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Domestic Disturbances: Home and History in Transatlantic Women's Writing

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An abstract of

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores how women novelists shape our understanding of the colonial past. Breaking with previous scholarship relegating women writers to a regional or national literary tradition, I chart points of connection and intersection across the Atlantic. Ireland, the American South, and the Caribbean share a history of settler colonialism. Twentieth-century women writers from these regions must contend with this legacy in their lives and literatures. Elizabeth Bowen, Eudora Welty, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Jean Rhys, and Tana French excavate the colonial past within the walls of the home. Settler colonialism has produced distinct domestic spaces and corresponding literary genres. My focus on the Irish Big House and the southern and Caribbean plantation home locates colonial complicity within the family unit. Analyzing the domestic sphere reveals how women are implicated in upholding colonial power structures.

Although they approach the plantation from different times and places, Bowen, Welty, Allfrey, Rhys, and French share a set of questions and preoccupations about the past. These writers ask how the larger forces of history manifest in domestic spaces. The traces of colonialism, plantation, and slavery infiltrate the home in submerged and surprising ways. In *A World of Love*, *Delta Wedding*, *The Optimist's Daughter*, *The Orchid House*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *The Likeness*, the home is more than just a setting. It is a portal to the past. My project in this dissertation is to uncover the places where home and history meet.

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Domestic Disturbances: Home and History in Transatlantic Women's Writing

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Introduction: Where Home and History Meet

Anne Bonny was born around 1700 in County Cork, Ireland. The product of an affair between a lawyer and his maid, Bonny was raised as a boy in an attempt to disguise her father's adultery. When his adultery was exposed, Bonny's father absconded to South Carolina with Bonny and her mother in tow. In South Carolina, her father established a successful plantation. Growing up, Bonny had a "fierce and courageous temper."¹ She physically fought off a would-be rapist and there were rumors that she had stabbed a servant girl. Nevertheless, she was considered a good prospect on the marriage market. Bonny, however, rejected the suitor her father chose for her. Instead, in 1718, she married a poor sailor named John Bonny. Her father was so displeased that he disinherited her. In response, legend has it that Bonny burned down her father's plantation and sailed for the Bahamas.²

In the Bahamas, Bonny met John "Calico Jack" Rackam, a notorious pirate. She left her husband for Rackam and began a life of piracy. She gave birth to Rackam's child in Cuba and soon took up with Mary Reade, another woman pirate in Rackam's crew. Like Bonny, Reade had been raised as a boy and had even served as a soldier in the Flemish army before her piracy. Together, the two women were "the fiercest members of the crew."³ They were active participants in all aspects of piracy, "ready and willing to do any thing on board."⁴ Bonny's life on the seas came to an end in 1720, when Rackam's ship was captured in Jamaica and his crew was imprisoned for piracy. The crew was found guilty and all were sentenced to death. When she

¹ Charles Johnson [Daniel Defoe?], *A general history of the robberies and murders of the most notorious pyrates* [...], (London: Ch. Rivington, 1724), 132.

² Bonny's burning of her father's plantation is an unsubstantiated yet enduring part of her legend. See "Anne Bonny and Female Pirates," accessed May 15, 2019, <http://www.annebonnypirate.com/> and "Wikipedia: Anne Bonny," Wikimedia Foundation, accessed May 15, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Bonny.

³ David Cordingly, "Bonny, Anne (1698–1782), pirate." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, January 2008, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.emory.edu/10.1093/ref:odnb/39085>.

⁴ Quoted in Cordingly, "Bonny, Anne."

visited Rackam before his execution, Bonny reportedly told her lover that “she was sorry to see him there, but if he had fought like a man he need not have been hanged like a dog.”⁵ Bonny and Reade were both granted a stay of execution due to pregnancy. From there, Bonny disappears from the written record. Daniel Defoe’s account of her ends by noting: “only this we know, that she was not executed.”⁶

Anne Bonny’s travels took her from Ireland, to the American South, and finally to the Caribbean. Her journey maps the regions of study in this dissertation and her life raises questions central to my investigations. In some ways, Bonny was a victim; of attempted rape, of patriarchal social structures, of heteronormative gender constructs, and of English colonization in Ireland. Yet she was also a perpetrator. Her piracy almost certainly abetted the rape of Caribbean women and pillaging of Caribbean towns. Piracy is, in a sense, a distillation of the colonial enterprise: a violent invasion which forcibly extracts goods for sale on a foreign market. Through her piracy, Bonny was an active agent of violence and exploitation.

In Michelle Cliff’s novel *Abeng*, Clare Savage learns about Anne Bonny as part of her schooling in Jamaica, alongside the poetry of Keats and Wordsworth. In Cliff’s *bildungsroman*, Clare’s real education takes place outside of the colonial classroom. Clare travels with her white father to the site of his family’s former plantation home. She is disappointed to discover that a visit to the site does not divulge the secrets of her family’s past:

Clare thought about the great house. The time which had passed through it. The salt taste of the walls. She sometimes imagined that the walls of certain places were the records of those places— the events which happened there. More accurate than the stories of the people who had lived within these walls. She did not remember where she had gotten this

⁵ Johnson, *General history*, 133.

⁶ Johnson, *General history*, 134. Johnson is generally considered to have been a pseudonym for Daniel Defoe.

idea, but she held on to it. The walls might not be able to reveal exactly what they had seen, but perhaps they could indicate to a visitor something, if only a clue, about the time which had passed through them.⁷

Clare struggles to understand her family's role in the colonialization and plantation of Jamaica. The plantation home itself holds few clues for Clare. "The house was not at all what she had expected," Clare thinks, "It was as though she had wanted it to be a time machine rather than a relic. A novel rather than an obituary."⁸

The writers studied here resurrect houses into novels. Like Clare, they turn to the plantation house seeking answers about the colonial past. Elizabeth Bowen, Eudora Welty, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Jean Rhys, and Tana French excavate the settler colonial past within the walls of the plantation home. Although they approach the plantation home from different times and places, they share a set of questions and preoccupations about the past. These writers ask how the larger forces of history manifest in domestic space. The legacies of colonialism, plantation, and slavery infiltrate the home in submerged and surprising ways. My project in this dissertation is to uncover these places where home and history meet. I study the distinct domestic spaces and corresponding literary genres that settler colonialism has produced. My focus on the Irish Big House and the southern and Caribbean plantation home locates colonial complicity within the family unit. Analyzing the domestic sphere, I argue, reveals how women are implicated in upholding colonial power structures.

Ireland, the American South, and the Caribbean are linked by centuries of historical contact. Throughout the Caribbean and the American South, there are traces of an Irish presence. There are large Irish Catholic communities in most Southern port cities like Savannah,

⁷ Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Plume Books, 1984), 33.

⁸ Cliff, *Abeng*, 36.

Charleston, and New Orleans. Appalachia bears traces of a Scots-Irish presence in song, storytelling, music, and folklore. In the Caribbean, Irish settlement is enshrined in the geography. Irish Town and Dublin Castle in Jamaica evidence large-scale Irish settlement. Descendants of Irish indentured servants known as “Red Legs” still live in poverty in Barbados. The island of Montserrat celebrates St. Patrick’s Day as a public holiday, an inheritance from Irish Catholics fleeing persecution in the seventeenth century. Dominica, the island of focus in this dissertation, reveals an Irish trace on its landscape through place names like Belfast and St. Patrick’s Parish. Political ties between Ireland and Dominica have proved enduring as well. In 1993, Roosevelt Douglas, leader of the Dominican Labor Party which Phyllis Shand Allfrey co-founded, offered to act as a mediator during the Irish Troubles. Douglas regularly attended the Sinn Fein annual meetings and was invested in international socialist activism.⁹ These attempts at Troubles mediation came to an end when Douglas, also a champion of the Black Power movement, was accused of terrorist affiliations.¹⁰

Intriguing cross-cultural connections of this sort have resulted in a growing body of transatlantic scholarship. Typically framed as a dialogue between two locations, work on Ireland, the American South, and the Caribbean has proved a productive line of inquiry. Much comparative work on Ireland and the American South is grounded in diaspora and heritage studies. David T. Gleeson’s *The Irish in the South 1815-1877* (2001) and Kieran Quinlan’s *Strange Kin: Ireland and the American South* (2005) have laid important groundwork. Gleeson’s study is a useful history of the Irish diaspora in the South, including Irish involvement in the Civil War. While Gleeson’s study is mainly historical, Quinlan divides his volume into sections

⁹ Polly Pattullo, “Rosie Douglas,” *Guardian*, October 4, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/oct/05/guardianobituaries.pollypattullo>.

¹⁰ Lennox Honeychurch, *The Dominican Story: The History of an Island* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 293.

on history and literature. In his first section on “kin,” Quinlan unpacks the historic connections between Ireland and the American South in discussions of emigration, slavery, and the Civil War. The second section on “kinship,” or literary and cultural affinity between the two regions, explores similar patterns of mythmaking, comparable cultural revivals, and parallel preoccupations with the past. Bryan Giemza’s *Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South* (2013) follows this line of thinking. Giemza is primarily concerned with parsing the Irish heritage of Southern writers like Flannery O’Connor and Cormac McCarthy.

Giemza’s edited collection *Rethinking the Irish in the South* (2013) takes a broader view by surveying cultural resonances that go beyond markers of Irish ancestry. Kathryn Stelmach Artuso’s *Transatlantic Renaissances: Literature of Ireland and the American South* (2013) adopts a similar approach by exploring the parallels between the Southern Renaissance and the Irish Literary Revival. Artuso pays significant attention to women writers, including Elizabeth Bowen, Eudora Welty, Margaret Mitchell, and Lady Augusta Gregory, to consider how these authors have forged new imaginative possibilities within their male-dominated literary traditions. In addition to these monographs and collections, the launch of the journal *Irish Studies South* in 2014 and the annual conferences of the southern chapter of the American Conference for Irish Studies demonstrate a growing interest in comparative work between these two regions.

While work on Ireland and the American South tends to be based on diasporic connections and cultural resonances, scholarship on Ireland and the Caribbean often focuses on poetics. Jahan Ramazani, a pioneer of transnational literary study, has looked at echoes between Irish and Caribbean poetry. Michael Malouf’s *Transatlantic Solidarities: Irish Nationalism and Caribbean Poetics* (2009) is indebted to Ramazani’s groundwork. Malouf is interested in how Caribbean writers like Derek Walcott, Claude McKay, and Marcus Garvey engaged with the

kinds of Irish nationalism depicted in the work of James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, and Eamon de Valera. Nathan Suhr-Sytsma's *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (2017) puts Walcott and Seamus Heaney in dialogue with Nigerian and British writers to show how their work shaped and was shaped by transnational print culture networks. Pivoting from poetry to fiction, Maria McGarrity's *Washed by the Gulf Stream: The Historic and Geographic Relation of Irish and Caribbean Literature* (2008), uses theories drawn from archipelagic and island studies to study share themes of "sanctuary, wandering, and exile."¹¹ The companion conferences Caribbean-Irish Connections, held in 2012 in Barbados, and Irish-Caribbean Connections, held in 2016 in Cork, speak to a sustained critical desire to engage these two regions. The edited collection *Caribbean-Irish Connections*, arising from the Barbados conference, has made these critical conversations available to a wider audience and generated further interest in comparative work between these two regions.

Work on the American South and the Caribbean has benefited from the geographic proximity of the regions. Theories of an "extended Caribbean, stretching from northeast Brazil to Maryland," or a "tropical America" call attention to the possibilities of thinking beyond regional boundaries.¹² As Jennifer Rae Greeson notes, such comparisons are "made cohesive" by a shared "climate, plantation system, reliance on African slave labor, and peripheral role in the world economy."¹³ The American South, meanwhile, has been conceived of as an "internal island" isolated from the rest of the country.¹⁴ Geographic proximity and the shared plantation structure

¹¹ Maria McGarrity, *Washed by the Gulf Stream: The Historic and Geographic Relation of Irish and Caribbean Literature* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 9.

¹² On the "extended Caribbean" see Immanuel Wallerstein, *Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 167. On "tropical America" see D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America, vol. 1* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹³ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 40.

¹⁴ Greeson, *Our South*, 273-291.

facilitated encounter and exchange between the regions. The movement of people, culture, language, and literature between the Caribbean and the American South is productively investigated in studies of creolization.¹⁵ Literary scholars including Valérie Loichot and Elizabeth Christine Russ have put southern writers in dialogue with authors from the Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean, respectively.¹⁶ Comparative Southern and Caribbean scholarship productively reconsiders categories of race in America and a critiques the legacy of the shared plantation system.

Whether on the South and the Caribbean, Ireland and the Caribbean, or Ireland and the South, this transatlantic scholarship tends to be dialogic. Limiting the scope of study to two regions enables a compare and contrast framework which produces valuable new insights. My project, however, seeks to expand this framework. Studying Ireland, the American South, and the Caribbean together moves past binary analysis to an investigation of global networks of power. This triangulated analysis advances each comparative framework, as well. Adding the Caribbean to studies of Ireland and the South, for example, productively unsettles literary criticism grounded in authors' heritages. At the same time, positioning Ireland within the southern and Caribbean plantation system prompts a reexamination of the extent to which the Irish were active participants in colonization. In addition to expanding a comparative framework, my dissertation also brings gender to the forefront of transatlantic studies. Most of the work noted above focuses on canonical male figures. Joyce and Walcott show up again and again, even in female-focused studies like Artuso's. I seek to both extend and deepen this comparative work with an exclusive

¹⁵ See, for example, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). On creolization theory in the Caribbean see Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Miami: Ian Randle, 2005).

¹⁶ Valérie Loichot, *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007) and Elizabeth Christine Russ, *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

focus on women writers. Such a focus not only broadens the scope of comparative work on these regions but also extends the discourse on gender and colonialism.

Settler Colonialism

Ireland, the United States, and the Caribbean are connected by the shared legacy of settler colonialism. Ireland, the South, and Dominica, my regions of focus here, are further bound by the particulars of English settlement. Settler colonialism is a method of colonization characterized by the installation and expansion of communities originating from a colonizing power into a colonized space. Settler colonialism requires the removal, absorption, or erasure of native populations. Discussions of settler colonialism, which emerged during the 1990s, have deepened postcolonial studies by focusing on the processes of colonial expansion and control within societies traditionally read outside of a colonial context.

Studies of settler colonialism are much indebted to Patrick Wolfe's claim that "invasion is a structure, not an event."¹⁷ In his 1999 book *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, Wolfe was the first to stake a claim for settler colonialism as a distinct form of colonialism. Wolfe stressed that in settler colonial situations, the goal was not to exploit but to replace a native population. Lorenzo Veracini has extended Wolfe's claims by arguing that settler colonialism is not just distinct from but actually antithetical to other forms of colonialism. According to Veracini, the location of power sets these two systems apart; in settler colonialism, the power lies in the colony rather than in the metropole. At the same time, settler colonialism

¹⁷ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (London: Cassell, 1999) 163. Quoted in Adam J. Barker, "Locating Settler Colonialism," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 13, no. 3 (2012), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/491173> and Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 9.

intersects and overlaps with metropolitan-based colonization. Settler colonialism, he argues, should be “framed beside” studies of other forms of colonization.¹⁸

Settler colonialism foregrounds the intimacy of invasion. As Adam Barker notes, “settler colonization is seen as something done by people.”¹⁹ Shifting the focus from empire to individual creates a space for those excluded from political life who are nevertheless active participants in colonization. Women, while unable to act as agents of empire in the same manner as men, played a crucial role in the settler colonial project. This project depends upon the reproduction of settler communities for their legitimacy and hegemony. “Settler colonialism,” as Veracini puts it, “is about domesticating.”²⁰

The settler family is both the means and the end of this domestication. Veracini argues that “reproducing familial patterns is one of the fundamental defining features of settler colonial regimes.”²¹ In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes shows that the family has always been at the heart of the settler colonial enterprise:

The procreation, or children of a Commonwealth, are those we call plantations, or colonies; which are numbers of men sent out from the Commonwealth, under a conductor or governor, to inhabit a foreign country, either formerly void of inhabitants, or made them void by war. And when a colony is settled....and requires no more of them than fathers require of the children whom they emancipate and make free from their domestic government, which is honor and friendship.²²

¹⁸ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 13.

¹⁹ Barker, “Locating Settler Colonialism.”

²⁰ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 16.

²¹ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 13.

²² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Andrew Cooke, 1651; Project Gutenberg, 2019), chap. XXIV, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm>.

If plantation is procreation, then women are crucial to the settler colonial mission. Yet women have been largely excluded from the settler colonial narrative.

One factor contributing to women's exclusion from this narrative is that settler colonialism is inherently secretive. According to Veracini, settler colonial discourse works towards its own suppression.²³ While establishing legitimacy is essential to the settlers' project, they must imagine themselves as the rightful inhabitants of their new colony. Such a gesture requires significant ideological manipulation of their circumstance:

The settler hides behind the metropolitan colonizer (the settler is not sovereign, it is argued; "he is not responsible for colonialism" and its excesses), behind the activity of settlers elsewhere, behind the persecuted, the migrant, even the refugee (the settler has suffered elsewhere and "is seeking refuge in a new land"). The settler hides behind his labor and hardship (the settler does not dispossess anyone; he "wrestles with the land to sustain his family"). Most importantly, the peaceful settler hides behind the ethnic cleanser (colonization is inherently a non-violent activity; the settler enters a "new, empty land to start a new life"; indigenous people naturally and inevitably "vanish"; it is not the settlers that displace them—in Australia, for example, it is the "ruthless convicts" that were traditionally blamed for settler colonialism's dirty work). Settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production.²⁴

As Veracini convincingly argues here, settler colonialists fundamentally misrepresent their present situation. My project asks how these flawed narratives have transformed settler colonists' understanding of the past. I investigate how women writers are implicated in perpetuating or subverting these settler fantasies.

²³ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 25.

²⁴ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 14.

Settlers are typically coded as male. Veracini shows above how the settler mentality is considered male by default. If “he is not responsible for colonialism” and attempts to “sustain his family,” what role do his female counterparts play? Women, in Veracini’s work, function primarily as symbols. Discussions of the “motherland” and “virgin territory” elide the historical impact of settler women.²⁵ Such an elision exonerates white women of their complicity in the violent settler colonial project. Considering women active agents of settler colonialism pushes Veracini’s framework from the symbolic to the real. The women studied here are producers of texts which narrate the settler colonial past. These texts have the power to both reify and subvert masculine settler colonial narratives. They unpack and expose the settler imaginary. Women, I contend, shape our understanding of the settler colonial past.

By applying critical attention to the violent replacement of native populations, settler colonial studies have been especially generative for interrogating the history of predominantly white societies. Canada, the United States, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand have all proved fertile ground for settler colonial analysis. Ireland’s position as a postcolonial country has been contested due to its proximity to England and the whiteness of its inhabitants, amongst other factors.²⁶ However, the plantation of Ulster under Cromwell in the seventeenth century definitively renders Ireland a settler colonial country. Greeson has shown the extent to which the United States has tried to efface its own colonial history, and the important role that the South has played in this disavowal.²⁷ Dominica (and the Caribbean more broadly) fits most comfortably inside both settler colonial and postcolonial frameworks. Because the settler project

²⁵ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 87.

²⁶ See Deepika Bahri, “Uncommon Grounds: Postcolonialism and the Irish Case,” in *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), and Joe Cleary, “Amongst Empires: A Short History of Ireland and Empire Studies in International Context,” *Éire-Ireland* 42, no. 1 (2007): 11–57.

²⁷ Greeson, *Our South*, 42–64.

in the Caribbean always involved both replacement of the native Carib population and the exploitation of an indigenous and imported slave workforce, the Caribbean highlights the points of continuity between settler colonial and postcolonial discourse.

“The Locus of Modern Contradictions”

Plantation is both a place and a method produced by settler colonialism to exert control over indigenous populations and native lands.²⁸ While the plantation manifests in unique ways across the globe, it has certain inherent characteristics. The plantation is, as George Beckford has argued, “a settlement institution” with agricultural and social dimensions.²⁹ While the daily operations of the plantation focus on agricultural production, its social function also plays a crucial role in legitimizing the settler presence and ensuring its continuation. As Beckford has it, “the social forces inherent in the Plantation system serve to perpetuate its existence and indeed increase continuously its hegemony.”³⁰ I explore this social function in greater detail in my chapter on Elizabeth Bowen.

Plantation cultures have produced distinct literary forms. My dissertation takes as its starting point Amy Clukey’s assertion that the Big House novel and plantation fiction are contiguous colonial genres.³¹ Clukey’s framework of “plantation modernity” charts a course which goes beyond discussing cultural affinities to investigating how the plantation system has shaped literary and cultural production across the Atlantic. Clukey is concerned with how the

²⁸ For a comprehensive survey of the various definitions of “plantation,” see Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells, “Introduction: Plantation Modernity,” *Global South* 10, no.2 (2016): 1.

²⁹ George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies in the Third World* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 1999), 8.

³⁰ Beckford, *Persistent Poverty*, 44.

³¹ Amy Clukey, “Plantation Modernity: *Gone with the Wind* and Irish Southern Culture,” *American Literature* 85, no. 3 (2013), 506.

plantation “has been an important catalyst of transatlantic modernity.”³² Where Clukey sees global capitalist systems emerging in plantation literature, I focus on the stubborn traces of the settler colonial past. These two readings are not mutually exclusive; rather, they illustrate the plantation’s tendency to occupy dualities. As Clukey herself says, the plantation “seems to epitomize the past” yet, given that it is “simultaneously old and new, fabricated and natural, feudal and capitalist, local and global, the plantation is a locus of modern contradictions.”³³

The writers studied here productively exploit these contradictions in literary forms that grew out of the plantation space. In Ireland, the Big House genre has formed a crucial component of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition. Roy Foster usefully glosses the genre’s major themes: “loneliness, uncertainty, a solitary house in an implicitly threatening countryside, unknown natives, the threat of death... a missing or dead mother.”³⁴ The Big House novels I study, Elizabeth Bowen’s *A World of Love* and Tana French’s *The Likeness*, exhibit every feature on Foster’s list. These conventions play a crucial role not only in defining a genre but also in expressing a particular worldview. Vera Kreilkamp has illuminated how, through the Big House novel, the Ascendancy “confronted a social reality—the breakdown of their imagined community of loyal tenants and their failure to achieve hegemony.”³⁵ Due to its close alignment with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the Big House genre holds a contested place within the field of Irish literary studies.³⁶ Approaching the Big House novel from a transatlantic perspective decenters nationalist debates and reveals how the genre is in dialogue with the global plantation system.

³² Clukey, “Plantation Modernity: *Gone with the Wind*,” 506.

³³ Clukey and Wells, “Plantation Modernity,” 6.

³⁴ R.F. Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and his Inheritances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 93.

³⁵ Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 11.

³⁶ See Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, 9-11.

In the American South, the plantation has been both erased and emphasized through literature. Greeson has shown how early American literature needed to disavow its plantation past and the colonial history that accompanied it:

The cohesive plantation South, differentiated from the larger idea of the United States, arose in the earliest U.S. literary writings as a site of spatial quarantine for two interrelated temporal concerns: the colonial origins of the nation, disavowed equally by ideologies of “newness” and “immemoriality”; and the uninterrupted, indeed calculatingly pursued centrality of plantation production to American ascendance—a form of production in its bald exploitativeness antithetical to every ideal expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and in its peripherality contrary to all nationalist assertions of development and self-sufficiency.³⁷

The threat posed to the plantation system by the abolitionist movement and impending Civil War occasioned a dramatic reversal in the role of the plantation in American literature. The Plantation School of fiction arose in the nineteenth century and “was largely responsible for popularizing images of columned mansions, vivacious ladies, dashing gentlemen, and simple, happy, slaves.”³⁸ Grounded far more in nostalgia than in reality, plantation fiction expresses the impossible settler colonial fantasy of benevolent domination. Boone Hall plantation in Charleston, South Carolina demonstrates the southern plantation’s paradoxical ability to simultaneously conceal and reveal itself. Still a working plantation, Boone Hall operates today as a tourist site and advertises itself as “America’s most photographed plantation.”³⁹ Yet no

³⁷ Greeson, *Our South*, 62.

³⁸ Elizabeth Christine Russ, *The Plantation in the Post-slavery Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69.

³⁹ “Home: Boone Hall Plantation,” Boone Hall Plantation, accessed May 5, 2019, <https://www.boonehallplantation.com/>.

photographs are allowed within the plantation great house itself. Whether prompted by the demands of historical preservation or a profit-driven desire to retain control of imagery, the effect of the plantation's photography ban is the same. Even this most exposed plantation, which has appeared in blockbuster films like *The Notebook*, maintains an aura of secrecy within its walls.

The Caribbean plantation extends this settler fantasy beyond the borders of the United States. Plantation literature was weaponized by the planter class in order to “fantasize legitimacy.”⁴⁰ Within the imaginative realm of fiction, writers could envision the dominion they desired. “The colonists and the Planters as well as the travelers who visited them,” Édouard Glissant has argued, “were possessed of a real need to justify the system.”⁴¹ Caribbean scholars like Glissant and Sylvia Wynter have shown how the plantation itself is a fiction, a construct designed to keep Europeans in power. As Wynter has argued, “the myth of history was used by the plantation to keep its power secure.”⁴² At the same time, critics like Antonio Benítez-Rojo have unpacked the realities of the plantation system on the Caribbean population. For Benítez-Rojo, the plantation is a repeating “machine” that “produced imperialism, wars, colonial blocs, rebellions, repressions, sugar islands, runaway slave settlement, air and naval bases, revolutions of all sorts, and even a ‘free associated state,’ next to an unfree socialist state.”⁴³ As Benítez-Rojo notes, the plantation system replicated the sugar economy throughout the Caribbean. However, the mountainous terrain of Dominica prevented the installation of large-scale sugar plantations. Instead, smaller estates growing lime, cocoa, coffee, and bananas sprang up around

⁴⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990): 70.

⁴¹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 70.

⁴² Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou* 5 (1971), 101.

⁴³ Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 9.

the island. For my purpose, these smaller plantations enable a tighter focus on the plantation home and the family which inhabited it.

The plantation repeats itself not just throughout the Caribbean but also throughout Ireland and the American South, as well as in parts of Africa and South America. As this brief survey demonstrates, these spaces and genres are both tightly aligned and meaningfully distinct. Clukey and Wells have argued that, “despite this variability,” throughout the plantation system, “scholarship tends not to recognize its many historical forms and the connections among them.”⁴⁴ To address this absence, Clukey and Wells issue a call for a “truly comparative, transnational look at the plantation as a global socioeconomic and cultural phenomenon.”⁴⁵ I answer their call by turning to the plantation home itself, the epicenter of settler colonial power.

Currents and Constellations: Comparative Frameworks

To conceptualize comparative projects linking distinct yet related literatures, scholars frequently look to the seas and to the skies. Maria McGarrity uses the currents of the Gulf Stream as “a metaphor of geographic connection” to suggest shared ways of imagining space and landscape.⁴⁶ Amy King has praised Patricia Yeager’s circum-Atlantic scholarship for “creating archives that cross boundaries— geographic, temporal, aesthetic— to show how constellations of texts illustrate and communicate with each other concerning social complexities that are condensed in a certain image.”⁴⁷ David Lloyd also draws on celestial imagery with his claim that “the work of postcolonial theory is not so much to achieve the unification and homologization of

⁴⁴ Clukey and Wells, “Plantation Modernity,” 6.

⁴⁵ Clukey and Wells, “Plantation Modernity,” 8.

⁴⁶ McGarrity, *Gulf Stream*, 23.

⁴⁷ Amy K. King, “Circling Back and Expanding Beyond: Theorizing Excess in Circum-Atlantic Contexts,” *South: A Scholarly Journal* 48, no. 2 (2016): 219.

its diverse objects as to assemble its fragments in provisional and telling constellations.”⁴⁸ As these metaphors illustrate, transnational projects of this scope present unique opportunities and challenges. Placing Ireland, the American South, and Dominica in conversation, I wish to highlight shared structures of settler colonialism while at the same time remaining sensitive to Lloyd’s observation that “there are no identical colonial situations.”⁴⁹ Lloyd suggests one way forward is to “mark the ways in which quite specific cultural forms emerge in relation to a universalizing process.”⁵⁰ In my analysis of the Big House and the plantation, I call attention to the “differentials” that distinguish each space, genre, and literary tradition while simultaneously pointing to the shared legacy of British colonization.

I am helped in this goal by the methodology laid out by Michael Malouf in his analysis of Pascale Casanova’s influential study *The World Republic of Letters*. Malouf refines Casanova’s use of paradigms and suggests that the case study may be a more precise way to approach comparative work. The case, as Lauren Berlant notes, is both exemplary and exceptional and thus lends itself to comparative analysis without presuming any transferability.⁵¹ Malouf suggests two methodologies for comparative, case-based analysis. He posits “readings” and “rubrics” as approaches that balance similarity and difference across time and space.⁵² While “readings” foreground cross-cultural reception and appropriation of texts, I find “rubrics,” or parameters of investigation that do not assume a conclusion, more helpful to my project.

⁴⁸ David Lloyd, “Ireland’s Modernities: Introduction,” *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 3 (2003): 321.

⁴⁹ David Lloyd, “Ireland after History,” in *Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2000): 378.

⁵⁰ Lloyd, “Ireland after History,” 378.

⁵¹ Lauren Berlant, “On the Case,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 663-672.

⁵² Michael Malouf, “Problems with Paradigms: Irish Comparativism and Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*,” *New Hibernia Review* 17, no. 1 (2013): 48-66.

Thinking about plantation as a rubric allows me to draw from shared frameworks without compromising the unique circumstances of each text and national context.

Considering the plantation as a rubric also enables a continual dialogue with historical systems of oppression in a way that other comparative frameworks do not. Remaining grounded in historical contexts forces a consideration of the real-world implications that sometimes get lost in metaphors of sea and sky.⁵³ My study of how plantation writing can perpetuate harmful narratives about the past and uphold unequal power structures has bearing on contemporary conversations. Colonization continues in the guise of tourism and gentrification. In our present moment, women play a vital role in upholding and perpetuating these new forms of colonialism. The stories women tell about home continue to shape our past, present, and future. To various extents, the women writers I study here prove Barker's contention that, "even as settler colonizers deny their complicity, they exercise massive power and privilege to rewrite history according to their preferences and beliefs."⁵⁴

The writers studied here are all products of or participants in this settler colonial tradition. Consequently, they are all white women. A growing body of scholarship on whiteness seeks to "reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege."⁵⁵ Recent studies such as Carol Anderson's *White Rage*, Eula Biss's "White Debt," and Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* show the potential for work which investigates both the constructedness of whiteness and the dangers of its continued hegemony. Whiteness, this work suggests, must be continually analyzed and deconstructed rather than naturalized as the default

⁵³ Forthcoming work by Marlo Starr and Valérie Loichot calls attention to the materiality of the sea to investigate literary production in transnational contexts.

⁵⁴ Barker, "Locating Settler Colonialism."

⁵⁵ Barbara Applebaum, "Critical Whiteness Studies," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, June 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-5>.

experience or category. I extend this line of thinking through my critique of white women's complicity in upholding and perpetuating the structures of settler colonialism.

Elizabeth Bowen, a canonical Big House author in the Anglo-Irish literary tradition, provides a useful starting point for my argument. In Chapter One, I break with past scholarship by shifting focus from Bowen's well-known novel *The Last September* to *A World of Love*, her later "oft-forgotten" Big House novel.⁵⁶ I chart Bowen's shifting understanding of the Big House and the role that the Ascendancy class can play in newly independent Éire. In 1940, Bowen published an essay in *The Bell* which made a case for the Big House as a progressive force for good for all Irish people. However, I argue that Bowen's optimism was compromised by her own espionage in Ireland for England during the Second World War. In *A World of Love*, Bowen shows the failure of her social idea by offering a parody of post-war Anglo-Irish hospitality. Ultimately, Bowen's Big House is a bastion of the settler colonial past.

My next chapter moves across the Atlantic to consider the work of Bowen's friend and contemporary Eudora Welty. Like Bowen, Welty was deeply invested in ideas of place and questions of belonging. Yet while Bowen ultimately offers a reactionary approach to the Big House, Welty's writing about the plantation provides a more subversive framework for engaging with the settler colonial past. In her plantation novel *Delta Wedding* and in the town-centric novella *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty deconstructs the sanctity of the southern home. As her characters damage, destroy, and desert household objects, Welty shows that southern memory need not be monolithic. Instead, she posits a dynamic form of southern memory which creates a space for the constant reinterpretation and renegotiation of the past.

⁵⁶ Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), 107.

My third chapter moves further south still to Dominica. Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey offer different examples of white creole women writers navigating their place in Dominica, the West Indies, and the literary marketplace more broadly. Shifting the conversation on white creole writing by focusing primarily on Allfrey, I argue that her otherwise progressive politics were ultimately limited by her reluctance to engage with the racial disparities perpetuated by the plantation system. I consider Allfrey's plantation novel *The Orchid House*, as well as her editorial career at the Dominican *Star*, evidence of her ambivalent orientation towards the settler colonial past. For Allfrey and for Rhys, the plantation encapsulates the "cruel paradoxes" of the white creole woman's experience.⁵⁷

I conclude with an analysis of Tana French's Irish crime novel *The Likeness*. Bookending my project with two Irish novels on the Big House, written half a century apart, illustrates its enduring relevance to the literary landscape while also highlighting the genre's ability to express the shifting demands of the contemporary moment. In the Celtic Tiger Ireland depicted in *The Likeness*, the Big House is sold to the highest bidder and the family destroys itself from within its walls. I analyze how French uses two familiar Irish literary forms, the Big House genre and changeling folklore, to highlight both the changes and continuities in Irish history. While French considers Ireland her home, her global upbringing gives her the critical distance necessary to explode and expose the Big House genre. She reveals the genre for what it has been all along: a case study in the uses and abuses of power.

⁵⁷ Evelyn O'Callaghan, "'The Outsider's Voice': White Creole Women Novelists in the Caribbean Literary Tradition," *Journal of West Indian Literature* 1, no. 1 (1986): 86.

Chapter One: “A Secret History”: Elizabeth Bowen, Espionage, and the Big House

A 2011 exhibition at the National Library of Ireland juxtaposed images of “upstairs” and “downstairs” life in the Irish Big House. “Power and Privilege: Photographs of the Big House in Ireland, 1858-1922” displayed rare photographs of everyday life in Ascendancy homes.¹ Exhibiting images of elaborate celebrations next to photographs of domestic labor offers a comprehensive depiction of what it looked like to live in an Irish Big House. The overall effect is a kind of double exposure in which the luxuries of Ascendancy leisure overlap with the tedium of their tenants’ work. One of the most interesting photos shows four women and one man on the grounds of an estate in County Galway in 1899. Their dress and posture clearly mark them as members of the gentry. Each holds a camera pointed towards the photographer and looks down into the viewfinder. Heads lowered and faces obscured by hats, the gaze they return is fractured and filtered. At the turn of the twentieth century, members of the Ascendancy were both observers of emerging modern life and relics of a fading social system. Yet they continued to view the world through their own privileged lens.

Ambivalence is built in to the Big House. According to Amy Clukey, the Big House is “locus of modern contradictions...simultaneously old and new, fabricated and natural, feudal and capitalist, local and global.”² This ambivalence renders the Big House, and the plantation system from which it grew, a productive site for literary and cultural production. Elizabeth Bowen delighted in this doubleness. She found the Big House inherently duplicitous, a place where artifice is more important than actuality. The Big House, she claimed, feels isolated to visitors, but actually is not. Bowen’s Court, for example, was a mile away from the village and adjacent

¹ A version of this exhibit has been preserved on Google Arts and Culture and is accessible at <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/gRZ2paFn>.

² Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells, “Introduction: Plantation Modernity,” *Global South* 10, no. 2 (2016): 6.

to a main thoroughfare. “The loneliness of my house, as of many others,” Bowen clarified, “is more effect than reality.”³ This “paradox” extends to the size of the homes as well, which “often... are not big at all.”⁴

This gap between effect and reality is what interested Bowen about the Big House. She was fascinated with the Ascendancy myth-making that had created this dissonance. At times, she expressed a desire to close this gap and expose secrets within the walls of the Big House. However, her wartime activities and later writings indicate that her loyalties to the past were more complicated and compelling than she acknowledged. As an Anglo-Irish writer, Bowen’s own subject position embodies the ambivalence of the Big House. Roy Foster has claimed that Bowen “felt most at home mid-Irish Sea.”⁵ Yet Bowen herself complicated this idea when she described how the Anglo-Irish “have a foot in each country, on each side, which sounds like an extremely uncomfortable metaphor when you think about how wide the Irish Sea is.”⁶

Bowen’s own assertion playfully pushes back against Foster’s comments placing her out to sea. Yet this dissonance also reflects a critical over-correction stemming from a desire to include Bowen in the Irish canon. Reacting against criticism policing Bowen’s Irishness, revisionist scholars recontextualized Bowen and writers like her by thinking beyond old binaries. Reconsidering Anglo-Irish writers within the Irish literary tradition was a necessary and worthwhile project. Yet early work towards this end was too ready to overlook power differentials in the name of cultural hybridity. Declan Kiberd, for example, claimed that Bowen “wrote not so much to record as to invent a self, a self which lived on the hyphen between

³ Elizabeth Bowen, “The Big House,” *The Bell* 1, no. 1 (1940): 71.

⁴ Bowen, “Big House,” 72.

⁵ Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), 107.

⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, *Listening In*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 326.

‘Anglo’ and ‘Irish.’”⁷ But that hyphen is a border, not a bridge. And Bowen’s project wasn’t as inventive as Kiberd claimed. Rather, Bowen continued a settler colonial Anglo-Irish tradition that has long sought to justify its presence in Ireland through literature. Scholars like Kiberd and Foster attempted to create a space for Bowen and Anglo-Irish writers like her. Yet, whether on the hyphen or out at sea, these spaces are “uncomfortable metaphors” rather than lived realities or aesthetic perspectives.

In the wake of the revisionist movement, Bowen has been continually being reclaimed, reinterpreted, and reevaluated.⁸ The global turn in literary studies, which seeks to move beyond national boundaries that relegate authors to a single tradition, has yielded interesting interpretations of Bowen’s place in world literature. Studies like Jed Esty’s *Unseasonable Youth* and Nels Pearson’s *Irish Cosmopolitanism* show the productive potential for considering the ways Bowen’s work participates in global systems. In 2017, an international conference dedicated to Bowen spawned both a society and review journal to continue conversations about her work. Following the critical preoccupation with reconsidering Bowen, the conference website claimed Bowen’s “contribution to world literature has been considerably underestimated and overshadowed by the achievements of canonical writers of the time.”⁹

In many ways, Bowen is a safe candidate for this kind of attention. Disadvantaged in some areas but advantaged in others, Bowen’s identity intersects at a familiar crossroad. While her reputation may have suffered on the basis of her gender and her Irishness, her whiteness and her class bolster her cultural capital. She is thus ideally positioned not just for reconsideration in

⁷ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 368.

⁸ A survey of the titles of recent Bowen criticism reveals this trend. See Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) Susan Osborn “Reconsidering Elizabeth Bowen,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 1 (2006) and Susan Osborn, ed. *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives* (Cork: Cork UP, 2009).

