaningfully with a community. Spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre describes the conditions for Will’s predicament in the following passage:
“traversed now by pathways and patterned by networks, natural space changes: one might say that practical activity writes upon nature . . . and this writing implies a particular representation of space. Places are marked, noted, named. Between them, within the ‘holes in the net’, are blank or marginal spaces” (118). Throughout The Last Gentleman, Will Barrett seeks these “holes in the net” as a means of escaping the historically saturated landscapes.

Another important “space of absence,” or “hole in the net,” that Will constructs and inhabits occurs when he returns to the South with the Vaught family. This is no genuine homecoming, though. If anything, Will’s return heightens his experience of alienation. As the narrator explains, “It is much worse to be homeless and then to go home where everyone is at home and then still be homeless. The South was at home. Therefore his homelessness was much worse in the South because he had expected to find himself at home there” (Percy 186). And again we find Will seeking spaces of absence that are available to him. At the Vaught’s home this space is the pantry: “‘He,’ the engineer, usually sat in the pantry, a large irregular room with a single bay window. It was not properly a room at all but rather the space left over in the center of the house when the necessary rooms had been built” (195). The Vaught’s pantry functions like Central Park: it creates a “hole in the net” where Will can escape history and community.

Will continually sabotages his search for identity and community by finding spaces of absence that allow him to remain in “a state of pure possibility” (4). After leaving the Vaught’s mansion, and the pantry that represents the interstitial space where Will finds refuge, he takes to the open road in that most twentieth-century American of interstitial spaces: the Trav-L-Aire. Will describes life in the camper as follows: “now
here surely is a good way to live nowadays . . . mobile yet at home, compacted and not linked up with the crumby carnival linkage of trailer, in the world yet not of the world, sampling the particularities of place yet cabined off from the sadness of place” (153). Upon his arrival in desert Southwest Will muses on his environs: “Here one was not watched. There was no one. The silence hushed everything up . . . The sky was empty map space. . . This is the locus of pure possibility . . . What a man can be the next minute bears no relation to what he is or what he was the minute before” (356). In the interstitial space of the camper, Will finds a relationship appropriate to his spatial dilemma. The highway, the space of flux, of movement, of transport in which history is not written in the material context allows Will to escape the “particularities of place” that only underscore his ontologic disorientation. That is, until he finds the desert, a locale uninscribed by the spatial problematic of any framing metanarrative with which he is familiar (capitalism, Agrarianism, etc.). At the end of the novel we find Will in what seems the only place that he can experience possibility, the geographical space of absence.

While Quentin Compson’s spatial context is suffused with the residue of memory, Will Barrett suffers from a lack of memory, a lack of tradition. In this sense, Will and Quentin can be read as spatio-temporal mirrored inversions of one another: the one unable to act in the present because he cannot escape from history, the other an amnesic drifter unable to connect to his past. Although each character’s condition manifests itself differently, both Quentin and Will share an all pervading sense of disconnection from their social contexts. Likewise, both characters are moving through their respective narratives toward an encounter with suicide. Quentin Compson is preparing to kill
himself in order to eternalize the otherwise transient moment. Will Barrett, on the other hand, travels through “spaces of absence,” eliding landscapes inscribed by history, until he encounters the space of his father’s suicide, remembers, and contemplates the possibility of establishing a new relationship to the spaces that he occupies.

The discourse of trauma studies provides an interpretive framework for reading this uncanny intersection that the two narratives share. According to Greg Forter, trauma can be interpreted through two distinct models: one systemic, the other punctual. The first corresponds to Freud’s earlier writing, and it concentrates on “traumatic events that one has not even experienced – events, for example, that took place before one’s birth” (Forter 277). Forter stresses the generational aspect of such traumas, that “to inherit a history is to have transmitted to one a disturbance that never stops disturbing” (277). Alternatively, Michelle Balaev describes punctual forms of trauma in her article “Trends in Literary Trauma,” as “a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self.” In this sense, the trauma becomes a process of the “transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory” (Balaev).

Reading Quentin Compson and Will Barrett as interlocutors in a traumatic dialogue brings the two prevailing strains of trauma theory into conversation with one another. In this sense, Quentin Compson and Will Barrett represent the transmission of intergenerational trauma through their relationship to history and space. Likewise, the suicide in both novels dramatically presents the punctual form of trauma in relation to the systemic. Finally, trauma is also a textual experience for the reader, for as Greg Forter
indicates, Faulkner’s narrative strategies are designed to “induce in readers a disturbance
that the book codes as trauma. They include, that is, the persistent planting of details
whose most basic significance Faulkner withholds, compelling thereby a cognitive
paralysis relieved only by the retrodetermined revelation of a given scene’s meaning”
(Forter 278-79). For both Quentin and the reader, making sense of the present is an
impossible task because the present moment is a compendium of associated moments
from the past. As long as the repetition of historical images and themes crowds and
disrupts the experience of the present moment, there is no room for recovery. To the
moment of his death, Quentin’s narrative refuses to adjust itself to a shared temporality.
Instead, he remains in the mythic time of his personal and cultural history.

Will Barrett, on the other hand, is a survivor who suffers what Judith Herman in
her book, Trauma and Recovery, describes as “a crisis of faith” and a “loss of trust” that
results when the connection between the individual and the community is shattered
because of a traumatic event (55). For Will, this traumatic experience was the localized
and specific event of his father’s suicide. To underscore the relation of Will’s punctual
traumatic experience to collective forms of trauma, it should be remembered that Will’s
father’s suicide was closely related to his relationship to the shifting narratives of the
South as is expressed in the dialogue between Will Barrett and his father on the night of
the father’s suicide:

“Father, I know the police said they were going to kill you … They
said you loved niggers and helped the Jews and Catholics and betrayed
your own people.”
“I haven’t betrayed anyone, son. And I don’t have much use for any of them, Negroes, Jews, Catholics, or Protestants.” (237)

Here, Will’s father addresses his own displacement from the dominant narratives that compete to inscribe the material and subjective experience of him and his community. Unlike Quentin who memorializes an historic moment through his suicide, Will Barrett’s father uses suicide to remove himself from his historical context. Referring to all of the narratives that interpret the region and provide subjective positions for its inhabitants, Will’s father states that “[he doesn’t] have to choose that” (330).

In response to his traumatic memory, Will refuses to countenance historic time, and as we have seen he finds refuge in the empty spaces and fugue states that underscore his inability to remember. Such “temporal gaps,” Michelle Balaev argues, can be read as the byproduct of traumatic experience. When Will does re-enter the space of his childhood trauma and the detailed memory of his father’s suicide, he allows history to re-inscribe itself upon place:

[Father] went into the house, on through the old closed-in dogtrot hall to the back porch, opened the country food press which had been converted to a gun cabinet, took down the double-barrel twelve-guage Greener, loaded it, went up the back stairs into the attic, and, fitting the muzzle of the Greener into the notch of his breastbone, could still reach both triggers with his thumbs . . . The sound came crashing through the music (331)

This is a pivotal episode in the novel because it opposes the dominant form and logic of the narrative. Throughout the novel Will establishes his subjectivity by orienting himself
within interstitial spaces, or gaps, in which his personal and cultural history is suppressed. Even during his return to the South, we have seen how Will seeks out the spaces that allow him to elide inscription into the spatial-material narrative of the South. But in the act of remembering, Will opens the possibilities of emerging from his refuge of spaces of absence and re-engaging in a shared reality.

Leaving the space of traumatic memory, Will tries to express a foundation from which he could engage with the material reality in which he is invariably entwined. His first steps toward leaving the spaces of absence that have defined his relationship to the world occur as he touches the hitching post outside of his childhood home. Here, Will muses on his father’s decision to kill himself as a response to his subjective position, as well as his own subjective position and what his proper response should be:

I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place.

No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place … It was not in the Brahms that one looked and not in the solitariness and not in the sad old poetry but . . . here, under your nose, here in the very curiousness and drollness and extraness of the iron and the bark that … (332)

While Will is not “better,” he finds in “the very curiousness and drollness and extraness of the iron and the bark” an existential core beyond the historical associations of his surroundings. This acknowledgement of a dehistoricized foundation for action provides Will with a framework of possibility for establishing more meaningful connections with others in which he does not use others to create the “holes in the net” that allow him to forget. Instead, Will may have discovered a way to act without having
to consider his relationship to Brahms or the “sad old poetry” that refers to an image of the South that never really was. From this new position, Will has the potential to interact with other subjects and spaces on their own terms, without being pressured by his traumatic associations to write these spaces and subjects into his own traumatic narrative. Judith Herman articulates Will’s new position succinctly, “Having come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future” (196).

As shown by the relationship between Will Barrett and Quentin Compson, character can be read as the embodied response to changing spatial and temporal circumstances that underscores the entanglement of context with subjectivity. The following chapters will show that the question of creating a future is not solved by Walker Percy. It is a question that pervades the more contemporary texts that I examine. Presently, Southern writers continue to explore the contemporary spatial contexts of the region, and Southern characters continue to embody their fictional explorations. By engaging the intertextual relationships among the characters that populate the fictional worlds of the South, we are better prepared as critics to discern the future(s) that have been created by the survivors of a traumatic past(s).
CHAPTER 2

America’s traumatic experience in the Vietnam War establishes a conceptual fissure between the fictional worlds of novels such as Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* and Barry Hannah’s *Ray*. While Percy’s fiction explores the suburban spaces of an industrialized and consumerist New South, it lacks a globally historic perspective. Instead, the representation of southern space and subjectivity in Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* is circumscribed by restrictive and isolated historical narratives. Alternatively, Hannah’s, *Ray* is a post Vietnam novella that explores the traumatic effects of war on individuals and the cultural narratives that they inhabit. *Ray* incorporates a globally historic event into the traditionally regional southern narrative, and in doing so evinces the “paradox of postmodernist parody” that according to Linda Hutcheon, “is … not essentially depthless, trivial kitsch . . . but rather that it can and does lead to a vision of interconnectedness” (24).

Regarding this vision of interconnectedness, William Spanos argues that “America’s inordinately violent conduct of the war made visible the polyvalent global imperial will to power that, under normal conditions, strategically remains invisible in the (onto)logic of the ‘free world’” (14). Because Vietnam made the “imperial will to power” a visible event, and the war displayed the brutality that can underpin the rhetoric of liberal democracy, it created a rupture in the legitimacy of the American narrative of exceptionalist democracy. While Spanos shows that the American culture industry has worked tirelessly to suture this epistemic rupture, I focus specifically on the novella, *Ray*, written by the contemporary American southern author, Barry Hannah, because it locates itself directly in what he describes as the American confusion of this historical moment.
and attempts to make some sense of the “contrarieties in our hearts” (Hannah 102, 51). Through its formal uses of parody and paradox, Ray subverts both the nationalist American exceptionalist narrative of the late twentieth century as well as the regional narratives of southern Agrarianism and the Lost Cause. Ray’s use of parody and paradox likewise subverts readers’ expectations and their desire for closure; further, Hannah’s text deploys narrative strategies that invoke both historical and punctual forms of trauma. In this chapter, I extend what Michael Kreyling and Martyn Bone have already shown, that Hannah’s fiction can be read as a critique of framing structural narratives. I apply Linda Hutcheon’s theories of postmodernity to Hannah’s Ray in order to recognize the historical import of the Vietnam War to the critique of the structural myths of America generally and “the South” specifically. And finally, I read Ray as a point of intersection between Cathy Caruth’s explanation of punctual, acute trauma and Greg Forter’s description of generational trauma. In short, this essay describes Ray’s textual disturbances as postmodern and traumatic subversions of the traditional narrative order, as the novel explores the region’s physical and conceptual spaces that have been radically altered by globalization. The incoherent and shattered form of Hannah’s prose, as well as the illness that Ray suffers from his actions in Vietnam become, as Fredric Jameson writes, an “expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” where the “the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror” (5). Because Ray has been intimately associated with this underside of culture, he can no longer accept the unitary narrative that rests on “the horror,” as Kurtz from Apocalypse Now would describe it, that he has experienced.
Interestingly, it has been argued that while stylistically divergent, Hannah’s fiction shares the cultural and ideological reality of Walker Percy’s novels. Critic Fred Hobson claims that Hannah “throws in a few more crazies, is a little more lewd, outrageous, and grotesque, less thoughtful, philosophical and spiritual, but in most other respects this is the world of Walker Percy’s fiction” (40). I will argue, on the other hand, that Hannah and Percy express two disparate “souths” constituted by distinct orders of perceiving. Further, I believe that the philosophical, conceptual, and linguistic discrepancies that separate the two fictions can be read as results of the very tangible, physical, and material history of America’s war in Vietnam. As such, the shift from Percy to Hannah mirrors the general cultural shift from modern to postmodern experienced in American culture during the Vietnam and post-Vietnam era.

Fred Hobson’s *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* reads contemporary fiction in the American south as devoid of a Faulknerian sense of history. Likewise Hobson believes that in contemporary southern fiction the high seriousness, tragic pathos, and social consciousness associated with the Southern Renascence literature of the early twentieth century has been replaced by new kind of minimalist fiction that is preoccupied with the transitory and homogeneous aspects of what Hobson describes as the “ahistorical postmodern world” (Hobson 34, 37). Throughout the critique, Hobson notes the penchant that contemporary southern American characters have for focusing on the ephemeral artifacts of American consumer culture, as opposed to the Renascence writers whose fiction “has been characterized by a certain elevated sense … of living dramatically, tied both to language and to certain notions about grandeur of person and nobility of purpose, and sometimes both” (12). In short, Hobson criticizes fiction from
the contemporary American south for being too invested in the overstimulation of American pop-culture. A tone of condescension infuses the critique; at times it seems that Hobson must grudgingly accept the opening of the southern canon to writers who do not share the aristocratic pedigree of their Renascence forbears.

In contrast, in his *Inventing Southern Literature*, Michael Kreyling writes that “parody is expression of a suspicion or conscious conviction that as humans we can make nothing but analyzable parts; wholes are figments of the imagination.” Addressing Hobson, Kreyling writes, “Hobson’s description of postmodernism…depends upon a nonironic, ideal southern identity” (156). In fact, Hobson’s reconsideration of Donald Davidson’s “authochthonous ideal” impels southern writers to reach a “harmony with his social and cultural environment” (80). For Hobson, this position of harmony will allow the southern writer to concentrate on what is universal in man rather than what is distinctive in the region (80). Kreyling argues that this autochthonous ideal is “an unmediated entity, the arbiter of meaning above interrogation” (156). Critics like Kreyling recognize in Hobson’s work the imposition of a “wholeness” through which Southern literature should be filtered. And it is just this sort of fictive wholeness, this “sense of history,” that the postmodern critics, including Michael Kreyling, find problematic.

Although acknowledging the fragmentary postmodern reality where “order, structure, and meaning are constantly called into question,” Hobson wants to maintain a harmonious authochthonous ideal for the southern writer (Hobson 9). *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* expresses a nostalgic yearning to return to the grand explorations of the human condition that Hobson argues define the modernist literature of
the twentieth century. Kreyling argues that Hobson’s “insufficient clearance for irony” limits his arguments to this critical nostalgia that seeks to recuperate the integrity of the Southern writer in the postmodern world. The important theoretical contributions made by postmodern theorists since the sixties are not addressed. In fact, a glance at Hobson’s endnotes reveals that he chooses not to incorporate, refute, or even acknowledge the pertinent arguments from the field of postmodern theory.