⁹ “Home,” Intentional Conference on Elizabeth Bowen, accessed October 16, 2018. <http://bowen.irf-network.org/>

the Irish or English canons but also for a place on the global literary marketplace. This urge to turn and re-turn to Bowen throughout an evolving critical landscape illustrates the enduring power and appeal of her work. Bowen's prose is so rich that any number of emerging subfields, from object-oriented ontology to ecocriticism, readily map onto her work and yield insightful interpretations. The ensuing scholarship is interesting, but it must acknowledge both Bowen's brilliance and her blind spots.

In this chapter, I consider how Bowen wields her circumscribed yet considerable power and privilege. I read Bowen's commitment to Big House ideology as a strategy which preserves the violent secrets of the settler colonial past. Interrogating three pieces of Bowen's cultural production during the Second World War and its aftermath reveals her adherence to problematic ideas of the Big House and the failure of these ideas in twentieth century. Reading her espionage reports from the Second World War, an essay on the Big House for *The Bell*, and her often-overlooked novel *A World of Love* in conversation offers an indictment of how the Ascendancy navigated the conflicts of the twentieth century. Further, considering Bowen's later Big House writings as part of the same project as her espionage locates colonial complicity in the home, enabling a discussion of how women writers translate global forces into domestic spaces. Yet the implications of this analysis go well beyond Anglo-Ireland by illuminating how those in power control the stories we tell about the past and, as a result, attempt to shape the future.

To Bowen, the Big House was more than just a genre. It was a home, a worldview, and a way of life. Scholars of Anglo-Ireland typically read the Big House either as a literary genre or as an architectural space. Past work such as Vera Kreilkamp's *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* offers insightful analysis of how writers like Bowen use the Big House genre to work through their ambivalent feelings towards the Ascendancy past. On the other hand, work like

Amy Clukey's considers the Big House and the plantation system more broadly as socioeconomic institutions working to advance global capitalism. While this work has laid valuable groundwork, limiting analysis of the Big House to either the genre or the space precludes meaningful discussion of how literature and institutions work together to control culture. For Bowen, the Big House was also a mode of discourse which navigated class conflict and ultimately reaffirmed the colonial past.

Reading the Big House as a mode of discourse elucidates how Ascendancy writers understand their own complicity in systems of colonial oppression. Big House discourse offers a framework for relegating class conflict to the home, thereby controlling and containing it. By encapsulating the violence of the settler colonial past within the walls of the family home, Big House discourse mediates settler colonial guilt and offers narrative control over the past. Bowen's investment in Big House discourse is grounded in her belief that the Ascendancy can pioneer a new Irish life free of the social stratification of the colonial past. Ultimately, though, Bowen's ideas about the Big House show the limits of top-down cultural mediation, in which those in power attempt to connect with those without. By dictating the terms of this cultural mediation, Bowen preserves the power structures which work to position the Anglo-Irish economically, politically, and socially above their colonial counterparts.

For Bowen, Big House discourse was a way to work through questions of cultural difference and national belonging. These questions were especially meaningful during the Second World War, when Irish neutrality both challenged and confused English war efforts. Today, these same questions have a new relevance. Brexit has reignited debates about the relationships between England, Ireland, and Northern Ireland. For some, Brexit represents the failure of the myth of a pan-European identity which could subsume Anglo- and Irish difference.

In a New York Times opinion piece, Megan Nolan, an Irish emigrant to England, writes of how Brexit forced her to “discover how little the people who shaped her country’s fate know or care.”¹⁰ In the pre-Brexit era, Nolan claims, both the English and many Irish wanted to “move on” and leave the past in the past. “After all,” she writes, “all that occupation business was so long ago.”¹¹ Nearly eighty years earlier, Bowen expressed a similar desire from her hyphenated perspective. Yet the wounds of colonialism are slow to heal when the power structures remain intact. “England keeps on making itself matter to Ireland,” Nolan writes, “against our will.” Citing multiple examples of England’s willful ignorance towards Irish suffering, Nolan claims post-Brexit, her anger is “more sincere” and that she is “more ready to call out centuries of excess, more likely to object to those... who still perceive us as their inferiors.” Periods of global conflict, such as the Second World War and Brexit, show that the wrongs of the colonial past are not past. Reading Bowen’s *Big House* discourse alongside her wartime espionage reveals the ways that the colonial past continues to haunt the present.

A “Social Idea”: The Big House and the Settler Colonial Situation

The Big House is always a haunted house. For the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, however, this haunting is a comfort. Elizabeth Bowen welcomed “the indefinite ghosts of the past,” who lent a house its history and imposed upon its living residents a sense of purpose. For Bowen, the Big House’s haunted history was a positive, productive force. In her 1940 essay “The Big House,” Bowen celebrated how within the walls of Bowen’s Court, “the dead who lived here and pursued the same routine of life in these walls, add something, a sort of order, a reason for living, to

¹⁰ Megan Nolan, “I Didn’t Hate the English—Until Now.” *The New York Times*. 18 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/opinion/england-ireland-border-brexit.html>

¹¹ Nolan, “Hate the English.”

every minute and hour”(BH 75). She enjoyed how “each house seems to live under its own spell,” exuding a sense of mystery (75). Bowen was enthralled with, rather than threatened by, the secrets contained within the walls of the Big House. She was so enchanted that she even wanted to share the magic of the Big House with her countrymen. She issued a call for the remaining owners to throw open the doors of their Big Houses. The Big Houses themselves, she argued, beg to be a part of a modern, inclusive Ireland: ““Can we not,’ the big, half-empty rooms seem to ask, ‘be as never before, sociable? Cannot we scrap the past, with its bitterness and barriers and all meet, throwing in what we have?’” (76). Bowen assumed that her colonial counterparts, the “Irish-Irish” as she called them, would be equally willing to overlook the traumas of history and take similar delight in Ascendancy pleasures. Yet Bowen’s open-doors enthusiasm proved short-lived. Ultimately, she was invested in preserving, rather than exposing, the secrets of the Big House.

Seán Ó Faoláin commissioned Bowen to write “The Big House” for the inaugural issue of *The Bell*, his magazine intended to offer “a survey of Irish life.” In her contribution, Bowen explored her ancestral past while offering a vision of an inclusive Ireland that fit with *The Bell*’s mission. In newly independent Eire, the team behind *The Bell* was more interested in bridging the colonial divide than reaffirming tribal loyalties. Ó Faoláin articulated this mission in his introduction to the first volume with language that explicitly includes Bowen’s essay: “Whoever you are then, O Reader, Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, priest or layman, Big House or Small House, *The Bell* is for you.”¹² In this editorial preface, Ó Faoláin signaled his own shift away from his earlier republican activism and towards an aesthetic production of cultural harmony.

¹² Seán Ó Faoláin, “This is your magazine,” *The Bell* 1, no.1 (1940): 9.

Biographical as well as political reasons explain Ó Faoláin's allusion to Bowen in his introduction. Bowen and Ó Faoláin, both married at the time, were in the midst of a romantic relationship. Bowen claimed the affair was a source of both great pleasure and great pain for the couple. "We are also by nature extremely secretive," she later wrote, "which helps."¹³ While both Ó Faoláin and Bowen suffered under the weight of their infidelities, Bowen's betrayals went beyond the bedroom. From 1940 to 1942, she conducted espionage in Ireland on behalf of England's Ministry of Information. Bowen had volunteered for the job. She traveled to Ireland, gathered information, and composed reports on Irish feelings about the Second World War. Bowen reported conversations she'd had with everyday folks, important politicians, and notable writers, including Ó Faoláin.

Publicly, Ó Faoláin downplayed the espionage, claiming Bowen had been seeking "personal aggrandizement."¹⁴ Yet he must have felt some sting at Bowen's clandestine activities. Ó Faoláin had prided himself on being able to locate, identify, and elevate the authentic aesthetic voice of the new Ireland with a "hound's smell for the real thing."¹⁵ The fact that his lover and literary collaborator so cavalierly celebrated her Ascendancy heritage in his own magazine while working for the English could not have failed to affront him. Yet the same values that enabled Bowen's espionage were evident in her writing for Ó Faoláin. Her fascination with the duplicitousness of the Big House and her belief that the Ascendancy had a duty to facilitate social interaction paved the way for her espionage.

Espionage and the Big House, Bowen's twin obsessions throughout the Second World War and its aftermath, are inextricably connected in her writing. Both preoccupations provoke

¹³ Quoted in Peter Lennon, "The spy who loved Daddy," *The Guardian*, 3 February 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/feb/04/features11.g2>

¹⁴ Nuala Ó Faoláin, quoted in Lennon, "Spy who loved Daddy."

¹⁵ Ó Faoláin, "Your Magazine," 7.

questions about identity, history, and complicity. What do *belonging* and *betrayal* mean for a writer of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in the twentieth century, particularly during wartime? Much of Bowen's wartime and postwar writing addresses these questions. Bowen extended her interests in the "The Big House" with the 1942 publication of *Bowen's Court*, a deep dive into her own family's settler colonial past.¹⁶ *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* followed in 1945 and included stories about both wartime secrets ("The Demon Lover") and Anglo-Irish identity ("The Happy Autumn Fields") in the same collection. Bowen most explicitly dealt with espionage in her critically acclaimed 1949 novel *The Heat of the Day*. Featuring a love triangle in which one member is a secret agent working for German intelligence, *The Heat of the Day* is the novel critics turn to most frequently when discussing Bowen's own espionage.¹⁷ While Bowen's espionage is certainly a crucial element of *The Heat of the Day*, the novel takes place largely in blitzed London and therefore the implications of her espionage are only partially felt. A brief foray to Ireland when the protagonist's son inherits a Big House demonstrates that Bowen could not fully escape her fixation on the Anglo-Irish home.

In her next novel, *A World of Love*, Bowen returns to the site of her own espionage. Published in 1955, this "often-forgotten" novel in fact extends Bowen's thematic interests in secrets and spies.¹⁸ Bowen's own espionage infiltrates the text, altering her characters' behavior and shaping her narrative style. The Big House—both the setting and the genre—proved the perfect vehicle for Bowen to excavate her own wartime loyalties and betrayals. In *A World of*

¹⁶ In his polemic introduction to the published version of Bowen's espionage reports, editor Jack Lane suggests that she wrote *Bowen's Court* to build up her Irish credentials as part of a cover in advance of her espionage.

¹⁷ For discussions of espionage in *The Heat of the Day*, see Anna Teekell, "Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War," *New Hibernia Review* 15, no. 3 (2003): 61-79; Heather Bryant Jordan, *How will the heart endure? Elizabeth Bowen and the landscape of war*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); W.J. McCormack, *Dissolute Characters: Irish literary history through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats, and Bowen*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, 107.

Love, Bowen revises her earlier theory in “The Big House,” that the Ascendancy can be a social good. Instead, she depicts an Anglo-Irish family consumed with a mythologized version of the past which suppresses uncomfortable truths.

A World of Love is set in a decaying Big House in the Cork countryside of the 1950s. The Danbys are a family unit cobbled together out of necessity, obligation, and the wreckage of war. Guy, the Ascendancy heir apparent and patriarch, died in combat during the Great War. He leaves behind him his world-weary cousin, Antonia, and his hapless fiancée, Lilia. Both women harbor romantic affections for Guy and live their lives in the wake of his memory. Antonia marries Lilia off to her illegitimate cousin, Fred. The three remaining members of the older Danby generation uneasily share ownership and responsibility for Montefort, the family Big House. Guy, the rightful heir, has left behind no suitable alternative. Antonia is disqualified from full ownership by her gender while Fred is disqualified by his illegitimacy, with its ensuing ethnic and class implications. As a compromise, Fred works the land and pays half of the profits to Antonia. In this precarious situation, the power-balance is unclear: “Of this arrangement it had not yet been decided whether it did or did not work, still less if it were equitable, or if not so, not so at whose expense.”¹⁹

The little action present in the novel begins when Jane, Fred and Lilia’s daughter and a typical Bowen heroine, finds a cache of love letters in Montefort’s attic. The letters are from Guy, but their intended recipient is unclear. Jane’s discovery calls up Guy’s ghost, and each of the Danby women (including Jane herself) are forced to confront their misconceptions about the past. The letters, it turns out, were written by Guy to a mysterious third woman. Once the Danbys confront this unsavory family secret, that their beloved Guy was actually an unfaithful

¹⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, *A World of Love* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 14.

lover, they are able to meet the future with a new sense of liberation. Despite its happy ending, *A World of Love* is not a future-oriented novel. Rather, it's a Big House novel in which the ghosts of the past loom large. The novel stages both Bowen's desire to "scrap the past" and the impossibility of this Ascendancy fantasy.

For Bowen, the home is where the past lives. Eighteen years after Ó Faoláin commissioned Bowen to write for *The Bell*, she was still parsing their relationship through the prism of her ancestral home. In her 1958 essay "Bowen's Court," Bowen remembered an evening when Ó Faoláin helped her close her house up for the night, and how their two competing pasts met at the threshold of the Big House:

Seán Ó Faoláin, helping me lock up—a nightly ritual involving heaving an iron bar into place, then fastening the hall door on the inside with massive chains— remarked that *here* was a Big House ready for siege! Complex race memories, conflicts, the raids and burning of the Troubles of his young days and mine simultaneously stirred in us two Irish—I whose first Irish ancestor had come from Wales, he descended from the ancient inhabitants of the land.²⁰

Domestic spaces mediate between the past and the present. "Race memories" find expression in household tasks as mundane as closing a door. Bowen positions herself as the inheritor of these memories and she understands her family's history as representative of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy more broadly. For Bowen, home, race, and family are contiguous concepts. She was a scholar of her "more or less synonymous race and family"²¹ and believed that "the home

²⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, "Bowen's Court," in *People, Places, Things*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 146-147 (emphasis original).

²¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975):14.

implies the family unit.”²² These connections were not incidental, but formative. “The person is the product, conscious or not,” Bowen argued “of what goes on inside the four walls.”²³ The individual is, essentially and unavoidably, a product of their family home.

When the individual is a member of the Ascendancy, their identity carries with it the weight of the colonial past. In her work on her own ancestry, Bowen frequently alluded to the foundational violence that characterizes the settler colonial situation in Ireland and beyond. “The stretches of the past that I have had to cover have been, on the whole, painful,” she writes in *Bowen’s Court*. “My family got their position and drew their power from a situation that shows an inherent wrong.”²⁴ Ultimately, though, Bowen is interested in how the Ascendancy survived, not what they did to secure their status. She often romanticizes the struggles of her early ancestors in ways that acknowledge their status as conquerors with something resembling pride. “After an era of greed, roughness and panic,” Bowen writes in “The Big House,” “after an era of camping in charred or desolate ruins (as my Cromwellian ancestors did certainly) these new settlers who had been imposed on Ireland began to wish to add something to life” (*BH* 73). Bowen’s use of the passive voice distances the “imposed” settlers from their violent colonial crimes. She moves quickly past their foundational violence and focuses instead on their social contributions. Bowen’s vacillations between colonial guilt and cultural superiority are typical of the twentieth-century Ascendancy outlook. As Foster argues, “The Anglo-Irish gentry in post-independence dispensation, long bereft of *raison d’être*,” found themselves “bound to a history which was a matter of mingled pride and bad conscience.”²⁵

²² Elizabeth Bowen, “The Idea of Home,” in *Listening In*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 163.

²³ Bowen, “Idea of Home,” 174.

²⁴ Bowen, *Bowen’s Court*, 453.

²⁵ Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, 102.

Because her family and her social class are so tightly aligned, Bowen can never quite bring herself to condemn the colonial situation. Instead, she offers a redemptive reading of Ascendancy culture. Bowen claimed the Anglo-Irish compensated for their initial misdeeds by contributing to Irish life, championing the arts, European culture, and a humanistic tradition. For Bowen, the ends justify the means: “The security that they had, by the eighteenth century, however ignobly gained, they did not use quite ignobly” (*BH* 73). In “The Big House,” she sets forth a theory of how the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy ultimately benefitted Irish society. The “social idea” was predicated on the assumption that once they’d established themselves in positions of power, the Anglo-Irish could contribute to Irish life in a positive and meaningful way.

For Bowen, the Big House itself is evidence of this Ascendancy purpose. The Big Houses, she admits, “have made no natural growth from the soil — the idea that begot them was purely a social one” (73). The architecture of these Ascendancy homes contributes to this idea. Bowen notes how the practical and mundane parts of the Big House— kitchens, storehouses, offices— were “sunk underground” and hidden out of sight. The true purpose of the Big House, she argues, is to create space for social interaction: “Yet in another sense, the most ornate, spacious parts of these buildings were the most functional — the steps, the halls, the living-rooms, the fine staircases— it was these that contributed to society, that raised life above the exigencies of mere living to the plane of art, or at least style” (73). The social idea, in other words, was literally built into the Big House from the beginning.

Bowen claims the Big House was “planned for spacious living— for hospitality above all” (73). Yet Bowen was envisioning a very specific form of hospitality bound by Ascendancy conventions and limited to Ascendancy values. The Anglo-Irish, in other words, would entirely dictate the terms of this hospitality. Following her interest in living “life with the lid on,”

Bowen's version of Anglo-Irish hospitality is one where civility reigns.²⁶ In this social setting, individual opinions are not welcome. "What is fine about the social idea," she wrote, "is that it means the subjugation of the personal to the impersonal" (76). This meant that debates about contentious topics, like history and politics, were off the table: "In the interest of good manners and good behavior people learned to subdue their own feelings" (76). Bowen's insistence on decorum over emotion precludes the possibility of any meaningful dialogue.

Bowen skirts the question of whether the Big House has fully embodied this ambitious social purpose. "It is something to subscribe to an idea," she writes, "even if one cannot live up to it" (73). She attributes the Big House's shortcomings to landlords' eccentricities and frivolities rather than to a fundamental cultural divide or an oppressive power structure. The descendants of these irresponsible landlords are victims of the past too, she argues. Much of "The Big House" is devoted to chronicling the struggles of the Ascendancy in decline and commending how bravely the Anglo-Irish face these difficulties. Things are different today, Bowen acknowledges. The Big House may seem a relic of the past, but Bowen believes it is more important than ever:

From the point of view of the outside Irish world, does the big house justify its existence? I believe it could do so now as never before. As I said, the idea from which these houses sprang was, before everything, a social one. That idea, although lofty, was at first rigid and narrow— but it could extend itself, and it must if the big house is to play an alive part in the alive Ireland of to-day (76).

In the twentieth century, especially, Bowen argues, the Big House should serve a social purpose to facilitate dialogue and bring people together. She stressed that the Big House could change and evolve to suit the times. "The big house has much to learn," Bowen claims, "and it must

²⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, *English Novelists* (London: W. Collins, 1942), 25.

learn if it is to survive at all. But it has much to give” (76). With the “social idea” of the Big House, Bowen flips the settler colonial script. By focusing on what the Big House can give, rather than what it can take, Bowen justifies the Ascendancy’s past, present, and future existence in Ireland.

Bowen celebrated the Anglo-Irish “manner of instantly striking root into the interstices of any society in which they happened to find themselves, and in their own way proceeding to rule the roost.”²⁷ If the Ascendancy was born to rule, Bowen figures their reign as a lonely one. She further collapses family into race when claiming the Anglo-Irish were the unhappy offspring of the English and Irish union: “It is possible that Anglo-Irish people, like only children, do not know how much they miss. Their existences, like that of children, are singular, independent, secretive.”²⁸ Herself an only child, Bowen fully embodied this secretive existence. Her espionage was one of many secrets in her life. Extramarital affairs and possible bisexuality are further evidence Bowen’s evasive loyalties. For a modern women writer of Anglo-Irish heritage, singular labels did not fit Bowen well. Yet at different times throughout her life Bowen took an either/or rather than a both/and approach to her various hyphenated identities.

Bowen always considered herself an Irish writer. But her space in the Irish canon was further challenged when her espionage came to light. In his polemical introduction to Bowen’s *Notes on Eire*, editor Jack Lane goes to great lengths to explain why he does not consider Bowen an Irish writer and thus excluded her from his *North Cork Anthology*:

The Bowen Family undoubtedly had a physical connection with the area—a predatory connection. They had owned estates, drawn rents, and represented the British State in the locality. And the Big House had stood in Kildorrey within living memory... the

²⁷ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, 14.

²⁸ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 365.

Anthology was meant to reflect the cultural heritage of local people down the generations— and Elizabeth Bowen was certainly not part of that. Her literary outlook, the themes of her books, her characters derived from another culture.²⁹

Lane uses Bowen's *Big House*, and its survival into the modern age, to justify his exclusion of Bowen from this regional canon. For Lane and likeminded readers, Bowen's espionage was an unsurprising act of allegiance to the English born out of a lifetime of profiting off the colonial situation. An approach less invested in policing the boundaries of national identity shows that Bowen's espionage was more of an extension of Ascendancy power rather than a mark of political loyalty. Like the *Big House* itself, Bowen's espionage grew out of a "social idea" that the Ascendancy could contribute to Irish life by facilitating dialogue and cultural understanding. While Bowen's desire to facilitate cultural understanding seems genuine, she fails to account for her own privileged subject position. Her unwillingness to cede narrative control and to confront the violent realities of the past prevent the possibility of meaningful reconciliation. Reading Bowen's espionage in conversation with the social idea of the *Big House* challenges this model of cultural mediation, in which those in power attempt to connect with those without.

"Unofficial Diplomacy:" The Social Idea in Bowen's Espionage Reports

Bowen's espionage was entirely enabled by Ascendancy status. She obtained a hard-to-come-by travel permit and avoided interrogation when entering the country of her birth. "At the Irish port (Rosslare) no search was made through my papers," she writes in her first report, "no questions were asked as to why I was coming into the country, or for how long" (*NE* 11). Bowen was in fact "surprised" that she did not experience more difficulties entering Eire as she

²⁹ Jack Lane, introduction to Elizabeth Bowen, *Notes on Eire*, ed. Jack Lane (Aubane: Aubane Historical Society, 2009), 6.

“understood that travelers coming into this country from England had lately been fairly closely scrutinized by the Irish authorities” (11). While Bowen is indeed a traveler coming from England, she is not an English traveler. As an Anglo-Irish traveler, Bowen was afforded both freedom of movement and freedom from suspicion.

Once she was in the country, Bowen was granted access to rarified social spaces due to her Ascendancy status. Much of her espionage depended upon her established social circles. She reported that she “was able... to see again, over tea or sherry, people whom I had met elsewhere, and to continue conversations that promised to be interesting” (39). When she did forge new connections, as with James Dillon, her reputation preceded her. She was able to meet the controversial politician for tea and had several follow-up conversations with him, upon which she reported at length. Her reports on these conversations with Dillon were among the more contentious and consequential of her reports; Dillon was reportedly enraged that Bowen had reported his fascist inclinations.³⁰

Although her objective was to speak to as many different people as possible, Bowen focused her reports mostly on the “Irish-Irish” and less frequently relayed information regarding about her own class (*NE* 43). Bowen did not consider the prospect of spying on her fellow Anglo-Irish a betrayal, but rather she felt “their attitude is generally predictable” (15). True to the social idea in “The Big House,” Bowen pursued cross-class conversations in the hopes that they would be insightful and, to bolster her reports, informative. The Ascendancy did not escape her scrutiny entirely, however. She was struck by their pessimism about the war effort. Through her espionage, Bowen worked to correct their negative opinions: “It is interesting that the worst defeatism, on behalf of Britain, that I have met, and tried to counter, in this country has been

³⁰ Lennon, “Spy who Loved Daddy.”

among the Protestant Anglo-Irish” (24-25). She warned Downing Street that the Anglo-Irish attitudes were an important barometer for morale in Eire and should be taken seriously. The Anglo-Irish, in Bowen’s estimation, were under constant surveillance by the “Irish-Irish” and their moods rippled out over the country: “My own feeling is that pessimism on the part of the Anglo-Irish people is regrettable, and nervousness still more so: the Anglo-Irish are fairly closely watched by ‘the Irish,’ and any drop in their spirits is immediately taken as a sign that ‘England is going to lose the war’” (24). Bowen’s report reveals the “paranoiac disposition” typical of the settler colonial worldview while also emphasizing the consequences of misinformation during wartime.³¹

While she warned that the attitudes of one group could infect the other, Bowen was simultaneously surprised at the dissonance she felt between the native Irish and their settler colonial counterparts. She lamented that the sharp divide still held fast: “That this gulf between the two Irelands...should continue to be felt by young people seems to me a pity” (*NE* 43). Bowen is uninterested in thinking throughout why this gulf persists. In her espionage, Bowen is much more interested in finding a solution than understanding the problem. She expressed similar sentiments in “The Big House” when she claimed that if the social divide persists, people will “impoverish life all around” (*BH* 77). In her espionage reports as in “The Big House,” Bowen continued to place the task of bridging this gulf on her own class. The Anglo-Irish, she suggested, should align themselves with the natives and eschew some of their Englishness. “In fact,” Bowen offers in one report, “the Anglo-Irish would be doing much better service to both England and Eire if they would not so zealously represent themselves as England’s stronghold here” (*NE* 43). For Bowen, this alliance would be mutually beneficial: “If the Anglo-Irish would

³¹ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 75.

merge their interest with Eire's they could make— from the point of view of England— a very much more solid and *possible* Eire, with which to deal” (43, emphasis original). Leaning towards the Irish side of their hyphenated identity and away from their Anglo-heritage, Bowen argues, is the way for the Ascendancy to forge a productive and cooperative future. Old distinctions and allegiances feel at best outmoded—and at worst dangerous—during wartime. Yet Bowen focuses on the benefits of this cultural shift for the English. If the Anglo-Irish were to integrate themselves into Eire, Eire would become more manageable for the English. Anglo-Irish absorption into the new country, Bowen suggests, would offer an infusion of civility and reason.

While Bowen was willing to critique her own class, she continues to affirm their role as leaders in Irish society. Their leadership in the twentieth century and especially during wartime, Bowen felt, should be less economic and more cultural. By delegating the responsibility of bridging the gulf between the Irish-Irish and the Anglo-Irish to the Ascendancy, Bowen allows them to dictate the terms of this newfound cultural understanding. Her social idea preserves the settler colonial power dynamic. Further, Bowen's future-oriented perspective refuses to acknowledge the violent wrongs of the colonial past. She offers no solutions beyond talk and hospitality and shows no interest in bridging the economic, political, or even linguistic “gulf” that separates the Anglo-Irish from the Irish-Irish. In her espionage reports to Downing Street as in her writings for *The Bell*, Bowen stops far short of arguing for meaningful changes that would attempt to correct the imbalances and injustices of the past. She's interested in culture and conversation rather than structural reform, land redistribution, or Irish language education. Ultimately, Bowen wants reconciliation without a reckoning.

Bowen's progressiveness was of course limited by her own subject position as a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Acknowledging the extent of settler colonial damage would mean

accepting her and her family's own complicity. In her espionage reports, Bowen creates a distance between herself in her class. Refusing to render herself a spokesperson for her class, she never uses first person plural in her reports to speak on behalf of the Ascendancy. Instead, she writes of her own singular opinions or clarifies that she is interpreting things through "the English mind" (*NE* 36). As Foster has noted, Bowen's reports "confront, much more clearly, the lack of understanding between Ireland and Britain which she had already exploited fruitfully in her fiction."³²

Bowen believed that these misunderstandings could be corrected through conversation. "I have stressed, in all my Reports," she writes to Downing Street, "the immense importance, in this country, of personal impressions and personal talk" (55). Essentially, Bowen's espionage consisted of little more than attending public meetings, seeing propaganda films, and most of all, talking to people. "Talk (I mean talk in ordinary conversation)," Bowen writes in her first report, "in this country cuts more ice than anything else" (11). Bowen made it her project to engage in as much talk, with as many different people, as possible. She was not just asking questions, she was answering them as well, engaging in a mutual exchange of information. The conversational nature of Bowen's espionage shows both optimism about the power of interpersonal interactions and ignorance toward the larger structural issues that have created these gulfs. Bowen's conversational approach to espionage embodies her vision of the social Big House, to which "everyone brought the best that they had – wit, knowledge, sympathy or personal beauty" (*BH* 76). Bowen brought her "best...knowledge" and sympathy to the citizens of Eire and took theirs in return. She clearly hoped this process would "add something to life" (73).

³² Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, 113.

Based on her emphasis on communication, Bowen seems to have viewed her role not as a gatherer of state secrets and distributor of propaganda but as a cultural mediator. At points, she calls on Downing Street to send more people like her to Ireland. She invokes a variety of euphemisms that emphasize cultural understanding over subterfuge and sabotage. “Very much could be done by unofficial diplomacy, and should be done *soon*,” she writes in her first report (NE 11). “The need for unofficial and unostentatious ‘ambassadors’ becomes greater than ever,” she followed up later (55). Bowen’s euphemistic renderings of her espionage may have been a measure of self-protection necessitated by the secretive nature of her work. But, given her investment in explaining one side of the hyphen to the other, it seems more likely that Bowen truly viewed her intelligence gathering as an act of cultural mediation. However, her reports demonstrate that Bowen’s version of cultural mediation was limited in both scope and content.

In many of her reports, Bowen seems to be working through her own thoughts on Irish politics and her feelings about the Anglo-Irish class. In a report dated November 9, 1940 Bowen writes in favor of Irish neutrality. Calling on both sides of her hyphenated identity, she anticipates the English perspective and counters with the Irish mentality: “It may be felt in England that Eire is making a fetish of her neutrality. But this assertion of her neutrality is Eire’s first free self-assertion: as such alone it would mean a great deal to her. Eire (and I think rightly) sees her neutrality as positive, not merely negative” (37). At times, Bowen’s defense of neutrality seems almost polemical: “In fact, there is truth in Mr. De Valera’s contention. It would be more than hardship, it would be sheer disaster for this country, in its present growing stages, and with its uncertain morals, to be involved in war” (37). Yet in the same report, Bowen validates England’s frustrations with Eire’s “growing stages.” She uses the same language of maturation to critique Eire’s youthful national consciousness when she assumes that “the childishness and

obtuseness of this country cannot fail to be irritating to the English mind” (36). In statements like this, Foster reads a “a certain colonial impatience with the obtuseness of the natives which she was careful to excise from more public writings.”³³ Encapsulated in the same report then, Bowen mediates between English and Irish mindsets. She expresses both a colonial frustration with Irish stubbornness and a stalwart defense of Irish neutrality.

Her arguments in favor of neutrality make it difficult to read her espionage as a pure act of disloyalty against Ireland. In many ways, Bowen’s espionage seems an extension of her hyphenated identity. But her espionage is also an expression of the power and privilege she embodies as a member of the Ascendancy. By positioning the Ascendancy as leaders of this cultural mediation, Bowen extends Anglo-Irish supremacy in Ireland. As she considered herself part of the social tradition of the Ascendancy, her mission, as she understood it, had always been facilitating “easy and unsuspecting intercourse to which everyone brought the best they had” (*BH* 76). During wartime, Bowen’s espionage followed that mission to its extreme end. While Bowen may have understood her espionage within the framework of a social good, it is impossible to ignore the unilateral direction of power in her reports.

Ascendancy Performance and Paranoia in *A World of Love*

“The charge of ‘disloyalty’ against the Irish has always, given the plain facts of history, irritated me,” Bowen wrote in one of her espionage reports. “I could wish that the English kept history in mind more, that the Irish kept it in mind less” (*NE* 38). As an Anglo-Irish writer, Bowen’s own loyalties were fractured, ambivalent, and layered. Vera Kreilkamp reads *Big Houses* as “stages of disloyalty” in Bowen’s fiction. Disloyalty here refers to a need to create

³³ Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, 113.

distance from an aesthetic tradition. Bowen claims the artist must free herself from “ancestral pieties,” “hereditary influence,” and “racial, local or social” attachments to find their own voice.³⁴ Kreilkamp argues that throughout Bowen’s oeuvre, Big Houses evidence her shifting attitudes about the Anglo-Irish tradition ranging from conservative nostalgia in *Bowen’s Court* to subversive iconoclasm in *The Last September*. The Big House is an enduring symbol of Ascendancy power onto which Bowen projects her own complicated thoughts about her colonial complicity.

Yet Bowen’s Big Houses are “stages” in another sense as well. In *A World of Love*, the Big Houses is the site of a performance of Anglo-Irish hospitality that shows the hollowness of Bowen’s “social idea.” The Anglo-Irish have always depended upon performance. Bowen noted the Anglo-Irish literary tradition had produced “unbeatable” dramatists, claiming “Art is for us inseparable from artifice: of that, the theater is the home.”³⁵ As a settler colonial community, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy was founded on a performance of sovereignty.³⁶ Initially, this performance was supported by the might of a colonial metropole and bolstered by real and anticipated violence. It was especially important in nations like Ireland, where the Ascendancy was a ruling minority, for the settler community to be actively engaged in performances of wealth and authority.

The Big House was both the stage for and production of this performance, marking the Irish landscape with ostentatious displays of class-based power. Bowen was alert to the performative potential of her class. “To most of the rest of the world,” Bowen wrote, “we are semi-strangers, for whom existence has something of the trance-like quality of spectacle.”³⁷ This

³⁴ Quoted in Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, 143.

³⁵ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, 23.

³⁶ See Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 53-71.

³⁷ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, 23.

Ascendancy spectacle was on show in home-based social gatherings. In “The Big House,” she celebrates how “society— or, more simply, the getting-together of people — was meant to be at once a high pleasure and a willing display” (76). Hospitality, then, was a crucial part of the Ascendancy performance. Yet in post-independence Ireland the Ascendancy could no longer claim any special sovereignty and they needed to justify their presence in Ireland in another way. When the Anglo-Irish were stripped of colonial authority, their presence in Ireland was reduced to a performance of belonging.

Throughout *A World of Love*, members of the Danby family are engaged in this performance of belonging. There is no audience for this performance; the Danbys enact their claim to an Irish homeland solely for their own benefit. They undertake this performance of belonging because they are invested in legitimizing their own history and ensuring the survival of their family line. Unlike other Big House novels, which usually contain the notable presence of native Irish people as foils to the Ascendancy, *A World of Love* focuses on a few Anglo-Irish remnants and English transplants. The limited cast of characters in the novel reflects the isolation that shapes the settler colonial mindset.

In *A World of Love*, Jane learns how to play her part in this Ascendancy production in lessons that occur within the walls of the Big House. Like Lois in *The Last September*, Jane has completed her studies in London and, in the absence of any clear future path, returns home to the family estate. The formal education Jane and Lois received in England contrasts sharply with the socialization they experience in Ireland, and this disconnect leaves both girls feeling adrift. The two sides of a hyphenated Anglo-Irish education create more tension than balance for Bowen’s protagonists. Yet both novels focus exclusively on the Irish side of their protagonists’

development, bracketing off the time spent, people met, and subjects studied in England in favor of the lessons learned within the walls of the Big House.

Aside from her time at boarding school, Jane's life is confined to a relatively small geographic area during these formative years. Until the trip to the airport which concludes the novel and liberates Jane, her "world of love" consists of Montefort and its grounds, her neighbor's castle, and occasional trips to town. The resulting sense of claustrophobia reinforces Ascendancy norms and values while fostering feelings of paranoia and isolation. This worldview is typical not just of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy but of settler-colonial populations more broadly. Lorenzo Veracini has noted the tendency toward a paranoiac disposition in settler communities which situate the settler in a defensive position and represses the memory of foundational violence.³⁸

The older generation of Danby women express these paranoid sentiments intensely and pass them down to Jane. Despite essentially marrying into the Ascendancy, English-born Lilia has never adjusted to life in the Irish countryside. Instead, she develops "a sense...of being besieged, under observation or in some way even under a threat" (*WL* 52). When Lilia ruminates on her anxiety, she fails to distinguish her own domestic realm from her new country of residence. As Bowen's narration dips into Lilia's paranoid mind, the family home readily collapses into the Irish nation: "was it the place itself, her mistrust of Ireland or the uncanny attentiveness of the country which kept her nerves ever upon the stretch?" (53). Bowen regularly personifies places, and in *A World of Love* she fully dissolves the boundaries between countrymen and countryside. As an extension of her diffuse fear of the landscape, Lilia is

³⁸ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 75.

especially suspicious of strangers and develops “a neurosis about anyone standing outside a door” (53).

Lilia’s fear of unknown people approaching her doorstep is a manifestation of the paranoid settler colonial mindset. “She dreaded any comer at all” to Montefort, “worst were those who stood at the door mute, neither speaking nor going away” (53). Lilia pins her fears to the threshold of the Big House. Her anxieties recall both Bowen’s conversation with Ó Faoláin at Bowen’s Court and her writings in “The Big House.” In *The Bell*, Bowen argues that the Big House should never be closed to visitors: “Symbolically (though also matter-of-factly) the doors of the big houses stand open all day; it is only regretfully that they are barred up at night” (*BH* 76). This open-doors policy extends the “social idea” and shares the goal of facilitating dialogue between diverse groups of people. Following this idea, the Big House has a duty to receive visitors both known and unknown: “The stranger is welcome, just as much as the friend—the stranger, in fact, *is* the friend if he does not show himself otherwise” (*BH* 77, emphasis original). In *A World of Love*, Lilia is not willing to take this chance. She gave up on the “social idea” long ago.

Fortunately for Lilia, visitors to Montefort are few and far between, heightening the family’s sense of isolation within their domestic domain. While Lilia is a skittish and nervous character who seems prone to irrational fears, her sister-in-law Antonia is bold and practical. Yet Antonia, too, expresses paranoia about the unknown danger of the Irish countryside surrounding her Big House. And like Lilia, Antonia places her paranoia on the threshold to the home, where the Irish exterior threatens to invade the Anglo-Irish interior. When Antonia is “drawn” to the doorway, she is overcome by Guy’s presence and consumed by memories of their childhood adventures: “Going to stand in the doorway, she was met at once by a windlike rushing toward

her out of the dark— her youth and Guy’s from every direction: the obelisk, avenue, wide country, steep woods, river below” (*WL* 77). Bowen’s narration approaches the depths of its opacity as it conveys Antonia’s heightened psychological state and the temporal collapses she experiences. Oxymoronic phrases capture Antonia’s disorientation while the language of land ownership takes on a distinctly sexual dimension:

No part of the night was not breathless breathing, no part of the quickened stillness not running feet. A rising this was, on the part of two who like hundreds seemed to be teeming over the land...All around Montefort there was going forward an entering back again into possession: the two now one again, were again here... All they had ever touched still now physically held its charge— everything that had been stepped on, scaled up, crept under, brushed against or leaped from now gave out, touched by so much as air, a tingling continuous sweet shock, which the air suffered as though it were half laughing, as was Antonia (77).

In Antonia’s vision, the night comes alive as she and Guy possess Montefort. In this passage, Bowen employs a new twist on one of her signature literary devices. She places Antonia and Guy as agents of personification who bring life to Montefort with their touch. Following Bowen’s social idea, the cousins “add something” to the Irish landscape. Bowen reaffirms Ascendancy supremacy when she evokes and inverts the language of Irish rebellion. The “rising” here refers not to the events of Easter 1916 but to the restoration of rightful Ascendancy rule. When Antonia’s flashback ushers in Guy’s disembodied return, order is temporarily restored to Montefort: “Tonight was a night which had changed hands, going back again to its lordly owners: time again was into the clutch of herself and Guy” (77). Antonia’s longing for her beloved cousin carries an incestuous charge that reaffirms their Ascendancy status. Her attraction

to Guy is tied to his position as the “lordly owner” of Montefort and her desire for him signifies a pursuit of Anglo-Irish purity and continuity. With his death, she mourns not just the loss of her beloved cousin but the end to the legitimate Danby bloodline.

In Guy’s absence, Antonia reluctantly assumes possession of Montefort. For Antonia, maintaining Montefort’s defensive position is tradition and part of her duty as the last remaining “lordly owner.” As she locks the front door, Antonia thinks about the empty significance of this nightly ritual. Bowen once again employs double negatives to emphasize the futility of this gesture in Antonia’s mind: “Not since Montefort stood had there ceased to be vigilant measures against the nightcomer; all being part of the hostile watch kept by now eyeless towers and time-stunted castles along these rivers. For as land knows, everywhere is a frontier; and the outposted few (and few are the living) never must be off guard” (79). Antonia’s attitude ironically invokes the paranoia of the settler-colonial situation and alludes to the specifics of the Irish context. Montefort may have survived the fires of the War for Independence but now faces the greater threats of neglect and decay.

Unlike Lilia, Antonia knows there is no shadowy Irish rebel hiding in Montefort’s shrubbery. Yet where Lilia permits her neurosis free rein, Antonia confronts her anxieties with cynicism and disdain. When she locks the door, she recognizes that she is “going through a performance” and for the first time realizes that “the ceremony became a mockery” (79). When she admits she “shut out nothing,” she seems to acknowledge that the real threats to Montefort—Guy’s letters, his ghost, and the troubling memories they invoke—have been located within the home the whole time. The past easily breeches Montefort’s fortifications.

Antonia recognizes the futility of barricading Montefort, yet she bars the heavy oak doors anyway. The disconnect between her thoughts and actions illustrate the performative nature of

the Ascendancy class. Antonia's cynicism also indicates a move away from Bowen's "social idea" of the Big House. In the original iteration of the social idea, there was no need to close and lock the doors of the Big House because all visitors were presumed to be friends or soon-to-be friends. In *A World of Love*, there is no need to lock Montefort because no one at all will be coming. Montefort has utterly failed to live up to its social purpose and the Danbys have internalized this failure. The only visitors to Montefort are ghosts from the Danbys' own past.

Anglo-Irish Hospitality in *A World of Love*

The Danbys are isolated from any outside guests on a geographic as well as a social level. They see themselves as the last of their kind, the "outposted few" with "no neighbors to speak of" (79, 53). The nearest residence is occupied by the extravagant Lady Latterly, a nouveau riche Englishwoman. Fleeing mysterious rumors, Lady Latterly purchased a decaying Irish castle near Montefort and lavishly spends her fortune repairing the property to her liking. But mishaps seem to follow Lady Latterly and nothing goes according to her plans:

Her trials, since she took up residence here, had been not less interesting than her reputed fortune—the number of baths she had installed under dry tanks, the lovers said or servants known to have left her, the failure of her house-parties to arrive, or, still worse, leave again, the costly fiasco of her herbaceous border, the delays, non-deliveries, breakages, leakages and general exploitation she had endured lost nothing in telling except sympathy for her; one is as rich as that at one's own risk (57).

From her misplaced bathtubs to her untimely houseguests, all of Lady Latterly's tribulations indicate that she is both in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Her garish new money attitude contrasts sharply with the decrepit and "unusually banal" Irish castle (57). Throughout the

novel, Lady Latterly's castle functions as a grotesquely exaggerated Big House.³⁹ Unlike Montefort, which was built for and occupied by the Danby family to enshrine their presence on the Irish landscape, Lady Latterly's new home is a native Irish space. In the absence of any noble lineage of her own, Lady Latterly repurposes an Irish kingdom rather than construct one. Her occupation of Irish land is unambiguous and immediate. In both her home and her individual circumstance, Lady Latterly condenses the arc of Anglo-Irish history into one character.

As her very name suggests, Lady Latterly is a late-arriving settler colonist who has essentially missed the party. So, she decides to throw one of her own. Lady Latterly becomes intrigued by Jane at her annual fête and invites her over for an intimate dinner party in order to examine her more closely. In keeping with the castle's temporal displacement, Jane arrives early to the dinner party and must join Lady Latterly in her bedroom as she dresses. Jane and Lady Latterly make small talk that further emphasizes their strange sense of time: "Yesterday feels like years ago," Jane remarks (*WL* 55).

Soon Jane grows bored with her surroundings. She started her day in Antonia's bedroom, and now wonders how "many hours of [her] life had already gone by in women's bedrooms." Instead, Jane longs to be in the "theatrical" drawing room (56). She has come ready to play her part in the Ascendancy performance and is frustrated at being kept backstage. Yet Jane learns valuable lessons about gender, class, and what is expected of her in these women's bedrooms. In *A World of Love*, women's bedrooms are stages for the gendered performance of Anglo-Irish anxiety. Like Montefort's thresholds, these bedrooms illustrate the fragility of Ascendancy identity and the precariousness of the Anglo-Irish presence in Ireland.

³⁹ Kreilkamp has noted that "Big House" and "castle" tend to be used interchangeably within the genre. See Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, 7.

Throughout Lady Latterly's dinner party, Bowen alludes to the theater to evoke the performativity of the Ascendancy class. Noting "the scene was differently set" in Lady Latterly's bedrooms than in Antonia's, Jane observes the excesses of her host's wealth (56). While Antonia's smoke-filled bedroom is littered with debris and clutter, Lady Latterly's shows "no trace of anything having been touched or used" (56). Jane assumes the room must be a "replica" of 1930s decor. The artifice of the space heightens as night falls and Jane observes how "the bedroom gained still more unreality by now seeming trapped somewhere between day and night" (56). Like the castle at large, Lady Latterly's bedroom seems suspended in time.

In the liminal twilight, the Irish countryside once again invades the domestic realm. Bowen's narration becomes increasingly opaque as she renders the impending darkness. The crystal chandelier "dripped into the sunset" while "tense little lit lamps under peach shades were easily floated in upon by the gold of evening" (56). Bowen's use of passive voice renders Lady Latterly's bedroom vulnerable to the changing environment outside. In Lady Latterly's bedroom, the sunset is threatening, not beautiful. Even the trees are "in on the conspiracy." The invasion culminates when the outside world violently breaks through: "a blinding ray presently splintered over the dressing table. With a cry, Lady Latterly downed tools. 'I can't see myself, you see! I can't see a thing!'" (56). The evening light penetrates Lady Latterly's bedroom, interrupting her makeup application and illuminating her artifice.

The bedroom is "a battleground of clashing dazzling reflections and refractions" and Lady Latterly is unable to see herself clearly (56). Lady Latterly's bedroom has fulfilled its function as a backstage dressing room, and when she finishes assembling her costume Jane feels a rush of excitement as she contemplates the histrionics of it all: "the girl tonight was in a mood for the theater...Here she was, spirited out of Montefort into this foreign dimension of the castle,

in which nothing, no one, could be unreal enough” (57). Lady Latterly herself embodies this unreality, her costume is neither natural nor subtle. Her “shoulders seemed to be made of plastic” while her eyes assume a “commanding” expression under her “varnished lids” (58). Lady Latterly’s artifice is the manifestation of both her excessive wealth and her feminine vanity, visually evoking the ostentatious fabrication of the Big House and Ascendancy class more broadly.

When Lady Latterly sends Jane out to greet the guests, they seem equally artificial. The men in particular are indistinguishable to Jane; they seem to be wearing “anonymous masks... attached to the same body, one abstract shirtfront” (58-59). Jane is an unknown player on Lady Latterly’s stage, yet the characters around her feel familiar: “She was in the presence of a race she did not know yet, yet somehow knew of” (59). As Jane interacts with the other guests, it becomes clear that the role expected of her is not a speaking one. After making her own grand entrance, Lady Latterly parades Jane around the “fictitious room” holding her “like a ventriloquist’s doll” (60). Jane is aware of and participates in the evening’s performance, “Greeting was thus very cleverly sunk in showmanship,” she thinks, as Lady Latterly silently wields her around the room, “exhibited but not introduced” (61).

When Lady Latterly leads Jane around the room, Bowen is parodying her earlier theories in “The Big House.” In Bowen’s “social idea,” newcomers to the Big House were indeed meant to be a focal point. “We should all, more than ever, have a great deal to say,” she wrote, “every newcomer, with their point of view, becomes an object of quite magnetic interest” (*BH* 76). Yet in this scene, Jane is not an object of conversational interest for her unique point view. Rather, she is rendered mute; she is an object of curiosity rather than a subject in a cultural exchange. According to Bowen’s social idea, when the Big House facilitates social interaction between

different groups of people, discourse is elevated above mundane chatter. “The big, or big-seeming, rooms in the big houses are meant for just such pleasures of intercourse,” Bowen wrote, “They are meant for something more creative, and gayer, than grumbles, gossip or the tearing to pieces of acquaintances’ characters” (*BH* 76). But Lady Latterly’s dinner party never progresses to this higher social plane. Instead, it devolves into a drunken parody of Anglo-Irish hospitality.

“God’s Spy”: Espionage in the Big House

Eventually, Lady Latterly relinquishes Jane and lets her mingle amongst the guests. Jane gravitates towards the oldest member of the party, Terence, the “only native other than Jane.” But although they are neighbors, Terence is not native in the same way as Jane. Terence is “Irish-Irish,” and Bowen’s description of him, filtered through Jane’s perception of him, relies on colonial stereotypes. “Alcohol,” Jane notes, “so quickly brought to the surface his Irish birthmarks that, even by this stage of the evening, one no longer could have mistaken him for the others— indeed how, it was to be wondered, could the girl have done so at first?” (*WL* 63). Terence’s undeniable Irish ancestry, seemingly exaggerated by his alcohol consumption, distinguishes him from the rest of the anonymous crowd. As Jane sizes Terence up, Bowen’s narrative calls back to Matthew Arnold’s descriptions of the passionate and moody Celt:⁴⁰

From the being out to the skin he was more florid. His exaggeration of his bravado, his brogue, himself was less exactly deliberate than he fancied— how much was acting, how much was second nature? Vanity, guilt, and sentimentality were at work in him,

⁴⁰ In *Celtic Literature*, Matthew Arnold draws a sharp dichotomy between the emotive Celt and the rational Saxon. His schema both drew from and contributed to cultural stereotypes. See Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1891).

undiagnosed yet worked upon by the aliens. Bad enough having got himself in with this set without being detected by God's spy (63).

Terence is playing his part, that of the stage Irishman.⁴¹ Yet for Terence, who has clearly moved in Ascendancy social circles for a long time, this "acting" is inseparable from his own "nature." Unsettled by Jane's gaze, he presciently casts her as "God's spy," a role in which she proves a natural. She studies Terence, and begins to question him for information about her cousin Guy. The relaxed and boozy atmosphere of Lady Latterly's dinner party provides the perfect opportunity for Jane's own espionage. Just as Bowen relied upon access to rarified social circles to conduct her own investigations, so Jane manipulates the scene at Lady Latterly's in her own quest for information.

When Terence asks Jane why she's staring at him, she responds with "Only, I wonder what you remember" (*WL* 63). Jane's unusual icebreaker is not even in the form of a question, yet it prompts Terence to enter the past. He responds that he is an old man, suggesting he can remember a lot. At this admission, Jane almost gives herself and her motives away. She nearly reveals that it is Terence's advanced age, and thus his potential to remember her cousin, that has drawn her to him. Jane catches herself "just in time" and lets Terence's mind temporarily wander before "gently recall[ing] him" to her questioning. Jane switches tactics and becomes increasingly specific. "Can you, for instance, remember this house?" she asks (63). Terence takes the bait and launches on a rant against Lady Latterly's castle and the company it keeps. "I'm getting sick to death of the whole bang lot of them—rotten old romancing and story-telling" he rants (63). Just as Jane readily placed Terence amongst the native Irish and all the accompanying

⁴¹ Popularized through Dion Boucicault's plays, the "stage Irishman" refers to a stock character embodying a host of stereotypically Irish traits. See G.C. Duggan, *The Stage Irishman* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1937) for theoretical foundations and Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) for a recent reinterpretation.

traits, so Terence neatly relegates Jane to the Ascendancy and all the ills he ascribes her class. “Nothing’s much to any of you these days,” he says, “You can buy up a lot; you can’t buy up the past. What is it? — Not even history. Goes to dust in your hands” (63). Jane is undeterred by Terence’s accusations and brushes them off. “I don’t buy,” she says, “I have no money. Do you remember Montefort?” (64). As she artfully moves from Lady Latterly’s home to her own family’s Big House, Jane hones in on the real target of her interrogation. “*When* were you most at Montefort?” Jane asks Terence, with an eye for the facts (64, emphasis original). Armed with the knowledge that Terence likely crossed paths with her cousin, Jane utters Guy’s name and the atmosphere at the dinner party changes irrecoverably. Her invocation summons Guy’s ghost to the dinner party and his disembodied presence continues to haunt the Danby family. Jane has found what she was looking for in Terence’s memories.

Peppering Terence with questions under the guise of small talk, Jane is actually on a targeted reconnaissance mission. But Jane’s conversation with Terence is uncharacteristically duplicitous. Jane, like many of Bowen’s heroines, is naive and earnest. Nowhere else in the novel is she deceptive or manipulative. Even throughout the rest of the dinner party, Jane is awkward and drunk. She seems incapable of this mode of social interaction. Bowen draws upon her own espionage experiences, perhaps at similar dinner parties, to give Jane the tools she needs to access the secrets of the wartime past. Jane probes her neighbor’s memories with skillful precision and determination. As Jane’s subtle interrogation of Terence moves from the general (what he remembers) to the specific (his memories of Guy), houses act as a crucial conduit for information. The home is the bridge between history and family history.

The Big House, in particular, facilitates the kinds of social interaction that makes meaning out of the past. In this scene, the Big House fails again to live up to the “social idea.”

Lady Latterly's dinner party has indeed brought together different kinds of people under her roof, facilitating conversation and cultural exchange. But the talk that takes place is not the "easy and unsuspecting intercourse" Bowen had imagined in 1940 (*BH* 76). Rather, Jane's conversation with Terence is strained, coded, and manipulated. Rather than bringing people together and facilitating social interaction, hospitality at the Big House actually sharpens rather than softens the cultural chasm. Class distinctions are reified as characters perform their cultural identity in an exaggerated and stereotypical manner. In *A World of Love*, Bowen's vision of Big House hospitality is a farce. After her own espionage, Bowen could no longer conceive of the Big House as an "unsuspecting" place. In *The Bell*, she celebrated how the Big House seems to exist in the space between artifice and reality. In *A World of Love*, the Big House is overwhelmingly artificial. The Big House is the stage not just for the Ascendancy performance of belonging, but also for the active production of new forms of knowledge about the past. In *A World of Love*, as in her espionage, Bowen relied upon this stage to conceal and reveal secrets.

Preserving Anonymity in *A World of Love*

Critics of *A World of Love* take issue with the novel's apparent absence of plot. As a bildungsroman, the novel is primarily concerned with Jane's evolving social and emotional consciousness. Following Jed Esty's pioneering work, *A World of Love* can be productively read alongside *The Last September* as a novel of protracted development. In this regard, Jane's slow and tedious journey to maturation is the product of "colonial mitigation and displacement."⁴² While the lack of a clear narrative trajectory might frustrate some readers, the novel contains layers of meaning that are not immediately apparent. Compounding this frustration is the fact

⁴² Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012): 2.

that the plot of the novel revolves around the revelation of a secret that's not actually revealed. When read in the context of Bowen's espionage and her evolving theories of the Big House, the novel's faults actually signal Bowen's ambivalence about her own past.

Part of the difficulty of *A World of Love* stems from its inability to conform neatly to the Big House genre. As Kreilkamp notes, the typical Big House plot revolves around tension between the Ascendancy class and various factions of the native Irish.⁴³ *A World of Love*, with its myopic focus on the Danby family, lacks this class conflict. Rather, the tension in the novel comes from two opposing iterations of the Ascendancy: the past, embodied by Guy's ghost, and the future, embodied by Jane. This tension turns into conflict when Jane becomes infatuated with Guy's ghost and obsessed with the past. This conflict largely plays out in the minds of Jane, Lilia, and Antonia, as each woman confronts Guy's ghost. The action of the plot, then, is mostly psychological as the Danby women repeat, remember, and work through their romantic entanglements with Guy.

The mystery propelling the conflict between Guy and the Danby women is the question of to whom his letters were addressed. Yet in *A World of Love*, Bowen is not interested in solving this mystery. Instead, she is interested in its effect on the psyches of the Danby women, in how wartime betrayals continue to resonate long after the battles have ended. Bowen's ambivalent handling of this mystery is often what frustrates readers and contributes the sense that the novel lacks a decipherable plot. Bowen simultaneously conceals and reveals the text's central secret, the identity of Guy's mystery woman.

When Jane reveals to Antonia that she has identified the addressee, Bowen's narrative both exposes and preserves the secret: "Jane gave the unknown name, naturally adding: 'So who

⁴³ Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, 6.

was she?’ ‘I don’t believe I remember,’ said Antonia” (*WL* 139). The name is revealed to the characters in the novel but withheld from the reader. In a novel that suffers from plot inertia, this is a deeply unsatisfying reveal. Both climax and anticlimax, this scene depends upon narrative intervention and deception. By letting “the unknown name” stand in for the third woman, Bowen has it both ways: she preserves the text’s central secret at the same time she reveals it. Antonia doubles down on this narrative deception when she tells Lilia the letters were addressed to her. Given how much of Lilia’s identity is still based around her status as Guy’s beloved, Antonia’s lie is perhaps an act of kindness. Yet it extends the novel’s secrecy and further distances the reader from the truth.

With this move, Bowen reaffirms a core principle of her social idea. By refusing to supply the name for the third woman, her narrative enacts the “subjugation of the personal to the impersonal” (*BH* 76). Bowen plays with identity throughout the novel, frequently privileging the impersonal over the personal. Guy’s vague name renders him an everyman figure while the imprecise use of pronouns, especially second person, frequently create confusion. Bowen enshrines this interest in anonymity onto the landscape of the Big House itself. An obelisk on Montefort’s grounds stands a monument to a long dead Danby patriarch. When visitors ask whom the monument honors, Antonia “supplie[s] the name,” of the obelisk builder but the narrative again refuses to divulge his name to the reader (*WL* 137).

Antonia also expresses an unwillingness to name herself. When Lady Latterly’s dinner party ends, Antonia picks up Jane. The butler announces that “the young lady’s cousin” has come for her and, when pressed for further details, reports that Antonia “gave no name” (139). The dinner party guests, like the reader, are prompted to think of Jane’s other cousin, Guy. For the first time, Jane notices the resemblance between the two Danbys: “That the likeness should

be a matter of look not looks, that it less declared than betrayed itself, like a secret history, made a deep-down factor of it—not least for Jane. The effect on her was to create a fresh significance for Antonia” (70). Guy’s ghost collapses into Antonia’s character, revealing a “secret history” of shared Danby family traits. That inescapable Ascendancy family traits “betray” rather than reveal themselves evidences Bowen’s ongoing commitment to preserve rather than exposing secrets.

Bowen’s interest in the malleability of identity was an ongoing preoccupation: “A main trait of human nature is its amorphousness,” she claimed in an early draft of her autobiography, “there results an obsessive wish to acquire outline, to be unmistakably demarcated, to *take shape*.”⁴⁴ In *A World of Love*, however, this interest carries a specific charge. W.J. McCormack has argued that in *The Heat of the Day*, “there is an ostentatious yet seemingly unproductive concern with naming.”⁴⁵ In *A World of Love*, Bowen extends this concern to the point of inversion. Her interest in the unnamed is a productive concern in *A World of Love*, where it pushes back against the Ascendancy preoccupation with the family name. The unnamed third woman in *A World of Love* poses a threat to the Danby family, and, by extension, the Ascendancy bloodline. Bowen’s suppression of that name indicates her commitment to preserving Anglo-Irish supremacy.

Eventually, Guy’s letters are destroyed in a kind of exorcism and the secrets they contain go up in flame. Antonia initially tasks the maid Kathie, one of the only native Irish characters in the novel, with their burning. Yet Jane reports that Kathie “got frightened. She found a name in them” (*WL* 139). The narrative asks, but doesn’t answer, what name might have caused Kathie to feel frightened. Why would Kathie be too afraid to burn the letters, unless she discovered a name

⁴⁴ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, 59 (emphasis original).

⁴⁵ W.J. McCormack, *Dissolute Characters* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 226.

she recognized? Perhaps Guy's third lover was a member of Kathie's class, the native Irish. This might also explain why Antonia doesn't "believe" she remembers the woman's name. Maud Ellmann has raised the intriguing possibility that Guy's secret lover was a man.⁴⁶ Yet here Bowen's narrative suggests a class-based transgression. If Guy was pursuing a relationship with an Irishwoman, his infidelity would also carry with it a threat to the Ascendancy bloodline. His betrayal would be not just to his family, but also to his social class and ethnic group.

Bowen doesn't pursue the identity of Guy's lover. When Jane completes Kathie's task of burning the letters, she forces narrative closure and replicates a generic convention of the Big House novel. The burning of the letters is a simulacrum of the burning of the Big House. In *The Last September*, the Big House meets its fateful end at the hands of Irish rebels. In *A World of Love*, the Big House must be destroyed from within. Jane, Ascendancy heir, has to finish the job the native Irish start by burning the Big House and its artifacts. Yet in doing so, she preserves, rather than exposes, the secrets within its walls. With this conclusion, Bowen preserves her ambiguous attitude toward the past. She wants to release of the ghosts of the past without hearing what they have to say.

Bowen wants to leave Ascendancy transgressions, from the foundational violence of settler colonialism to her own wartime espionage, in the past. In *A World of Love*, as in "The Big House," Bowen signals the possibility of a harmonious future unencumbered by the past. However, this idealistic vision fails because Bowen wants understanding without accountability. Ultimately, the "social idea" works to preserve the secrets of the Ascendancy. Bowen opens the doors of the Big House, but only halfway. By positioning the Ascendancy as the gatekeepers of the past, Bowen ultimately safeguards the settler colonial past.

⁴⁶ Maud Ellmann. *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

Chapter Two: Domestic Destruction in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*

In Eudora Welty's 1951 short story "The Bride of the Innisfallen," a young American girl absconds to Ireland. She leaves her husband behind in London and her baggage behind at the dock. Weary from the long journey, the girl feels revived as she wanders the streets of Cork with a newfound sense of freedom. She observes how "Cork's streets take off from the waterside and rise lifting their houses and towers like note above note on a page of music."¹ The harmonious blending of domestic spaces with the natural landscape appeals to her. Eyeing the riverside homes, the girl contemplates her own future in Cork and imagines how she might "Look up to that window— that upper window, from which the mystery will never go. The curtains dyed so many times over still pulled back and the window looks out open to the evening, the river, the hills, the sea."² Her rapturous vision is temporarily interrupted when a woman tosses a lit cigarette out of the window to be extinguished in the gutter below. But the girl is uninterested in the inhabitant and her crude gestures. Instead, she finds meaning in the home itself: "But it wasn't to the impatient tenant, it was the window itself that could tell her all she had come here to know— or all she could bear this evening to know, and that was light and rain, light and dark, dark, light, and rain."³ After contemplating the window, the girl walks on. Welty closes the story with an opening. The girl opens the door to a Cork pub and enters "without protection into the lovely room full of strangers."⁴

¹ Eudora Welty, "The Bride of the Innisfallen," in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2008), 517.

² Welty, "Bride," 518.

³ Welty, "Bride," 518.

⁴ Welty, "Bride," 518.

The American girl finds inspiration in Ireland, as Welty herself did. She wrote “The Bride of the Innisfallen” while she was visiting Elizabeth Bowen at Bowen’s Court. During this visit, Bowen was writing *A World of Love*. In both “The Bride of the Innisfallen” and *A World of Love*, Irish homes are more than just a setting; they reveal how domestic spaces can shape our understanding of the past, present, and future. Yet Bowen and Welty approach these spaces from very different perspectives. As I argued in the previous chapter, Bowen is preoccupied with the perspective of a paranoid insider looking out. Welty, on the other hand, focuses on a liberated outsider looking in. Bowen’s novel is obsessed with the past where Welty’s story is oriented towards the future. These points of departure highlight subtle yet crucial differences between Bowen and Welty’s work.

Bowen and Welty’s friendship officially began when Welty traveled to Europe on a Guggenheim grant in 1949, but the two writers had long appreciated one another from afar. In 1947, Bowen wrote a favorable review of Welty’s *Delta Wedding* which she hoped would “come to be recognized as a classic.”⁵ Prompted by this review, Welty reached out to Bowen, who warmly received her by inviting her to Bowen’s Court. Welty accepted the invitation and traveled to Cork. She was delighted with life at Bowen’s Court and noted the many geographic and cultural resonances between the American South and the south of Ireland. Welty found the Irish as “warm and friendly” as southerners, and the port city Cork reminded her of Savannah or New Orleans.⁶ During Welty’s stay in the Big House, the two writers found a pleasurable and productive rhythm that involved working in the morning and exploring the countryside in the

⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, “Book Shelf,” *The Tatler and Bystander*, August 6 1947, 183.

⁶ Kathryn Stelmach Artuso, “Transatlantic Rites of Passage in the Friendship and Fiction of Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen,” *Eudora Welty Review* 4 (2012): 40.

afternoon.⁷ This initial meeting spawned a decades-long friendship which prompted many transatlantic visits and instigated a passionate correspondence.⁸

This friendship had personal and professional dimensions. The two writers promoted one another and helped cultivate an international readership.⁹ This commitment to one another's work endured even after Bowen's death in 1973. In 1979, Welty wrote—but did not publish—a review of *Bowen's Court* for its reissue.¹⁰ In this review, Welty praised Bowen's ability to make meaning out of the past. In Welty's estimation, Bowen does not skirt the settler colonial history of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. She claims Bowen offers “no justification” but rather “self-examination” of “the human struggle into which all were plunged.”¹¹ The home, in Bowen's case the Big House, is the epicenter of this struggle. “The story of Bowen's Court,” Welty observes, “Elizabeth Bowen sees as a microcosm of the society that made it, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.”¹² This idea of a family home as a microcosm was productive for both writers, and Welty's final pronouncement on *Bowen's Court* evidences the centrality of this project: “As a full-length portrait of a house, a family, its time and place, it belongs somewhere near the heart of Elizabeth Bowen's body of work.”¹³ As in “The Bride of the Innisfallen,” Welty's critical eye begins in the home and gestures outward to its larger contexts. Ultimately, Welty is not interested in holding Bowen to account for the limitations of her privileged worldview nor does

⁷ Suzanne Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), 195.

⁸ Ann Waldron and Katherine Stelmach Artuso have suggested that these letters may evidence a sexual relationship between Bowen and Welty. While this possibility is intriguing, it remains unclear how our understanding of Welty and Bowen's work would change in light of a romantic relationship. See Artuso, “Transatlantic Rites,” 41 and Ann Waldron, *Eudora: A Writer's Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 225.

⁹ See Dawn Trouard, “The Promiscuous Joy of Eudora Welty: Meeting Bowen in Mississippi,” in *Transatlantic Exchanges: The American South in Europe – Europe in the American South*, ed. Richard Gray and Waldemar Zacherarasiewicz (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2007), 257-76.

¹⁰ This review was published as Eudora Welty, “Review of *Bowen's Court* (Reissue 1979),” *Eudora Welty Review* 8 (2016): 21-30.

¹¹ Welty, “Review of *Bowen's Court*,” 25.

¹² Welty, “Review of *Bowen's Court*,” 21.

¹³ Welty, “Review of *Bowen's Court*,” 21.

she point out the problems with commemorating Bowen's Ascendancy heritage. She claims that writing *Bowen's Court* was a "labor of not only love but of necessity" for Bowen, and this review plays a similar role for Welty. It is a glowing homage to her late friend and a celebration of their shared themes, preoccupations, and approaches to fiction. The friendship that began with Bowen's glowing review of *Delta Wedding* finds a fitting bookend in Welty's laudatory review of *Bowen's Court*.

Katherine Stelmach Artuso, Dawn Trouard, and Sarah Dyne have illuminated the many similarities between Bowen and Welty's writing.¹⁴ Both writers favor place over plot, focus on the maturation of young female protagonists, and navigate male-dominated literary traditions. In this chapter, I break with past scholarship by calling attention to crucial differences in the ways that these two kindred writers excavate the past within domestic spaces. I argue that Welty offers a more subversive approach to the problems posed by the legacy of settler colonialism. While Bowen's desire to open the doors of the Big House was ultimately thwarted by her own colonial complicity, Welty offers an alternative framework for navigating the plantation past. In *Delta Wedding* as well as in *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty depicts a kind of southern memory that rejects the inviolability of the plantation past. Southern memory in these novels is living, changing, and evolving.

Biographical differences go some way to account for Welty's more radical approach to the past. While Bowen was unable to extricate herself from her "more or less synonymous" race, family, and home, Welty was more removed from the settler colonial power structures that

¹⁴ Kathryn Stelmach Artuso, "'A Child of this Century': Rites of Passage in the Friendship and Fiction of Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen," in *Transatlantic Renaissances: Ireland and the American South*. (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press), 2013; Artuso, "Transatlantic Rites"; Trouard, "Promiscuous Joy"; and Sarah Dyne, "Of Memory, Place, and Friendship: Eudora Welty's Unpublished Review of Bowen's Court," *Eudora Welty Review* 8 (2016): 13-20.

shaped southern life.¹⁵ She never lived on nor owned a plantation. Born in 1909 to a middle-class family, Welty was a first-generation Mississippian; her parents were Appalachian and Midwestern. Yet, simply by virtue of being a white southerner, Welty was implicated in the plantation system and benefited from the inequity it perpetuated long after its demise. Her work shows both an awareness of this complex subject position and a sensitivity to the weight of the southern past. Yet she refuses to be crushed by the weight of that past. Her female protagonists are frequently caught between the demands of a calcified southern past and the possibilities of their own dynamic future.

The monumental southern past against which Welty's heroines struggle has a particular location. The home, more than the battlefields or the cotton fields, is the epicenter of southern memory. The southern home enshrines within its walls the stories that shape the past. As both the hub and product of the plantation system, the plantation house is uniquely implicated in the region's history. The physical space of the plantation itself, as Elizabeth Christine Russ has noted, acts as an "insidious ideological and psychological trope through which intersecting histories of the New World are told and retold."¹⁶ In *Delta Wedding*, Welty resists this trope by depicting the large and small violences contained within Shellmound plantation. As her characters chip away at the plantation, Welty deconstructs the mythic reverence surrounding this bastion of southern memory. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty extends this domestic destruction beyond the plantation home. By moving away from what Kamau Brathwaite has deemed the "plantation model," Welty decentralizes the plantation in southern memory discourse.¹⁷ Across time and space, Welty heeds Brathwaite's warning that writing about the

¹⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975): 14.

¹⁶ Russ, *Plantation*, 3.

¹⁷ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," *Savacou* 11-12 (1975): 1-11.

plantation “runs the hazard of becoming as much tool as tomb of the system that it seeks to understand and transform.”¹⁸

While *The Optimist's Daughter* differs in setting from *Delta Wedding*, it extends Welty's domestic destruction and continues her efforts to subvert southern memory. In both novels, Welty's characters wreak havoc on domestic objects and spaces. They damage desks and shatter nightlights; they abandon prized bread boards and loose heirloom pins; they bloody doorways and garishly reupholster beds. Read together, these novels chronicle southern homes under siege. This domestic destruction, I will argue, is neither an act of iconoclasm nor an erasure of the past. Rather, in these novels Welty posits a form of southern commemoration which accounts for the dynamic fluidity of memory and creates a space for the constant reinterpretation and renegotiation of the past. The kind of commemoration Welty depicts in these novels responds to the needs of the present and is distanced from materiality. “Memory is a living thing,” Welty has written, “it too is in transit.”¹⁹

This “living thing” is the key to understanding Welty's subversive approach to the plantation. Best known for her short stories focusing on town life, Welty is not a plantation novelist. Yet her career-long preoccupations with memory, home, family, and place readily lend themselves to the plantation. Welty's interest in the plantation, however, is grounded firmly in the twentieth century. Her focus on the post-slavery plantation, rather than the antebellum or Civil War plantation, suggests that Welty is more concerned with how the past infiltrates the present than with the past itself. To different extents, both *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter* are distanced from the plantation South. This distance enables Welty's critique not just of the plantation system but of the ways that it has been enshrined in southern memory.

¹⁸ Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man,” 4.

¹⁹ Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 104.

Delta Wedding is in a sense twice-removed from the plantation South. Temporally and geographically, the novel operates in a sphere of isolation. Although it was written during the Second World War and published in 1946, Welty intentionally set *Delta Wedding* in 1923 because she wanted a time and place where “nothing very terrible happened.”²⁰ *Delta Wedding*, Welty claims, is a “family stor[y]” and she did not want it “inhabited by outward events [she] could not control.”²¹ Like Bowen’s *Danielstown*, the interwar plantation offered a microcosm for a society suspended on the verge of change. Free from the narrative demands of current events like war, this microcosm creates a space for memory to unfold. Paul Connerton has shown how “present factors tend to influence— some might want to say distort— our recollections of the past” while “past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experiences of the present.”²² In *Delta Wedding*, Welty centers this dialogue between past and present by removing events outside of her narrative control.

Delta Wedding is also at a slight geographic remove from the heart of the plantation system. The novel is set on the Yazoo River Delta, which was only planted after the Civil War.²³ Suzanne Marrs has argued that Welty transplanted her memories of Waverly, a real plantation located near Columbus, Mississippi that she had visited, onto the Delta “where wilderness seemed to linger” in order to “change the history of the house in service to her story.”²⁴ By pushing her story westward, Welty creates space for creative reinterpretation of the past. In *The Optimist’s Daughter*, Welty also blends real and imagined places. Set in New Orleans and the

²⁰ Quoted in Linda Kuehl, “The Art of Fiction XLVII: Eudora Welty,” in *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984), 82.

²¹ Quoted in Kuehl, *Conversations*, 81.

²² Paul Connerton *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

²³ Lisa Kramer, “‘Seeing Things as They Really Are in Mississippi:’ *Delta Wedding*’s Anatomy of Pure White Womanhood,” *Eudora Welty’s Delta Wedding*, edited by Reine Dugas Bouton, Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam, 2008, 142.

²⁴ Suzanne Marrs, “The Treasure Most Dearly Regarded”: Memory and Imagination in *Delta Wedding*,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 25, no. 2 (1993): 88.

fictional Mississippi town of Mount Salus, *The Optimist's Daughter* is even further removed from the plantation South. Yet the novel is written in a post-plantation mode which offers a critique of rigid, stratified, insular, and racist southern society.²⁵ Mount Salus appears to Laurel just as she has left it: elitist, cliquish, and simmering with racial tension. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty shows how plantation society extends beyond the cotton fields and big houses to encompass a southern way of life.

Welty's choice to engage directly with the plantation in *Delta Wedding* came with consequences. While Bowen found a certain universal appeal in the novel, claiming "*Delta Wedding* is not specifically American... it strikes a note to which people all over the world will respond," not all American readers were as taken with the setting.²⁶ Initially, many reviewers criticized *Delta Wedding* as a nostalgic celebration of plantation culture. Diana Trilling charged Welty with giving in to "the narcissistic Southern fantasy" and outing herself as a "dreamer on the Southern past."²⁷ More recently, critics including Albert J. Devlin, Lisa Kramer, and Elizabeth Christine Russ have pushed back against this reading by highlighting the ways that Welty resists the conventions of the plantation novel. In this chapter, I call attention to the ways that Welty resists not just the generic conventions of the plantation novel, but the plantation space itself and the monolithic form of southern memory that it engenders.

Foregrounding the plantation in Welty's work highlights her critique of the structures that uphold white supremacy. Race is a crucial context for understanding Welty's work. Yet in much of her oeuvre, including *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty casts her black

²⁵ Lisa Hinrichson defines "Post-plantation southern imagination" as "the set of cultural and imaginative narratives rooted in historical events that structure belonging and often rely on believed or imagined memories." See Lisa Hinrichson, *Possessing the Past: Trauma, Imagination, and Memory in the Post-Plantation Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), X.

²⁶ Bowen, "Book Shelf," 183.

²⁷ Diana Trilling, "Fiction in Review," in *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty's Fiction*, ed. Laurie Champion (Westwood: Greenwood, 1994), 105.

characters in supporting roles. Typically, the reader is not granted access to her black characters' subjectivity. This has created a tendency in Welty criticism to read race symbolically or metaphorically.²⁸ While such criticism charts important character development, it has a tendency to downplay the racial realities with which Welty engaged. Furthermore, such readings persistently center whiteness. Rather than focusing on what Welty's black characters reveal about her white characters, readers should ask what Welty's white characters can tell us about race, racism, and systemic oppression.

Welty thus poses a challenge to readers: How might one understand race in her work as more than symbolic while simultaneously respecting the limits of her narration? Barbara Ladd, Elizabeth Russ, and many of the authors anthologized in *Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race* have offered one way forward.²⁹ Calling attention to the subversive presence of black characters in Welty's work acknowledges a reality that symbolic readings deny while working within the carefully constructed confines of her narration. Reading the plantation and its trace in Welty's writing offers another framework for understanding race in her work. Foregrounding the plantation, both a site and a mechanism of settler colonialism's racial violence in America, reveals how Welty is in dialogue not just with other southern writers, but with writers like Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, and Tana French. Yet Welty's approach to the plantation past differs from her Irish and Caribbean counterparts. She subtly embeds her critique of the plantation past in a series of outsider characters who systematically erode domestic spaces. These outsider characters create space for the more radical acts of memory

²⁸ See Betina Entzminger, "Playing in the Dark with Welty: The Symbolic Role of African Americans in *Delta Wedding*," *College Literature* 30.3 (2003): 52-67 and Suzanne Marrs, "The Metaphor of Race in Eudora Welty's Fiction," *Southern Review* 22, no. 4 (1986): 697-797.

²⁹ See Barbara Ladd, "'Coming Through': The Black Initiate in *Delta Wedding*," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1988): 541-551; Russ, *Plantation*, 83-94; and David McWhirter, "Secret Agents: Welty's African Americans," in *Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race* ed. Harriet Pollack (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013): 114-131.

by her protagonists.

“Circle Breakers”: Outsiders, In-laws, and Plantation Infiltration

In “The Bride of Innisfallen,” Welty’s protagonist is an outsider who encounters a new place with a sense of reverence and respect. In Welty’s novels, outsiders tend to adopt a very different perspective. In-laws, in particular, interact with domestic spaces in important ways. Those distanced from the nuclear family by blood yet attached to it by marriage, like Troy and Robbie in *Delta Wedding* and Fay in *The Optimist’s Daughter*, occupy unique positions in the text. They are granted access to the family home yet refuse to treat it with the respect other characters feel it deserves. They systematically erode the sanctity of the home and force Welty’s insiders to reconsider their reverence of these domestic spaces. Often, these outsiders are problematic, violent, and unlikeable, and they visit violence upon the home in large and small ways. Yet, as John Hardy notes in his generous reading of Fay, the reader must not attribute the characters’ disdain to Welty.³⁰ The outsiders’ work is necessary not just for her insiders’ character development, but also for understanding the way Welty thinks about home and history in the South.