In response to Hobson’s reading of contemporary southern fiction, critics like Michael Kreyling have introduced counter arguments that are informed by Linda Hutcheon’s theory of postmodern parody. According to Hutcheon, narratives of consensus are unavailable in the contemporary postmodern moment. The use of parody, however, has the potential to “work toward a public discourse that would overtly eschew modernist aestheticism and hermeticism and its attendant political self-marginalization” (Poetics 23). Martyn Bone’s essay, “All the Confederate Dead … all of Faulkner the Great,” examines Hannah’s use of parody as a technique for revising and interrogating the metaphor of the “chivalric southern tradition of heroism and male character.” Bone describes how novels like Ray employ parody to “interrogate the metaphor” or the grand narratives, that may be represented in the iconic texts of the past.

In order to interrogate the perennial metaphor of heroism and tradition in American culture, Hannah’s narrative, Ray, juxtaposes the disparate physical and psychological locales of the Civil War era south and the Vietnam War and post-Vietnam War era south. This postmodern strategy of simultaneity and time-space compression allows the novella to forcefully critique and deconstruct the narrative of exceptionalism that gilds the brutality of war with ideological legitimacy. To accomplish this, Hannah
creates an unstable narrator whose “story” is conditioned by his service during the Vietnam War. For Ray, the war in Vietnam has unhinged him from the structural myths of his culture. The effects of the Vietnam experience on Ray are far reaching: the trauma of this experience is the catalyst for Ray’s crisis in identity. Because he has lost the psychological legitimizing structure of the American exceptionalist narrative, Ray looks to the Confederate south for a narrative that could recuperate his conception of the hero soldier who makes “clean choices” for the defense of his ideal. But Ray finds that there are no ideal narratives – particularly not that of the Confederate south – and the failures of multiple contending ideological narratives contribute to the psychological fracturing occurring in Ray and expressed in the formal fragmentation of the novella.

*Ray* is a narrative in disarray. The novella is a fragmented attempt by the protagonist to cure himself of a disease that he is unable to describe. Ray says that he is a “vicious nightmare of illness” because “God cursed [him] with a memory that holds everything” (*Ray* 51). He traces the beginnings of his condition to an engagement with an enemy pilot:

> then the buttons when he got into the middle of the scope.

> It’s so easy to kill. Saw him make the bright, white flower … It was the start of what I’ve got, and no nooky, no poem, no medicine or nothing will make it go away. Jesus, my head. (64)

This is the disease that causes Ray to plead to us, “Hold old Ray close, everybody, for he is estranged from the clear home that he once knew” (53). The home that Ray is nostalgic for is not a physical location; instead, Ray laments the loss of a meaningful
context that would validate his action. The novella is Ray’s attempt to reconcile his memory to a framing narrative that provides meaning for his actions.

As a traumatic text, *Ray* participates in the “enigma of trauma as both destruction and survival” that Cathy Caruth explores in *Unclaimed Experience* (72). Ray’s service in Vietnam referenced throughout the text, as well as his Civil War flashbacks, illustrate the traumatic episodes of violence in which Ray’s survival is as incomprehensible as the nearness of his death (Caruth 64). Ray exemplifies Caruth’s “enigma of trauma” by entwining strategies of destruction and survival both formally and thematically in his narrative. By allowing strategies of construction and destruction to remain present and unresolved in the narrative, *Ray* situates itself in Caruth’s “enigma of trauma” and inhabits the irreconcilable landscape of paradox. The clear linear progression of a work like Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* is not available. Instead, Hannah’s novella seems to drift laterally without regard to temporal or spatial restraints; the text is constituted by sixty two individual segments that are held together by the tenuous threads of Ray’s paradoxical consciousness.

The form of the text becomes a testament for the shattered perspective of a subject who can no longer identify with the structural narratives of his culture. Ray’s inability to connect with a larger cultural mythology leads critics such as Ruth Weston to question Ray’s ability to maintain a unified identity. Instead, Weston argues that “Hannah’s stories cohere around the antiphonal, often cacophonous, debunking rhythms that contribute to the debunking of the unitary self and story” (72). This debunking rhythm is clearly illustrated by Ray’s paradoxical approbation and condemnation of the confusion that Ray sees as fundamental experience of his culture. At one point Ray celebrates this
detachament by stating that “without a healthy sense of confusion, Ray might grow smug. It’s true isn’t it? I might join the gruesome tribe of the smug” (103). In a contradictory statement preceding Ray’s need for a “healthy sense of confusion,” he says, “I tell you, if not for his old records and his Shakespeare, Ray would be a casualty of the American confusion” (102). Reading these passages together displays the “debunking rhythm” that Weston recognizes: the American confusion is lauded, and then it is presented as a menace. This textual practice of simultaneous construction and deconstruction develops a landscape of paradox through the text where opposite and irreconcilable practices are presented as legitimate and valid. In this way, Hannah uses our practice of reading against us. By subverting readers’ expectations, the novel becomes a performance of the trauma that it encodes. In fact, one of Ray’s few consistencies is its ability to frustrate the reader’s desire to connect the disparate sections of the novel in a consistent and linear way. The reader’s desire for a “narrative arc” and for epiphany is summarily disposed of by Hannah’s novella. And, like Ray, readers are left adrift in the text, trying to figure out how to assign meaning to the shattered narrative.

Another example of this debunking rhythm occurs in section thirty one of Ray when the narrator states, “Now I guess I should give you swaying trees and the rare geometry of cows in the meadow or the like – to break it up. But sorry, me and this one are over” (81). At this point, Ray recognizes the construction of his narrative. He tells the reader that the expected narrative strategies will not be followed, that he is outside of the narrative illusion and that “[he] and this one are over” (81). Again, following Weston’s illustration of the antiphonal rhythms in Hannah’s fiction, the reader finds Ray, in section thirty four, constructing, or “giving us,” the very images he just refused, and
more: “… We’re going through the weeds and the woods and just the sliver of the moon comes in through the dead branches, and the running rabbits and squirrels are underneath and above … Everybody’s around and we are flying kites over the tall oaks, the Black Angus cattle are roaming comfortably in the taller weeds, and the geese control their placid squadrons” (83-4).

This debunking tendency likewise applies to Ray himself. He is introduced (and introduces himself) as contradiction, paradox, antiphony: “Ray, you are a doctor and you are in a hospital in Mobile, except now you are a patient but you’re still me” (Hannah 3). The opening of the novel initiates the debunking rhythm of the text, as the point of view continually vacillates from the third to the first person. While Ray attempts to heal himself through the act of telling his story, the reader is required to register the text as both an objective account, as well as an intimate narrative. The effect, like the effect of the constructing and deconstructing strategy as a whole, is to create a jarring, disconcerting fissure in the text, as well as in the identity of the narrator. By destabilizing the text and the narrator, the novella mirrors the traumatic fragmentation of Ray’s identity as he tries to find a context for his experience that would afford him a sense of meaning. The fragmented structure of the novella, the juxtapositions of unconnected narrative segments, the nonlinearity of the text: these stylistic choices become the language of extremes through which the novella elicits its jarring, disconcerting, and fracturing effects.

Throughout the novella, Ray attempts to locate a context, or cultural narrative, where his actions can assume legitimacy. Because he has lost the psychological legitimizing structure of the American exceptionalist narrative, Ray looks to the
Confederate south for a narrative that could recuperate his conception of the hero soldier who makes “clean choices” for the defense of his ideal. As Ray looks to the past to find a cure for his disease, he becomes more confused and estranged, and he begins to “lose [himself] in two centuries and two wars” (45). The Civil War scenes that Ray narrates utilize the same textual strategies that were previously examined. In this case “each successive narrative act undercuts the previous act; and thus the story’s structure, instead of providing a more traditional formal coherence, reflects, by its surface incoherence, a narrative consciousness shattered by violent internal and external conflicts” (Weston 105). In this way the Civil War segments of the novella contribute to the overall debunking rhythm in the text.