In both *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*, these characters bring the outside indoors in a literal sense, as well. As Hardy has observed, both Fay and Robbie are associated with the intrusion of birds in the home.³¹ In *Delta Wedding*, Robbie’s entrance to Shellmound may have ushered in a rogue bird. According to Roxie and Troy, a bird in the house is a bad omen which signifies death.³² In *The Optimist’s Daughter*, Fay’s offensive presence in Laurel’s

³⁰ John Edward Hardy, “Marrying Down in Eudora Welty’s Novels,” in *Eudora Welty, Thirteen Essays* ed. Peggy Prenshaw (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1983), 85-97.

³¹ Hardy, “Marrying Down,” 86.

³² Eudora Welty, *Delta Wedding* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 209.

home is temporarily replaced by a chimney swift's residence. The bird pursues Laurel, forcing her to seek refuge in her mother's sewing room. The McKelva's unseemly handyman Mr. Cheek deems the bird a "sign o' bad luck."³³ By batting their wings, loosing feathers and droppings, these birds promise to wreak havoc within the walls of these two memory-rich southern homes.

While the birds initially seem to bring misfortune with them, in both novels these avian intrusions also initiate important emotional work. As Laurel flees the chimney sweep, she retreats further into the depths of her home and further into the recesses of her memory. In her mother's sewing room, she finally confronts her grief for her father, mother, and husband. When Robbie enters Shellmound along with the bird, she is able to speak her piece and force the Fairchilds into a confrontation. This confrontation allows Robbie to vent her frustrations and paves the way for her reunion with George. When Aunt Mac accuses Robbie of marrying George for his money, Robbie sets the record straight: she married him because he "begged" her (*DW* 211). Robbie manages to wrest some power out of Fairchild hands. She accuses the Fairchilds of being "a spoiled, stuck-up family that thinks nobody else is really in the world! But they are! You're just one plantation" (215). With her avian-accompanied intrusion to the plantation space, Robbie, pierces Shellmound's microcosm.

Sharlee Mullins Glenn and Mae Miller Claxton have shown how *Delta Wedding* is a novel preoccupied with depicting and resisting an insider/outsider binary.³⁴ Like Robbie, Laura mediates between insider and outsider status within the Fairchild family. Laura enacts this dynamic with her cousins in a childhood game. The players hold hands in a circle as one

³³ Welty, *Optimist's Daughter* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 164.

³⁴ Sharlee Mullins Glenn, "In and out the Circle: The Individual and the Clan in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*," *The Southern Literary Journal* 22, no. 1 (1989): 50-60 and Mae Miller Claxton, "Outlaws and Indians: Eudora Welty's 'Border' Characters in *Delta Wedding*," in *Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding* ed. Reine Dugas Bouton (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 123-134.

participant acts as a “circle breaker.” As Laura parses the complicated feelings this game generates in her, she reveals important truths about the Fairchild family dynamic. “It was funny how sometimes you wanted to be in a circle and then you wanted out of it in a rush,” Laura thinks. “Sometimes the circle was for you, sometimes against you, if you were It. Sometimes in the circle you longed for the lone outsider to come in — sometimes you couldn’t wait to close her out” (*DW* 94-95). As the Fairchild children dart in and out of the circle, they chant a refrain of “Go in and out the window, go in and out the window...” (94). The game spatializes the Fairchild family circle as a home. Further, the refrain’s evocation of “windows” rather than doors suggests something clandestine about the permeability of the home. Even as children, the Fairchilds are preoccupied with violations of their domestic space. This violation takes on additional meanings in the plantation context. According to Édouard Glissant, the plantation is “an enclosed place...defined by boundaries whose crossing was strictly forbidden.”³⁵ While slavery is no longer in place at Shellmound, it is still governed by strict codes dictating who can move in which spaces and in which ways. On the post-slavery plantation, these boundaries have shifted from geographic demarcations to social and racial hierarchies. Throughout the novel, outsider characters strategically subvert these boundaries.

Troy Flavin, the plantation overseer, is both enforcer of and subject to these rules. The wedding at the center of *Delta Wedding* unites Dabney, daughter of Shellmound plantation, with Troy. The marriage is cause for both excitement and anxiety, as Dabney is considered to be making a poor match. Troy is nearly twice Dabney’s age, he is an outsider (from hill country rather than the Delta), and he has a crop of thick red hair that the Fairchilds find particularly

³⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990): 64. Russ also reads Shellmound as an “enclosed space,” although she is more interested in how Welty’s protagonists “unite” Glissant’s “closed space” of the plantation and the “open word.” See Russ, *Plantation*, 67.

offensive. In *Delta Wedding*, Troy is threatening not merely because he is of a lower class, but because he brings the violent realities of the plantation into the home. As overseer, Troy is “the designated enforcer of the racial power structure by which Shellmound, the Fairchild plantation, and the agrarian south as a whole, produces wealth.”³⁶ Troy embodies the plantation’s modes of production. In *Delta Wedding*, he reveals how the racial violence of the plantation economy has persisted in the postbellum era.

Troy’s marriage to Dabney threatens to shatter the carefully cultivated civility enshrined within the walls of Shellmound. Throughout the novel, Shelley emphasizes Troy’s infiltration by calling attention to the particular way in which he enters the home. “I think it’s so tacky the way Troy comes in from the side door,” Shelley objects, “it’s like somebody just walks in the house from the fields and marries Dabney” (*DW* 270). Shelley, the Fairchild most invested in leaving Shellmound, is the one most attuned to its boundaries. Welty reiterates Shelley’s appraisal during the wedding, when the narrator observes that “Troy came in from the side door, indeed like somebody walking in from the fields to marry Dabney” (279). This observation bears repeating because Troy’s entrance crosses more boundaries than just the threshold. His casual use of the side door indicates both Troy’s uncouth informality with the Fairchild family and his intimate role in their plantation operation. Appearing to object to Troy’s crude manners, Shelley is in fact disturbed by the way his entrance collapses the distance between “house” and “field.”

Shelley is disturbed by Troy throughout the novel and Troy plays an important role in Shelley’s understanding of plantation life. The evening before the wedding, Shelley and Troy enact a violent ritual which is also located at a threshold. Shelley has been sent to bring the late groom to the rehearsal. As Shelley travels across the bayou, she anticipates her upcoming trip to

³⁶ Michael Kreyling, *Understanding Eudora Welty* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 97.

Europe and fantasizes about being “beyond all this” (256). To get to Troy, Shelley must first cross over to “the other side” as his house is located at the far end of a bayou bridge (257). This crossing signals an important shift in the way Shelley understands Troy, Shellmound, and the plantation system. Russ has noted how for the Fairchild women moving across the plantation landscape frequently amounts to a “spiritual quest.”³⁷ On this quest, Shelley seeks Troy the groom, but she finds Troy the overseer. She finally witnesses firsthand the violence that has always upheld her lifestyle.

Emboldened by her journey and in protest of Troy’s casual entrances to Shellmound, Shelley storms into the overseer’s house: “To show him what she thought of him, and rather shocking herself, she walked in with the briefest of knocks” (*DW* 257). Shelley walks in to the middle of a violent standoff. Root M’Hook, one of the black field laborers, is threatening Troy with a knife. Shelley runs to Troy, who assumes his role as defender of white womanhood with ease as he shelters Shelley behind him. As Root aims his knife at the overseer, Troy shoots off Root’s finger. Troy’s shocking violence literally dis-arms his opponent and lays bare the racial violence upon which the plantation depends.

With Root’s shooting, Welty also reveals how closely Troy himself is aligned with the plantation’s mission. As overseer, he is expected to maintain order so that he may maximize the plantation’s profits. As Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells have shown, the plantation is at the heart of the global capitalist enterprise.³⁸ The profit-driven ideology of the plantation depends upon a slave labor force that is both indispensable and highly replaceable. As Shellmound evidences, the plantation’s dependence on black labor remained after emancipation. Troy, however, does not think much on the capitalist mission of the plantation and its place in the global economy. He

³⁷ Russ, *Plantation*, 86.

³⁸ Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells, “Introduction: Plantation Modernity,” *The Global South* 10, no. 2 (2016): 1-10.

views his job as a simple undertaking: “just a matter of knowing how to handle your Negroes,” he tells Ellen (*DW* 125). Yet ultimately, Troy is more interested in enforcing a racial hierarchy than he is in turning a profit. Troy “handle[s] the Negroes” by shooting the hand off of a field hand. Troy compromises Root’s ability to work in the fields. His shooting exposes the white supremacist logic at the heart of the plantation and shows how this logic supersedes even its capitalist mission.

The reasons for Root’s confrontation are never fully explained, beyond Pinchy’s ability to “cause trouble comin’ through.”³⁹ Root is removed from the cabin and Troy turns his attention to another injured field laborer, Big Baby, who has a bottom full of buckshot. Troy barks orders which extend the infantilization readily apparent in the laborer’s name: “Pull down your clothes, Big Baby, and get over my knee. Shelley, did you come here to watch me?” (258). While Shelley did not come to watch, Welty has put her there precisely for this reason. Shelley, the Fairchild destined to leave the plantation, must view this grotesque display of mastery. Welty refuses to let Shelley go “beyond all this” without exposing her to the racial violence implicit in her home. Shelley is rattled by what she witnesses and tries to leave. Yet she is stopped in her tracks by the traces of Troy’s violence: “‘I can’t get past— there’s blood on the door,’ said Shelley, her voice like ice. ‘Then you’ll have to jump over it, my darlin’,’ said Troy, sing-song” (258). To Shelley, Troy seems like “a man drunk,” high on his own power. Seeing the black blood Troy has spilled on the threshold, Shelley immediately thinks of her sister’s wedding. In a moment of epiphany, she thinks that the marriage must be stopped: “As though the sky had opened and shown her, she could see the reason why Dabney’s wedding should be prevented. Nobody could marry a man with blood on his door...But even as she saw the reason, Shelley knew it would not avail. She

³⁹ Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 257. For a discussion of Pinchy’s coming through see Ladd, “Black Initiate.”

would jump as Troy told her, and never tell anybody, for what was going to happen was going to happen” (258). With her jump, she recognizes both the impossibility and unavailability of the marriage. Troy’s plantation violence will remain an unspoken secret at the heart of Shellmound.

Shelley’s jump across the threshold evokes the antebellum slave marriage ritual of “jumping the broom.” Barred from any official forms of marriage, slave brides and grooms would jump over a broomstick, often placed next to a door, to solidify their union. Frequently officiated by the slave master, these marriages were typically considered binding.⁴⁰ This ritual endured as an African American wedding custom after the Civil War. In *Delta Wedding*, this ritual is perverted as two white characters jump over black blood, symbolically united in their complicity. Troy has already performed a gesture reminiscent of this ritual on an earlier visit to Shellmound as he “leaped over little Ranny’s stick horse” (*DW* 146). Now Shelley, who immediately links the blood on the door with marriage, must follow. Troy’s drunken demeanor, his celebratory “sing-song” tone, and his use of the “my darlin’” to refer to Shelley strengthen the sense that this is a wedding of sorts. The embedded trace of this ritual in *Delta Wedding* shows how Troy introduces Shelley to the cruel truths of plantation life: every Fairchild marriage is built on the spilling of black blood. Their way of life is entirely supported by the violent white supremacy enabled by the plantation system, even in the twentieth century.⁴¹ On her way to collect Troy, Shelley had thought about how the overseer’s cabin is “one of the houses none of the girls ever paid any attention to” (*DW* 257). After this disturbing encounter, Shelley will no longer be able to ignore the overseer’s house and the racial violence contained within its walls.

⁴⁰ For a full account of broom jumping ceremonies, see Alan Dundes, “‘Jumping the Broom’: On the Origin and Meaning of an African American Wedding Custom,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 433 (1996): 324-329.

⁴¹ Mae Miller Claxton has argued that Troy is also associated with a Native American trace in the novel. In this scene, she argues, Troy shows Shelley that “Their land has been bought with blood from the Native Americans and the slaves.” Claxton, “Outlaws and Indians,” 131.

Troy initiates both Shelley and Dabney to the violent realities of plantation life. In criticism of the novel, there is a tendency to read Troy allegorically as a field-god, centaur, or satyr.⁴² While Welty certainly draws on myth in *Delta Wedding* as in much of her work, it is important not to eclipse Troy's role as plantation overseer. If Troy is to be allegorized, he is best thought of as a Trojan horse. Such a reading builds on his equestrian associations as the "dark shouting rider" who seems "part horse" while accounting for the violence he enacts as he moves from the (battle)fields into the home (*DW* 41, 147).⁴³ Troy even comes to Shellmound bearing gifts. While he himself seems a gift for Dabney, the threat of violence already hovers around their future marriage. Dabney acknowledges that sometimes Troy can be stoic, while "other times he laughed and mocked her, and shook her, and played like fighting—once he had really hurt her" (41). As readers have speculated, Dabney may be in for a rough wedding night.

Troy's gift to his bride is a bundle of quilts, a "womblike sack" of blankets which is mistaken for Aunt Studney's signature womblike sack.⁴⁴ Troy is proud of the quilts, of his mother's handiwork, and of his hill-country heritage. He makes a show of displaying them for the Fairchild women and rattles off the names of their various patterns. He has a certain quilt in mind for his and Dabney's future bed: "'Delectable Mountains,' that's the one I aim for Dabney and me to sleep under most generally, warm *and* pretty" (*DW* 148, emphasis original). The lasciviousness of "delectable," coupled with the maternal swelling evoked by the mountains, proves too much for Fairchild ears; Ellen and Tempe exchange a knowing glance.

Troy manhandles the quilts under watchful Fairchild eyes: "They all came forward and watched Troy spread out the quilts, snatch them together, spread them out again" (124). Troy's

⁴² See Kreyling, *Understanding Welty*, 97 and Louise Westerling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 77-86.

⁴³ Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 41, 147.

⁴⁴ Westerling, *Sacred Groves*, 81.

concern for the quilts and his eagerness to display them for his future in-laws indicates his earnest desire to find a place within Shellmound. Yet his “spreading” and “snatching” suggests that Troy’s desire is bound up with violent possession. The Fairchilds start to feel smothered by Troy’s display, “as if the quilts were getting hot and hotter” (148). They physically recoil at Troy’s quilts. Primrose retracts her hand and the women shield their eyes: “The pattern shone and the ladies and Dabney all fluttered their eyelids as if the simple thing revolved while they held it” (148). Russ has shown how iridescence in *Delta Wedding* “captures perfectly the external fixedness and internal flux that characterizes Welty’s vision of the plantation.”⁴⁵ Troy’s shining quilts, like the Delta and the Fairchilds themselves, encapsulate the plantation’s contradictions. Yet Troy’s quilts perform additional work as well. They cover the violation that Dabney will receive from Troy on their wedding night and perhaps throughout their marriage. They blanket violence with domesticity.

Inside Shellmound, Troy is a bull in a china shop. When Ellen asks him to help polish goblets for the wedding, Troy again combines excessive care with the threat of violence. When Ellen indicates to Troy the significance of the glassware, explaining “that cup in your hand now will be Dabney’s,” he “almost let it fall” (*DW* 123). Ellen continues to emphasize Dabney’s ownership of the glasses to counter Troy’s clumsiness: “Here’s one will be Dabney’s, for you to shine,” Ellen says as she hands him another goblet, “It was from the Dabneys— my family— brought over... This is Danbey’s cup” (123). Ellen’s repetition of Dabney’s name reinforces her ownership and echoes Dabney’s own wish to “never give up anything... to Troy” (159). To Ellen, the cups represent the continuation of her family line and the preciousness of her daughter. To Troy, the cups are grail-like objects to be simultaneously revered and possessed. Ellen

⁴⁵ Russ, *Plantation*, 85.

watches as he extends a phallic reach for the object: “Troy took it with his thumb and middle finger, sticking his forefinger well out” (123). Troy’s polishing performs a violent sexuality that is directed not just at his future bride, the owner of the goblets, but at Ellen herself.

Ellen and Troy’s chatter verges on flirtation. “Troy,” Ellen says when he shares an anecdote about his family’s quilts, “I believe you’re a tease too” (125). Closer in age to Ellen than Dabney, Troy performs a virile masculinity for Ellen as he works. In response to Ellen’s teasing, Troy “straightened up, and taking a goblet as if it were unfinished business on the table between them, he attacked it with his rag, first spitting on it thinly between drawn lips” (125). Troy’s assault on the glasses is twice accompanied by his spit. As they work, Ellen observes how Troy “added a little spit now and then, and held up each goblet critically but silently to see how Ellen thought it shone” (123). As with Troy’s use of the side door, his manners suggest not just his crudeness but his violence. As he leaves his bodily fluids on Dabney’s glasses, Troy shows Ellen what kind of a husband he will be.

Troy’s virile display is not entirely wasted on Ellen. Ellen fixates on Troy’s fingers in a manner that foreshadows his future dismemberment of Root. Through Ellen’s female gaze, Welty highlights the differences in the ways that the plantation perceives black and white bodies. Root’s fingers are dangerous and disposable. Troy’s fingers, on the other hand, are aesthetically pleasing to Ellen and signify personality traits. She notes how “his fingers were sprouted with his red hairs but they had a nice shape and they were kind, in Ellen’s judgement” (123). Yet Welty has shown the reader that Ellen’s judgement of men is deeply flawed. She is attracted to violent men. Ellen is drawn to George even after he admits he has raped the girl in the woods. Her marriage to Battle is predicated on her multiple pregnancies and his repeated disregard for her physical wellbeing. Ellen even shows some misgivings about Troy as she hesitates to introduce him to

judgmental Aunt Tempe. After watching Troy manhandle the goblets, Ellen fears what damage he will do to glassware gifted by her Virginia cousins. “Now I’m really scared for you to touch the Bohemian glass till after the wedding, Troy,” Ellen confesses (127). Troy’s destructive touch, Ellen ultimately realizes, will be unavoidable after he marries her daughter.

The care that Ellen shows for household goods mirrors Welty’s own devotion to domestic objects and spaces. “Feelings,” Welty claims, “are bound up in place.”⁴⁶ *Delta Wedding* is replete with long descriptions of interior decor. These descriptions evidence Welty’s longstanding interest in place while revealing key differences in the ways that insider and outsider characters navigate their homes.⁴⁷ Place acts as a useful constraint for her characters’ development by giving them limits to push up against. For Welty, the more narrowly place is established, the more her characters grow: “by confining character, it defines it.”⁴⁸ Enclosed places like the plantation thus provide productive limitations. In *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*, these enclosed places become sites of small domestic rebellions.

Robbie Reid is the most rebellious character in *Delta Wedding*. While Troy enters the Fairchild family with an oafish smile that belies his inherent violence, Robbie is more brazen. She wears her rejection from the Fairchild family like a badge of honor. She has left her husband George due to his presumed allegiance to the Fairchild family over her. Moping in the Fairchild family store, where she used to work, Robbie remembers in great detail the domestic bliss she once shared with George:

The flat in Memphis had heavy face-brick pillars and poured cement ornamental fern boxes across a red tile porch. It was right in town! The furniture was all bought in

⁴⁶ Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 123.

⁴⁷ See Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction,” in *The Eye of the Story* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 123.

⁴⁸ Welty, “Place in Fiction,” 122.

Memphis, shiny mahogany and rich velvet upholstery, blue with gold stripes, up and down which she would run her fingers, as she would in the bright water in a boat with George. There were soft pillows with golden tassels, and she would bite the tassels. Two of the chairs were rockers to match the davenport and there were two tables— matching. The lamps matched, being of turned mahogany, and there were two tall ones and two short ones, all with shades of mauve gorgette over rose China silk. On the mantle, which was large and handsome and made of red brick, was a mahogany clock, very expensive and ticking very slowly. The candles in heavy wrought-iron holders on each side had gilt trimming and were too pretty to be lighted. There were several Chinese ash trays about. (Oh, George's pipe!) The rugs were both very fine, and he and she went barefooted. The black wrought-iron fire-screen, and irons, and poker set were the finest in Memphis. Every door was a French door, the floors were hardwood, highly waxed, and yellow (*DW* 181-182).

Through these recollections of her home, the reader learns a lot about what matters to Robbie: stability (concrete, brick, iron), harmony (matching pieces), centrality (closeness to town), and the trappings of wealth (mahogany, velvet, silk, gilt). Not all of the interiors in the novel are as indicative of personality. To choose one example from many, compare Robbie's mantel with Shelley's:

Shelley's mantel was wood and white marble, and the hearth was round and raised in a flat apron. The fireplace was now hidden by a perfectly square silk screen painted by Aunt Tempe, with a bayou floating with wild ducks at sunset; a line of the ducks was rising at a right angle from the water and when straight to the upper corner like an arrow. On her mantel shelf was a gold china slipper, a souvenir of Mary Denis's summer

wedding, and that was all, except for an incense burner and a photograph of Shelley in a Spanish comb and a great deal of piled hair, taken the year she graduated from Fairchilds High School (108).

With its slow clocks and unlit candles, Robbie's mantle shows she values aesthetics over practically—a value she also expresses when she traverses the Delta in high heels. The description of Shelley's mantle reveals little about Shelley herself, beyond her relationship to other Fairchilds. While the upwards flight of the painted ducks and the Spanish comb might allude to Shelley's future European voyage, the hearth is overwhelmed by other Fairchilds. Like the fireplace itself, Shelley's qualities in this passage are hidden, screened behind her relatives' attributes. Yet this obfuscation is itself telling. With these lengthy domestic descriptions, Welty shows that what matters to the Fairchilds are other Fairchilds and their shared history. What matters to Robbie, conversely, is Robbie and the life she has made for herself with George. In the description of Shelley's mantle and elsewhere in the text, Welty highlights the Fairchild family values of history, tradition, and continuity.⁴⁹ These values contrast with Robbie's sense of independence, freedom, and individuality.

The way that Robbie interacts with her space is also very different than the Fairchild way. She “run[s] her fingers” on the upholstery, bites pillow tassels, and walks barefoot on the carpet. She inhabits her home in a bold and embodied way that stakes a claim on her space. Descriptions of Shellmound, filtered through Fairchild eyes, are detached and disembodied as they catalogue a room's contents with a proprietary but emotionless gaze.⁵⁰ Robbie interacts with the objects in her home as she describes them. She parses the differences between her world and Shellmound

⁴⁹ For example, consider Aunt Tempe's judgmental survey of Shellmound's “outdated” decor. See Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 128-130.

⁵⁰ Like Robbie, semi-outsider Laura's descriptions of Shellmound reveal that she interacts with the space in a physical way. See Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 7-9.

when she considers George's books: "His books had never a speck of dust on them, such as the Shellmound books were covered with if you touched them. His law books weighed a lot and she carried them in her arms one by one when she moved them from table to chair to see all was perfect, all dusted" (182). Robbie is tender towards her husband's law books; she knows their weight and cradles them with care. Shellmound's neglected books are for display only, as Robbie learns by touching them, too.

Robbie also interacts intimately with the objects in her bedroom. In her reminiscences, Robbie notes how the bedroom is the one part of the house she is unhappy with, as it is "still not the way she wanted it" (182). Robbie's dissatisfaction with her bedroom is indicative of her marital problems and her description of the space shows her embodied response to this unhappiness:

They had an old iron bed with a lot of thin rods head and foot, and she had painted it. There were noticeable places where the paint had run down those hard rods, that had never quite got dry, and when George went away on a case or was late coming home she would lie there indenting these little river of paint with her thumbnail very gently, to kill time, the way she would once hold rose petals on her tongue and gently bite them, waiting here in the store, the days when he courted. (182-183).

At this point in the novel, the reader knows of George's adultery with the girl in the woods. Welty thus allows for speculation that George might not really be "away on a case" or late coming home from work. Robbie's anxious picking of their marital bed suggests she might be aware of his adultery on some level; perhaps it was a factor in her desertion. As she dents the "hard rods" of the bed that "had never quite got dry" Robbie enacts a small rebellion against George's infidelities. Robbie always seems to be waiting for George. She thinks of happier times

from their courtship and her girlish ways. Unlike the Fairchilds, she tends to internalize her surroundings while externalizing her emotions.

Like Robbie, Fay Chisom stages a small rebellion on her marital bed in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Fay, however, is cast as the perpetrator of adultery rather than its victim. Her usurpation of Laurel's mother Becky is evident in Fay's redecoration of the master bedroom:

Instead of her mother's writing cabinet that used to stand between those windows, the bed faced her. It seems to swim in a bath of pink light. The mahogany headboard, rising high as the mantel-piece, had been quilted from top to bottom in peach satin; peach satin ruffles were thrown back over the foot of the bed; peach satin smothered the windows all around. Fay slept in the middle of the bed, deep under the cover, both hands curled into slack fists above her head (*OD* 60).

Fay has displaced Becky's writing desk, which becomes an important site of memory for Laurel, and has centered the space around the garishly redone bed. Ensconced in peach satin, the once understated mahogany bed billows with a cheap femininity. Fay's upholstery overtakes both the room and Laura's description of it, as "peach satin" is repeated thrice within a single sentence. The all-encompassing fabric suggests that Fay has both replaced Laurel's mother and overtaken her father in their shared space. Fay thus asserts her primacy over both Becky and Judge in Laurel's former home.

While Laurel balks at the gaudy bed and all it represents, she cannot help but feel a rush of something resembling pity for sleeping Fay. Swallowed by the womb-like bed with "hands curled into slack fists," petite Fay appears childlike and harmless (60). Laurel considers Fay's exposed neck, "the most vulnerable part of anybody," and wonders "is there any sleeping person you can be entirely sure you have not misjudged?" (60). Yet when Laurel spies Fay's green heels

displayed “like ornaments” on the mantel, she returns to her earlier harsh judgment of Fay (60). The heels remind Laurel not only of the violence Fay has visited upon her father in New Orleans, but also of how Fay has installed herself in a place of prominence on Laurel’s home. As in *Delta Wedding*, Welty reveals much about characters’ values through their mantel decor. Fay’s green heels put her tacky femininity on display.

While Laurel ultimately reaffirms her dislike of her stepmother, Fay’s redecoration has temporarily caused a productive shift in her perspective. For a moment, Laurel realizes Fay may not be as dangerous as she seems. Throughout the novel, Laurel expresses anxiety about Fay’s sleeping arrangements. First, Fay sleeps too close for comfort at their hotel in New Orleans. Laurel recoils at the proximity between their rooms: “These were adjoining—really half-rooms; the partition between their beds was only a landlord’s strip of wallboard. Where there was no intimacy, Laurel shrank from contact; she shrank from that thin board and from the vague apprehension that some night she might hear Fay cry or laugh like a stranger at something she herself would never know” (18). As Travis Rozier and Julia Eichelberger have observed, the carnivalesque atmosphere of New Orleans challenges Laurel’s boundaries.⁵¹ At the Hibiscus Inn, Laurel confronts not just the permeability of her space but the limits of her own understanding. She fears that she might overhear Fay making some noise that would reveal her stepmother’s subjectivity. Such a sound would force Laurel to recognize Fay as a person in her own right rather than the villainous caricature she so often seems.

Laurel’s preoccupation with her sleeping stepmother continues when they return home to Mount Salus. Lying awake in her childhood bedroom, Laurel remembers listening to her parents

⁵¹ Julia Eichelberger, “Rethinking the Unthinkable: Tracing Welty’s Changing View of the Color Line in Her Letters, Essays, and *The Optimist’s Daughter*,” in *Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race* ed. Harriet Pollack (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 232 and Travis Rozier, “The whole solid past”: Memorial Objects and Consumer Culture in Eudora Welty’s *The Optimist’s Daughter*,” *Southern Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2015): 141.

read together in bed: “she could hardly fall asleep, she tried to keep awake, for pleasure...their two voices reading to each other where she could hear them never letting a silence divide or interrupt them, combined into one unceasing voice and wrapped around her as she listened” (*OD* 58). Laurel’s comfort thinking of this memory is short-lived as her mind immediately jumps to Fay, “sleeping in the bed where Laurel was born; where her mother had died” (58). Her mother died feeling betrayed, angered by her husband’s incomprehension of her needs and anticipating the likes of Fay. The Judge was stupefied by Becky’s illness and ignored her pleas to return to her West Virginia home. Fay’s presence in her parents’ bed challenges Laurel’s memory of their life together. Happy memories of the past prompt an acknowledgment of the uncomfortable present, which in turn forces a reexamination of the past. What Laurel had interpreted as harmonious as a child was in fact full of discord. Thinking of Fay occupying her parents’ bed, Laurel must acknowledge that her parents were not always on the same page.

Fay’s desecration goes beyond well the bedroom. Laurel notices that she’s wreaked havoc on an heirloom desk in her father’s office. The desk is Laurel’s paternal great-great-grandfather’s, “a massive, concentrated presence” imported from Scotland, the McKelva’s ancestral home (121). She inventories the desk, noting that a photograph of Becky has been removed while a framed image of Laurel’s own wedding remains. She deems the removal of Becky’s photograph “understandable” and thinks how she, too, has framed her marriage to Phil (121). Laurel celebrates the “magical ease” of her highly compartmentalized Chicago-based marriage (121). Abruptly, Laurel’s gaze catches the traces of her stepmother. “But something had been spilled on the desk,” Laurel notes, “There were vermilion drops of hardened stuff on the dark wood— not sealing wax; nail polish. They made a little track toward the chair, as if Fay had walked her fingers over the desk from where she’d sat perched on its corner, doing her nails”

(121-122) The traces of Fay's bright red nail polish must seem a trail of blood to Laurel, further evidence of her stepmother's violent conquest of her father's body and space.

Laurel follows Fay's trail and sits in her father's chair. Emboldened by this positioning, she rummages through her father's desk drawers "which she had never thought of opening in her life" (122). She is surprised to find them unlocked and unoccupied except for an "empty cigar box" which reinforces the emasculation the Judge experienced in Fay's hands (122). Laurel is saddened that she cannot find any of her mother's letters to her father, which she knows Becky wrote assiduously. As much as Laurel would like to blame Fay for their disappearance, she cannot. She remembers that the Judge had always "dispatched... promptly" her mother's correspondence: "he never kept them: Laurel knew it and should have known it to start with" (122). Laurel eventually acknowledges the lack of care her father showed to her mother's letters, and by extension, her mother's memory.

Fay's domestic damage once again prompted a shift in Laurel's perspective that reveals the emotional distance between her mother and father. Of course, Laurel does not think of Fay's actions in these terms. She is determined to remove all traces of her stepmother, the way her father has excised the memory of Becky. "But there was nothing of her mother here for Fay to find, or for herself to retrieve," Laurel observes. "The only traces there were of anybody were the drops of nail varnish. Laurel studiously went to work on them; she lifted them from the surface of the desk and rubbed it afterwards with wax until nothing was left to show of them, either" (123). At this point in the novel, Laurel cannot bear to have a trace of Fay in her family home. She externalizes her grief by fastidiously working to remove the stains.

Laurel's aversion to her stepmother and her distress at seeing the damage she has inflicted on the family home are understandable. Fay is an unlikeable character. Her "desecration" is the

result of her own selfishness and carelessness with McKelva property. Nevertheless, Fay's small violences within the home prompt Laurel to perform the necessary emotional labor that accompanies mourning. These realizations help Laurel move away from an idealized version of the past that she has "sealed away into its perfection" (154). Once she ceases to idealize her parents' marriage, Laurel can confront her grief over her own brief marriage. Fay, like fellow outsiders Robbie and Troy, facilitates important memory work through domestic destruction. By prompting a reconsideration of the past through the home, these outsiders create space for Welty's protagonists to reinterpret the past on their own terms.

Breaking (with) the Past

In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yeager issues a call for a renewed attention to things in southern literature. "There is an overlooked, under-analyzed story involving southern objects," she claims.⁵² This story is of course shaped by the legacy of slavery. In a society where "people have been defined as things," objects carry a particular weight and ownership is both carefully constructed and hotly contested.⁵³ For Yeager, "the reifications of slavery have continued to exert a residual effect, contaminating perceptions about who is and who gets to possess property."⁵⁴ As I have argued in the previous chapter, property and the past are close connected in settler colonial societies. In *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, possessing the past means owning objects that are saturated with history. "Objects," Fitzhugh Brundage has argued, "become infused with commemorative qualities, and thereby serve as physical markers of memory that

⁵² Patricia Yeager, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 202.

⁵³ Yeager, *Dirt and Desire*, 206.

⁵⁴ Yeager, *Dirt and Desire*, 211.

preserve the past in the present, underscoring the connectedness of past and present.”⁵⁵ As bridges between past and present, objects perform memory work. Yet Welty’s heroines eschew this form of commemoration anchored in materiality. They break with the “solid past” in order to achieve their own fluid futures (*OD* 172).

In *The Optimist’s Daughter*, Laurel initially clings to the past. Yet Fay’s desecration has tarnished Laurel’s memories. As with the antique McKelva family desk that Fay has covered in nail polish stains, Laurel’s stepmother has left her mark on a treasured breadboard. After spending an emotional night fully remembering her father, mother, and husband, Laurel is going through the cabinets of the family home, as if on a quest: “something was waiting for her to find; and she was still here, to find it,” Welty writes (172). Laurel unearths a breadboard that her husband Phil had made for her mother. It is pockmarked from Fay’s walnut cracking and covered in her cigarette burns. The gendered tools of Fay’s desecration (walnuts and cigarettes) recall the violence with which she “laid hands” on Judge. The roughness of Fay’s handling, which a nurse deems “abuse,” may have contributed to the Judge’s death (30). Fay has gotten her hands not just on Laurel’s father, but on her family heirlooms as well. The violence the breadboard has endured at Fay’s hands contrasts with the love it encountered in Phil’s and then Becky’s hands. Phil crafted the board for Becky, who had in turn used it to knead nourishing bread for Laurel and her father.

Initially, Laurel clings to the breadboard and even contemplates using it as a weapon against Fay. Laurel confronts Fay with her “desecration,” but Fay refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing since she can’t understand the value of the breadboard. “What do you see in that thing?” Fay asks. “The whole story, Fay. The whole solid past,” Laurel replies (178). Fay,

⁵⁵ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, introduction to *Where these Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 8.

perhaps because of her “vulgarity,” unwittingly admits the limitations of this form of commemoration which relies on external cues like objects. “The past isn’t a thing to me,” she says, “I belong to the future” (179). While Fay’s declaration is meant to convey her lack of interest in the subject, her word choice prompts Laurel to reconsider her own relationship to the past. The past isn’t “a thing” to Fay because, in Laurel’s mind at least, Fay is incapable of feeling. But, as Laurel realizes, the past isn’t “a thing” at all. It cannot be possessed, owned, or held. Nor can it be changed, for better or worse. “The past is no more open to help or hurt than was Father in his coffin,” Laurel thinks:

The past is like him, impervious, and can never be awakened. It is memory that is the somnambulist. It will come back in its wounds from across the world, like Phil, calling us by our names and demanding rightful tears. It will never be impervious. The memory can be hurt, time and again—but in that may lie its final mercy. As long as it’s vulnerable to the living moment, it lives for us, and while it lives, and while we are able, we can give it up its due (179).

Living memory is more dynamic, and thus more dangerous and demanding, than the dead past. It is through memory that the past continues to make meaning in the present.

After fighting with Fay, Laurel ultimately relinquishes her hold on the breadboard, on the solid past, and feels liberated by her decision. “Memory,” Laurel realizes, “lived not in the initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams” (179). Laurel returns to Chicago unencumbered by the past. As Laurel learns in the case of the breadboard, the past is not a thing to be possessed. Although Laurel has relinquished her artifacts, Welty gives the reader no indication that Laurel will forget Phil or her parents. Rather, she closes the novel with a scene which mediates between

the past and present. Laurel's final image of Mount Salus, and the final image of the novel, is that of waving schoolchildren: "the twinkling of their hands, the many small and unknown hands, wishing her goodbye" (180). While the children represent the future, the wave is an ambivalent gesture, signifying arrival or departure. In Laurel's case, they are saying goodbye. Yet Welty's repetition of "hands" shows that Laurel has not forgotten Phil or their married life. If, as Laurel now believes, memory lives in "the freed hands," then the children's farewell is a commemorative gesture rather than an amnesiac one. Hardy has noted how "the word hand is elaborately played upon in the text" and with this closing paronomasia, Welty makes certain that the reader does not forget, either.⁵⁶ By confronting her grief, abandoning the relics of the past and instead entering into a dialogue with memory, Laurel can finally transition from her ossified emotional state to a liberated future.

Since *The Optimist's Daughter* is centered around funeral, readers might expect memory, commemoration, and the past to be Welty's key themes. *Delta Wedding* is, of course, centered around a wedding. Yet in this novel, too, Welty offers a sustained examination of the relationship between the past and present. As in *The Optimist's Daughter*, objects play a key role in her characters' journey towards the future. Rather than acting as anchors to the past, objects provide opportunities for Welty's female protagonists to assert agency. In *Delta Wedding*, preparations for the wedding have objects moving into and within the plantation with great energy. Wedding gifts, like Troy's quilts and Ellen's heirloom glasses, bring new objects into Shellmound which are interpreted by the Fairchild family and incorporated into the household. While the wedding creates opportunities for new objects to enter Shellmound, it simultaneously highlights the way that objects typically move within the plantation space. The gift-giving economy at Shellmound

⁵⁶ Hardy, "Marrying Down," 95.

is remarkably circular. Objects move within Shellmound, traveling from owner to owner. As these gifts circulate the plantation, they become dynamic, open to interpretation and reinterpretation in new hands. This circular gift economy further inscribes Glissant's enclosed plantation space.

Laura expresses this circular logic when she gives George the gift of his own pipe. Like the rest of the Fairchilds, Laura reveres George. Yet Laura is drawn to him in part because of her own liminal status within the Fairchild family. To Laura, her uncle is a refuge from the emotional and physical violence that she bears from her cousins. In George, she finds "the miracle of safety, strange in any house" (*DW* 98). Laura's young mind persistently conflates George with safety and the home with danger. She understands her love for George in relation to the destruction of the plantation home: "She stored love for Uncle George fiercely in her heart, she wished Shellmound would burn down and she could run in and rescue him" (98). While the rest of the Fairchilds view George as either their hero or a "sacrificial beast," Laura wants to be his savior, rescuing him from the forces that holds him too close (82). Laura's fantasy of pulling her uncle from the burning plantation builds on George's association with smoke. George's presence is often announced by the smell of his pipe, leading Laura to form positive feelings about the object and its odor, "As if by smell," she thinks, "by the smell of his pipe she knew that he out of all the Delta Fairchilds had kindness" (98).

It is thus unsurprising when Laura announces that she wants to give George a wedding present rather than Dabney, with whom she rarely interacts. Yet she has difficulty selecting an object worthy of her uncle, even in the well-stocked Fairchilds store. The Fairchilds store is a site of unrestrained Fairchild privilege in which "any member of the Fairchild family in the widest sense who wanted to, could go into the store, walk behind the counter, reach in and take anything

on earth, without having to pay or even specify what he took” (178). Through Laura’s admiring gaze, Welty comprehensively inventories the abundance at the Fairchilds store.⁵⁷ Although Laura is drawn to “all kinds of boxes and bottles, all objects that could keep and hold things,” she is unable to find anything suitable (179). “The pipe was the thing he would want,” Laura thinks (254). She is learning that what the Fairchilds want most is what they already have. Glissant has shown how the performance of autarky is central to the plantation’s project.⁵⁸ On Shellmound, the pretension of self-sufficiency extends to even the gift-giving economy. When Laura ceremoniously returns the pipe, George thanks her with the pronouncement that she is “growing up to be a real little Fairchild” (*DW* 274-275). Laura has intuited the circular movement of objects within the enclosed space of the plantation and has thus proven herself a true Fairchild.

George’s pipe offers a masculine counterpoint to many of the feminine objects circulating the text, since of course most wedding gifts are for Dabney. When Dabney pays a visit to her two elderly spinster aunts, who live on the plantation in a home of their own, they insist that she choose an object for her wedding present. Rather than purchasing a gift, as Ellen’s Virginia cousins have done with their Bohemian glasses, the aunts ask that Dabney select a pre-owned Fairchild object. Of course, the aunts are not looking to save money on Dabney’s gift but instead are expressing a Fairchild family value. The best gifts are not the prettiest or most useful objects. Rather, they are the artifacts most saturated with Fairchild family history.

At first, Dabney selects a simple flower bowl, but the aunts refuse, calling it a “trifling little thing!... nothing but plain glass!” (56). Dabney sees some meaning in the object, noting it came from Fairchilds store. Like Laura, Dabney associates the store with abundance. Dabney is

⁵⁷ The lengthy description here recalls the inventories of Robbie’s apartment and Shelley’s bedroom. See Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 179.

⁵⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 67.

perhaps drawn to the flower bowl because its connection to Fairchild's store reiterates her privilege and the same sense of entitlement which prompted her to "reach out and take" Troy from the fields to be her fiancé. Yet the aunts reject the tacky commercialism they associate with the flower bowl. They do not want Dabney to have something she wants, as Primrose tells Dabney she will have "something *we'd* want you to have" (56, emphasis original). The aunts prioritize their own desires over Dabney's as the Fairchild family once again subsumes any individual identity.

For the aunts, a flower bowl from the local store is too vulgar and ordinary a wedding gift. They insist on giving Dabney an heirloom that is saturated with meaning and history. Dabney's wedding present is to be a cherished family night light. The night light is a palimpsest of meaning for the Fairchild family. It is what drew the Fairchild children to visit their aunts; it is "what they had all come to see when they were little—the bribe" (57). For the aunts as well as its original owner Aunt Mashula, the night light is "company" (57). As Aunt Jim Allen explains, "Aunt Mashula loved it—that waited for Uncle George, waited from him to come home from the Civil War till the lightning one early morning stamped her picture on the windowpane" (57). In Jim Allen's personification of the night light, the object is an extension of Aunt Mashula's deepest desires. The night light waits with and for Aunt Mashula, acting as an external manifestation of her longing. Uncle George, however, never came back from the Civil War, and family legend claims Aunt Mashula's ghost haunts the bayou. By containing a war widow's sadness, the night light carries a sense of Civil War victimization with it across generations.

Given the night light's connection to a tragic chapter in Fairchild family history, one might expect it to be considered cursed or avoided. Yet instead it is cherished. The unusual composition of the night light accounts for some of its appeal. The night light is a porcelain lamp

with a painted scene of London on the bottom and a functioning tea pot on top. When a candle is placed inside its body, the London scene illuminates, evoking the Great Fire of London, and the teapot warms. This nightlight is based on one Welty herself knew of and “could go beautifully to sleep by,” although she seems to have added the teapot element.⁵⁹ The nightlight offers a confusing combination of domestic solace and destruction: the violence of the Great Fire contrasts with the comfort of the tea it might produce.

The ambivalence of the night light makes it a fitting wedding gift for Dabney’s marriage to Troy, which is safe in that it will keep her at Shellmound, but dangerous in that it will dilute the Fairchilds’ presumed aristocratic bloodline. Like Troy himself, the night light contains within it hints of both violence and care. Dabney finds the gift “indulgent” and wishes the aunts had instead engaged her about her marriage. “They didn’t try to understand *her* at all,” Dabney thinks, or “her love, which they were free, welcome to challenge and question” (*DW* 60, emphasis original). Unlike Aunt Mashula, whose identity collapses into the night light that waits beside her, Dabney refuses to be overtaken by the object. She wants to be seen as an individual in the present moment, making important choices of her own will, rather than given an heirloom and a lesson in family history.

Nevertheless, Dabney thanks the aunts. As with George’s pipe, the exchange of the gift-object is highly ceremonial. When the aunts light the lamp and give it to Dabney, they are passing the torch in a literal and symbolic sense. To complete the ritual, Aunt Primrose “with a respectful kind of look at Dabney, lifted the pot away and blew out the light” (59). The aunts gaze at their niece in awe, “as though Dabney had transformed it” (59). In a sense, Dabney has transformed the heirloom; it takes on a new light in the arms of a young bride rather than on the

⁵⁹ Welty, “Place in Fiction,” 120.

dusty shelves of the maiden aunts. As she cradles it around her midsection, Dabney's possession of the night light immediately prompts both sexual and maternal associations. India asks if Dabney will take it with her on her honeymoon and is scolded by Aunt Primrose because "little girls don't talk about honeymoons" (59). Yet Dabney herself follows India's line of thinking, proclaiming "I hope I have a baby right away" (62). In Dabney's possession, the night light seems to symbolize the continuation of conservative Fairchild family values dating back to the Civil War.

Dabney cradles the nightlight gingerly in her arms as she rides on horseback back to Shellmound. When she arrives at Shellmound, however, Dabney catches sight of Troy, "a black wedge in the lighted window" (68). Dabney drops the nightlight and runs towards him. Troy's silhouette recalls the image of Aunt Mashula illuminated by lightning and "stamped on the window." Yet now the gender roles are reversed; it is Troy who waits inside the home for Dabney's return. When Dabney drops the night light, she effectively closes the loop on Aunt Mashula's grief while simultaneously declaring her own independence in the face of Fairchild family tradition. Dabney may be rushing headlong into a problematic marriage, but she is no passive window watcher. By choosing Troy over the cherished night light, Dabney reasserts her own individual desires over her family's. She chooses her future over their past.

While Dabney does not seem to pay any mind to the broken night light, its destruction reduces India to tears. She is comforted by George, who assures her by "teasing her about a little old piece of glass that Dabney would never miss" (68). George is not entirely wrong, although Dabney does later "shed tears" for breaking the night light (254). However, it is not because she regrets her carelessness, but rather because she views the destruction of the night light as "unavoidable" (254). As Welty's narration moves from Shelley's perspective to Dabney's, the

sisters seem to share the revelation that life “could change in a moment. Life was not ever inviolate” (254). Life, Dabney learns, is as fragile as the night light. Dabney’s realization about the malleability of life recalls Laurel’s epiphany regarding the vulnerability of memory. Both of Welty’s heroines abandon artifacts in order to understand the ephemerality, and thus the beauty, of life.

Pinning Down the Past

As with Bowen’s *A World of Love*, contemporary critics took issue with the apparent lack of plot in *Delta Wedding*.⁶⁰ More recent work by Elizabeth Russ and Michael Kreyling has shown how *Delta Wedding* is motivated by forces more intricate than plot. Russ has argued that *Delta Wedding* is a “lyrical novel” which “strives to create its world, not from a series of actions that takes place of time, but rather from a series of images whose meaning emerge through structural and linguistic patterns.”⁶¹ Kreyling notes how “The invocation of rhythm and repetition as the structural principle of *Delta Wedding* distinguishes it from the traditional realist novel.”⁶² Kreyling, Russ, and others have pointed to the Yellow Dog episode as one way that Welty achieves narrative cohesion in *Delta Wedding*. Yet the telling and re-telling of the narrowly avoided train accident is just one way the novel comes together. Less attention has been paid to the other shared stories and objects that circulate within the text. Ellen’s garnet pin, for instance, also presents an alternative form of narrative cohesion. While the Yellow Dog episode provides a masculine, mock-heroic, linear narrative throughout *Delta Wedding*, the search for Ellen’s pin offers a feminine, domestic, and diffuse alternative narrative.

⁶⁰ Russ, *Plantation*, 84.

⁶¹ Russ, *Plantation*, 66.

⁶² Kreyling, *Understanding Welty*, 85.

The pin first appears in the novel when Ellen puts Bluet down for a nap. Ellen tells Bluet her dreams to lull the baby to sleep. In the past night's dream, Ellen "was warned that her garnet broach, a present in courting days for her husband, that had been lying around the house for years and then disappeared, lay in the leaves under the giant cypress tree on the other side of the bayou" (*DW* 85). Ellen places great stock in her dreams, which often prove prescient: "She dreamed of things the children and Negroes lost, of where they were, and often when she looked she did find them, or parts of them, in the dreamed-of places" (84). If, as Susan Donaldson argues, "property and ownership, the proudest boasts of the Fairchild legacy, are highly problematic in *Delta Wedding*," then Ellen's pin calls attention to both the slipperiness of ownership and the racial implications of possession in the plantation South.⁶³ Ellen, who feels that her children have overtaken her body and her black servants have overtaken her home, blames the disappearance of household objects on "children and Negroes." Her dreams subconsciously reveal where she "pins" her own anxieties around ownership and possession at Shellmound.

Ellen's dream initiates a quest for the pin that links many of the female characters in the novel. At first, Ellen searches for the pin on her own. The missing object serves as a conduit for Ellen's racial anxieties and aggressions as she attempts to attribute its disappearance to black and black-seeming characters in the novel. First, as Ellen traverses the bayou, she links the pin with the mysterious girl she encounters in the woods. Ellen initially reads the girl as black, "a dark creature not hiding, but waiting to be seen" (90). Ellen is already thinking about possession when she asks the girl, "are you one of our people?" (90). It is only when the girl speaks—"I haven't seen *no pin*"—that Ellen realizes she's white (90, emphasis original). She's absolved of the theft

⁶³ Susan V. Donaldson, "Gender and History in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*" *South Central Review* 14, no. 2 (1997): 8.

at the same moment Ellen identifies her race; her whiteness and her innocence go hand in hand. At this point, “a whole mystery of life opened up” to Ellen.⁶⁴ After this racial realization, the girl persistently declares her innocence. “Nobody can say I stole *no pin*,” she claims (*DW* 92, emphasis original). Ellen changes the subject: “I wasn’t speaking about any little possession to you. I suppose I was speaking about good and bad, maybe. I was speaking about men— men, our lives” (92). Given the girl’s whiteness, Ellen attempts to absolve herself of her earlier accusation. She translates her search for the pin into a moral quandary and tries to bond with the girl over their shared femininity. Through Ellen’s encounter, Welty links the elusiveness of the pin to the slipperiness of race.

Once she knows the girl in the woods is white, Ellen likens her to one of her daughters. If, in Ellen’s dreams, missing objects are typically lost by “children and Negroes,” then in her waking life Ellen seems to connect these two groups. The next time the pin appears in *Delta Wedding*, it is with Shelley. As the first-born daughter, Shelley has inherited many of the Fairchild family jewels. Yet these heirlooms clash with her new-woman style: “Shelly would not be caught dead wearing any of them” (107). Ellen’s garnet brooch, however, is a notable exception: “She liked a garnet brooch of her mother’s to pin her middy blouse together, but now she could not find it” (108). A middy blouse is an iconic 1920s garment that invokes the era’s androgynous style with a maritime twist: “a loose, unbelted, hip-length blouse with a sailor collar” which is “based on the blouse worn by midshipmen in the U.S. Navy.”⁶⁵ While Shelley’s blouse alludes to her upcoming European voyage, her pairing of it with her mother’s pin suggests a desire to keep her family close to heart. For Ellen, the pin acts as a proxy for her racialized

⁶⁴ Intriguingly, Kreyling suggests the girl might have some connection to Troy, whose cabin is located nearby. See Kreyling, *Understanding Welty*, 102.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Lewandowski, *The Complete Costume Dictionary* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 192.

anxieties around possession. For Shelley, the pin encapsulates her ambivalent urge to separate from the family.

As the search continues and the novel progresses, Shelley grows increasingly distressed about the missing pin. She seems more disturbed by the lost heirloom than by Root's lost finger. Ellen rebukes her in language that reflects her own preoccupation with ownership, telling Shelley to stop "taking things that hard" (*DW* 164). Ellen must still suspect the pin lies with "children or Negroes," and sends Shelley on a "lowly kind of errand" to find out if Partheny has the pin (170). Yaeger notes the ambiguity of the situation when she asks, "Is Partheny sought out for her voodoo powers, or is she being accused?"⁶⁶ Partheny indulges Shelley's questioning ("don't suppose that pin could have flown down *here* anywhere, do you?" Partheny asks) and makes a show of looking for it (*DW* 169, emphasis original). She even looks underneath the chickens roosting in the hen house, as if a bird would be incubating the gem. Of course, Partheny finds "nary a garnet present," but the Fairchilds refuse to leave empty-handed (171). "But what have you got?" India asks (171). Instead of the heirloom pin, Partheny sends the search party on their way with a Voodoo-laced patty cake for Uncle George. Partheny's gift reflects the ambiguity of Ellen's behest. Is it a love-potion meant to restore George's marriage, or something more sinister? India's observations mark the cake as an object with racial significance. "Oh, look how black it is!" she exclaims, "How heavy!" (172).

Partheny's cake may be a generous attempt to heal a broken Fairchild marriage. Yet she concludes Shelley's demeaning errand by reasserting her own power within her home. The Fairchild children, however, disregard Partheny's instructions and India gives the love-cake to Troy. Due to their immense privilege, the Fairchild children have a problematic understanding of

⁶⁶ Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 203.

ownership. When the pin itself actually appears in the novel, Laura and Roy fight over it. They find the pin in the deep grass outside Marmion, the abandoned plantation house where Dabney and Troy will live. Ownership of Marmion itself is in question; Laura, Maureen, and Dabney all have some claim on the home. This ambiguity highlights the dubiousness of ownership throughout the novel. The cousins' argument shows how, as Donaldson has noted, "under scrutiny the issue of who owns what among the Fairchilds turns out to be as elusive as the lost garnet pin."⁶⁷ Just as ownership of the plantation home is debatable, Roy and Laura each stake a claim on the garnet pin. Laura has a claim based on her femininity; she knows how and where the pin should be worn. Roy has a claim based on inheritance: "it's Mama's," he says, "I'll take it back to her" (*DW* 233). The cousins' dispute over the pin contrasts with their earlier agreement to steal the contents of Aunt Studney's sack. "We'll run off with what's in it," suggests Roy. "Oh, Roy. That would be perfect," Laura swoons in agreement (229). While the children are divided over possession of their family heirlooms, they are united in their project to dispossess a black woman.

Aunt Studney's sack acts as a foil to Ellen's pin. While Ellen's pin moves freely around the plantation, Aunt Studney's sack seems almost prosthetically attached to her body. While it is unfixed in space, Ellen's pin is knowable: a recognizable artifact with a known origin. Aunt Studney's mysterious sack, conversely, is entirely unknowable. When Roy speculates it is where Fairchild children come from, he is inadvertently applying plantation logic whereby black women deliver, nurse, and care for white babies. Both Ellen's pin and Aunt Studney's sack are present with the cousins at Marmion, the plantation house which, as Donaldson argues, "suggests something slippery and elusive at the heart of the Fairchild legacy."⁶⁸ By putting these two

⁶⁷ Donaldson, "Gender and History," 8.

⁶⁸ Donaldson, "Gender and History," 8.

objects in the same plantation space, Welty calls attention to the different rules that govern black and white ownership, even on the post-slavery plantation.

Fortunately for Aunt Studney, Roy and Laura are easily distracted and abandon their quest to raid the contents of her mysterious sack. Laura wins temporary custody of the pin, but Roy reasserts his dominance when he pushes her into the Yazoo River. As Glenn and others have noted, Roy's push acts as a kind of "initiation/baptism."⁶⁹ Yet the moment of Laura's unity with the Delta, and by extension with the Fairchilds, is also a moment of loss. Significantly, it is when a soaking Laura enters Shellmound that she contemplates the loss of the pin: "Laura's hand stole down to her pocket where the garnet pin had lain. For a moment she ached to her bones—it was indeed gone. It was in the Yazoo River now. How fleetingly she had held her treasure" (*DW* 236).

Veracini has shown how settler colonial narratives preclude the possibility of a return.⁷⁰ In *Delta Wedding*, the garnet pin is never returned to Ellen. Yet its loss, and the quest for it, have shaped the novel and helped define many Fairchilds. Laura, for instance, possessed the pin only for a moment, but she thinks of it often. When Laura attempts to replace Lady Clare in the wedding party, her thoughts turn to the pin. Laura "suddenly wondered where the rosy pin was. She got to her feet and backed away from her aunt slowly— she wanted to know in what wave. Now it would be in the Yazoo River, then it would be carried down to the Mississippi, then..." (*DW* 240, ellipses original). While Laura's world ends with the Delta, Welty's ellipses open up to the Atlantic and beyond. The expansiveness Welty captures in this sentence anticipates Laura's gesture at the novel's conclusion. In the final sentence of *Delta Wedding*, Laura has "both arms

⁶⁹ Glenn, "Circle," 57.

⁷⁰ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 97.

held out to the radiant night” (326). As in “The Bride of the Innisfallen,” Welty ends with an opening.

The garnet pin is also present at the conclusion of the novel, as is Dabney’s night light. During the Fairchild’s evening picnic, India brings up the shattered night light, saying it is “gone... Dabney broke it for good” (324). The family is not bothered by India’s reminder. Instead, they are overtaken by “another silence, but gentler, more restful” (324). Laura, meanwhile, debates telling Ellen about the loss of her pin. She compromises by offering Ellen “three anxious, repaying kisses” (326). Laura is at peace with her indecision and is content to join in the stargazing with the rest of the family. Like the shooting stars that illuminate the Delta, the night light and the pin are no less real because they are intangible. These objects are remembered, but their loss is not mourned. Instead, the Fairchilds discuss modernizing the plantation. Loss and change complement one another at Shellmound.

These family heirlooms are gone, but they are not forgotten. In *Delta Wedding* and in *The Optimist’s Daughter*, Welty calls attention to mutability of memory. She divorces commemoration from its material manifestations and instead focuses on its “living” qualities. Memory, in Welty’s estimation, is subject to change, rearrangement, and reconsideration. “The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time,” she wrote, “but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily—perhaps not possibly—chronological.”⁷¹ In *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*, Welty shows the possibility of a more dynamic form of southern commemoration, one which accounts the fluidity of memory and creates a space for the constant reinterpretation and renegotiation of the past. Southern memory need not be monumental or monolithic. In this way, memory is like family itself. “A

⁷¹ Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, 68-69.

family story,” Welty writes, “is a family possession, not for a moment to be forgotten, not a bit to be dropped or left out — just added to. No good story ever became *diminished*.”⁷² The story of the plantation is just one story of the South, yet it is a story that has shaped the literary landscape and cultural memory of the region more than any other. Welty shows how this story may change without being forgotten.

⁷² Eudora Welty, “From Where I Live,” in *Occasions: Selected Writings*, ed. Pearl Amelia McHaney (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009): 245. Emphasis original.

Chapter Three: Paradox and Plantation in Dominican White Creole Women's Writing

In a 1985 interview with Hermonie Lee, Eudora Welty discussed the importance of storytelling in the South. "Story-telling is *part* of life in the South," Welty claimed, "it's a social activity, always arising in family gatherings."¹ Storytelling and family gatherings provide ample opportunities to investigate a shared past. Lee had recently written the introduction to the 1984 reissue of Elizabeth Bowen's *Bowen's Court*, a text with which Welty was intimately familiar. Lee noted that both writers share "a very vivid sense of place, and a lot of close detail, and a strong narrative voice."² Expanding upon the importance of place in her fiction, Welty revealed that an all-or-nothing approach works best for her:

Either I have to know everything about a place, so that I don't have to think, or else I must never have seen it before, so that I'm wide awake to everything as a stranger, and can write one thing out of what I see and feel, as I did once with a story about Ireland. I didn't know Ireland and I didn't mean to write a story about it, but it left an indelible impression in my mind.³

In "The Bride of the Innisfallen," unfamiliarity about place was an asset for Welty. In much of her other work, including *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty took the opposite approach by invoking a place she knew and loved.

Welty's interview with Lee is anthologized in the 1988 volume *Writing Lives: Conversations between Women Writers*. The volume by Virago Press sought to put "an older generation of Virago's writers" in dialogue with their "younger successors."⁴ Welty appears

¹ "Eudora Welty talking with Hermione Lee," in *Writing Lives: Conversations between Women Writers*, ed. Mary Chamberlain (London: Virago, 1988), 256. Emphasis original.

² "Welty with Lee," 257.

³ "Welty with Lee," 255.

⁴ Chamberlain, *Writing Lives*, i.

alongside Mary Lavin, Eavan Boland, Maya Angelou and many others. In this volume, Phyllis Shand Allfrey in conversation with Polly Pattullo, issues her “last recorded statements on [her] life and work.”⁵ Allfrey, a Dominican white creole writer and politician, shares Welty’s preoccupation with place. Allfrey’s work follows the approach Welty takes when writing about Mississippi. She writes of Dominica with a deep sense of purpose that elevates place to the level of character. “I wanted to write a book about an island,” Allfrey told Pattullo, “the island is the real hero.”⁶

Allfrey’s *The Orchid House*, like Welty’s *Delta Wedding*, depicts the planter class in decline. Both writers describe the way that the plantation patriarchy has been supplanted by a new matriarchy. Welty tells Lee of her interest in how “plantation life” reshaped gender roles: “Those were the real matriarchies, which sprang out of the South during and after the Civil War years. I don’t know that first hand, but I’ve read it and seen the results down the generations, where the sexes seem to me really divided, with the men galloping around outside and the women running everything.”⁷ Welty depicts this world through Shellmound plantation in *Delta Wedding*, where “the women always ruled the roost.”⁸ Allfrey, whose work is deeply autobiographical, found herself in a similar situation in Dominica. “I have made my own society here,” Allfrey tells Pattullo, “I have my own matriarchy.”⁹ L’Aromatique, Allfrey’s fictional estate, is similarly “a house of women,” owned by a planter family “in danger of becoming a matriarchy.”¹⁰

⁵ Chamberlain, *Writing Lives*, i.

⁶ “Phyllis Shand Allfrey talking with Polly Pattullo,” in *Writing Lives: Conversations between Women Writers*, ed. Mary Chamberlain (London: Virago, 1988), 229.

⁷ “Allfrey with Pattullo,” 253.

⁸ Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 190.

⁹ “Allfrey with Pattullo,” 234.

¹⁰ Phyllis Shand Allfrey, *The Orchid House* (Colorado Springs: Three Continents Press, 1985), 229, 134.

The Orchid House tells the story of one such matriarchy, an unnamed planter family in the first half of the twentieth century. The patriarch, known only as the Master, has returned from the Great War shell-shocked and drug-addicted. Narrated by the family's black nurse Lally, the novel chronicles the return to the island of the family's three daughters. Stella and her son Helmut arrive from their German-American farm home in Maine. Penniless activist Joan visits next from London with her son Ned in tow. The two eldest daughters find the island much the same as they left it, except that their father's drug addiction has squandered what remains of the family's wealth. The youngest daughter Natalie, a wealthy widow residing in Trinidad, has purchased the family's estate home and given it back to her parents, saving them from total ruin.

Stella and Joan each try to enact change on the island in large and small ways. Stella is sentimental and focuses on changing individual lives. She seeks to revive her despondent cousin Andrew from his tuberculous and stop her father's drug addiction. Joan takes a broader view and is more concerned with the systemic inequalities she sees on her home island and abroad. Together with Baptiste, the black son of the family's cook Christophine, Joan tries to organize a labor union. The sisters' desire for change competes with their nostalgia about their childhood. The result is a "Janus-like work" that looks back to the past with longing and ahead to the future with anticipation.¹¹

This bifurcated novel reveals Allfrey's own perspective and speaks to her subject position as a white creole. Kamau Brathwaite has argued that biographical contexts are especially relevant in analyses of Caribbean literature. "We cannot begin to understand statements about 'West Indian cultures,' since it is so diverse and has so many subtly different orientations and interpretations," Brathwaite argues, "unless we know something about the speaker/writer's own

¹¹ Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, introduction to *The Orchid House*, by Phyllis Shand Allfrey (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), xix.

socio-cultural background and orientation.”¹² Allfrey’s ambivalent orientation in *The Orchid House* is evidence of a larger tension between her ancestral background and her personal politics.

Like Elizabeth Bowen, Allfrey could trace her settler colonial roots back centuries and took pride in her family’s history. On her mother’s side, Allfrey was related to Napoleon’s Empress Josephine. A male relative was allegedly descended from a knight of King Arthur’s Round Table and had married a relative of Anne Boleyn. While these European ancestors lent a sense of nobility to the Shand family, Allfrey especially celebrated her family’s longstanding West Indian roots. Her first ancestor to cross the Atlantic had been offered passage in lieu of imprisonment for opposing Cromwell in 1644. In a letter to Elaine Campbell, Allfrey self-identified as a “Dominican of three-hundred years’ standing despite my pale face.”¹³

Allfrey’s “despite” reveals the central tension within her racial and national identity. For some readers and critics, Allfrey’s colonial family history—the whiteness it depended upon and perpetuated—justifies her marginalization within a Caribbean literary tradition. Brathwaite has claimed, “White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea.”¹⁴ For Brathwaite, West Indian literature ought to be defined by writers of African and/or Carib descent. Scholars like Evelyn O’Callaghan have pushed back against Brathwaite’s assertions by creating a space for white creole writing within the diverse Caribbean literary tradition.¹⁵

¹² Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural diversity and integration in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Savacou Publications, 1974), 33.

¹³ Quoted Paravisini-Gebert, “Introduction,” x.

¹⁴ Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, 38.

¹⁵ Evelyn O’Callaghan, “‘The Outsider’s Voice’: White Creole Women Novelists in the Caribbean Literary Tradition,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 1, no. 1 (1986): 74-88.

It is beyond the purposes of this chapter to determine who may be considered a West Indian writer or to argue the merits of white creole literature. Rather, I will examine how Allfrey and her more famous friend Jean Rhys navigated their settler colonial status in their lives and literatures. Such an analysis seeks not to bracket off questions of national identity and canonicity but rather to nuance them through an analysis of the ways white creole writers think about power, place, and belonging. I will argue that Allfrey's writing about Dominica is paradoxical, contradictory, and ambivalent. In both her editorial career and her fictional writing, Allfrey seems caught between her more progressive political inclinations and the limitations of her "color-blind" worldview. Her long career contains both problematic representations of race and meaningful social justice work. In Allfrey's life and literature, these paradoxes were both unresolvable and productive. Rather than seek to reconcile these paradoxes here, I will chart the ways in which Allfrey wrote about home; both her home island of Dominica in her newspaper the *Star*, and the plantation home in her novel *The Orchid House*. When considered alongside the work of Elizabeth Bowen, Eudora Welty, and Tana French, Allfrey's writing demonstrates the immense difficulty of critiquing the settler colonial tradition from within.

Jean Rhys provides a useful point of reference for this analysis of Allfrey. If, as Peter Kalliney argues, Jean Rhys's contradictory views on race have become "cliché," then Allfrey offers a new framework for parsing white creole women's relationship to race.¹⁶ Furthermore, Allfrey's political career and social activism complicate understandings of white creole subjectivity that are solely based on Rhys's isolationist perspective. Much of the small body of scholarship on Allfrey is grounded in a comparison to Rhys, a fact which Allfrey lamented late in her life. These comparisons frequently extol Rhys's superior literary talents. Rhys, who

¹⁶ Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 233.

devoted her life to her writing with a meticulous passion, certainly has a more lyrical and engaging style. Yet Allfrey, who published her plantation novel thirteen years before *Wide Sargasso Sea*, felt comparisons overlooked frequently her influence on Rhys. While both writers invoke similar themes (and similar names; Christophine and Baptiste appear in both novels), they differ greatly in many respects. Allfrey's political career shapes many of these differences. Foregrounding Allfrey's more engaged politics over Rhys's more practiced craft lends new insights into the ways that white creole writers understood their place in Caribbean life and literature.

Although Rhys and Allfrey shared similar settler colonial background in Dominica, they led very different lives. Rhys's Dominican childhood was one of anxiety, alienation, and fear. Her family owned two estate homes including one called Geneva, upon which she would base Coulibri in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.¹⁷ Like Coulibri, Geneva was a target of politically-motivated arson, although Geneva was in fact burned twice: once by newly freed black Dominicans in the post-Emancipation era and again in a 1930 fire which finally destroyed the house. Rhys left Dominica for England in 1907, the year before Allfrey was born. Rhys lived a bohemian life throughout the continent before retreating to a life of isolation on the British coast. Rumors of her death in World War II were corrected by the 1966 publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novel brought Rhys late-in-life fame and security until her death in 1979. Rhys returned to Dominica only once, in 1936. She visited the ruins of Geneva and found "there was nothing, nothing. Nothing to look at. Nothing to say."¹⁸ For Rhys, Dominica was a site both of personal and historic trauma.

¹⁷ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 25.

¹⁸ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please*, 29.

Allfrey's experience of and attitude towards Dominica was very different. According to her biographer Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Allfrey's childhood was one of wonder and delight rather than fear and isolation. She seems to have accepted the racial and social barriers that set her apart from the island's majority. Unlike Rhys, whose siblings were scattered, Allfrey had the constant company of sisters close in age. Allfrey's family also owned estates which were not vandalized as Geneva was. Allfrey and her sisters were educated by a series of aunts and governesses. Allfrey took to literature at an early age and studied poetry under the tutelage of Daniel Thaly, a Dominican poet. Allfrey left Dominica at age 19 with the aim of being a governess in America. She was taken in by the J.P. Morgan family whom the Shands considered friends. Allfrey renders this period of her life as a colonial "protégée" abroad through Stella's journey in *The Orchid House*.¹⁹ While Allfrey considered herself essentially "the royal family of Dominica," in New York she was received as "a rather unsophisticated penniless girl from an obscure island."²⁰ According to Paravisini-Gebert, Allfrey's experiences abroad of even this slight marginalization helped develop her class consciousness.²¹

Allfrey continued developing her social awareness in London, where she met and married English engineer Robert Allfrey. In London in 1936, Allfrey met Rhys for the first time. Rhys's reputation preceded her, as Allfrey had heard about her fellow Dominican. "I had been told by my mother that Jean Rhys was a rebel, and 'rather fast'; that she'd let down the Williams family by her life as a stage chorine and a wanderer in Europe," Allfrey reported in a tribute to Rhys.²² Allfrey's aunt had described Rhys as "'that woman who writes those terrible books'."²³ Allfrey

¹⁹ Paravisini-Gebert, Introduction, xi.

²⁰ Paravisini-Gebert, Introduction, xi.

²¹ Paravisini-Gebert, Introduction, xi.

²² Phyllis Shand Allfrey, "Jean Rhys: a tribute," *Kunapipi* 1, no. 2 (1979): 23.

²³ Allfrey, "Jean Rhys," 23.

disagreed with her aunt, she had read *Voyage in the Dark* during her time in America and admired its “simplicity and beauty.”²⁴ As she acknowledged Rhys’s talents, Allfrey simultaneously distinguished her own tastes and sense of morality. “Her style was so pure,” Allfrey noted, “but she wrote about impure things.”²⁵

Despite their different values, the two writers formed a fledgling friendship in the interwar years. In London, Allfrey became involved in the Labour Party through her secretarial work for Scottish novelist and politician Naomi Mitchison. Rhys and Allfrey socialized at parties and visited one another, discussing Dominica and the social change that was sweeping the island. During the war, the two corresponded infrequently but shared the emotional pain of being separated from their children. Rhys’s daughter Maryvonne had gone missing and was feared dead. Allfrey had sent her children away to Maine to avoid the Blitz while she remained in London to aid the war effort.

I have argued that through her espionage, Elizabeth Bowen used her privilege to reassert colonial authority during the Second World War. Allfrey offers an alternative model of settler colonial wartime engagement. During the war, Allfrey created a network in London for arriving Dominican emigrants and provided them with food, clothing, shelter and job opportunities. She served as a welfare officer in southwest London. During this period of her life and career, Allfrey was able to successfully use the privilege she had as a white woman with a stable job and a measure of social standing to help her Dominican compatriots. Allfrey also published volumes of poems and short stories during and after the Second World War. For a time, her politics and her

²⁴ “Allfrey with Pattullo,” 227.

²⁵ “Allfrey with Pattullo,” 227.

writing fueled one another. According to Peravisini-Gebert, “the 1940s were her most creative decade.”²⁶

After the war, Allfrey’s life diverged dramatically from Rhys’s. Rhys retreated from public life first to Cornwall and then to Devon. In 1953, *The Orchid House* was published by Constable, Allfrey’s first-choice publisher. Juliet O’Hea, Allfrey’s literary agent with Curtis Brown, reported that Constable had uncharacteristically accepted the manuscript within twenty-four hours of receipt.²⁷ Allfrey soon sent a copy of her novel to Rhys. Inspired by both her wartime activism and the publication of her novel, Allfrey returned home to Dominica with a renewed sense of purpose. The Dominica to which Allfrey returned, however, was quite different than the island she had left in 1927. In 1951, universal suffrage had been established in Dominica, but no political parties had taken shape. Upon her return, Allfrey began organizing with the Dominican Trade Union. In 1955, she launched the Dominican Labor Party. Pattullo has noted how the party’s motto, “No one is truly free who does not work for the freedom of others,” speaks to Allfrey’s personal brand of politics: “a mixture of Fabian socialism and paternalism.”²⁸ Allfrey put this motto into practice; her political organization on the island involved traversing the difficult landscape to speak to rural Dominicans about democracy in patois. That Allfrey’s political organization mirrors Joan’s activism in *The Orchid House* shows that Allfrey had been envisioning such a project for some time.

Allfrey’s grassroots efforts paid off. In 1958, she was elected as one of two Dominican representatives to the newly formed West Indian Federation. She was appointed Minister of Health and Social Affairs. She moved with her husband and two biological children to Trinidad.

²⁶ Lizabeth Peravisini-Gebert, *Phyllis Shand Allfrey: A Caribbean Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 62.

²⁷ Peravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 89.

²⁸ “Allfrey with Pattullo,” 230.

During this time, she also adopted two children: Sonia, an Afro-Dominican girl, and David, a Carib boy. Allfrey's work on the Federation took her to Lagos and Geneva, where she advocated for women, children, housing, and international workers' rights. Allfrey wholeheartedly supported the Federation and believed it would benefit smaller islands like Dominica. She was optimistic about the Federation's future and her role in forming a new West Indies.

Through her work in the Federation, Allfrey found for the first time a role that offered both personal fulfilment and financial security. Yet Allfrey's role in the Federation also shows that despite her otherwise progressive views and what appears to be a genuine concern for the welfare of her black compatriots, Allfrey persistently centered herself in Dominican politics. She considered her appointment a win for women. To Allfrey, her representation of a majority black and mixed-raced island was a revolutionary victory over racial bias rather than a continuation of settler colonial power. She declared her appointment in the Federation "a triumph of tolerance over skin-deep differences, and even over historical prejudice."²⁹ According to Paravisini-Gebert, "a black political colleague" described Allfrey as "color blind."³⁰ Allfrey's ability to disregard race is itself a mark of her white privilege. As Audre Lorde has argued, "white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore the differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age."³¹ The result of this narrow focus that Allfrey exhibits is a persistent centering of whiteness as the dominant experience and the continued marginalization of others, especially black women.

As black nationalism rose in Dominica and throughout the Caribbean, Allfrey was forced to recede from political life. She was ousted from her party due to a minor dispute over banana

²⁹ "Allfrey with Pattullo," 232.

³⁰ Paravisini-Gebert, Introduction, ix.

³¹ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984): 116.

tariffs in 1962, the year she returned to Dominica after the collapse of the Federation. Allfrey bore the changes in the Dominican political landscape with some bitterness and disappointment. Yet she found other ways to be an active participant in Dominican life. In 1965, Allfrey and her husband started the political newspaper the *Star*. Allfrey served as editor and wrote satirical articles under the pseudonym “Rose O”—a pun on Dominica’s capital, Roseau. She also published under her own name. For Allfrey, political activism had come at the cost of her literary career. “Politics ruined me as a writer,” Allfrey claimed.³² In the *Star*, Allfrey was able pursue different forms of journalistic writing while simultaneously engaging with Dominican politics.

“Print, poetry, and politics”: Allfrey, Rhys, and the *Star*

In *The Orchid House*, Lally laments that she has raised “two darling babblers who feed on print, poetry, and politics.”³³ In different ways, Stella and Joan both rely upon print culture for their sense of purpose. For Allfrey and Rhys, print, poetry, and politics also played a nourishing role. Allfrey’s newspaper the *Star* sustained their friendship and fulfilled individual needs for each writer. For Allfrey, the newspaper was a mouthpiece for her social, political, and racial views. For Rhys, *The Star* was a lifeline back to Dominica. Kalliney has charted the ways in which relationships between modernist and postcolonial writers created networks of “collaborators and conspirators.”³⁴ Allfrey and Rhys’s epistolary friendship offers new insights into the ways that women writers constructed mutually beneficial exchanges in the postwar years.

³² “Allfrey with Pattullo,” 230.

³³ Allfrey, *Orchid House*, 181.

³⁴ Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*, 4.

The correspondence between Rhys and Allfrey was reinvigorated in 1973 when Allfrey wrote Rhys a belated congratulations on the success of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys responded quickly and enthusiastically. The two writers corresponded warmly but intermittently until Rhys's death in 1979. The *Star* played a crucial role in their correspondence. Allfrey would send Rhys a copy with personal notes or "slips" inserted in the pages. Allfrey would even address Rhys directly in the paper, as she did in an "open-letter" review of *Sleep it Off, Lady*. "My dear Jean," Allfrey wrote and published in the *Star*, "I have your book in my hands now; it is small and delicate, like a little plant loaded with gems of wild flowers and berries which might be dangerous! Of course I love it, as I love everything that is yours, that is you."³⁵ In this review Allfrey alludes to a theme she shared with Rhys: the tangle of beauty and danger in the West Indies. The intimacy of this review also illustrates the extent to which Allfrey viewed the *Star* as her own personal forum.