The initial Civil War segment sketches a romantic image of the southern soldier surrendering to the ideal of the cause:

We wear gray in the big meadow and there are three thousand enemy in blue, much cannon and machinery behind them. The shadow of the valley passes over our eyes, and in the ridge of the mountains we see the white clouds as Christ’s open chest. Many of us start weeping and smiling because we will die and we know… You take your saber from your left thigh and hold it straight above. The pennants go higher. You put the cavalry hat down because the sun is coming over the raised sabers. (65-6)

Here the cause is presented as an idealized scene of honor and sacrifice. The physical environment of the battle becomes transcendent; the field of battle is translated into a beatific vision of martyrdom. Any competing or contrary voice of protestation, insecurity
or fear is silenced. Likewise, the impending and inescapable carnage, the unavoidable dismemberment and death, the rot of innumerable corpses is an inconvenient reality that is lost in glare of the “sun coming over the raised sabers.”

As the novella progresses, though, this chivalric confederate narrative deteriorates into an indictment of the existential brutality of the battlefield. Again, the legitimacy of the romanticized and idealized narrative of the “just war” and the “heroic warrior” are compromised by the phenomenal reality that Ray responds to when he says, “Then sabers up and we knock the fuck out of everybody. With the cherished dream of Christ in our hearts. Basically, the message is: leave me the hell alone or give me a beer” (69-70). As Ray progresses through the narration of his Civil War experience, the romanticized narrative of the Confederate cause becomes as muddled and contradictory as the narrative of America’s cause in Vietnam. Ultimately, Ray finds no worthy rationale for allegiance to the ideal of the Confederate south:

Your hat’s rotting off. It’s hot. You’re not sure about your horse. Or the cause. All you know is that you are here – through the clover, through the low-hanging branch, through the grapeshot. All of it missed you.

Your saber is up, and there goes your head, Christian. (Ray 96)

In this segment, there are little pretenses of romanticism or mythologism. Instead, the speaker is aware of his presence in a singularly corporeal environment, and a dangerous one at that. All of the mythologized assurances of sacrifice and honor that structured the first Civil War segment are absent, and an atmosphere of incertitude pervades the scene. The image of the romanticized soldier and cause is finally invoked with the phrase,
“Your saber is up,” but in keeping with Weston’s analysis, the final mythic phrase is debunked in the course of the sentence, “and there goes your head, Christian.” By the final segment of Ray’s Confederate experience all of the hopes he may have had for locating a legitimizing narrative context for his actions have vanished. Through juxtaposing the two disparate historical orders of the Civil War south and the post-Vietnam south, and presenting Ray as the protagonist in both, the novella compromises and questions readers’ expectations of narrative order and desire for closure – formal imperatives that undergird hegemonic ideological narratives like American exceptionalism and Southern pastoralism.

While these textual strategies of parodic intervention, deconstructive juxtaposition, space-time compression and ontological confusion express the turn toward a postmodern aesthetic in Hannah’s vision of the American south, these characteristics should also be read as textual strategies for representing a traumatic experience that can be articulated and possibly invoked in the reader. As a traumatic text, Ray’s various debunking rhythms encode both historical and punctual forms of trauma at work in the narrative. In doing so, the novella brings these complementary but independent strains of trauma theory into conversation. As Ray attempts to locate meaning in the romantic mythology of the Civil War south, he underscores the ideological and textual relationships that connect seemingly disparate historical eras. In doing so, Ray illustrates the capacity for historical narratives to affect the present moment. In this way, Ray illustrates how “historical traumas” can be written into our contemporary moment without the accompanying acute or punctual traumatic event being visited upon the effected individual. As Greg Forter argues, “systems of domination can inflict
themselves on the psyche as traumagenic potentialities” that are “retrodetermined as traumas” (280). In this way, traumagenic potentiality is written on the subject through the ineluctable imposition of historical narratives.

If Ray’s narrative offers commentary on the historical nature of traumatic experience, then his character is inscribed by the unique trauma of his own experience in Vietnam. As such, the novella elucidates the “peculiar and paradoxical complexity of survival that the theory of individual trauma contains within it the core of the trauma of a larger history” (Caruth 39). By engaging and textualizing the simultaneous experience of both punctual and historic forms of trauma, Ray confronts some of the contemporary limits of the discipline of trauma studies. Hannah’s narrative exists along the border of individual and historic expressions of trauma. Ray does not focus specifically on a “punctual blow to the psyche that overwhelms its functioning, disables its defenses, and absents it from direct contact with the brutalizing event itself” as Greg Forter describes the sites of acute trauma that Caruth theorizes (Forter 259). But neither does Hannah’s novella specifically explore the “recursive effects of traumatic events that one has not even experienced” (Forter 277).

Instead, Ray articulates the meeting place of the two distinct classifications of trauma: the individual and the historic. In doing so, Ray expresses a moment of overlap between the lived, material trauma of the Vietnam War and the cultural and historic trauma that resulted from the experience. Ray situates itself in a unique individual, historical, and textual position, at once a record of individual trauma – as seen in the textual strategies of dislocation and fragmentation that Ray employs, as well as in its status as an artifact of a widespread shift in the representation of the American narrative.
of exceptionalist democracy. In short, Ray can be read as a text that bridges the divide between the individual and the historic trauma. In Ray, the reader is able to witness the passage of individual trauma into its collective form of historic trauma. Therefore, reading Hannah’s Ray as a traumatic text allows us to unfold and examine the entwinement of Ray’s war story as an expression of the larger cultural transformations developing in America following the Vietnam War. Further, this traumatic reading helps illuminate the changing conditions for literature emerging from the American south.

Walker Percy’s The Last Gentleman and Barry Hannah’s Ray are particularly interested in the relationship between the material context of the landscape (the physical and social space), as well as the psychology of the subject that inhabits (and in many ways creates) that space. Likewise, both narratives consider spatial and subjective representation within the context of a globalizing South. In Percy’s The Last Gentleman, the protagonist Will Barrett maintains an uncanny relationship with the material spaces where he feels “at home.” In this way, space is interpreted as an exteriorization of Will’s psychological state. While Will’s relationship to the material space of the novel evokes and defines his character, Barry Hannah’s novella Ray presents the material space of the South as a highly subjective experience. For Ray, both space and time are amenable to imagination. Moreover, Ray introduces and explores the critique of the American cultural narrative in the post-Vietnam era South. Through Ray, the reader experiences a culture’s ideological degeneration within the deteriorating psyche of the novella’s protagonist.

This degeneration is more far reaching than the psychic detachment that is represented in Percy’s protagonist. Will Barrett seeks the solace of interstitial spaces
within the material field of his culture because, for Will, the material context of culture is immutable and authoritative. For Hannah’s protagonist Ray, the materiality of his surroundings and his subjective experience are fluid expression of one another. For this reason the penultimate image in *Ray* points to a kind of imaginative rebirth that follows the violent psychological disruption that is an effect of the loss of the legitimacy of the authorized cultural narrative. In this image, Hannah reconstitutes the trope of the hero that his novella has worked to deconstruct. Here, Hannah introduces a new hero who has weathered the fracturing of the American cultural and historical metanarrative. Hannah’s revised iteration of the trope of the hero posits an alternative reality. In this new reality, progressive, linear time is abandoned for a space where historical periods collapse into an imagined landscape, or parallel reality where people of all creeds and colors unite to destroy Washington D.C., the illegitimate site of American cultural authority:

Let us meet again, we with our gray and forward hats on a million horses. Pushing the attack toward Washington, D.C. … Looking at the vista, there are cavalrmen of every race and creed … On myself I have the wool short jacket with every color of the rainbow on the breast … Christ, here we go. Not a chance, but what a territory to gain!

Their cannon just missed me as my horse started running on the water. We are high on our horses and laughing and I can hear the shrill Rebel yell behind me. They are throwing out phosphorus bombs, and I see some of the men go down. My men
just laugh and the horses climb the banks. What an open field. We are laughing and screaming the yell.

It is an open field. (109)

Matthew Guinn argues that at this point Ray achieves a “kind of unity … through a postmodern view of history [in which Ray] is indeed rewriting history from the subjective vantage point of his own experience” (175). Since, according to Guinn, Hannah is rewriting history from a “subjective vantage point,” he is “at ease with the impossible and the indeterminate” (175). Guinn continues, “History is for Ray no longer a linear progression but a lateral one; he has relinquished the metanarrative for his own petite histoire” (175). The singular, personal history that Ray articulates is perceived as “all messed up” when seen in juxtaposition with the linear, teleological progression of the American historical metanarrative. The novella is an expression of cacophony and chaos of form and content that denotes a cultural and textual transition occurring in the American south after the Vietnam War. Hannah’s narrative explores the experience of a character’s loss of an authoritative cultural context, and it concludes in a triumphant and optimistic vision of the “open field” that can be read as an emancipation from oppressive narratives of cultural authority. In this vision, the thinking, acting, autonomous subject has experienced the loss of cultural truth and the psychic fragmentation that results from this loss. Once the subject has been (however painfully) detached from the hermetically bound master narrative, though, he is able to act as an autonomous agent, inventing a new history that develops from his newfound authentic subjectivity.

*Ray* shows a region defined by diverse narratives of the marginal and nomadic survivors of regionally as well as globally traumatic histories. In this sense, *Ray* can be
read as a critical text that articulates the ideological confusion in America following the Vietnam War. Further, *Ray* becomes a signpost toward the landscape of a postmodern American south. Through form and content *Ray* is a text that resists and critiques the practice of ideological recuperation described by critics like William Spanos. Finally, Hannah assures us that there are stories that continue to speak for the myriad voices that rotated back to the world from Vietnam unwilling or unable to accept the official recuperative script.
CHAPTER 3

In his collection, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, the contemporary African-American southern writer Randall Kenan explores the problematic nature of community and subject (re)formation in the postmodern South. The hopeful vision of the “open field” with which Barry Hannah concludes his novella, *Ray*, is, for Kenan, untenable. The “open field” that Ray experiences as he “yells the yell” does not, according to Kenan’s fiction, provide a space for a character to construct a unique narrative based on newly acquired agency; the open field is too fleeting a landscape. Instead, the experience of “openness” becomes a transitional moment that exists only as the traditional metanarrative collapses around the subject. Kenan explores the environment that exists after this moment has passed, after traditional ordering narratives of the region have fractured and deteriorated in the wake of globalization. His fiction extends the psychic confusion of the subject, as represented both formally and thematically in Hannah’s *Ray*, to reflect the ontological confusion of the community itself. In Kenan’s fiction, this confusion is dispersed throughout the textual and material landscape of Tims Creek. Moving beyond any particular consciousness, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* suggests that fragmentation is diffused throughout the discursive field in which subjects act and interact.

In Randall Kenan’s collection of short stories, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, the field of disrupted historical and cultural narratives becomes a site of contested authority. Kenan’s fictional landscape illustrates Lyotard’s proclamation that the loss of credibility in metanarratives results in the dispersion of a multiplicity of little narratives. Kenan’s stories become sites where emergent discourses traverse the landscape and its inhabitants
and compete for dominance; the fictional community of Tims Creek documents the material and conceptual spaces that develop in response to the erosion of an authorized cultural narrative. Additionally, this dispersion of discourses shows the multiple orders of “truth” that develop in response to the loss of a culture’s structuring metanarrative. Truth, in this decentralized and heterogenous discourse environment, becomes a function of discourse rather than a description of a shared and absolute Reality.

Each story in the collection illuminates this fractured and contentious landscape that is inscribed by a multiplicity of discourses that vie for authority. Stories such as “The Things of this World” and “The Foundations of the Earth” exhibit how a discourse is embodied and lived by characters that inhabit a space. These stories also exemplify the way that marginalized discourses vie for authority and legitimacy in the newly cleared ideological landscape of the contemporary south. For example, in “The Things of this World” a “man of decidedly Asian aspect appeared in Mr. John Edgar Stokes’s front yard, near the crepe myrtle bush he had planted in the southwest corner back in 1967” (Kenan 24). Only after the appearance of “the man of decidedly Asian aspect” does Stokes act outside of scripted social, economic, and racial roles and stand up to the community’s powerful white landholder, Malcolm Terrell. In “The Things of this World,” the agency that John Stokes ultimately exhibits must first enter the material and conceptual space of the story as a physically embodied presence. Once the “Other” exists in the space, Mr. Stokes can approvingly reflect on his subversive action, “Seems like up to now I been sitting right here in this chair waiting, waiting” (47). The manifestation of the Other in Mr. Stokes front yard illustrates the opening of the spatial narrative in Tims Creek in the wake of the displaced historical metanarratives that suppressed the
legitimacy and hence the availability of marginal, Other voices. In this example, and throughout Kenan’s collection, the reader witnesses how material spaces adjust to shifting conceptual conditions. As the legitimacy of subjectivity and community becomes less restricted by oppressive ideological parameters, short stories like “The Things of this World” consider how the simple happenings that occur in everyday life both influence, and are influenced by, the conditions of a culture’s legitimated discourses.

Another example of the presence of the marginal discourse within the physical and conceptual space of Tims Creek occurs in the short story, “The Foundations of the Earth.” While the story takes place within that quintessential southern space, the front porch, it subverts and complicates these kinds of traditional spaces of southern representation. First, the landowner in “The Foundations of the Earth,” Maggie Williams, is an African American woman. This fact alone disrupts common patriarchal assumptions of southern property owners. Secondly, she leases a portion of her land to a white male sharecropper, further eroding the Agrarian constructions of southern space. Finally, the presence of the character Gabriel on Maggie William’s porch fractures all of the constructions of codified, legitimate southern relationships; Gabriel is a white man who was Maggie’s grandson’s homosexual partner. Maggie’s grandson died without telling her that he was gay, and Gabriel has come to Tims Creek at Maggie’s request. The embodied spatial, racial, gender, and sexual (re)constructions in “The Foundations of the Earth” subvert traditional textual and ideological practices. Even Maggie, who embodies many of these spatial and ideological re-organizations of the southern community, comments on the continual transitions that she must absorb when she states, “How curious the world had become that she would be asking a white man to exonerate
her in the eyes of her own grandson; how strange that at seventy, when she had all the laws and rules down pat, she would have to begin again, to learn …” (Kenan 72).

As these examples show, Kenan is interested not in documenting the death throes of a culture’s framing narrative, but in describing the landscape of culture and narrative that exists on the other side of the fractured metanarrative. Stories like “The Things of the World” and “The Foundations of the Earth” illustrate the way that the dominant narrative’s loss of legitimacy – as depicted in contemporary texts like Hannah’s Ray – has enabled once subversive and aberrant discourses to gain currency in the spatial, material, and conceptual landscape of the community. Likewise, these stories illustrate how social and spatial discourses are embodied by individuals within a community.

In the final story in his collection, Kenan focuses on the genealogy of the community itself. The text becomes an archive of divergent yet entangled discourses that collectively express the polyglot composition of an historical and social space. “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” tracks the movements and thoughts of characters through a multiplicity of discursive lenses. Doing so allows the narrative to foreground what Bakhtin describes as the “ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere” (xviii). In representing the tension that characterizes the dialectical interaction among subjects, discourses, and spaces, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” allows the reader to experience the postmodern composition of community as an atomized, dynamic, and perpetual event: a dialogized community.