Allfrey took any opportunity to promote Rhys's work in the *Star*. Before she had reinstated her correspondence with Rhys and started sending her copies, Allfrey had favorably reviewed *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In her review, Allfrey made the case that the parts of the novel set in Dominica were the strongest. Allfrey's review reveals the extent to which she privileges description of a Dominican setting over examination of race relations. After "love for an island (the strongest of passions) and the injury which men can inflict on woman," Allfrey claims Rhys's

Third obsession—the love-hate between coloured and white people, engendered in her memory by childhood nostalgia—takes first place in the Jamaican opening chapters of the tragic tale. But... and let us be realistic, perhaps it is because we know how much she

³⁵ Robert and Phyllis Allfrey, "Book Review: Sleep it off Lady," *Star* (Dominica), January 28, 1977.

is bound to Dominica in dream, myth and reality... the Jamaican days and events, wildly dramatic as they are in scene and scope, do not grip a Jean Rhys fans as much as the Dominican days of Part II: that exquisite nightmare of cruelty, mésalliance, and the beauty of the natural surroundings.³⁶

Allfrey's review thus sets up a misleading contrast between the "Jamaican days" and the "Dominican days" in Rhys's novel. The Jamaican sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea* were in fact based on Rhys's family history and experiences in Dominica. In *Smile Please*, Rhys describes how she transposed her family's Dominican estate Geneva into the Jamaican plantation Coulibri: "I tried to write about Geneva and the Geneva gardens in *Wide Sargasso Sea*."³⁷ Allfrey notes that Rhys began her "obsession" with race relations during her Dominican childhood. Yet she finds the part of the novel which details the tension between black and white islanders less compelling. In this review and elsewhere in the *Star*, Allfrey shows how her "color-blind" worldview shaped her editorial practices.

Aside from Allfrey's quibbles about the Jamaican portions of the novel, her review of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is glowing. By promoting Rhys's work, Allfrey was in a sense promoting herself. In the *Star*, Allfrey created a space for white creole women's writing in Dominica. The print inches Allfrey allotted to Rhys in the *Star* stand in contrast to the physical space her work occupied on library shelves in Dominica. In her review of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Allfrey laments how Rhys's "earlier works [are] hardly to be found in Dominica, island of her birth."³⁸ This is an error on Dominica's part, Allfrey claims. She informs her readers that "big-city libraries

³⁶ Phyllis Shand Allfrey, "Book Review: *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Star* (Dominica) May 13, 1967. Ellipses original.

³⁷ Rhys, *Smile Please*, 25.

³⁸ Allfrey, "Sargasso Sea."

(London, New York) have long waiting lists for her new books.”³⁹ Allfrey’s suggestion in this review is that Rhys’s metropolitan reception is the only correct one.

The place of white creole writing in West Indian libraries was an ongoing point of contention for Allfrey. In her review of *Sleep it Off Lady*, Allfrey wrote: “I won’t give away our copy of this book to the library. Once I gave them 3 copies of my *Orchid House*, and they were all stolen. One may bet that your newest work would not last long.”⁴⁰ Allfrey’s emphasized possessive pronouns create an “us vs. them” mentality similar to the one Rhys cultivates in the first part of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It is unclear how Allfrey knows that her books were stolen, rather than checked out. Furthermore, if they were indeed stolen, it may have been out of either protest or admiration. The series of assumptions that Allfrey makes in this review illustrate that in libraries as in their estate homes, the white creole feels besieged.

In the final year of Allfrey’s editorial career, and the year that Rhys died, Allfrey reflected upon her earlier “color-blind” perspective in the *Star*. She again used a library anecdote, this time to illustrate her growing disenchantment. In a review of a “racial” issue of *Caribbean Quarterly*, Allfrey revises her earlier optimism: “I sigh, thinking how during Federal days I believed that the West Indies could be the best small nation of mixed people in the world. After all, I have been here for 356 years (since Thomas Warner came). Then I strolled to the Trinidad Library and found my one novel on a shelf for ‘white people’s fiction’!”⁴¹ Peravisini-Gebert suggests that in this review of *Caribbean Quarterly*, Allfrey ultimately confronts her own privilege. “Now for the first time in her life,” Peravisini-Gebert argues, “she began to

³⁹ Allfrey, “Sargasso Sea.”

⁴⁰ Allfrey, “Sleep it Off.” Emphasis original.

⁴¹ Phyllis Shand Allfrey, “Review: *Caribbean Quarterly* June-September 1977” *Star* (Dominica), February 2, 1979. Emphasis original.

acknowledge her whiteness was a problem.”⁴² Yet it is unclear whether Allfrey actually understands her whiteness as a problem or simply recognizes that it is perceived as such in Dominica and the West Indies more broadly.

Allfrey certainly felt that her whiteness disadvantaged her literary aspirations. As a white creole writer, she felt caught between competing demands on the literary market place. Somewhat pigeonholed by *The Orchid House*, Allfrey felt compelled to write about Caribbean themes. As she had been organizing the Dominican Labor Party, she had been writing a novel about her wartime activism in Fulham and an affair she had with A.E. Coppard. This more “experimental” novel was influenced in part by her reading of Elizabeth Bowen.⁴³ The novel, *Dashing Away*, was rejected by Constable in 1954 in large part because Allfrey had strayed from her West Indian themes. Allfrey confessed her “private opinion that Constable hopes that I’ll abandon it and write a new ‘tropical one.’”⁴⁴ Between the blow of *Dashing Away*’s rejection and the demands of her political career, Allfrey never attempted to publish another novel, “tropical” or otherwise.

While she felt pressure to conform to English expectations, Allfrey recognized with some frustration that West Indian literature was increasingly black. In the *Star*, she published pieces on the growing prominence of black literature at home and abroad. An unsigned piece in the *Star*, “A New Awareness of Blackness,” cited an article in the *New York Times* which described the rise of black culture as seen in “everything from afro wigs in the best stores to special reports on television” in America.⁴⁵ “Black is not only beautiful these days,” the article states, “it is

⁴² Lizabeth Peravisini-Gebert, “Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey: The Story of a Friendship,” *The Jean Rhys Review* 9, no.1-2 (1998): 18.

⁴³ Paravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 100.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Paravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 101.

⁴⁵ “A New Awareness of Blackness,” *Star* (Dominica), March 22, 1969.

culturally bountiful.”⁴⁶ The book reviewer Mel Watkins was quoted reporting that “almost every title ‘remotely connected with aspects of Afro-American culture soared in sales this year.’”⁴⁷ As editor, Allfrey was responsible for both selecting and summarizing this article. Its inclusion in the *Star* demonstrates an awareness of the growing importance of race on the global literary marketplace.

Allfrey does not critique the rise of black literature in America or in the West Indies. Yet given her defensiveness about the reception of her work and Rhys’s, she likely felt a correlation. Thus in the *Star*, she championed Rhys’s work while simultaneously attempting to acknowledge the political reasons for its marginalization in Dominica. This ambivalent and ultimately paradoxical editorial perspective is encapsulated in the March 15, 1969 issue of the *Star*. In this issue, Allfrey published Rhys’s short story “Again the Antilles” alongside an editorial from the Jamaican *Gleaner* on the Black Power movement by Thomas Wright. The juxtaposition of these two pieces highlights the political limitations of Allfrey’s editing.

Appearing under the headline “A Story by Dominica’s Greatest Writer,” Allfrey praised “Again the Antilles” as a “very short, exquisitely economical” story.⁴⁸ The story’s brevity belies its complexity. In “Again the Antilles,” an unnamed narrator reminisces about a dispute between Papa Dom, the mixed-race editor of the *Dominican Herald and Leeward Islands Gazette*, and Hugh Musgraves, a white planter. Papa Dom lambasts Musgraves for an unspecified “act of tyranny” in a pseudonymous editorial in his newspaper. In his critique, Papa Dom incorrectly attributes a line of Chaucer’s to Shakespeare. Musgraves issues a rebuttal letter with a seemingly corrected attribution and concludes with a racial slur, which Papa Dom glosses but refuses to

⁴⁶ “A New Awareness of Blackness.”

⁴⁷ “A New Awareness of Blackness.”

⁴⁸ Phyllis Allfrey, “A Story by Dominica’s Greatest Writer,” *Star* (Dominica), March 15, 1969.

print. Rhys's narrator, however, states the slur. Papa Dom responds to Musgraves's correction by casting doubt onto notions of authorship altogether. The story ends with the narrator wondering if she "shall ever again read the *Dominican Herald and Leeward Island Gazette*."⁴⁹

On its surface, the story appears "a bit of nostalgia, an ironic little snippet of the ridiculous and bizarre situations that are the legacy of British colonialism in the tropical islands."⁵⁰ Sue Thomas and Judith Raitskin have explored Rhys's complex negotiation of race, subjectivity, and power in the story.⁵¹ Of most import to the story's publication in the *Star* is Thomas's assertion that Papa Dom is based on a real Dominican figure. Augustus Theodore Righton, the "historical Papa Dom," was the embattled editor of the *Dominican Guardian* during Rhys's childhood. Righton once wrote that "the legitimate and only proper use to which a Journal professing to be an exponent of public opinion (and known to be such) can be put, is to make it strictly impartial."⁵² Righton was ultimately unable to live up to his own impartial ideal, as he was frequently criticized for pro-government colonial bias.

Allfrey's editorial career was also not an impartial one. Her choice to publish "Again the Antilles" in the *Star* suggests that Allfrey was thinking about the role a newspaper editor could play in Dominica. In Rhys's story, the editor becomes an author as he advances his own personal opinions. The editor also creates a space for public debate, as Papa Dom does when he publishes Musgraves rebuttal. However, as Papa Dom's refusal to print a racial slur shows, the editor retains control of the terms of that debate. Yet Rhys undermines this editorial authority when her narrator uses Musgraves's insult instead of Papa Dom's euphemism. The story calls attention to

⁴⁹ Jean Rhys, "Again the Antilles," *Star* (Dominica), March 15, 1969.

⁵⁰ Judith L. Raitskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 118.

⁵¹ See Raitskin, *Creole Subjectivity*, 115-120; Sue Thomas, *The Worliding of Jean Rhys* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999): 52-61; and Sue Thomas, "Jean Rhys Remembering the 'Riot'," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (2013): Article 6.

⁵² Quoted in Thomas, *Worliding of Jean Rhys*, 58.

the disconnect between a newspaper editor and the public they attempt to reach. The *Star's* publication record on the issue of Black Power reveals a similar disconnect. Wright's editorial from the *Gleaner*, printed alongside "Again the Antilles," begins by gesturing towards inclusivity and representation. "The doctrine of Black Power is one of those things," Wright begins, "that means more or less what you want it to mean."⁵³ Wright surveys different interpretations of this movement from various racial perspectives, dwelling on the "gradations" that fall "between the extremes."⁵⁴ About halfway through the article, Wright pivots from explanation to editorialization. He considers the Black Power movement as a "sort of restatement" of Marxism, except that "in Black Power, the division can never be between rich and poor but between Black and White."⁵⁵ Focusing on class over race, Wright mirrors Allfrey's own perspective. He charges the Black Power movement with "inventing the enemy" and ultimately concludes that the Black Power movement "seems to me farcical at best and wayward at worst."⁵⁶ He laments the "nagging self-consciousness about color which always obscures that most important fact that human beings are just human beings."⁵⁷ Like Allfrey, Wright expresses a kind of color-blindness that glosses over the history of slavery and its lingering effects throughout the Caribbean. Color-blindness has political implications, as well, as such a worldview renders systemic reform unnecessary or unimportant. Privileging a common humanity thus acts as a conservative desire to maintain the status quo.

Wright's opinions on the issue of black power should not necessarily be taken as Allfrey's own. Yet her failure to offer alternative perspectives on the issue acts as a kind of tacit

⁵³ Thomas Wright, "Black Power," *Star* (Dominica), Saturday March 15, 1969.

⁵⁴ Wright, "Black Power."

⁵⁵ Wright, "Black Power."

⁵⁶ Wright, "Black Power."

⁵⁷ Wright, "Black Power."

confirmation. The Jamaican *Gleaner*, where Wright's editorial originally appeared, published a response and rebuttal by Marcus Garvey, Jr. According to Garvey, Wright's "customary attack" on the Black Power movement is "a mass of clever distortions and irrelevancies concocted by a columnist whom I have always considered to be a past master in the art of sophistry and false argument."⁵⁸ The editors of the *Gleaner* seem committed to examining more than one side of the issue, or at least to offering a forum for debate.

Letters to the editor were an irregular feature of the *Star*, and Allfrey published none responding to Wright's article. Instead, she followed up the discussion of the Black Power movement with articles stating its harm to the fledgling tourism industry. "Scaring away Tourists" appears in the April 5, 1969 issue without any byline. The article cites a letter to *The Vincentian*, a Barbados newspaper, from a white tourist describing the street harassment she experienced when she came ashore from a cruise.⁵⁹ The concluding lines echo Wright's editorial and express the hope that Black Power may be kept at bay in Dominica: "the people of Dominica keep a sense of balance, a sense of Christianity and put both black and white supremacy out of court in favour of the human race."⁶⁰

The following week, Allfrey published an article by Marie Davis Pierre entitled "Has Black Power Any Meaning?" Given Pierre's use of "we" throughout the article, she is likely a black or mixed-race Dominican. Bizarrely, she takes the framework for her critique from "The Sound of Music" by examining "the fundamentals of life... habitats, attitudes and sense of values."⁶¹ Among her complaints about habits is that "we soil our beaches by using them as

⁵⁸ Marcus J. Garvey [Jr.], letter to the editor, *The Daily Gleaner* (Jamaica), March 31, 1969.

⁵⁹ "Scaring Away Tourists- Black Power," *Star* (Dominica), April 5, 1969.

⁶⁰ "Scaring Away Tourists- Black Power."

⁶¹ Marie Davis Pierre, "Has Black Power Any Meaning?" *Star* (Dominica), April 12, 1969.

toilets and hope that the sea will make them clean.”⁶² Her discussion of “attitudes” replicates stereotypes of black workers as “lackadaisical.” How, Pierre asks, “can we derive power from this form of civilization?”⁶³ She ends with a call for literacy and education through the Black Power movement. Like Wright, Pierre views race as a hindrance: “Colour is meant only to be our pigment, but we have nursed it psychologically and distorted our thinking powers.”⁶⁴ Once again, an author in the *Star* rejects the reality of racialization in favor of “unity.”

These three pieces on Black Power appeared over three successive weeks in the *Star*. They are written by writers from Jamaica, Barbados, and Dominica. Yet each article arrives at versions of the same conclusion: that Black Power ought to be abandoned, depoliticized, or transcended. Rather than interrogating the reasons behind the Black Power movement, these articles attempt to bypass the legacy of slavery and focus instead on a common humanity. This approach precludes any meaningful reform that would address structural systemic racism. In the *Star*, Allfrey replicates her own color-blind perspective. By devoting print space to the topic of Black Power, Allfrey appears to be engaging with transnational debates on black nationalism. Her choice to include such pieces alongside Rhys’s writing demonstrates her commitment to a multiracial Dominican literature. However, Allfrey’s unwillingness to move past her color-blind perspective ultimately created an echo chamber for her own views.

“Ghosts in a Plantation House”: Poltergeist and Parasite

In her editorial career, Allfrey attempted to engage in contemporary debates about race and writing. In her literary career, she focused primarily on the planter class in decline. In her

⁶² Pierre, “Black Power.”

⁶³ Pierre, “Black Power.”

⁶⁴ Pierre, “Black Power.”

1973 poem “Ghosts in a Plantation House,” Allfrey depicts a conflict between the ghosts of the colonial past and the “strangers” who come occupy the plantation home. The poem opens with the uncanny presence of “predators” in familiar domestic spaces: “Strangest of all strange things is the presence of strangers / In the rooms and the haunts and the glades of the dearly known.”⁶⁵ While the owner of the plantation house expresses his desire to “leave the place empty and leave it to the spirits / Until the day my youngling son inherits,” the financial realities of the present make his settler fantasy impossible.⁶⁶ In the twentieth-century plantation house, “Both ghosts and lawyers are waiting / Deep in the shadows: the struggles not yet abating.”⁶⁷ The home is an “enchanted enclave” from which “nobody wants to move.”⁶⁸ Allfrey, like Bowen before her, finds the plantation house simultaneously haunted and hospitable.

In *The Orchid House*, sickly male characters haunt the estate home where they “hover between dying and being alive.”⁶⁹ Although the novel hovers around the family estate L’Aromatique, the plantation home itself receives relatively little attention. Together with the title greenhouse and their Roseau town home Maison Rose, the family’s properties are triangulated throughout the island. Although the family has only narrowly avoided financial ruin, the dispersal of their properties illustrates the way the planter class continues to dominate the landscape even in their decline. Had Natalie not paid off her family’s debts, L’Aromatique would have been sold to awaiting lawyers like those Allfrey mentions in her poem; her father would have landed “in a loony-bin” and her mother “in a paupers’ home for poor-whites.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Phyllis Shand Allfrey, “Ghosts in a Plantation House,” in *Love for an Island*, ed. Lizabeth Peravisini-Gebert, (London: Papillote Press, 2018), 65.

⁶⁶ Allfrey, “Ghosts,” 65.

⁶⁷ Allfrey, “Ghosts,” 65.

⁶⁸ Allfrey, “Ghosts,” 65.

⁶⁹ Allfrey, *Orchid House*, 211.

⁷⁰ Allfrey, *Orchid House*, 203.

Despite the importance of L'Aromatique to the family's stability and sense of identity, the home does not prominently factor into the novel. While Welty chronicled the plantation home in exacting detail, Allfrey and Rhys are both less interested in domestic interiors. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the plantation home burns in the first third of the novel. In *The Orchid House*, L'Aromatique is an absent center around which family members circulate. According to Édouard Glissant, the decentering of the plantation home is typical of Caribbean writing. For Glissant, plantation literature springs from a need to "justify the system."⁷¹ This project of justification requires emphasizing certain aspects of settler life while negating others. "One condition of the process," Glissant argues, "was that conventional landscape be pushed to extremes—the gentleness and the beauty of it—particularly in the islands of the Caribbean."⁷² He notes the "propensity to blot out the shudders of life, that is, the turbulent realities of the Plantation, beneath the conventional splendor of scenery."⁷³ Landscape acts as a smokescreen for the violent realities of plantation life and the wealth gap that the system perpetuates.

Certainly, the splendor of the Caribbean landscape is a theme shared by white creole and Afro-Caribbean/Indigenous writers of any gender. White creole women, however, both illustrate and nuance Glissant's claim that plantation writers push the "gentleness and beauty" of the Caribbean landscape to extremes. While Rhys and Allfrey both emphasize the beauty of Dominica, they simultaneously call attention to the danger, disease, and decay that accompanies this splendor. There are no gentle landscapes in *The Orchid House* or *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Instead, Allfrey and Rhys depict scenery that illustrates their paradoxical position in Dominica.

⁷¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 70.

⁷² Glissant, *Poetics*, 70.

⁷³ Glissant, *Poetics*, 70.

Evelyn O'Callaghan has argued that white creole women writers including Rhys and Allfrey construct a composite figure of the white creole woman that mirrors their own lived experiences. "This figure is a second-class member of an already precarious social group," O'Callaghan argues:

She's creole rather than 'real' (English) white, she belongs emotionally and spiritually to no group, despite efforts at partial integration. With neither blackness, nor money and 'Englishness' as a passport to identity, she's a lonely, withdrawn, isolated and marginal figure, subject to cruel paradoxes—such as having privileges with virtually no power or being oppressed without the support and solidarity of fellow victims.⁷⁴

Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell makes a similar point in her discussion of the "paradoxes of belonging" in white creole women's writing.⁷⁵ Given the hostilities that they perceive from every direction and their "paradoxical" circumstance, it is clear that white creole women writers do not see gentleness in their surroundings. Rather, in their writing and perhaps in their lived experience, they dwell on the threats ensconced within the beautiful Caribbean landscape.

Allfrey and Rhys approach this paradoxical landscape in different ways. In the Dominican sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea* especially, Rhys illustrates Glissant's claim that West Indian writers push the beauty of the landscape to excess. Rochester, Antoinette's English husband taken from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, views this excess as negative. "Everything is too much," Rochester thinks, "Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers are too red, the mountains are too high, the hills too near."⁷⁶ He thinks the landscape is "not only

⁷⁴ O'Callaghan, "Outsider's Voice," 86.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell, "The Paradoxes of Belonging: The White West Indian Woman in Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 31, no. 2 (1985): 281-293.

⁷⁶ Rhys, *Sargasso Sea*, 63.

wild but menacing. Those hills would close in on you.”⁷⁷ He sees black Dominicans as part of this landscape. To Rochester, the black domestic laborer Amélie is “a lovely little creature but sly, spiteful, and malignant perhaps, like much else in this place.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Rochester is attracted to Amélie and the paradoxical landscape she represents for him. Amidst this dangerous, beautiful Dominican landscape, Rochester becomes increasingly cruel, Antoinette is driven mad, and their marriage collapses beyond repair. Rhys confronts what O’Callaghan calls the “cruel paradoxes” of the white creole woman’s position in Dominica with pessimism and despair.

In *The Orchid House*, Allfrey seems to echo Rhys’s paradoxical depiction of the landscape: “Beauty and disease, beauty and sickness, beauty and horror: that was the island” (75). Yet for Allfrey’s characters, especially sentimental Stella, these paradoxes are themselves beautiful. “Even if the sparkle of the sea hurts my eyes, I want to see it,” Stella tells Lally, “I don’t mind being hurt! I want to lie in the sun until I’m so hot that I crackle” (58). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester consummates his desire for the “lovely... malignant” landscape when he sleeps with Amélie. Rhys codes this desire as destructive and, since Rochester is under the influence of obeah, unnatural and evil. Obeah, a spiritual practice throughout the Caribbean with West African origins, is a threatening force in Rhys’s novel. Christophine is an obeah woman, and Antoinette pressures her into using her powers to enchant Rochester. Obeah also makes a small but significant appearance in *The Orchid House*. Lally offers to procure obeah help Madam revive the traumatized Master. In Rhys’s novel, the white creole woman must coerce her black nurse into using obeah whereas in Allfrey’s novel it is freely offered. Obeah for Allfrey is a positive force, whereas for Rhys it is purely negative.

⁷⁷ Rhys, *Sargasso Sea*, 63.

⁷⁸ Rhys, *Sargasso Sea*, 59.

In *The Orchid House*, Stella's desire for unity with the landscape is similarly positive. She is frequently spotted with her "arms around the trunk of a laurier cypre" tree (65). During her time abroad in New York and Maine, Stella has dreamed about the beauty of her home, and when she sees it in person the excesses of the island landscape seem surreal: "*It is more beautiful than in a dream, for in dreams you cannot smell this divine spiciness, you can't stand in a mist of aromatic warmth and stare through jungle twigs to spread of distant town, so distant that people seem to have no significance; you cannot drown your eyes in a cobalt sea, a sea with the blinding gold of the sun for a boundary!*" (64, italics original). While the beauty of the island can "blind" and "drown," Stella nevertheless desires to experience it physically in the present, rather than just in her memories. Her brief mention of the town, full of "people [who] seem to have no significance," illustrates Glissant's argument that plantation writing can obscure the realities of island life in favor of landscape.

For Stella, the obliterating beauty of the landscape is part of its appeal. So, too, is the coarseness of the natural environment. On her first day home, she embraces a tree and proclaims, "This marvelous roughness!... All the while, when I lived in New York City, I noticed the awful smoothness of things. I would touch walls with my hands in gloves, and I would feel so sad, so sad! I longed to have a cocoa-pod in my bare hands and turn it over and throw it far into the roughness of the dead leaves and broken branches!" (55-56). It is not Glissant's gentleness that attracts Stella to the island landscape, but its roughness. This roughness signals a closeness to nature for Stella, a primitiveness which she associates with the past. "I came here to grab the past and feel how rough and real it is," she tells Lally (59).

Stella is not the only character preoccupied with the past. The return of the family's three daughters incites a wave of nostalgia and brings up memories of their childhood at

L’Aromatique. When Allfrey does detail the plantation home in the novel, she focuses on sites of decay and places where the natural world and the domestic realm meet. Lally remembers a game created around one such spot:

Downstairs in the playroom, wood-ants had eaten away a hole in the wall...Miss Stella called the hole in the playroom ‘posterity hole.’ She used to write poetry and stuff her papers into it. In the evening I would come and remove her writings, and the next morning she would say that they had been claimed by posterity. Posterity was a zombie, a magic shape which lived on words and pictures, said Miss Stella. (31)

Stella’s zombies are very different from the ones Rhys feared as a child.⁷⁹ While Rhys’s zombies were a nocturnal threat, Stella’s zombies are playmates. As with obeah, Allfrey codes the Caribbean supernatural as positive while Rhys offers a much more negative depiction. Stella’s misunderstanding of the word “posterity” also reveals larger truths about the planter class in decline and foreshadows her son Helmut’s illness. For the planter family, posterity is always already dead. The poems that should be for her descendants are intercepted by her black nurse, who seems to cherish them.

Insect invasion is endemic at L’Aromatique in the playroom and beyond. According to Lally, “The wood-ants had been at work all over the house, and we fought them as we fought the little milky insects on Madam’s roses and the two-inch cockroaches which flew in and frightened us when there was a gale from the sea. We fought the centipedes too, but they came in more rarely” (30). Like Shellmound in *Delta Wedding* and Montefort in *A World of Love*, L’Aromatique is a house under siege. Throughout the novel, Allfrey associates insects with

⁷⁹ Rhys, *Smile Please*, 265.

working-class Dominicans. When a group of impoverished laborers follow Joan back home to beg for food, Lally describes them as invading like a plague of locusts. To her, the workers seem “a great horde of those worthless no-work labourers” (190). Lally’s use of “horde” not only renders the laborers as ethnically other but also calls to mind a secondary definition of horde as “a moving swarm or pact” of insects.⁸⁰ Later, on a journey to town from L’Aromatique to town, Stella stops and observes that “ragged labourers could be seen like ants below, oiling the town road” (83).

Stella’s positioning in this scene reveals another paradox central to Allfrey’s novel. Although Allfrey depicts a planter family in decline, she positions them physically and socially above all other islanders. L’Aromatique is at the top of a mountain and the journey to and from the home is physically strenuous, especially for the sickly male characters Andrew and the Master. Despite its prominent position, L’Aromatique is considered “hidden away” and the family’s relocation there is coded as a retreat from public life (23). Lally is “not surprised that Madam and the Master had hidden themselves away here and given up all their old life in the town” (52). Stella laments the fact that her parents are so withdrawn, claiming “Father and mother stay indoors so much, with the blinds drawn half-way, as if they want to shade the whole of life” (58).

The planter family’s retreat to their mountain estate ironically appropriates the journey made first by the indigenous Caribs and then by the Maroons during French and English colonization.⁸¹ Taking advantage of their local knowledge of the rugged terrain, Caribs and Maroons were able to retreat to the island’s interior. Removed from the immediate danger of the

⁸⁰ “horde, n.”. *OED Online*. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/88445?rskey=7GnUbs&result=1>.

⁸¹ Lennox Honeychurch, *The Dominican Story* (Oxford: Macmillan Education, 1995).

town and coasts, Caribs and Maroons could regroup, and in some cases, rebel. On Dominica, the mountainous interior is a site of survival and resistance. Allfrey co-opts this landscape for her planter family in *The Orchid House*, suggesting that though diminished, they will persevere. The family's retreat up the mountain, then, may be read as strategic. Their self-imposed isolation is a protective measure. As in so much of *The Orchid House*, Allfrey builds her fictional estate upon her family's experience on Dominica. Although the Shand family estate—St. Aroment rather than L'Aromatique—was close to Roseau, it was “built high up on the hills.”⁸²

This sense of incubation is further symbolized through the title orchid house. Critics of the novel have argued that the orchid house is a symbol of the outdated extravagance of the planter class.⁸³ Yet it also suggests the possibility for regrowth and regeneration. The orchid house was originally used by Stella's grandfather, Old Master, as a place of both retreat and revival. As Lally tells it, the Old Master sought solace in the orchid house to avoid his duties as a doctor:

He wasn't just hurrying to the sick-beds but hastening to get back to his orchid house at L'Aromatique, for that was where the spent the rest of his time pottering...He would scoop out bits of log and fill the hollows with charcoal, then bind these queer roots with coconut fiber (*OH* 42).

The Old Master tinkers with orchids to avoid treating the epidemics that overtake the island. “Beauty grows like a weed here,” Stella says, “and so does disease” (127). When he hollows out old logs and binds roots, the Old Master is grafting orchids onto their environment. Unlike most vegetation, orchids do not typically grow in soil; they form on trees or shrubs. Attaching themselves to another living organism without being bound to the earth themselves, orchids are

⁸² Peravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 13.

⁸³ Nunez-Harrel, “Paradoxes,” 282.

an apt metaphor for the settler colonial situation. As Elizabeth Bowen remarks of the Ascendancy class in Ireland, they “have made no natural growth from the soil.”⁸⁴

Allfrey extends the botanical metaphor throughout the novel by invoking another parasitic plant. Like the orchid, the bromeliad “live[s] without its own roots in the earth” (*OH* 178). Baptiste, a political organizer and son of the family’s cook, tells Joan about this meaningful sighting. “Do you believe in symbols, Miss Joan?” he asks, “What I saw was a tree that was not a tree...something taller than a tree, but it was a parasite, a bromeliad Old Master called it. I saw it on the top slope of Morne Gauchin. A tree, old but still tender, had this great glossy spike towering above it, sapping it like a disease but growing to be even stronger and more beautiful than the tree itself” (178). Disease and beauty meet again in the bromeliad. While Baptiste claims the beauty of the parasite will surpass that of the tree, his description continually circles back to the host. He repeats “tree” five times and only utters “bromeliad” once. Dominant though the bromeliad may be botanically, the tree occupies the most discursive space. Like Allfrey’s planter class, the bromeliad is a small but powerful presence exploiting a larger body.

Allfrey’s botanical and entomological symbols meet near the end of the novel, when Natalie observes a group of wood-ants. “These little marauders always choose the most beautiful trees to undermine,” Natalie claims, “Just look at the devils!” (206). Associated with the working class throughout the novel, the ants here are the invaders and parasites. For Baptiste, a “beautiful tree” which hosts a bromeliad is symbolic of Dominica’s exploitation under the plantation system. For Natalie, the “beautiful tree” represents her planter class and family, besieged by a newly enfranchised working class. That both Baptiste and Natalie use the same set of symbols to

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, “The Big House,” *The Bell* 1, no. 1 (1940): 73.

illustrate the settler colonial relationship in such opposing ways reveals the contradictions that shape Dominican society.

These ambiguous botanical metaphors call attention to the exploitations of the settler colonial relationship while simultaneously naturalizing it. The bromeliad and the ants may be invaders, the novel suggests, but this invasion is both natural and inevitable. The orchid house itself encapsulates this ambiguity. It is a relic of the bygone colonial era when “white creoles could afford the luxury of having a house to shelter their orchids.”⁸⁵ However, it also shelters the upcoming generation of the planter class. In the novel, the orchid house is where visiting men sleep. Helmut, Stella’s son, sleeps there until he grows ill, as does Natalie’s suitor Eric. Yet both Eric and Helmut represent significant deviations from the planter family tree. Helmut is German-American and sickly, while Eric is Canadian and considered an unsuitable prospect. Joan’s son Ned, “the hardy one” who Lally hopes “will outstay us all, living here perhaps to repair some of our mistakes,” does not sleep in the orchid house (*OH* 235). The orchid house, paradoxically, is a regenerative relic.

“A domestic conspiracy”: Writing the Black Domestic Labor⁸⁶

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* and in her autobiography, Jean Rhys expresses the “paranoiac disposition” typical of a settler colonist.⁸⁷ She attributes this worldview to the care she received from her nurse Meta as a child. “Meta had shown me a world of fear and distrust,” Rhys claims, “and I am still in that world.”⁸⁸ According to Rhys, Meta was “very black” and “always seemed

⁸⁵ Nunez-Harrell, “Paradoxes,” 283.

⁸⁶ Allfrey, *Orchid House*, 74

⁸⁷ Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 75.

⁸⁸ Rhys, *Smile Please*, 24.

to be brooding over some terrible, unforgettable wrong.”⁸⁹ While the true source of Meta’s pain is unknown, the twinned legacies of slavery and colonialism are certainly a historical “wrong” on which one might ruminate. According to Rhys, Meta expressed her unhappiness by terrorizing her. A bedtime story became a theater of horror:

It was Meta who talked so much about zombies, souciantes and loups-garous... Zombies were black shapeless things. They could get through a locked door and you heard them walking up to your bed. You didn’t see them, you felt their hairy hands round your throat. For a long time I never slept except right at the bottom of the bed with the sheet well over my head, listening for zombies. I suppose someone came in and pulled it down or I would have suffocated.⁹⁰

According to Rhys, Meta’s stories were sadistic; she took pleasure in scaring the young child in her care. Yet a more skeptical reading of Rhys’s memories offers an alternative possibility. Scary stories may also be didactic. Legends, folklore, and fairy tales teach children important lessons about what society deems acceptable. Given Rhys’s memories of the vandalism that plantation houses experienced during her childhood, Meta’s warnings about nocturnal invaders may not have been pure fantasy. There is even evidence of genuine care embedded in Rhys’s otherwise negative memory. Meta was likely the “someone” who pulled Rhys’s sheet down to prevent her suffocation. Rhys does not challenge or reinterpret her memories shows that she has not considered her own role in the systemic oppression Meta faced.

Allfrey, too, failed to reconsider her childhood caretaker in light of her seemingly progressive politics and her advocacy for worker’s rights. While Rhys depicts Meta as almost demonic, Allfrey viewed her nurse as purely angelic. Both depictions are gross caricatures which

⁸⁹ Rhys, *Smile Please*, 22.

⁹⁰ Rhys, *Smile Please*, 22.

reduce and dehumanize these nurses. These views romanticize domestic labor and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about black women. Allfrey's nurse, whom she called "lynchpin of my life," had the given name of Flora.⁹¹ Yet Allfrey and her sisters renamed her "Lal," and she used the family surname Shand.⁹² Much of Flora's life maps onto Allfrey's rendering of Lally in *The Orchid House*. Like Lally, Flora was a Methodist from Montserrat who spoke English rather than patois. She identified more with English culture than French. In religion, speech, and dress, Flora stood apart from the other nurses in Roseau. According to Peravisini-Gebert, Flora was a loving nurse who provided the Shand girls with emotional comfort and stability: "she offered love and comfort and a lap to sit on."⁹³ Peravisini-Gebert has done important work championing Allfrey's writing and has constructed a meticulous biography. Yet given the laudatory nature of her project reclaiming Allfrey's work, she is often quick to extoll her virtues and hesitant to recognize her limitations. Particularly troubling is Peravisini-Gebert's unquestioning affirmation that Flora was "one of the family."⁹⁴ Flora's "position in the family," according to Peravisini-Gebert, "was more that of a family friend than of a servant."⁹⁵ Scholars such as Kimberly Wallace-Sanders have shown the harm caused by perpetuating this "part of the family" narrative.⁹⁶ In this narrative, the black nurse's family is replaced or negated by the white family in her care. According to Peravisini-Gebert, Flora "never married and gave her charges the dedication she would have given her own children."⁹⁷

⁹¹ Quoted Peravisini-Gebert, Introduction, x.

⁹² Peravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 21. Both for the sake of clarity and in an attempt to reassert some measure of individuality, I will refer to the real woman as Flora and the fictional woman as Lally.

⁹³ Peravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 22.

⁹⁴ Allfrey, *Orchid House*, 190.

⁹⁵ Peravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 21.

⁹⁶ See Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

⁹⁷ Peravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*, 21.

In *The Orchid House*, Lally is similarly childless. Lally tells the reader that “when you are working for white people whom you love, you only think of those people and their wants, you hardly notice anything else. I did not even pay any attention to my own people, the black people, in those days, but now I am observing them and seeing what is happening to them” (*OH* 8). Her care for a white family has not just made it impossible for her to raise her own family, it has caused her to ignore the racial disparities on Dominica. Lally’s “love” for the family extends to a troubling obsequiousness. “The family is everything... to a woman like me,” Lally proclaims. “I suppose that in coming years poor people won’t take such stock of families, royal families and ordinary high families like Madam and Master’s. But it’s a comfort to have a family to tend to and admire, at least I have always found it so” (27). In the novel, Lally’s devotion is not just a mark of her own character but also the inevitable conclusion in her line of work. Andrew calls Lally and his servant Majolie “our watchdogs... the last of the slaves” (86). Unsurprisingly, Allfrey’s depiction of Lally and choice of her as narrator have been the subject of critique. Anthony Boxill has claimed that “Lally’s character, is... embarrassing” and that she “on occasion sound[s] a bit like a colonial lackey longing for the good old days of the Empire.”⁹⁸ Allfrey’s choice to appropriate the voice of her black nurse and to render her subservient is so clearly problematic that it needs no further debate here. Rather, an examination of how Allfrey and Rhys understood the relationship between black nurse and white child offers insight into how settler colonial women writers navigate domestic power.

Christophine’s role in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has ignited crucial conversations about race, power, and gender.⁹⁹ Yet Christophine’s profession as a nurse, and the inescapability of this role,

⁹⁸ Andrew Boxill, “The Novel in English in the West Indies 1900-1962.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Brunswick, Canada, 1966. Quoted in Peravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Lives*, 83.

⁹⁹ Gayatri Spivak has argued that Christophine is “tangential” and “cannot be contained” in a text deriving from a European tradition. Benita Parry has pushed back against Spivak by claiming that Christophine represents a crucial

has received less attention. In the Dominican portion of the novel, Antoinette commodifies her relationship to Christophine by asserting her financial dominance. When Antoinette gives Christophine money in exchange for obeah, it damages what had been Antoinette's most stable emotional bond and sets in motion the events which finally destroy her marriage. "I forced her with my ugly money," Antoinette thinks.¹⁰⁰ In this transaction, Antoinette pays Christophine for her care in the form of obeah. She forces Christophine to resume her duties and reduces their relationship to one of child and nurse. The next time the two meet, this transaction reaches its tragic culmination. Christophine must care for Antoinette in her drunken, childlike state. Christophine lets her cry, sings her lullabies in patois, gives her milk, and lulls her to sleep. Antoinette proves incapable of seeing Christophine as anything other than her nurse.

Like Christophine, Lally is drawn out of retirement. There is no rest or reward for these caretakers. Allfrey's opening sentences stress that like Christophine, Lally's relationship to the white family is both transactional and emotional. "Madam came to see me this afternoon," Lally reports, "bringing the news with her and my few shillings which she has always been faithful to give me, even when there was hardly any money in the house" (*OH* 3). Lally thus establishes the benevolence of her planter family from the beginning of the novel. After paying Lally, Madam encourages her to come up to L'Aromatique to care for the family's three daughters and two grandsons. Madam presents this opportunity to Lally as an option, claiming she will understand if Lally isn't up to it. Yet Madam has already paid Lally, so her compliance is assured. Lally agrees, although she is ill.

native voice which may be recovered. Recent scholarship continues to expand upon and refine these analyses. See Gayatri Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 243-261; Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 27-58; and Keith A. Russell II "'Now Every Word She Said Echoed, Echoed Loudly in My Head': Christophine's Language and Refractive Space in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37, no. 1 (2007): 87-103.

¹⁰⁰ Rhys, *Sargasso Sea*, 107.

Lally has been nursing a tumor. Lally's tumor serves no narrative purpose in *The Orchid House*. It does not propel the plot. Lally's sense of mortality does not alter her conservative worldview. She does not die from it at the end of the novel. It is simply there, her burden to carry. Like the orchids and the bromeliad, the tumor operates on a symbolic level. It, too, is a parasite. The tumor has invaded Lally's body, which it feeds on, and will eventually kill her. Yet as with the novel's botanical symbols, Allfrey naturalizes Lally's cancer. Lally accepts her death by cancer as inevitable and refuses to get examined or treated. Even more troubling is the fact that Joan and Stella, who are committed to saving Andrew, their father, and Dominica's black laborers, make no attempt to heal their beloved nurse.