Ostensibly, the event around which “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” is the organized is the explanation of the origin of a large mound of earth located near the
center of Tims Creek. As the text attempts to answer this seemingly innocuous question, though, the reader is led into the rabbit hole of the post-deconstructed environment that Kenan is navigating. In “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” the mound becomes a discursive Pandora’s Box. Once opened, the availability of straightforward authoritative explanations diffuses into a mist of discursive potentialities. In this new dialogic community, the event itself becomes a problematic construction that seems more dependent on the discourse in which it is inscribed than on any appeal to objective or absolute reality. In an interview with Vivian Hunt, Randall Kenan states that when he wrote “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” he was “playing with academic history as opposed to oral history as opposed to personal history, and memory, and plain old gossip. And how they are all very different and disparate, and all very much alike” (Hunt 5). He continues, “It’s all sort of subjective, the way we view history … you may be able to approximate the facts, but there is only one real event … Reality in some ways is like that. We can do all sorts of things to approach it, but we can never actually attain it” (Hunt 5). For Kenan, the idea of the event is inexorably entwined within the discourse. Moreover, the flattened perspective of “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” underscores the problematic relationship that characters in postmodern fiction have with discourses and authority. The textual construction of “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” induces in the reader an experience of the chaotic jumble of discourses and subject positions that exist within the experience of any object or event. The final story in Kenan’s collection employs a variety of narrative strategies, including use of the textual organizations characteristic of different genres/discourses, the abrasion and interpenetration among discourses, and the simultaneous presentation of different discourses to articulate the
crowded landscape of divergent discourses that disrupt the borders between fiction and history, subject and discourse, and time and space.

*Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* is characterized by a tension among the multiple discursive sites within the shared physical space of Tims Creek. As critic Lindsey Tucker notes, the maroon society that is an important site in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” does not occur in some “other” space outside the material and conceptual boundaries of Tims Creek. Instead, the maroon society exists within the borders of the dominant spatial and cultural order of the town. As Zeke Cross, narrator of Tims Creek’s oral history, states at the beginning of the narrative, “See, this here place started off as what they call a runaway, or a maroon society … Slaves, run off from their masters, built up little towns and villages in the swamps so as the white folks couldn’t find them. Live as free men” (Kenan 283). Tims Creek originates as a marginal community existing within the hegemonic order of the official, legitimate town. Similarly, the various marginal discourses (racial, gender, sexual, etc.) that constitute the text of “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” exist within the shared spatial framework of Tims Creek. The elevation of Tims Creek to an accepted position within the legitimized social and historic framework echoes Michel deCerteau’s interpretation of marginality which is “no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive…[m]arginality is becoming universal […, and that a] marginal group has now become a silent majority” (deCerteau xvii). The prevalence of multiple and contradictory discourses that inhabit the space of the narrative produces the texture of the story; these discourses denote the varied representational landscape of Kenan’s fictional community, Tims Creek.
The first of these discourses that the reader encounters occurs in the introduction by Reginald Kain, the fictional editor, to James Green’s fictional ethnographic text, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, the Annotated Oral History of the Former Maroon Society called Snatchit and then Tearshirt and later the Town of Tims Creek, North Carolina [circa 1854-1985].” While Reginald Kain attempts to exclude a subjective presence within Green’s manuscript, he nevertheless provides an introduction that situates the reader. The reader thus situated is required to approach Green’s manuscript through the biographical and critical frame that Kain imparts. In this way, Reginald Kain becomes the initial authoritative voice that presides over the arrangement and representation of Green’s Tims Creek chronicle; Kain establishes the primary discourse of the story that subordinates the textual arrangements that follow. To complicate this initial discourse, Reginald Kain concludes his introduction by extending his thanks to the institutions and groups that financially and otherwise supported his work:

I am particularly grateful for a sabbatical from the Department of Anthropology and Folklore of Sarah Lawrence College. Thanks also to the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Arts, the North Carolina Council for the Arts, the MacDowell Colony, and to the kind people of Tims Creek, North Carolina. (Kenan 281)

As the reader is aware that Kain is a fictional character and Tims Creek a fictional town, the inclusion of standard ethnographic discourse protocol within the narrative underscores how the standards of certain discourses are approached as more real than others. In this case, Kain’s acknowledgment of thanks illustrates how the construction of
knowledge and history is dependent on a system of legitimizing institutions and
discourses.

Likewise, each of the disparate discourses that comprise the narrative creates an
independent field in which the event is constructed. And the event is arranged in as many
different ways as there are independent discourses to construct it. The fictional
archivist/ethnographer, Reginald Kain, introduces the narrative as follows:

[Let the Dead Bury Their Dead] is the record of a conversation
with the Reverend’s great-uncle, Ezekiel Thomas Cross. [b 1901], and
great-aunt, Ruth Davis Cross [b. 1895], that took place on September 22,
1985, at the home of Mrs. Cross. It is in many ways emblematic of
Greene’s major preoccupation: the origins of Tims Creek; his family’s
slave past; the intermingling of the two Cross families, black and white;
folklore and the supernatural; thanatology; issues of community leadership
and decay. (277-78)

As editor of Greene’s papers, Kain establishes the initial frames through which the reader
approaches Greene’s text. By making an interpretive claim regarding “Greene’s major
preoccupation,” Kain exhibits his authority over the text. As a result, the reader’s
perceptive is likely to orient itself around Kain’s interests. As this example illustrates,
the divergent discourses and localized truth claims that constitute the textual landscape of
“Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” do not represent a static plurality of “little narratives.”
Instead, as Kain’s introduction indicates, in the wake of delegitimated metanarratives, the
polyglot composition of the new material, textual, and conceptual environment is a
volatile jostling among discourses for predominance.
Next, the reader encounters the problematic discourse of the oral history. “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” begins as Zeke Cross addresses, presumably, a question posed by James Green. Cross begins the narrative, “Well they tell me that that mound you asked me about was the center of town a long long time ago” (283). Before directly addressing Green’s question, Zeke mentions three other explanations for the mound:

Some say ain’t no earthly explanation. Just is. Some folk say it was an Indian burial ground … But my granddaddy told me –and I heard the same story from a whole lot of different people been round here longer than I have, so I’m inclined to believe it … (285-86)

At the outset of the narrative, Zeke complicates the authority of his explanation by acknowledging that other explanations of the mound exist. His narrative of Tims Creek history becomes one narrative among multiple possibilities. To underscore the variability of the Tims Creek history, Ruth Cross, Zeke’s wife, interjects, questions, and contradicts Zeke throughout the narrative. This can be seen in Zeke’s interchange with Ruth when he introduces Tims Creek as the descendant community of a former maroon society established by runaway slaves:

[Ruth:] Tain’t no such a lie –

[Zeke:] Hush, woman. Was my granddaddy told me, now. You’s calling him a lie?

[Ruth:] Yeah.

[Zeke:] Well, I hope he come to get you tonight and whup up on your head. (284-5)
Ruth provides a divergent perspective from within the story’s discourse of oral history, and her skepticism of Zeke’s narrative illustrates the story’s characterization of recollected history. Furthermore, her oppositional perspective can be read as a strategy to prevent the reader from fully accepting Zeke’s narrative. This narrative strategy of periodically disengaging the reader from Zeke’s story allows the text to continually reposition the reader as a shifting participant in the multiplicity of discourses that orbit around a common event.

The narrative employs copious footnotes as another technique to strengthen the sense of dislocation and ontological confusion in the reader. Thematically and formally, as a device for inculcating a thematic dissonance, the footnotes routinely situate information from the primary text into another textual discourse. For example, as Zeke begins to describe the circumstances that led to the creation of the mound in Tims Creek, he introduces the character, Pharoah: “Anyhow, boy. See, it all started one night. In a graveyard over where them Batts people is buried. There was a grave there, you know, of the man who founded Snatchit. Old slave name of Pharoah” (287). Here, the reader is guided to a footnote that reads,

According to some accounts, the slave is named Menes, first king of the First Kingdom of Egypt. Other accounts call him: Sultan, King, Prince, Emperor, Lord, Caliph, Massa, Hero, Alexander, Caesar, William, Henry, and Montezuma. See Reginald G. Kain’s monograph Tims Creek Chronicles (Oxford, 1999), and Peter L. Helm, Oral Histories of the Rural South (Boston, 1976). (287)
Throughout the text the inclusion of footnotes requires readers to process material presented from multiple and sometimes contradictory discourse positions simultaneously. Footnotes become another narrative strategy to induce a kind of conceptual stalemate in the reader whereby no discourse offers a sense of resolution or legitimacy.

Zeke continues his narrative, with occasional interjections from Ruth, and occasional footnote references, until the text breaks into a short italicized entry that is seemingly written by the ethnographer, James Green. Written in first person, this section includes the speaker’s personal observations that are obviously tinted by emotions and memory. Here, Green breaks the expectations of the ethnographic discourse by foregrounding his own presence in the story. Instead of the disinterested position of observation, Green allows himself to enter the narrative. As Green enters the ethnographic text, he underscores the permeability of textual borders in “Let the Dead Bury their Dead.” Green’s autobiographical entrance into the text introduces his own insecurities, “She loves to sit on her porch and listen to the wind. She loves to talk. She loves fatback rind, collards, and neckbones. And dried apples. She knows what she loves. You wish you did” (294). Furthermore, this autobiographical segment denotes the complex entanglement of emotions that underlie the speaker’s relationship to his subject. Green’s autobiographical presence in the ethnography furthers the critique of the idea of strict borders between and within discourses.

Following this autobiographic segment and another oral history section, Green introduces “excerpts…from Bury Me Whole: The Diaries of Rebecca Cross, edited by A.M. Homes (University of Louisiana, 1980)” (306). Green’s inclusion of these (fictional) primary texts introduces yet another discourse into the narrative. The selection
of diary entries from 1854 to 1880 presents Rebecca Cross’s intimate ruminations on events that affect her and her family. In these entries the reader is presented with a first-hand account of events that also occur in the oral history of Zeke Cross. For instance, a letter dated November 20, 1854 documents the arrival of Pharoah into Canaan (the Cross plantation): “Owen again came Home drunk tonight. He almost fell from His Sulky. He came in bragging to Alexander about having won a Slave in a poker game. I reproached Him saying that Drunkenness & Gambling were Unseemly in a Member of the State Legislature” (306). While the veracity of the event is underscored by its appearance in more than one discourse, the intrinsic reality of the event is displaced by the discursive contexts that situate and narrate the event. Additionally, the textual organization of the page as the presentation of diary entries contributes to the temporal and spatial flattening that characterizes “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead.” The accretion of temporally dispersed discourses disrupts the cohesiveness of the narrative. Instead of following a character or a trajectory of action, the narrative impels the reader to experience a multiplicity of discourse positions, each representing, in their fashion, a shared and singular event.

After presenting entries from Rebecca Cross’s diary, Greene introduces a letter sent from Phineas Cross, youngest son to Rebecca and Owen Cross and “one of the most eminent botanists of his day” (320), to his partner, Nigel. The letter, dated April 13, 1859, becomes yet another lens from which to approach the story of Pharoah and Tims Creek. Adding to the discourse polyphony that pervades “Let the Dead Bury their Dead,” Phineas’s letter combines elements of the taxonomic discourse of the botanist with the
emotional exhortations of the love letter. Again, the singular event is displaced by its revised narration.

Returning to Zeke’s oral history, the reader must abruptly transition from the discourse position of Phineas’s letter to the supernatural environment of Zeke’s narrative. At this point in Zeke’s story the dead are “clawing out of they graves” (327). Zeke states that “[e]very last one of them what died and been buried in [Tims Creek] going back to the first who died when Pharoah first brung em out of bondage” were rising from the earth. The scene that Zeke creates becomes an apocalyptic vision of destruction where the undead surround the townspeople and “come in at them poor folk with axes and hatchets and hammers and knives” (331). Zeke goes on to describe “wolves walking on they hind legs, buzzards eating people alive, red demons with bats’ wings” that entered the apocalyptic orgy until at last Pharoah returned, declaring “Damnation and ruin. What began as good has ended in evil. We are not ready” (332). Shortly after Pharoah’s departure, “fire rained down from the sky just like the Lord sent to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and none of the wicked escaped” (332). Zeke notes in conclusion that the fire burned for days and “when it died down, wont nothing left. Nothing. Just that mound you asked about, smoking hot. Took a year to cool off. Say it goes all the way down to hell” (332). After winding through the varied textual, spatial and historic environments of Tims Creek and experiencing the town from a multiplicity of discursive and temporal positions, the conclusion of Zeke’s narrative returns the reader to the beginning of the story and the initial question regarding the origins of the mound that initiated Zeke’s response.
In “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” Kenan explores the problematic construction of community. His fiction locates the event (in this case the origin of the mound in Tims Creek) as a site of intersection wherein multiple discourses weave discordant patterns situating the event in a variety of textual, spatial, and historic positions. Moreover, the narrative forces the reader to simultaneously experience this multiplicity of discursive positions. By using the postmodern narrative strategies of time-space compression and by juxtaposing multiple and contradictory discourses, Kenan challenges the possibility of reading any single discourse as a framing authority for the text. Likewise, the narrative interrupts and questions the treatment of social spaces and textual organizations as subordinate to any single framing spatio-temporal perspective. As this analysis has shown, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” illustrates the unavailability of a dominant organizing narrative to situate the text and event.

The text likewise subverts the reader’s ability to impose a discursive or ideological order onto the narrative; in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” the reader is implicated in a network of incompatible discourses. Events in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” are constructed by a multiplicity of discourses, each in accordance with its own unique and circumscribed truth claims. Furthermore, the subjective position from which the reader engages the text introduces yet another competing position from which to order and narrate the event. In this way, the reader’s position in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” becomes one more voice that comprises the polyphonic texture of the narrative. As a result, the experience of Kenan’s text foregrounds and underscores the way that each discursive position, including the reader’s own, desires to control the discursive construction of the event.
Postmodern narrative techniques in Kenan’s text invoke in the reader a critical recognition of the relationship between discourses and authority. The text fractures precisely at the borders of the various discourses that compose the fragmented topography of Tims Creek. In the postmodern southern community that Kenan describes, discourse polyphony has emerged as the new norm. Without the expansive structuring narrative that encompassed the spatio-temporal context of his modernist forbears (e.g. Faulkner and Percy), Kenan articulates a spatial and textual context in which the subject is conditioned to act in an environment where the volatility among competing discourses is obvious and inescapable. In this context, the contemporary subject may find herself intimidated, but I believe the free movement between discursive borders that Kenan describes is ultimately a liberating environment. In this postmodern field of “little narratives” the subject is empowered to interact with and influence a material and textual environment where spaces and subjectivities have become fluid and malleable constructions.

“Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” likewise articulates a shift in the representation of trauma in the narratives that this thesis has examined. In the previous chapters, a character’s traumatic experience has performed two primary tasks. First, the subject’s traumatic experience has highlighted the presence of contradictory metanarratives within the psychological and spatial framework of the character and environment. Second, the simultaneous presence of framing contradictory metanarratives, I have argued, produces a rupture in the subject’s ability to contextualize himself in the environment. This rupture and the subjective displacement that follows are encoded in the text as a trauma that results in the subject’s dislocation from his spatial and cultural context. Quentin
Compson, Will Barrett, and Ray Forrest exemplify the different positions that subjects may take when displaced from their framing cultural and spatial narratives.