Throughout the novel, Lally's tumor is linked with her childcare. When Joan asks about the tumor, Lally claims that it is typical of her "to speak of my complaint as if I carried a child" (130). Later, Lally thinks that perhaps her affection for the planter family has caused the tumor. "I'd like to know what grave sin I have committed to inflict me with this tumor. Perhaps my sin has been loving Madam and the Master and their children too much. For that love grew in me through the years, and not a mortal soul, let alone a man of God, could dislodge it" (195). Lally wonders if her feelings for the planter family will destroy her. Yet although she often claims to be tired throughout the novel, Lally performs strenuous domestic labor for the family. She hikes the difficult path between L'Aromatique and Andrew's home. She also neglects her spiritual life, as she becomes consumed with the daily drama and stops her habit of reading the Bible. Throughout *The Orchid House*, Lally prioritizes the family's wishes over her own needs.

Yet the novel does not fully endorse a reading of Lally's tumor as a manifestation of her work for the white family. Allfrey complicates such a reading by showing how the three daughters brought "life to the place," not sickness and death (229). The sisters do in fact succeed

in reviving Andrew and ending their father's drug addiction. Furthermore, Allfrey suggests that the only reason that Lally acquired the tumor is because her nursing duties had come to an end. "When I was a nurse to the little girls," Lally remembers, "I had no time to fall ill or to see how beautiful everything was" (8). Beauty and disease again appear inextricably linked. Paradoxically, the white family is both the cause of Lally's cancer and the reason for her former health.

Paradoxes like Lally's tumor shape *The Orchid House*, Allfrey's editorship of the *Star*, and her life more broadly. For white creole women writers like Allfrey and Rhys, these paradoxes were the product of their settler colonial inheritance. While they received immense privilege from their race and social standing, they simultaneously found themselves marginalized both on their home island and on the global literary marketplace. For Rhys, this tension formed in her a "terrified consciousness" which led to both personal dismay and literary innovation.¹⁰¹ For Allfrey, the paradoxes of her circumstance as a white creole were politically and creatively generative. Driven less by a desire to resolve these contradictions than to transcend them, Allfrey engaged in public and political life on Dominica in a way that did not appeal to Rhys. While ultimately Allfrey's engagement with Dominican life was hindered by her inability to recognize her white privilege and her adherence to a color-blind worldview, she nevertheless presents an important counterpoint to Rhys's isolationism. In *The Orchid House*, Allfrey enshrines within the plantation home the contradictions that she encountered in her political and editorial careers.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Faber, 1970), 236. Ramchand sees both Allfrey and Rhys as products of a "terrified consciousness." I feel the term is best applied only to Rhys. Paravisini-Gebert also pushes back against Ramchand's use of this term in relation to Allfrey. See Paravisini-Gebert, *Caribbean Life*.

In her life and literature, Allfrey expresses these paradoxes as she saw them: “strong, constant, and mine.”¹⁰²

¹⁰² Allfrey, “Return,” in *Love for an Island*, 64.

Chapter Four: A Chang(el)ing Ireland: The Celtic Tiger Big House

In Harry Clifton's 2006 short story "A Visitor from the Future," Ann returns to an Ireland that she does not recognize. After spending ten years in America pursuing a doctorate in English, Ann is taken aback by the "dyed blonde generation" she now teaches as contingent faculty at a Dublin university.¹ Her students are products of the Celtic Tiger economy and the changes it brought to Ireland. Ann struggles to adjust to the new cultural climate. She hopes that the literature she teaches will bridge the gap between the country she left and the one in which she now resides. "Reading, they would see Ireland again," Ann hopes, "as it had been, as it might be. But which Ireland? Hers, where objects were solid and real, where people were continuous with themselves, and everything could be named? Or theirs, weightless and discontinuous, where day and night, work and play were interchangeable, and money was no object?" (165).

Ann's students do not seem to value literature at all. Her chair tells her that the students are their "clients" and that they must give them "precisely what they want" (174). But the students are not buying what the English department is selling. Part of the "post-literate age," they refuse to even purchase the books required for the course (164). Eventually, Ann confronts her students about their differing worldviews. She explains to them "her strange sense that the country she came from was levitating into weightless, valueless space where everything equaled everything else" (173). Her students do not disagree with her observations. Instead, they offer a different perspective: "These things— disintegration, discontinuity— are not threatening but good, the best of them told her. Tomorrow we will change our names, invent ourselves again" (173).

¹ Harry Clifton, "A Visitor from the Future," in *The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2006-7*, ed. David Marcus (London: Faber, 2007), 161-176.

The dead woman at the center of Tana French's 2008 novel *The Likeness* embodies these students' values. Herself a literature postgraduate student at Trinity, the woman known throughout the novel as Lexie Madison has changed her name and invented herself anew with a compulsive frequency. Born Grace Audrey Corrigan on a cattle farm in western Australia, she was Naomi Ballantine in New Zealand, Alanna Goldman in San Francisco, May-Ruth Thibodeaux in Appalachia, and Mags Mackenzie in Liverpool before she died as Lexie Madison in Wicklow. The protagonist of *The Likeness* is compelled by the mystery of Lexie's life as much as her death. Yet like Ann's students, Lexie proves elusive, unfixed, and unreal.

The success in Ireland of both *The Likeness*, which was shortlisted for the Irish Book Award for Crime Fiction, and "A Visitor from the Future," which was anthologized in *The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2006-2007*, suggests that these stories reflect important truths about the late Celtic Tiger years to an Irish audience. Yet both pieces are also pitched to an international readership. The Faber anthology was reviewed abroad while *The Likeness* was an international bestseller. Together, these stories offer a portrait of a changing Ireland to a global literary marketplace.

Celtic Tiger Ireland is defined by its indefinability. Sociologists of the Celtic Tiger have observed the difficulty of fixing a central Irish identity during the boom years. G. Honor Fagan argued in 2003 that Ireland is in "a new state of flux, typical of postcolonialism and globalization, [which] opens up a new era of more fluid and uncertain constructions of cultural identity."² The same year, Colin Coulter noted "a radical recent transformation of the manner in

² G. Honor Fagan, "Globalised Ireland?: Or, contemporary transformations in national identity," in *The End of Irish History? Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*, ed. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 110-118.

which Irishness is perceived, signified and imagined.”³ In 2008, at the tail-end of the Celtic Tiger, Carmen Kuhling claimed that “the experience of living in contemporary Ireland is that of living in an in-between world, in between cultures and identities— an experience of liminality.”⁴ This critical consensus, both during the boom and in its aftermath, suggests that change permeated multiple facets of Irish life.

This sense of flux in Celtic Tiger Ireland operates on both national and individual levels. Nationally, a series of ill-conceived and unfocused policies created economic instability that resulted in a spectacular boom and bust.⁵ On an individual level, Irish citizens felt increasingly free of the stranglehold of the institutions of the past and more in control of their future. In the past twenty years, Ireland has seen significant (although hotly contested) changes in public opinion regarding divorce, gay marriage, and abortion. The rules that governed Irish life at the beginning of the twentieth century no longer seemed to hold at the turn of the next. According to modernization theorist Anthony Giddens, the twentieth century saw the rise of “biographical autonomy” in which “individuals are no longer constrained by those traditional forms of identity that arise out of the likes of nation, religion or class.”⁶ This freedom enables new forms of agency: “Rather than adhere to the dictates of custom, social actors are increasingly willing and able to assemble their own biographies out of the manifold resources of everyday life.”⁷

The opportunity to create one’s own biography is both liberating and destabilizing. For Ann’s students in “A Visitor from the Future,” the ability to forge their identity anew is a source

³ Colin Coulter, “The End of Irish History?: An Introduction to the Book,” in *The End of Irish History? Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*, ed. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1-33.

⁴ Carmen Kuhling, “‘Liquid Modernity’ and Irish Identity: Irishness in Guinness, Jameson, and Ballygowan Advertisements,” *Advertising and Society Review* 9, no. 3 (2008): accessed December 28, 2018, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

⁵ For a full analysis of the policy decisions underlying the Celtic Tiger economy, see Fintan O’Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

⁶ Coulter, *End*, 7.

⁷ Coulter, *End*, 7.

of power. For Lexie in *The Likeness*, reinvention is a way of life. Yet biographical autonomy is not just for fictional characters; in Celtic Tiger Ireland it rose to the highest level of politics. Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, a key leader of the Celtic Tiger, continually manipulated his own identity to suit his political agenda. In Fintan O'Toole's estimation, Ahern

Could be a friend to everyone...He could be a socialist with a trade union leader, a neo-liberal with a business leader. He could share with a property developer his contempt for tree-hugging environmentalists and with the Green Party a passion for sustainable development. This adaptability and opportunism, this talent for absorbing all sorts of fires within himself, may have had their source in a kind of emptiness, but they functioned splendidly in the shifting landscape of boomtime Ireland. He had no hard core of moral passion to weigh him down as he modulated from friend of the rampant rich to every worker's pal. This allowed him to embody the evasiveness of a society that was in many minds about its own reality.⁸

Ahern personifies the shifting values of the nation he represents. Like Lexie and Ann's students, Ahern constitutes "the principle subject of late modernity... the reflexive individual constantly revising and reinventing her notion of herself throughout the entire course of her life."⁹ Under the demands of modernity, change has become a constant.

Ireland has always been a place of change. However, from the early 1990s through 2008, the rate of change accelerated while the extent of change seemed to permeate many facets of Irish life. As O'Toole explains, "the very speed of the transformation contained its own problems. There was little time to absorb what had happened, to weigh it and understand it."¹⁰ In

⁸ O'Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 79-80.

⁹ Coulter, *End*, 7.

¹⁰ Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 16.

his study of change in Ireland, Roy Foster has claimed that since the 1970s, Ireland has been “experiencing history in fast-forward mode, as transformations accumulate in economic practice, in social and religious experience, in cultural achievement and in political relationships, both at home and abroad.”¹¹ French has expressed similar sentiments about the rate of change in Ireland. “We never got together a new Irish cultural identity within the Celtic Tiger,” she has claimed, “we were just so confused.”¹² For French and O’Toole, transformation is a “problem” that causes “confusion.” Yet this consensus overlooks the benefits of destabilization. What O’Toole and French herself do not account for is that this instability created both problems and potential for Irish writers. On the one hand, traditional frames of reference like self, family, and nation no longer carried the same weight. “These days, it is by no means clear what the big story of Ireland actually is,” O’Toole wrote in 2001, “or indeed that the whole notion of ‘Ireland’ as a single framework has any validity.”¹³ On the other hand, rethinking the “big story” has opened up space for new possibilities. As the millennium turned, Celtic Tiger writers like French productively explored the sense of alienation and disorientation resulting from the changes the boom wrought. The best Celtic Tiger literature, like *The Likeness*, uses change itself as a framework to throw into relief the enduring and evolving power structures shaping Irish life.

In this chapter, I analyze how French uses two familiar Irish literary forms, folklore and the Big House genre, to highlight both the changes and continuities in Irish history. I argue that the changeling is a myth ideally suited to Celtic Tiger Ireland and that *The Likeness* represents a crucial contribution to the Big House genre. In *The Likeness*, French depicts the changing

¹¹ Roy Foster, *Luck and the Irish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 1.

¹² Claire Coughlan, “Paper Tiger: An Interview with Tana French,” in *Down these Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century*, ed. Declan Bourke (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2013), 337.

¹³ Fintan O’Toole, “Writing the Boom,” *The Irish Times*, January 25, 2001, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/writing-the-boom-1.273557>.

cultural landscape of Celtic Tiger Ireland while showing the ways that those in power have always used the home as an instrument of control. By grafting the tropes of crime fiction onto the conventions of the Big House novel, *The Likeness* serves a culmination of the genre rather than a deviation from its form. French productively updates the Big House novel and reveals the genre for what it has been all along: a case study in the uses and abuses of power.

As an author, French's own identity is somewhat unfixed. Born to an Irish-American father and a Russian-Italian mother, French grew up in Italy, the United States, Malawi, and Ireland, where she has lived for almost thirty years. Although French retains dual Italian and American citizenship, she considers Ireland her home.¹⁴ While French is a self-described "international brat," her white privilege has allowed her claims of Irishness to go unchallenged.¹⁵ Like Elizabeth Bowen before her, French occupies a sweet spot for Irish writers on the global literary marketplace. Her international upbringing makes her cosmopolitan enough to be interesting abroad while her whiteness renders her Irish enough to participate in a national tradition.

In her work, French productively exploits what she refers to as a "semi-outsider" perspective.¹⁶ Due to their class, gender, or ethnicity, her narrators are detectives who do not readily conform to the norms of the Irish police force. It is precisely this perspective that makes her protagonists good detectives, as French claims, "people who take for granted the shared culture are not as interesting because they don't have any insight into it."¹⁷ Both Cassie, the protagonist of *The Likeness*, and Lexie, her dead doppelgänger, are semi-outsiders in Ireland.

¹⁴ Tana French, "Author Talk," *Book Reporter*, July 16, 2010, <https://www.bookreporter.com/authors/tana-french/news/talk-071610>.

¹⁵ Ibid. For an interesting point of comparison consider the career of Shani Mootoo, an Irish-born writer of Indo-Trinidadian descent who is typically read as a Caribbean author.

¹⁶ Janet Potter, "A Killed B: The Millions Interviews Tana French," *The Millions*, October 4, 2016, <https://themillions.com/2016/10/killed-b-millions-interviews-tana-french.html>.

¹⁷ Potter, "A Killed B."

Cassie's French ancestry sets her apart in an Ireland where "everyone... was related one way or another."¹⁸ Cassie pegs Lexie as an outsider (and correctly guesses her country of origin) because Lexie is fascinated with famine cottages. "Definitely not Irish, then, or at least not brought up here," Cassie concludes, "Famine cottages are all over the countryside, we barely even see them anymore. It's only tourists—and mostly from the newer countries, America, Australia—who look at them long enough to feel their weight" (63). Lexie has a different orientation towards Irish history. Unlike her Irish friends, who are inured to their shared past, Lexie is sensitive to the traumas of the history and the ways that these traumas manifest in domestic spaces. French herself shares this perspective and is similarly fascinated with the ways that home and history intersect on the Irish landscape.¹⁹ Her own semi-outsider status enables an investigation of how the settler colonial past continues to haunt the Celtic Tiger present.

French actively positions herself as a semi-outsider not just in Ireland, but in the literary world more broadly. In interviews, she frequently mentions how her acting background contributes to her writing, especially the nuances of character and dialogue.²⁰ French often expresses surprise that she's achieved recognition as a writer rather than an actress. When she tells the origin story of her breakout 2007 bestseller *In the Woods*, she contributes to a mythologizing of her own career that emphasizes its unconventionality. French relies on tropes of authorship depicting spontaneous creativity over careful study. She claims she was struck by the idea that would become the novel's plot when she was working on an archaeological dig to make ends meet between acting jobs. Surveying the wooded landscape of the excavation site,

¹⁸ Tana French, *The Likeness* (London: Penguin, 2008), 34.

¹⁹ Allison Flood, "Tana French: 'I'm haunted by Ireland's ghost estates,'" *The Guardian*, July 27, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/27/tana-french-interview>.

²⁰ Tana French, "*The Likeness* Reader's Guide," *Penguin Random House*, accessed November, 5, 2018, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/300449/the-Likeness-by-tana-french/9780143115625/readers-guide/>.

French reports wondering, “what if three kids went in there one day and only one came out, and he couldn't remember what had happened?”²¹ She wrote the idea down on a phone bill, forgot about it, and rediscovered it years later. When she returned to the idea, she found herself writing nonstop: “I thought I could never write a proper book, I’d never done it before. But I thought I would write a sequence. Then I had a chapter. The next thing I knew I was turning action down.”²² French frequently emphasizes her own surprise that she chose writing over acting, stressing the economic implications of that choice. “It was my first book, practically nobody even knew I was writing it,” she reports. “I was a ridiculously broke actor, and I was turning down work, which, if you know any actors, you know actors just don’t do that. But I was turning down work in order to finish this book. It was really just me and the book, and the hope that this would somehow go somewhere.”²³ While French’s optimism pays off, her narrative focuses on the financial risks of her writing career. French’s story of writing *In the Woods* progresses from doubt to investment, hope, and ultimately, reward.

Referring to the international rise of psychological crime fiction, French has claimed “There’s been a movement over the last while and I’ve been lucky enough to catch it.”²⁴ While the Celtic Tiger has contributed to the rise of the Irish crime fiction genre, it would be reductive to claim that French’s success is purely a product of the boom economy.²⁵ Nevertheless, her own success story maps on to the growth of the Irish economy in revealing ways. French is both a product and a producer of Celtic Tiger mythology. Her success plays into popular narratives

²¹ Jane Cadzow, “Irish crime novelist Tana French: upending the whodunit genre has its rewards,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/irish-crime-novelist-tana-french-upending-the-whodunit-genre-has-its-rewards-20170731-gxmbne.html>.

²² Flood, “Ghost Estates.”

²³ Tara Block, “Tana French is the Mystery Writer You Haven’t Read Yet (but Should),” *Popsugar*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/Tana-French-Interview-About-Trespasser-42505451>.

²⁴ Flood, “Ghost Estates.”

²⁵ For a discussion of the role of the Celtic Tiger in the rise of Irish crime fiction, see Brian Cliff, *Irish Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

about boomtime Ireland. French emphasizes her initial poverty and her skepticism regarding the viability of her own writing. When she chooses writing over acting, she follows a new dream she did not even know she had, and her investment pays off. It turns out she has undiscovered natural talent and she profits accordingly. Irish consumers could find an aspirational trajectory in French's success story.

French's writing career, however, was not as unstudied and spontaneous as she makes it seem. As Rosemary Erickson Johnsen has noted, French worked as a copywriter for Hodder Headline Ireland for several years and copyedited Irish crime writer Arlene Hunt's first three books. Johnsen concludes that "her work as a copyeditor would have informed French's decision to launch her own writing career with a crime novel and given her insight into genre conventions— including when it could be effective to push the limits of those conventions by introducing elements from other genres."²⁶ By presenting her success as a surprise rather than a study, French exemplifies the optimism of the Celtic Tiger era. One of the key themes of *The Likeness*, the gap between appearance and reality in Celtic Tiger Ireland, is thus at play in French's own career.

Nevertheless, French has contributed to public discourse critiquing the social climate of the Celtic Tiger and advocated for the cultural work that crime fiction can do. Much writing about French, in both scholarly and popular publications, mentions the ways her work "blur[s] genre borderlines."²⁷ French herself encourages this line of thought. She favors authors who take "genre conventions as starting points rather than limitations, who refuse to recognize that

²⁶ Rosemary Erickson Johnsen, "Crime Fiction's Dublin: Reconstructing Reality in Novels by Dermot Bolger, Gene Kerrigan, and Tana French," *Eire-Ireland* 49, nos. 1&2 (2014): 121-141.

²⁷ John Tell, "Blurring the Genre Borderlines: Tana French's Haunted Detectives" in *Clues* 32, no. 1 (2014): 13-21.

supposed boundary between genre and the literary.”²⁸ She sees this boundary as a false demarcation and endeavors to transgress it in her work. “I’ve never been much for the artificial divide between ‘literary’ fiction and ‘genre’ fiction,” French claims, “I’ve never seen why audiences should be expected to be satisfied with either gripping plots or good writing. Why shouldn’t they be offered both at once?”²⁹ Reviewers frequently elevate her work to the level of literary fiction, but in the process, they uphold the very dichotomy that French rails against.

Scholarly studies of French’s work make similar claims about her genre-defying work. Yet the conservative bent of academic publishing has relegated most work on French to crime fiction studies. A special issue of the journal *Clues: A Journal of Detection* has been dedicated to French’s novels. Johnsen’s valuable work on French appears here, as a in a special issue of *Eire Ireland* on Irish Crime Since 1921. French occupies a prominent place in anthologies about Irish crime fiction, such as Declan Bourke’s *Down These Green Streets* and in monographs on the same subject, like Brian Cliff’s 2017 *Irish Crime Fiction*. Despite frequent claims to the contrary, literary criticism overwhelmingly reads French through the lens of crime fiction.

Recent articles by Emily Johansen and Molly Slavin in *Contemporary Literature* and *C21*, respectively, demonstrate the productive potential of reading French in broader contexts by mining her work for commentary on the bleak realities of twenty-first century life.³⁰ While French’s work has much to say about neoliberalism and the housing market, it is simultaneously indebted to literary forms that complicate a singular genre designation. Future studies of

²⁸ Tana French, “Tana French: By the Book.” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/books/review/tana-french-by-the-book.html>.

²⁹ Quoted in Michelle Dean, “What Takes a Mystery Novel to Another Level? A Q and A with Tana French.” *Gawker Review of Books*, September 3, 2014. <http://review.gawker.com/what-takes-a-mystery-novel-to-another-level-a-q-a-with-1629500294>.

³⁰ Emily Johansen, “The Neoliberal Gothic: *Gone Girl*, *Broken Harbor*, and Terror of Everyday Life,” *Contemporary Literature* 57, no. 1 (2016): 30-55; and Molly Slavin, “Ghost Stories, Ghost Estates: Melancholia in Irish Recession Literature,” *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1-21.

French's work must look beyond the conventions of crime fiction to show how her novels revise and resist other Irish literary traditions. Additionally, as the appeal of French's work has reached well beyond an Irish readership, critics must account for her place on the global literary marketplace. Reading French alongside Bowen, Welty, and Rhys reveals her work's contributions to a transnational tradition of women's writing investigating the intersections of home and history.

The Likeness picks up the story of detective Cassie Maddox, the protagonist's partner in *In The Woods*. Cassie, still reeling from the traumatic events of *In the Woods*, has transferred to the Domestic Violence Unit and is in a supportive if unexciting relationship with murder detective Sam O'Neill. When Cassie's doppelgänger turns up dead of a stab wound in a famine cottage in Wicklow, Cassie gets pulled into the investigation. She discovers the woman was using her old undercover alias, Lexie Madison, and living in a Big House with four other postgraduate students studying literature at Trinity. Cassie's old handler Frank Mackey convinces her to go undercover as Lexie once again to solve the murder. After some resistance, Cassie agrees to the risky plot: she returns to the Big House as a Lexie who has survived her stab wound. Armed and wired, Cassie lives Lexie's life with her housemates, each of whom is a suspect in her murder.

Daniel March has inherited Whitethorn House from his recently deceased uncle Simon. Daniel comes from an Anglo-Irish family with a villainous reputation in the surrounding village of Glenskehy. The rest of the housemates are misfits from different walks of Irish life. Abby comes from a working-class Dublin upbringing and is both matronly and naive. Belfast-born Justin is sensitive and has been estranged from his family after coming out as gay. Raphael, or Rafe, is a swaggering English-born alcoholic who resists his father's pressure to enter the profit-

driven business world. Together with Lexie, the students form a pseudo-family unit that only has one rule: “no pasts.” The bond between the five is codified in Whitethorn House itself: Daniel has shared ownership of the estate with his friends. Each student owns one fifth of the Big House.

Through the course of her undercover investigation, Cassie becomes enthralled with Whitethorn House and its inhabitants even as she uncovers their painful secrets. “Look for the cracks,” Frank tells Cassie. “There are cracks there. They could all be keeping the same secret, or they could each have secrets of their own, or both” (*TL* 180). French takes a similar approach in her writing, using crime fiction to explore the cracks and secrets in Irish society:

Crime writing subconsciously becomes a way to explore the things that we can’t deal with within our society. And I don’t think we’ve dealt with the Celtic Tiger boom, never mind the recession — psychologically, just on the national psyche level. I think crime’s the natural way, because a murder is a crack in the fabric of society, it’s the huge chasm that opens up and through the crack surfaces the troubles and tensions and the unresolved questions that society’s been coping with.³¹

In *The Likeness*, the secrets within the Big House open up the cracks in Celtic Tiger Ireland. French highlights the expanding gap between appearance and reality that shaped the boom years. Further, in her depiction of a fundamentally flawed understanding of the relationship between actions and consequences, French anticipates the mentality that would lead to the 2008 crash. *The Likeness* reflects important truths about the unique environment of Celtic Tiger Ireland while simultaneously showing how the boom conforms to larger patterns of Irish history. By

³¹ Quoted in Coughlan, “Paper Tiger,” 336.

juxtaposing the conventions of crime fiction with those of the Big House novel, French offers insight into Ireland's past, present, and future.

"A Mocking Reflection:" Updating the Big House Genre in *The Likeness*

Gene Kerrigan, a journalist and crime novelist whom French admires, argues that the most interesting and successful crime fiction depicts criminal activity set "against a backdrop of a country that's aware of its shameful past and worried about its uncertain future."³² According to Kerrigan, crime writing, "tends not to describe a society but to reflect it."³³ *The Likeness* is a novel preoccupied with mirroring and it offers a disturbing reflection of Ireland's past, present, and future. The cover images on both the Penguin and Hodder paperback editions of *The Likeness* depict mirrors in varying states of abstraction and Cassie's undercover assignment is given the case name "Operation Mirror" (56). The haunting prologue of the novel describes Cassie's dream of a decaying Whitethorn House where "the others aren't gone...They're only hiding; they're still here, for ever and ever" (1). Cassie chases the phantoms of her former housemates throughout the Big House, but "they slide away like mirages, always just behind that door or up those steps" (1-2). Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, Cassie turns around and comes face to face with "the spotted old mirror at the end of the corridor [and] my face reflected in it, laughing" (2).

Cassie confronts her own "mocking reflection" within the walls of the Big House (86). French claims that Whitethorn House is "a fluid character, one that's defined by the other characters and defined differently by each one. It becomes a mirror reflecting what they want or need to see—it's a home, a haven, a threat, an inspiration, a symbol of oppression, a golden

³² Gene Kerrigan, "On Writing Irish Crime," in *World Noir*, (New York City: Europa Editions, 2012), 79-82.

³³ Kerrigan, "Irish Crime," 82.

opportunity.”³⁴ As Whitethorn House acts as a mirror for the characters in *The Likeness*, French holds a mirror up to the Big House genre itself. She does not merely reflect the conventions that shape the genre. Instead, she refracts them, bending them to suit the cultural climate of the Celtic Tiger. The result captures “the angular, discontinuous, spliced-together nature of contemporary Irish reality.”³⁵ French’s updating of the genre reveals the ways that the settler colonial past continues to shape the Irish present.

The Likeness draws on the four conventions of the Big House genre that Vera Kreilkamp had enumerated ten years earlier. Most Big House novels, Kreilkamp wrote in 1998, feature:

1. The significance of the decaying house as the archetypal image of a declining social class;
2. An account of the decaying family line, of genealogical breakdown and collapse [which] accompanies the depiction of the decline of the house;
3. A deracinated or alienated landlord whose irresponsibility is experienced by his tenants as the loss of order, security, and permanence; [and]
4. The figure of an outsider, usually a Catholic land agent or rising professional man, [who] through devious economic manipulations and the power of cash... usurps control of the Big House from its heirs.³⁶

The conventions that Kreilkamp charts are a helpful reference but her list creates artificial boundaries that elide the important symbolic work of the genre. Her first two points are inextricably linked and, by separating them, Kreilkamp deemphasizes important connections between family, home, and history. The decay of the Big House indicates not just the decline of

³⁴ French, “*The Likeness* Reader’s Guide.”

³⁵ O’Toole, “Writing the Boom.”

³⁶ Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998): 21-24.

the Anglo-Irish family residing in the house, but also the decline of the Ascendancy class that family represents. As Bowen wrote of her “more or less synonymous race and family,” the Big House genre sets up an equivalence between the family unit and their social class.³⁷ Central to the Big House genre is the way that categories of home, family, and class collapse into one another in their decline. Isolating these categories belies this symbolic equivalence.

In a conventional Big House novel, a decaying house reflects a family which reflects a social class. In *The Likeness*, French creates two distinct yet connected families in decline, both of which represent different classes displaced by the Celtic Tiger. The novel’s insistent focus on decline during a period of economic growth speaks to the subversive potential of the Big House genre when written from a semi-outsider perspective. French’s dual focus on the student family and the March family enables an analysis of the continuities between the Irish past and present. Although the nontraditional student family attempts to write its own rules within the walls of the Big House, they cannot escape the decay that permeates its walls. *The Likeness* locks family, home, and class in an inescapable cycle of decline.

Crucially, Cassie first observes the student family during their first encounter with Whitethorn House. As Cassie prepares to go undercover, she watches cell phone video of her new housemates. French alludes to a classic of the Big House genre in this casework; the video is dated “September last” (*TL* 74). In the cell phone video, Lexie films her housemates and their first impressions of the neglected Big House. French’s description of Whitethorn House neatly invokes the hallmarks of the Big House genre:

The walls had been papered at some stage, but a greenish mold had staged a coup, creeping in from every corner and almost meeting in the middle. Spectacular Halloween-

³⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975):14

decoration cobwebs trailed from the ceiling, swaying gently in the draft. The linoleum was grayish and curling, with sinister dark streaks; on the table was a glass vase holding a bunch of very dead flowers, stalks broken and sagging at odd angles. Everything was about three inches thick with dust (76).

The Big House is embattled by a “coup” of mold. The “spectacular Halloween-decoration cobwebs” bespeak the theatricality of the Big House that Bowen had articulated, while the “sinister” linoleum and uncanny dead flowers indicate the Big House’s closeness to the gothic tradition. With this description, French establishes Whitethorn House as an archetypal Big House and locates *The Likeness* as a contemporary contribution to the genre.

The video ends abruptly, as Rafe objects to the record they’re creating. “I am not recording this,” Rafe says, “When we’re old and gray and wallowing in nostalgia, our first memories of our home should not be defined by *fungus*” (77, emphasis original). By attempting to safeguard their future memories, Rafe wants to preserve a sanitized image of the Big House. This video clip simultaneously introduces Cassie to Whitethorn House and to the students’ selective, controlling attitude towards the past. Yet despite Rafe’s protestation, decay is unavoidable. Decline is built in to the Big House. In his tenure as landlord, Simon March has neglected the family home and filled it with worthless clutter. The students systematically repair Whitethorn House and their work serves as a demonstration of their commitment to the permanence of their living arrangement. Early on, Cassie notes that the students have made modifications to the house that indicate permanent residence. Their language reflects this mentality, as they refer to Whitethorn House using first person plural: “we didn’t buy it, we inherited it,” says Justin (183).

As the tensions grow between the students, French highlights their desperate attempts to mitigate Whitethorn’s decay. Ultimately, Whitethorn House acts as a diffuser, subsuming any

interpersonal conflict in the student family. “The house was their safe zone,” Cassie notes, “whenever things got tense, one of them would steer the conversation onto something that needed fixing or rearranging, and everyone would settle again. We were going to be in big trouble once the house was all sorted out and we didn’t have grouting or floor stains to use as our Happy Place” (299). Cassie’s increasing attachment to Whitethorn House and the students is evident in her own pronoun usage. In the space of a sentence, the Big House moves from “their safe zone” to “our Happy Place.”

Throughout her undercover operation, Cassie’s physical investment in Whitethorn House translates into an emotional connection that compromises her objectivity. “I had put a lot of work into that house,” Cassie thinks, “we had spent half the evenings stripping the moldy wallpaper in the sitting room— and I was getting attached to it” (169). When she learns of neighbor John Naylor’s vandalism, Cassie takes the attack on Whitethorn House personally. “The idea of it as a target of that kind of focused hatred made something hot flare up in my stomach,” Cassie admits (169). Her embodied affective response indicates the extent to which she has internalized affection for the Big House. She comes to see the Whitethorn House as “exposed on every side; besieged” and forgets that she herself is “one of the invaders” (197, 170). Her attachment to Whitethorn House leads to a romanticized and highly selective version of the Big House’s history. When Cassie imagines Whitethorn House’s past, she positions the student family as the rightful heirs to the Big House tradition:

The wide bare room tossed Abby’s voice back and forth as if there were someone harmonizing in every corner and our footsteps ran and echoed till it sounded like the room was full of dancers, the house calling up all the people who had danced here across centuries of spring evenings, gallant girls seeing gallant boys off to war, old men and

women straight-backed while outside their world disintegrated and the new one battered at their doors, all of them bruised and all of them laughing, welcoming us into their long lineage (175).

Evoking Bowen's frequent use of personification in the genre, French gives Whitethorn House the agency to call up its ghosts. The phantoms of Whitethorn House's past merge seamlessly with the students' present. Cassie focuses exclusively on the glamor within the walls of the Big House rather than the world outside. Under Whitethorn's spell, Cassie expresses the privileged settler colonial perspective and reflects its selective memory towards the Irish past.

Cassie sees Daniel, Rafe, Abby, Justin and Lexie as part of the Big House's "long lineage." In *The Likeness*, Daniel's biological family overlaps with the student family unit he has built. True to the Big House conventions, both families are in decline and both families have secrets that are tied to Whitethorn House. Once Cassie understands that students have formed themselves into a family unit she gains new insight into their behavior as a group. Teasing Daniel about his patriarchal tendencies, Cassie almost stumbles upon the idea:

I had just realized— *Yes, Dad*— what this whole setup reminded me of: a family. Maybe not a real-life family, although what would I know, but a family out of a million children's-book series and old TV shows, the comforting kind that go on for years without anyone getting any older, to the point where you start to wonder about the actors' hormone levels. These five had it all: Daniel the distant but affectionate father, Justin and Abby taking turns to be the protective Mammy and the lofty eldest, Rafe the moody teenage middle kid; and Lexie, the late arrival, the capricious little sister to be alternately spoiled and teased (158).

Beneath the undeniable love between the student family, Cassie notes something performative and even uncanny. Her comparisons to fictive families in books and on television underscores the sense that the students have created these roles themselves while their unnatural agelessness links the student family with the fairy world.

Daniel serves as the link between his housemates and Ireland's ancestral past. He is both father and son: the patriarch of the student family and the last legitimate heir to the March family. Caught between the secrets of his family's past and his dreams of a new kind of family, Daniel expresses the Celtic Tiger impulse to eschew the past and forge a new future. French has said that "the major question that Ireland's dealing with right now" is "when the past and the present crash into each other at a hundred miles an hour, how do you balance the two without wrecking both?"³⁸ Daniel's desire to build a new family in Whitethorn House is his attempt to balance his deep dissatisfaction with his ancestral past and an optimism about the future. While discussion of Daniel's absent parents is off-limits thanks to the students' "no pasts" rule, Justin notes that Daniel's childhood "can't have been too pleasant... for him to be so secretive about it" (*TL* 203). The rest of the March clan, however, are fair game to the students. For the students, Daniel's ancestral past seems of little significance in the present, but their love of Whitethorn House sparks an interest in its past owners. Cassie unearths a family biography that Simon had been writing. She discovers "the Marches had been around for a while— the dates went back to 1734, when the house had been built— but had apparently never done anything more interesting than getting married, buying the odd horse and gradually losing most of their estate" (129). Notably, Simon begins his narrative not with the earliest known March birth — which is 1598— but with the year Whitethorn was erected.

³⁸ French, "*Likeness* Reading Guide."

The March family begins with Whitethorn House. Whitethorn House begins with the March family and ends with the student family. Both families represent social groups at odds with the realities of their time and in a state of decline. The March family are typical Anglo-Irish landlords and Simon's biography makes it clear that their power and influence has been steadily waning for centuries. *The Likeness* uses Whitethorn's artifacts to invoke the generic convention of genealogical decline. The housemates find a March family tree accompanying Simon's biography. The material condition of the family tree indicates the March family's decline. The family member's handwritten names deteriorate from "delicate, browning ink at the top" to "spider scrawl at the bottom" (228). Uncle Simon's "saga" is almost entirely illegible, as he "wrote most of it when he was very, very drunk" (228). Like Whitethorn House itself, the March family archives reflect their diminished social position.

By the time the students inherit the home, the decline of the landlord class is well-established and unsurprising. In *The Likeness*, the decay and eventual destruction of Whitethorn House indicates the decline not just of the March family and the Ascendancy they embody, but also of the student family and their way of life. In French's updating of the genre, the students form their own social group which resists the dominant culture. They eschew the Celtic Tiger worldview that "elevates having over being."³⁹ The students value contentment over financial gain. In Abby's estimation, this is a radical stance:

Our entire society's based on discontent: people wanting more and more, being constantly dissatisfied with their homes, their bodies, their decor, their clothes, everything. Taking it for granted that that's the whole point of life, never to be satisfied. If you're perfectly happy with what you've got— specifically if what you've gotten isn't

³⁹ Coulter, *End*, 25.

even all that spectacular— then you’re *dangerous*. You’re breaking all the rules, you’re undermining the sacred economy, you’re challenging every assumption that society’s built on... We’re *traitors* (TL 165, emphasis original).

Abby’s language invokes the violence of opposing social conventions. In French’s updating, the social group that declines alongside the Big House is not solely a modern-day iteration of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Rather, French presents another kind of minority with values and interests that stand in opposition to the dominant Irish culture. By supplementing the story of the March family’s decline with the student family’s own tragic tale, French illustrates the many ways history repeats itself in Celtic Tiger Ireland.

While Daniel embodies the continuation of the Ascendancy, his values distance him from the settler colonial tradition of wealth accumulation. Daniel resents his home’s history, he “wonder[s] if the best thing would be for ‘no pasts’ to apply to the house as well” (230). Daniel claims that his deepest desire is for “the company of [his] friends and the opportunity for unfettered thought” (338). For him, Whitethorn House represents security and freedom more than power and wealth. The Big House is a means to this end. “It wasn’t the house itself I wanted— much as I love it,” Daniel clarifies, “It was security, for all of us; a safe haven” (341). Sharing ownership of his house is his attempt to avoid the “crude” situation of being his friends’ landlord (341).

Despite his wish to avoid the label, I will argue in the final section of this chapter that Daniel cannot avoid embodying his role as landlord. Daniel thus fulfills Kreilkamp’s third generic convention, the “deracinated or alienated landlord.” Although he is not physically absent, Daniel is alienated from other people. He confesses to Cassie that he has “a tendency to keep [himself] at some distance from life.” He has always felt like “an observer, never a

participant...watching from behind a thick glass wall as people went about the business of living” (354). Daniel expresses his alienation in terms of both distance and domesticity. The “glass wall” that separates him from others suggests that Daniel sees a fundamental divide between the way he lives and the way others do. Daniel’s use of domestic imagery anticipates his attempts to construct a safe house for himself and his friends and the fragility of this dream. After Lexie’s stabbing, he becomes increasingly distant and abstracted. In the aftermath of the crime, Rafe claims that Daniel was prone to “surfacing to tell us what Chaucer thought of us all and then disappearing again” (147). The students experience Daniel’s distance as a loss of order and his distracted mood is a source of great psychological distress for his housemates. In the twenty-first century, absenteeism becomes absentmindedness. While the economic costs of Daniel’s neglect are low, the emotional toll is high.