Alternatively, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” presents a uniquely postmodern understanding of the subjective and cultural experience of trauma. Kenan’s text explores the spatial representation of trauma as it is dispersed across a discursive landscape. In this new textual landscape that Kenan articulates, where the condition of spatial heteroglossia renders “truth” and “event” as functions of the discourse in which they are inscribed, the experience of trauma also exhibits a new discursive function more appropriate to its environment. In “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” the traumatic experience is no longer rendered in strictly historic terms as either a “punctual” trauma that is represented as a temporal rupture, or as “historic” trauma that represents cultural history in terms of traumatic experience. Instead, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” represents trauma as the subjective experience of shifting discursive frames. In this way, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” encodes trauma spatially as the borderlands that separate the multiplicity of discourses that exist in the variegated landscape of postmodern community. Instead of an embodied experience of subjective displacement as represented by Faulkner, Percy, and Hannah, trauma as represented by Kenan, is a function of the text and discourse that affects the subject as she moves through the discursive landscape. In this way the experience of trauma is normalized as a function of the environment. Kenan articulates a postmodern experience of trauma in which displacement is the condition of ontology: to be is to be displaced. The traumatic spaces that weave the new textual landscape that Kenan describes in “Let the Dead Bury Their
Dead” can be read as the stitching that holds the fragmented, atomized discourses of the new cultural and textual environment in the closest thing to cohesion that is available.
CONCLUSION

I recall one of the texts that initiated and influenced this thesis was Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies*. The first readings of Soja’s text opened the rich critical vein of spatial representation and pointed me to such theorists as Lefebvre, Foucault, and Harvey. Soja’s text introduced me to a way to conceive of space as a material product. Space was not just any material product, though. As Lefebvre explains, “Social Space … subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity … Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others” (*Production* 73). Lefebvre suggests that material space is a critical point of intersection where divergent discourses are woven into the social process of spatial production. Space in this sense is constituted by the global entanglement of diverse political and economic geographies, and it is traversed by locally situated subjects like you and me. In “Of Other Places” Foucault addresses our situation:

> We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when 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 process of intersections and juxtapositions is apparent in the fiction that this thesis addressed. The juxtaposition of disparate temporal orders in *Ray* and the simultaneous presentation, “side by side,” of multiple discourses in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* illustrates the kind of epoch in which Foucault believes Western society is now located.
While *Postmodern Geographies* helped me to articulate the critical spatial perspective that I was developing, it also left me feeling disoriented. On one hand I was excited to follow the channel of spatially oriented criticism, but on the other, I felt frustrated because I knew that much of Soja’s text was still obscure to me. Returning to Soja in the process of finishing the thesis has allowed me to consider this question of what was missing from my initial reading of the text. Interestingly, it is Soja’s (and spatial criticism’s) interest in the contemporary political-economic component of the argument that I either could not or would not perceive in my initial reading of *Postmodern Geographies*. Of course, this layer of the text is not masked in the least. In fact, the entire book turns on the issue of asserting a critical spatial and political praxis in order to address contemporary organizations or human geography, to read them intelligently with the understanding that just as spatial organizations affect subjectivities, so can these organizations be affected by the subject’s agency. There are even entire chapters devoted to the spatial reading of Los Angeles as a material organization of political and economic histories. But I was interested in reading narrative from a critical spatial perspective, and I glossed over the important political implications of this theoretical frame.

Specifically, I have returned to *Postmodern Geographies* with a critical interest in what Soja describes as the “wave-like periodicity of societal crisis and restructuring” that he argues we are only beginning to understand (27). For Soja, this “wave-like periodicity” is necessarily inscribed in the material landscape:

> All social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived social existence, only when they are spatially “inscribed” – that is,
concretely represented – in the social production of social space. Social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing “in” space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. There is no unspatialized social reality. (*Thirdspace* 46)

Therefore, these periodic crises that continually reshape landscapes, subjectivities, and texts are all inscribed within the spatial problematic. Reading the spatial text becomes analogous to reading the geologic record: each layer in the stratified field tells a story. And like the geologic field, in the social production of social spaces, one layer is accreted upon the next layer. Texts like those that I examined in this thesis contain a representation of a particular spatial moment, what Jameson called a “fragment in flight” (78). Examining these fragments with an eye toward the spatial dialectic within which the tension among subject, space, and discourse is inscribed displays the conception of space-time that is embedded in the material field that is the social production of social space.

In addition to reading examples of the spatial discourse at work in texts by William Faulkner, Walker Percy, Barry Hannah, and Randall Kenan, I have also reviewed the accumulation of postmodern narrative strategies that organize themselves around the textual and cultural “image” of the South. Ontological confusion, time-space compression, discourse fragmentation, delegitimization of ideological truth, fracturing of the metanarrative into a multiplicity of little narratives: the accretion of these postmodern articulations of subject, text, and space have developed alongside the simultaneous experience of southern globalization. Theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Michel deCerteau, Edward Soja, and David Harvey all read the spatialization of
discourses as an aspect of these postmodern forms of expression. Likewise, this group of theorists concurs that accompanying the postmodern and spatial turn, a new emphasis on the body as an important site, or localization, of intersections among relations of space, time, geography, politics, economy, ecology, etc. has emerged.

But what happens to the experience of trauma in this postmodern turn toward space and the body? I believe that an interesting inversion in the usual logic of trauma can be seen here. Trauma, as a modern experience, is very much a bodily event: for Quentin it is suicide, for Will Barrett it is the visceral experience of a family member’s suicide, for Ray Forrest it is the experience of war. As the body becomes the preeminent site for inscribing abstract discourses in postmodern theory and fiction, as well as in trauma studies itself, we witness the illogical disembodiment of trauma as explored in fiction such as Randall Kenan’s “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead.” In this collection, the trauma is writ across the discursive landscape itself. As I argued in the last chapter, the trauma that is encoded in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” is an expression of discourse borders and of the subject moving between and among these borders. This focus on the discursive experience of trauma seems contradictory to the general pattern associated with the spatial and postmodern turn in representation in which the body becomes paramount. I am interested in looking closer at this new understanding of trauma, how it moves beyond both punctual and historic explanations and into a textualized, discursive, and spatial rendering in which the traumatic experience is inscribed within the fragmented postmodern environment.

Finally, upon returning to Soja, I now read his text with an interest in applying the spatial practice he describes to my own spatio-temporal material environment and to the
texts that circulate through it. Here, it seems I’ve returned to the outline of the third chapter that I included in the initial prospectus for this thesis, in which I wished to apply critical spatial theory to a few material spaces in my hometown of Selma, Alabama. As I began work on the thesis I realized that in order to adequately examine my subject I would need to focus on an analysis of the literature, saving Selma for another project. I did not realize it at the time, but the process of writing the thesis was also the process of acquiring the perspective from which to approach a living cultural space like Selma. In the prospectus for the thesis I suggest that “one possible site of critical intervention is the Harmony Club” (Prospectus 7). I describe why this is a particularly interesting site for a critical spatial reading:

[The Harmony Club is] an historic building in Selma’s downtown that was initially a Jewish Men’s club and later owned by the local Elk’s Club, until its windows were boarded in the 1960s. The brick building was erected in 1909, and it has stood overlooking the Alabama River since. Although the Harmony Club was vacant and boarded up during the racial violence and trauma that culminated at the Edmund Pettus Bridge (located across the street from the Harmony Club) on Bloody Sunday in March of 1965, its windows have been open to the more recent Bridge Crossing Jubilee that annually commemorates Selma’s pivotal role in the civil rights movement. Since 1999, the Harmony Club has been the residence of David and Bill. The pair of artists moved together from Atlanta to Selma to make The Harmony Club their home. (7)
From the perspective that I have gained through the course of writing this thesis I can see a myriad of critical entrances into the spatial text of this one localized site. From the global flows of labor and the Jewish diaspora, to shifting modes of production during the life of the Harmony Club, to the multiple economic and political crises that were inscribed upon the building, the space evinces a skein, as Foucault may characterize it, in which multiple and divergent discourses, and the periodic traumas that disrupted them, are embodied in the material, historic, and conceptual space of the Harmony Club. Furthermore, reading the building as a spatial text that embodies the various postmodern strategies of juxtaposition, simultaneity, fragmentation, and parodic intervention establishes a critical space in which to orient myself in the landscape of the town.

Interestingly, the process of writing this thesis has not only allowed me to discern a way of seeing that addresses the complexities and seeming paradoxes of postmodernity as they are presented in some texts that represent our contemporary moment, but it has rendered the spatio-historical moment in terms of the text itself. In this sense the landscape takes on the form of the text. And if the epigram to this thesis is critically important, and, indeed, “I am the space where I am,” then a final consideration that I will need to address as I wander through this new landscape is just who is it that is walking and reading this space?
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