Daniel’s cousin Ned, from another branch of the March family tree, espouses the profit-driven Celtic Tiger ideology. Like Bertie Ahern and Lexie, Ned embodies the sense of blankness that is often ascribed to Celtic Tiger Ireland. “It’s not just that Ned has a weak character,” Daniel explains, “but that he has no character at all; he’s essentially a cipher, composed entirely of the jumbled reflections of what he thinks other people want to see” (345). Cassie concurs, noting that Ned “was so exactly like everyone else that there was no way to see him, through all the thousands of reflected images... I hoped to God I never had to pick him out of a line up” (312). Ned views Whitethorn House as an investment opportunity and seeks to commodify his family’s past. He wants to turn his ancestral home into a hotel and spa. Although Ned is part of the March family, he has been disinherited and must gain control of the Big House through devious means. He takes Daniel to court to question the legitimacy of Simon’s bequest. When this fails, he plans to buy off each of Daniel’s housemates systematically, gaining ownership of Whitethorn House

piece by piece. He starts with Lexie, who proves a willing participant in this scheme. Ned acts as the “usurper” who uses “economic manipulations” to gain control of the Big House, fulfilling Kreilkamp’s fourth convention. Lexie, too, is a usurper. She is an “outsider” who “elicits sexual anxieties” as her pregnancy threatens the stability of the student family.⁴⁰ In French’s updating of the Big House genre, both outsiders are also insiders. The usurper comes from within the family. Ned is biologically a March, just not the heir chosen by Uncle Simon. Lexie is part of the student family, her ownership of one-fifth of Whitethorn House codifies her sense of belonging. In the Celtic Tiger economy, the biggest threat to the Big House comes from within its own walls.

Fairies and Finance: Old Myths for a New Economy

In Celtic Tiger Ireland, on both a national and individual level, the appearance of wealth was of the utmost importance. Those who benefitted from the boom favored extravagant displays of wealth, including elaborate weddings and lavish international travel. O’Toole has highlighted the ways in which the Irish *nouveau riche* patterned themselves on a “global celebrity culture” that valorized highly visible displays of affluence.⁴¹ The reality that these displays of wealth were limited to such a small portion of the Irish population only served to amplify the performance. The government seemed to authorize this behavior. The frivolous spending of taxpayer money by Irish officials during the Celtic Tiger years rivals that of the Trump administration a decade later in America.⁴² The Irish government both reflected and intensified the sense that lavish spending had become an Irish cultural value. During the boom, a “new aristocracy” emerged to continue the performance of wealth that had long been central to the

⁴⁰ Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, 24.

⁴¹ O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 79.

⁴² Examples abound. Consider, for instance, Mary Harney’s €80,000 flight to Florida and David Shulkin’s \$122,000 flight to Europe.

settler colonial project in Ireland.⁴³ The newly constructed estate homes fulfilled a similar function to that of the Big House by enshrining on the landscape the wealth and power of its owner. These estate homes, however, were purchased on credit with high interest. The new Irish home in the boom years thus contained the paradoxes of the Celtic Tiger: projecting wealth while concealing debt.

This paradox shaped the Celtic Tiger years and crystalized in official statements. Writing in 2003, Coulter noted the disconnect between state-sanctioned financial reports and economic realities: “Official statistics hugely overrated the speed at which— and the scale to which— the southern Irish economy has grown. In simple terms, there is rather less wealth circulating within the Republic of Ireland than appears to be the case on paper.”⁴⁴ The disparity between wealth generated in Ireland and wealth retained in Ireland contributed to these inflated statistics.⁴⁵ For Coulter, this disconnect is both harmful and purposeful. “The bullish rhetoric that has attended the era of the Celtic Tiger,” he argues, “conspires to conceal the actual fragility of the southern Irish economy.”⁴⁶

French has made similar observations about the deceptive optimism of the era. “There’s an entire chunk of a generation who bought into this [economy] and invested their minds and their futures in what the government told them was happening,” French has noted. “The government, the media, the banks, the property developers— a lot of people had a vested interest in claiming the Celtic Tiger was going to last forever.”⁴⁷ Those in power, French claims, had a stake in marketing the continued success of the Irish economy. As a resident of Ireland during the Celtic

⁴³ O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 78.

⁴⁴ Coulter, *End*, 20

⁴⁵ At the height of the Celtic Tiger, up to one fifth of money made in Ireland was invested abroad annually (Coulter, *End*, 20).

⁴⁶ Coulter, *End*, 21.

⁴⁷ Coughlan, “Paper Tiger,” 338.

Tiger years, French experienced the changing economy firsthand. Yet French reports that she was not so easily taken in by the boom mentality. Her father's work as a developmental economist, coupled with her international perspective, may have rendered French a more skeptical and wary consumer.

As a writer, actress, and member of a creative, bohemian class, French counts herself among those whom the Celtic Tiger left behind.⁴⁸ Many individuals found themselves similarly untouched by the growing economy. However, the myth that the booming economy was benefitting all aspects of Irish society was pervasive. Coulter has noted how "the euphoria that has exemplified the era of the Celtic Tiger has often failed to square with the everyday realities of the lives of actual flesh-and-blood southern Irish people."⁴⁹ Coulter's incisive analysis highlights how neither the government messaging nor the national feeling matched the lived experience of many Irish citizens. French has described how, in Celtic Tiger Ireland,

There was a distinct disconnect between reality and perception, and we were all being told that perception was much more important than reality. If you dared try and focus on what the reality was, you were somehow a bad person and a traitor to your country. No, everything was wonderful, property in Ireland was worth millions and we're all going to live happily ever after and buy an iPod.⁵⁰

French confronts the myths of the Celtic Tiger with cynicism while simultaneously emphasizing their potency. In *The Likeness*, French turns to another kind of myth by mapping Irish folklore onto the contemporary economic landscape. The changeling provides an illuminating motif for

⁴⁸ Coughlan, "Paper Tiger" 338.

⁴⁹ Coulter, *End*, 23.

⁵⁰ Coughlan, "Paper Tiger," 338.

the expanding gap between appearance and reality, highlighting the dangers implicit in this distance.

It may seem strange that French turns to ancient Irish folklore to explain contemporary economic realities. However, myth can take an especially strong hold during transitional moments. Angela Bourke has argued that folklore becomes “tenacious in a changing cultural environment” because it provides a stable point of reference, a structure offering “concision and vivid memorability” in a shifting landscape.⁵¹ Folklore serves as an index of a society’s beliefs, values, and fears. It provides a code of conduct which illuminates the dominant cultural norms. “In fairy legend,” Bourke suggests, “we find a vernacular textbook for belonging: a way of teaching about the many boundaries that social life imposes, about the peril of transgressing them, and the necessity of revising them.”⁵² Fairy lore, in particular, serves as a potent warning against “curiosity and lack of caution.”⁵³ These warnings are typically gendered, containing “disciplinary messages for women...warning them about behavior considered by a patriarchal society to be unacceptable.”⁵⁴ Fairy folklore thus functions as a threatening reminder for women like Lexie and Cassie who transgress social norms.

The changeling myth is directed at women and children and offers a framework for understanding a variety of social problems. A changeling is a fairy who has assumed the body of a human, typically a woman or young child, who has been taken by the fairies. The changeling is a poor replacement who typically exhibits sickness and antisocial behavior. Nevertheless, the changeling must be treated with respect and caution, as any harm that befalls the fairy changeling will be done to the human. The changeling myth offers an explanation for any sudden differences

⁵¹ Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (New York City: Penguin Books, 2001), 32-33.

⁵² Bourke, *Burning*, 121.

⁵³ Bourke, *Burning*, 121.

⁵⁴ Bourke, *Burning*, 41.

in behavior or health not attributable to external factors. When an otherwise healthy child falls ill or a woman experiences a bout of depression, the changeling myth provides a way of making sense of the change.

The extent of belief in the changeling myth, as with other folk legends, varied greatly from person to person across time and place. Yet literal belief is only one metric to measure the power of a legend. The changeling myth permeates Irish culture and literature. In 1889, W. B. Yeats's "The Stolen Child" popularized the myth for a modern Anglophone audience. Yet Yeats's poem only tells one side of the changeling story. Once the child is stolen, he could have been replaced by a changeling who would avail itself of the comforts of the child's home. Yeats's poem positions an enchanting fairyland in direct opposition to the family household, depicting how tantalizing escape might be for a human child. Yet for the changeling, who could move freely between worlds, the domestic realm might prove equally as enticing. Inherently uncanny, the changeling is an invader in the home. It blurs the boundaries between the familiar and strange, offering a reminder that things are not always as they seem. Although the changeling appears to be a family member, the logic of the legend suggests that it is really an imposter. By forcing a reexamination of the relationship between appearance and reality, the changeling creates a space for doubt. This sense of uncertainty and unreality makes the changeling a potent myth for Celtic Tiger Ireland. In *The Likeness*, French exploits the contemporary potential of this ancient legend.

The entire plot of *The Likeness* depends upon a gap between appearance and reality. Cassie appears to be Lexie, but in reality, is an undercover detective. The students seem like a harmless bunch of academics but are actually hiding their own murderous secrets. Whitethorn House feels like a utopia but is actually a crime scene. The tension in *The Likeness* comes in large part from French pushing against the thin membrane that separates appearance and reality. Even before

she encounters Lexie's corpse, Cassie seems susceptible to fairy intervention. She's "not been [her]self" since she left the Murder Squad and claims that her "own border fence between real and not-real has never been all that great" (48, 52). Cassie's active imagination proves a useful tool when she and Frank create the original Lexie Madison alias for Cassie to use in an undercover drug bust. When Cassie and Frank create Lexie, French writes the scene as more of a conjuring than a birth: "Lexie Madison developed out of nothing like a Polaroid, she curled off the page and hung in the air like incense smoke, a girl with my face and a life from a half-forgotten dream" (7). Even before the discovery of a body, Cassie sees her old alias as a separate but very real presence. Cassie personifies her undercover alias, giving it agency and a dark energy: "We had made Lexie Madison bone by bone and fiber by fiber, we baptized her and for a few months we gave her a face and a body, and when we threw her away she wanted more. She spent four years spinning herself back, out of dark earth and night winds, and then she called us here to see what we had done" (19). In Cassie's imagination, Lexie as both human flesh and elemental matter.

Cassie's first undercover mission comes to an abrupt end when she's stabbed by a dealer during a drug bust. But Cassie cannot seem to shake Lexie's ghost. When she encounters the body of the woman posing as Lexie, Cassie feels as though this meeting is the inevitable conclusion of some unfinished business. She codes their relationship in economic terms: "I had no clue what currency I had to offer Lexie Madison," she thinks, "but she had come looking for me, alive and dead she had padded closer on soft feet till she arrived with a spectacular bang on my doorstep: she wanted something. What I wanted from her in exchange— I really believed this, at the time— was simple: I wanted her the fuck out of my life. I knew she would drive a hard bargain, but I was good with that; I had done it before" (79). By describing their encounter

as an economic exchange, Cassie shows the extent to which the transactional Celtic Tiger economy has infiltrated her own jaded worldview.

Lexie and Cassie's transactional relationship is symbiotic. Lexie has stolen Cassie's undercover identity, which enables Cassie to assume Lexie's life at Whitethorn House. In a sense, they are both changelings of one another. Initially, Cassie feels she invented Lexie out of thin air, and thus bears a sense of responsibility for both her life and death. She collapses Lexie, the person born Grace Corrigan, with Lexie, her invented alias. She feels increasingly similar to Lexie/Grace — even their stab wounds match. French has claimed that Cassie's "borderlines have been damaged so badly that she's not grounded enough to stop herself blurring into Lexie."⁵⁵ Cassie's lost sense of self reinforces the idea that there are no stable identities in contemporary Ireland.

In *The Likeness*, Lexie is both a customer driving a hard bargain and a spectral enchantress. Cassie cannot shake the sense that she's entered a fairyland when she arrives at Whitethorn House. French depicts the Big House and its inhabitants as otherworldly and enchanting. Cassie's first experience of Whitethorn House is uncanny; she finds it "strange and new and utterly familiar at the same time." She feels like she's been there before and that "it felt like coming home" (108-109). Cassie is both captivated by and wary of her own attraction to Whitethorn House. During her first meal, she thinks of "old stories where one sip or bite seals the spellbound walls forever, dissolves the road home into mist and blows it away in the wind" (111). Her folkloric fantasies are matched by a detective's pragmatism: Cassie also wonders if the food has been poisoned. But she eats anyway.

⁵⁵ French, "*Likeness* Reading Guide."

Throughout the novel, Cassie becomes enchanted with Whitethorn House, its inhabitants, and the way of life it represents. Isolated from the economic demands of Celtic Tiger Ireland, the students have created a world apart within the walls of the Big House. The student family themselves neatly conform to Bourke's description of fairies: "Unconstrained by work and poverty, or by the demands of landlords, police or clergy, the fairies of Irish legend inhabit a world that is sensuously colorful, musical and carefree."⁵⁶ In a sense, fairies exemplify Giddens's biographical autonomy. Free of the demands of the real world, they seem to live on their own terms. Similarly, the students of Whitehorn House attempt to make their own rules and live by their own ideals. They have firmly rejected the materialistic norms and values of Celtic Tiger Ireland. They eschew technology in favor of antiquated forms of entertainment including music, dancing, reading, picnicking, needlepointing, and playing piquet.

Typically, fairies and fairy lore are associated with the native Irish peasantry rather than with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy that Whitethorn's inhabitants embody. Yet fairies have long held an appeal for the Ascendancy class. Foster has shown that the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy had a "proprietary interest in fairies" as a means to "connect... to the land beneath them."⁵⁷ For Ascendancy writers like Sheridan Le Fanu, William and Lady Wilde, W. B. Yeats, and Augusta Lady Gregory, fairies in particular and the supernatural more broadly offered opportunities to "explor[e] the other side, indeed the 'otherness', of their country."⁵⁸ Furthermore, fairies hold an overlooked symbolic significance for the Anglo-Irish. According to Bourke, fairies fell from heaven alongside Lucifer, but got caught along the way: "like figures in a film that is suddenly stopped, the expelled angels falling towards Hell halted where they were: some in mid-air, others

⁵⁶ Bourke, *Burning*, 32.

⁵⁷ Roy Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and his Inheritances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 115.

⁵⁸ Foster, *Words Alone*, 102.

in the other, and some in the ocean, and there they remain.”⁵⁹ Fairies, like the Anglo-Irish, are caught between worlds. In *The Likeness*, French productively exploits this connection between the Ascendancy and the fairy world to show how those with power, whether of an earthly or supernatural origin, will use it to control those without.

Cassie is not the only one who associates fairies with Whitethorn House and its inhabitants. In the course of their investigation, Cassie and Sam research a longstanding vendetta between the March family and the residents of the surrounding Glenskehy village. They learn that Whitethorn House has been repeatedly vandalized by Naylor, who is deeply invested in this historical feud. In an interrogation, Naylor reveals to the detectives his version of the March family secret: that Daniel’s ancestor William had impregnated and killed a Glenskehy girl who worked at Whitethorn House as a maid. The unnamed girl was found hanging from a tree; Naylor insists that she died by William’s hand. According to Naylor, this pregnancy transgressed more than just class boundaries. He notes that the Big House’s namesake, the Whitethorn tree, “belongs to the fairies” and claims the March family are “a bit odd” because they are touched by fairy magic (*TL* 276-277). William’s oddness perhaps had a more earthly explanation: he served in the First World War and suffered from mysterious psychological ailments, possibly shell shock. Whatever the cause of his oddness, William believed “there was something wrong with him, in his blood, that would wreck the child” (277). The villagers were equally opposed to the union. To the residents of Glenskehy, William’s affair with a village girl carried the threat of miscegenation. “They said she lay down with one of the fairy men from up there at the House,” Naylor claims, “and she got up with a fairy child. And serve her right” (277). Sam clarifies, “they thought the baby would be a changeling” (277). By sleeping with a March man, the unnamed maid

⁵⁹ Bourke, *Burning*, 31.

transgressed social boundaries. That the villagers applied the changeling myth to this transgression follows Bourke's claims about the cautionary cultural work of fairy lore. French allows for the possibility that the maid was actually killed by angry villagers, exacting the kind of "tribal revenge" Seamus Heaney invokes in the context of the Troubles.⁶⁰

The maid's death remains unsolved, and the Naylor plot line acts as red herring in *The Likeness*. Ultimately, Naylor's vengeful vandalism pales in comparison to the intimate betrayals within the walls of the Big House. Yet this red herring reveals important continuities across generations of Irish history. While French acknowledges that these fairy beliefs are outdated, they speak to larger power dynamics that remain intact. The March family still holds Glenskehy's fate in their hands. Daniel's unwillingness to sell and develop Whitethorn House fuels the feud into the twenty-first century. As Ascendancy heir, when Daniel deprives the surrounding village of jobs and opportunities for growth, he replicates centuries of March control that has evolved from oppression to neglect. According to Naylor, Glenskehy owes its origins to the March family's own selfish needs:

The Marches. They made it, to suit themselves. When they were given the land and they built that house, they brought people in to work for them... They wanted their servants on their land, under their thumb, so they could keep them in line, but not too nearby; they didn't want to be smelling the stink of the peasants. So they built a village for the servants to live in. Like someone having a swimming pool put in, or a conservatory, or a stable full of ponies: just a little luxury, to make life more comfortable (278).

Naylor crafts a historical narrative that stretches straight from the March's colonial land grant to contemporary conceptions of luxury. Naylor's reading of March family history may be reductive,

⁶⁰ Seamus Heaney, "Punishment," in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996*, (New York City: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998), 112.

but it reveals the continuities of settler colonial control in Ireland. While the Marches of the past have had dominion over Glenskehy, the Marches of the present have neglected their responsibility to care for it. "Now that it's not serving their pleasure any more," Naylor explains, "they're standing by and watching it die" (279). Daniel's unwillingness to part with the Big House comes at the cost of opportunities for Glenskehy village. Naylor sees this selfishness as the latest iteration of March family values and ties it back to William March's crimes: "If you make a child, it's yours to care for, as long as it lives; you've no right to kill it to suit yourself," Naylor argues. "If you make a village, it's yours to look after; you do what it takes to keep that place going" (280). Linking infanticide with irresponsible landownership, Naylor shows how family secrets carry much larger historical implications. William's violence and Daniel neglect are part of the same tradition of settler colonial selfishness. "That's what they are, the Marches," Naylor claims, "That's what they've been all along. What they want, they keep, and the rest of the world be damned" (280).

Like the fairies, the Ascendancy class rules over the native Irish, governing them based on their own selfish needs and unpredictable whims. The Glenskehy peasantry processes their lack of agency by imaging their landlords are from another world. The villagers project fairy legends onto local authority figures in order to make sense of their own powerlessness. In *The Likeness*, French renders the Big House a "fairy fort" (46). As Bourke notes, fairies are a signifier for that which is suppressed; they "stand for the unconscious, for the secret, or the unspeakable."⁶¹ In Celtic Tiger Ireland, the secrets behind the walls of the Big House remain stubbornly unspeakable. *The Likeness* shows how those in power conceal truths about their own past and, in the process, continue to shape the future.

⁶¹ Bourke, *Burning*, 32.

The Celtic Tiger Wanders Out: Actions, Consequences, and the Crash

As *The Likeness* reflects important truths about Celtic Tiger Ireland, it simultaneously anticipates the economic crash that devastated Ireland. *The Likeness* was published in Ireland in the winter of 2008, the same year as the crash, when the cracks and fissures in the Irish economy were starting to show. I have argued that French uses the changeling myth to highlight the widening gulf between appearance and reality in Celtic Tiger Ireland. This myth shows how the shiny surfaces of the Celtic Tiger economy were concealing important truths. For French, crime fiction is a medium for social critique and *The Likeness* offers a critique which goes beyond the Celtic Tiger to offer prescient insights into the impending economic crash. The novel explores the fundamental breakdown between actions and consequences which contributed to the crash.

In an essay for *The New York Times*, French made explicit the link between crime fiction and social critique. “I write psychological crime,” she explains, “so I spend a fair amount of time thinking about morality and amorality and what underlies them. And it seems to me that this amorality could be a symptom of something deeper: a total disconnect between actions and consequence.”⁶² As noted above, a campaign of misinformation furthered the idea that excessive spending would result in excessive returns, rather than crippling debt. The average Irish consumer quite literally bought into the promises of the Celtic Tiger that were predicated on this connection between cause and effect. “Throughout the economic boom,” French claims, “the politicians and bankers and property developers, along with the news media, were telling all of us that cause and effect were perfectly, inextricably linked.”⁶³ If one purchased a house, the

⁶² Tana French, “The Psychology of an Irish Meltdown,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2013.

⁶³ French, “Psychology of Irish Meltdown.”

thinking went, one would see a return on their investment. To Irish consumers, actions had consequences.

This linear mode of thinking fulfilled a deep psychological need by offering a framework for understanding the boom. “We needed to believe that the Celtic Tiger hadn’t simply wandered in,” French argues, “because that would mean it could wander out again. We needed to believe that we had somehow made it happen, and that therefore there were things we could do, like buying overpriced houses, to make it keep happening. We needed, basically, to believe in that chain of action and consequence.”⁶⁴ The problem was that this logic mapped on to the long-standing uneven power structures in Ireland. Those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder were the actors while those on the bottom bore the consequences.

The legacy of settler colonialism in Ireland has created a ruling minority that has endured as it has evolved. This continuity is exemplified by the Anglo Irish Bank scandal, in which a financial establishment bearing the name of the Ascendancy class was exposed for giving exorbitant secret loans to a “Golden Circle” of ten investors.⁶⁵ Seán FitzPatrick, former head of the Anglo Irish Bank and a Catholic with a deep dislike of the “Protestant establishment,” shows how closely this new ruling class mirrored its predecessor.⁶⁶ In 2017, after Ireland’s longest criminal trial to date, FitzPatrick was acquitted of misleading auditors about Anglo Irish Bank loans. FitzPatrick, the Anglo Irish Bank, the “Golden Circle,” and the financial industry more broadly, show how corrupt kinship networks continue to shape a new Irish elite. “Our ruling class,” French explains, “including many of the politicians, bankers and property developers who

⁶⁴ French, “Psychology of Irish Meltdown.”

⁶⁵ “Anglo Irish lent golden circle 451 million euros,” *Reuters*, February 20, 2009. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ireland-banks/anglo-irish-lent-golden-circle-451-million-euros-idUKTRE51J3SB20090220>.

⁶⁶ Newton Emerson, “The Twelfth Anglo Irish conspiracy against the Anglo Irish boss,” *Irish Times*, July 14, 2010. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/the-twelfth-anglo-irish-conspiracy-against-the-anglo-irish-boss-1.621687>.

wrecked the economy—is a tiny community, interwoven by friendship, marriages, education, sports and financial transactions to a degree that would be unimaginable in a bigger country.”⁶⁷

This tiny community cultivates a fertile ground for nepotism. Bertie Ahern attributes Ireland’s problems to the fact that it is a small country with “too many incestuous relationships.”⁶⁸

Figuring Ireland’s intimate elite in familial terms, Ahern illustrates the enduring importance of kinship networks in postcolonial Ireland while diffusing the blame for his own financial misdeeds.

For this “incestuous” and interwoven ruling class, the chain of cause and effect does not seem to hold. O’Toole has noted this breakdown. “A large slice of the business elites,” he argues, “defrauded the Exchequer of hundreds of millions of pounds. The consequences ought to have been profound. Instead, they were simply non-existent.”⁶⁹ According to O’Toole, “a culture of impunity” surrounded the elite during the boom years.⁷⁰ He notes that the DIRT and Ansbacher scandals saw no legal or managerial accountability nor any “loss of prestige.”⁷¹ In fact, O’Toole argues that Celtic Tiger Ireland valorized a culture of corruption. Often, there were no consequences for corrupt politicians, many of whom enjoyed reelection and greater success after their crimes became public knowledge.⁷²

This impunity did not trickle down. The consequences of the actions of the ruling elite did, however. When the boom turned to bust, the average Irish consumers were the ones who felt the consequences most severely. For those at the top of the Irish economy, this was as untroubling as it was unexpected. “It genuinely never seems to mean anything to them that the

⁶⁷ French, “Psychology of Irish Meltdown.”

⁶⁸ Quoted in O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 43.

⁶⁹ O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 70.

⁷⁰ O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 30.

⁷¹ O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 70.

⁷² For example, the career of Michael Lowry. See O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, especially Chapter 2, for a full discussion of corruption in the Celtic Tiger.

taxpayer is going to be forced to pay their bills, to the tune of tens of billions,” French has written of the Anglo Irish Bank officials. “More than that: it never seems to occur to them that their actions might harm people.”⁷³ In the present as in the past, ignorance and indifference typify the settler colonial worldview.

The main characters in *The Likeness* each express a problematic understanding of the relationship between actions and consequences. To varying degrees, Cassie, Frank, Lexie, and Daniel each assume a distance between their actions and the consequences of these actions on themselves and others. Although Cassie is in general a sensitive and caring person, she has a hard time understanding the emotionally devastating effects of her undercover deception. Throughout the investigation, Frank manipulates Cassie into increasingly dangerous situations. Cassie knows Frank’s tactics and is a willing participant in this high-stake game. Frank knows that this undercover investigation puts Cassie in danger, but he is willing to risk her safety to solve the case. Frank’s attitude toward risk makes him an ideal handler. He is adept at incrementally raising the stakes, using “a series of little tiny steps, each one looking perfectly safe and innocuous until suddenly, bam, you’re smack in the middle of something you really did not want to deal with” (28). Frank’s calculating nature suggests that he understands that actions have consequences but does not much care, as long as he gets his desired outcome.

French codes Frank’s recklessness as an extension of his loose grasp on reality. Failing to understand the reality of a situation creates a space in which actions become divorced from their consequences. According to Cassie, Frank has “never quite managed to connect with reality” (51). Cassie, whose “own border fence between real and not-real has never been that great,” makes an ideal partner for Frank (51-52). Cassie traces the root of her own disconnect back to

⁷³ French, “Psychology of Irish Meltdown.”

the random tragedy of her parents' death in a car crash: "they were there one day and gone the next, crashing through that fence so hard and fast it splintered for good" (52). Her parents' untimely death ruptures Cassie's sense of causality, opening up a space for her risky undercover operations. While Frank and Cassie understand that actions have consequences, they are willing to bracket off this knowledge in order to solve a case. This distance allows them to act quickly without pausing to consider the ramifications, an important ability in an undercover investigation. Their ruthlessness makes them effective investigators. People get hurt as a result of their investigation, but they are able to bring their case to a close. For French's detectives, the ends justify the means.

Daniel and Lexie demonstrate a more fundamentally flawed understanding of actions and consequences. Lexie is seemingly oblivious to the hurt she leaves in her wake. As she continually disappears and forges a new identity, Lexie readily discards family, friends, and lovers. Her housemates are just the latest casualties of Lexie's restless lifestyle. Like the bankers at the head of the financial crisis, Lexie's ruthless pursuit of her own goals leads her to both personal and monetary deception. Her decision to sell her share of Whitethorn House to fund her escape is an emotional betrayal with financial implications. Frank suggests that her possession of Whitethorn House itself is fraudulent, an extension of her callousness: "She may not have ripped people off financially— although that's debatable; you could argue that she got her share of Whitethorn House under false pretenses— but she ripped them off emotionally" (381).

Yet those who knew Lexie in her various iterations remain convinced that she never intended to harm them. Rather, Lexie was stubbornly oblivious to the consequences of her actions. As with Frank's recklessness, French links Lexie's callousness to a fundamental misunderstanding of reality. "We all knew that she had never for a moment intended to hurt us,"

Daniel claims, “and so it had never really occurred to her that we could be hurt; the devastation she was about to cause had truly never seemed like a reality to her” (347). Cassie admires Lexie’s tenacity, claiming “She bent reality around her like a lens bending light” (386). Yet Cassie also sees important differences in the way that she and Lexie understand causality. Cassie feels responsible for the case’s unsatisfactory ending and for Daniel’s death. She’s sensitive to “the multiple innocences that make up guilt” (450). Cassie’s understanding of action and consequence is ruptured, traumatized by her parent’s death and further splintered by her undercover work. Lexie’s understanding of this relationship is not just damaged, it is nonexistent. Ultimately, this difference finally allows Cassie to disentangle herself from Lexie. “I thought of Daniel with that unutterable sadness like a brand on his face,” Cassie recalls, “telling me, *Lexie had no conception of action and consequences* and I felt that slim blade slide deeper between her and me, twisting” (450). That Cassie’s visualization of this separation invokes Lexie’s death by stabbing suggests the underlying violence of the changeling myth.

Frank, Lexie, and Cassie each have complicated understandings of the consequences of their actions. Their attitudes towards consequences range from Lexie’s unknowing to Frank’s uncaring. Daniel, meanwhile, has spent a great deal of time contemplating the relationship between actions and consequences. He both knows and cares about the consequences of his actions, yet his subject position as an Ascendancy heir prevents him from fully accounting for the impact he has on others. Daniel’s entire worldview is based on the fact that actions have consequences and that there is always a price to be paid. He’s “fascinated” by the Spanish proverb “take what you want and pay for it, says God” (335). Lexie’s problem is that she focuses exclusively on the first half of the decree while failing to acknowledge the emotional cost of her actions. Daniel identifies this same limitation in the contemporary Irish moment, further linking

Lexie to the Celtic Tiger mentality. “We as a society have come to overlook the second clause... Take the national economic explosion, as the most obvious example: that’s come at a price, and a very steep one, to my mind. We have sushi bars and SUVs, but people our age can’t afford homes in the city where they grew up, so centuries-old communities are disintegrating like sand castles” (335). To make his point, Daniel defaults to property. In Celtic Tiger Ireland, the home is both an enduring symbol of belonging and, like a sand castle, a fragile icon of impermanence.

Daniel obsesses over the price to be paid and finds fault in a society that refuses to acknowledge the balance. “What could possibly be simpler, or more crucial? You can have anything you want, as long as you accept there is a price and that you will have to pay for it” (335). Daniel’s problem, however, lies with the first half of the proverb. As a descendant of settler colonialists, Daniel is accustomed to taking what he wants. He is willing to pay a high price, but he is unwilling to go without. Crucially, Daniel fails to realize that because he’s in a position of power, others around him are also implicated in his choices.

Daniel’s authority permeates Whitethorn House. He is father, landlord, and king. Cassie thinks Daniel looks like “some ancient war leader... a high king in his banquet hall, shining and reckless, celebrating between battles” (322). Daniel is preoccupied with the role of the king. He sees kingship as the ultimate expression of his worldview that one should “take what you want and pay for it.” According to Daniel, the king must be willing to put his life on the line in order to rule effectively:

Look at the old wars, centuries ago: the king led his men into battle. Always. That was what the ruler was: both on a practical level and on a mystical one, he was the one who stepped forward to lead his tribe, put his life at stake for them, became the sacrifice for their safety. If he had refused to do that most crucial thing at that most crucial moment,

they would have ripped him apart—and rightly so: he would have shown himself to be an imposter, with no right to the throne....once that physical and mystical link is broken, once the ruler is no longer willing to be the sacrifice for his people, he becomes not a leader but a leech, forcing others to take risks while he sits in safety and batons on their losses (320-321).

Daniel valorizes the idea of sacrifice. He believes that a ruler should have a fundamental understanding of the consequences of his actions. Yet Daniel fails to account for the consequences of his actions on others. He does not think, for example, of the troops the king leads to the slaughter on the battlefield. The king may be willing to sacrifice himself for his ideals, but what about those under his command?

Daniel's dominion over Whitethorn House shows this limited line of thinking. He is both king and landlord of the Big House. Despite his best efforts, Daniel cannot eschew the settler colonial power dynamic. Although Whitethorn House is split equally amongst the housemates, Daniel's ownership is historical as well as economical. Whitethorn House acts as a family home for all of the students, but it is also Daniel's ancestral home. Uncle Simon's hoard of family artifacts constantly remind the others of Daniel's inherited claim on the house. Furthermore, Daniel's generosity in trying to share his ancestral home places his housemates in a debt that is emotional, rather than financial. The Big House acts as the ultimate evidence of Daniel's benevolence and shields him from criticism. "This fucking house," Rafe exclaims to Abby, "Every time anyone hints that your precious Daniel might not be prefect, you throw the house in our faces" (421). When Rafe has finally had enough of Daniel's domination, he speculates that Daniel's generosity has darker motives: "If you ask me, that's why he gave us shares in the

house. Not to make our lives all sunshiny. To have company, here in his private universe. To keep us, for good” (423). As Rafe sees it, Daniel wants control, not companionship.

Daniel demonstrates the settler colonial impulse to control the past. The student family lives by the house rule “no pasts” which prevents any meaningful dialogue about their individual lives before Whitethorn House. This rule reinforces the idea that the students only have one another, increasing both their intimacy and isolation. After Lexie’s stabbing, the student family looks to Daniel to assert control of the situation. Daniel goes to great lengths to create a believable alibi to assuage their collective guilt. In the aftermath of the crime, Daniel was “waxing philosophical about the art of the alibi” rather than panicking or seeking help (409). He sets the clocks back to a time before the stabbing and forces his housemates to play a game of poker. Daniel knows that forcing his housemates to play an actual poker game, rather than fabricating a scenario, will create a more consistent and believable alibi. He plays Lexie’s hand as well as his own.

Throughout this macabre performance of domesticity, Daniel dictates the game. “He kept *narrating*,” Rafe remembers (409, emphasis original). Daniel’s domination does not end with the card game. After Lexie is eliminated from the poker game, Rafe claims Daniel “made us act out this little *scene*, you heading off on your walk and all of us waving bye-bye into thin air.” In the aftermath of the stabbing, Daniel is both the director and the narrator. Justin confirms Rafe’s account of Daniel’s domination: “Daniel wouldn’t let us go to bed,” he adds, “we had to sit there and keep playing Texas bloody Hold-‘em, to the bitter end—Daniel won of course” (409). Abby views Daniel’s actions in a more heroic light, but still admits he controlled the crime scene. “He was like a general,” she claims (409). Ultimately, Daniel’s elaborate alibi acts as an extension of the “no pasts” rule. He claims that they all must develop a selective memory about the events of

the evening: “As it stands, all we need to do is remember that we went from the washing up to the card game, and eliminate the intervening events from our minds. They never happened” (409). In Daniel’s mind, his family’s survival depends on their ability to forget the sins of their past.

The students default to Daniel’s version of the stabbing and its immediate aftermath. He followed Lexie out of the house and into the cabin where she eventually died. It is unclear, to both the characters and the reader, in what state Daniel found Lexie. French allows for the possibility that Daniel found her alive and let her bleed to death. Upon reflection, the students realize that they should not have trusted Daniel’s assessment of her condition. “Here’s what still amazes me,” Rafe confesses “we took Daniel’s word for it. He has all the medical knowledge of a cheese soufflé but he told us Lexie was dead and we just assumed he was right. Why do we always *believe* him?” (416, emphasis original). Abby, acting again as Daniel’s defender, offers an explanation: “habit...he usually is right” (416, ellipses original). Daniel continues to control the narrative of the past after Cassie’s arrival as Lexie. He prevents the housemates from telling her what really happened during her stabbing, and the students defer to him yet again.

The dynamic Daniel has cultivated within the family unit at Whitethorn House contributes not only to Lexie’s death but also to his own. During the climax of the novel, Daniel admits to stabbing Lexie. He enters his version of events onto the official record, speaking for the benefit of Cassie’s concealed microphone and the detectives he knows are listening on the other end. By accepting full responsibility for the stabbing, Daniel exonerates his housemates. Ultimately, he is willing to sacrifice his life for theirs. Daniel intentionally escalates the situation by drawing a gun on Cassie. The gun is a March family heirloom, a Webley Mark VI that was likely used by William March in the Great War. When Daniel fires the gun at Cassie, she is

forced to return fire. She kills Daniel in what Frank later deems suicide by cop. Like the ancient rulers he idolizes, Daniel has the ultimate settler colonial privilege: the ability to live and die according to one's own principles. The women in the March family's orbit, like Lexie and William's pregnant lover, were not so lucky. Their deaths were the direct consequences of the March men's actions.

French allows for ample ambiguity as to whether or not Daniel's confession is accurate.⁷⁴ Rosemary Erickson Johnsen argues that French frequently "asks readers to share the investigators' experience of not knowing" and that the ambiguity of her endings speaks to "the dark uncertainties concomitant with life in post-Tiger Dublin."⁷⁵ What Johnson overlooks is that in *The Likeness* French draws from the Big House genre to expose these "dark uncertainties." The Big House genre works to preserve ambiguity, anonymity, and ambivalence. As in Bowen's *A World of Love*, the genre allows for a settler colonial control over the past. In *The Likeness*, French invokes the genre to show how this control extends into the twenty-first century. By highlighting the gaps between appearance and reality, and between actions and consequences, French offers a critique of contemporary Ireland that looks back to its settler colonial roots.

⁷⁴ Justin, jealous of Lexie's sexual relationship with Rafe, is a likely culprit.

⁷⁵ Johnsen, "Crime Fiction's Dublin," 133 and 137.

Coda: The Unsettled Past

These women writers speak to one another other across time and space. In some cases, they were joined in friendship. Elizabeth Bowen and Eudora Welty, alongside Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, illustrate the importance of companionship for women writers navigating male-dominated literary traditions. These friendships also provided inspiration and insight which improved their writing. Where unconnected by friendship, these women were frequently influenced by one another. Tana French names her most paranoid and ethnically ambiguous detective Antoinette Conway, a riff on Rhys's Antoinette Cosway. Allfrey was inspired by Bowen's writing and attempted to replicate her more impressionistic technique in her unpublished novel *Dashing Away*. Twentieth- and twenty-first century women writers looked to one another for both models and motivation.

These writers also share a set of themes, motifs, and images. Timekeeping is a problem in many of these novels. The Fairchilds have a notoriously poor sense of time in *Delta Wedding*. The clocks at both Montefort in *A World of Love* and Whitethorn House in *The Likeness* are unreliable. Within the walls of these Big Houses, even ordinary objects and occurrences taken on new meanings. A moth wanders in to a candle flame during a tense dinner in both *A World of Love* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Letters from the previous generation are burned in *The Optimist's Daughter* and *A World of Love*. Fire, in fact, appears in every novel studied here. From the flames of Dabney's night light in *The Optimist's Daughter* to the spectacular fires that engulf the big houses in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Likeness*, these novels contain a certain combustibility. With its inherent ambiguity, fire is a fitting symbol for these novels. Like the hearths and homes from which they emanate, these flames have the potential to be both comforting or dangerous, and liberating or destructive.

Airplanes, too, weave in and out of these novels. As air travel brought the world closer together, these writers explore the possibilities of a more connected future. *A World of Love* and *The Orchid House* both end with flight. In *A World of Love*, when Jane meets her American love interest at the airport, Bowen signals a belated optimism about the prospect of a transatlantic future. In *The Orchid House*, the patriarch Master dies midair on a seaplane on route to seek treatment for his drug addiction. Allfrey leaves little room for doubt about the decline of the white creole planter class, and with the Master's death she leaves the titular estate home in the hands of white creole women like herself. Phil Hand in Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* also perishes in the air. While the Master's death in *The Orchid House* is coded as inevitable and almost desirable, Phil's untimely death in *The Optimist's Daughter* is a trauma wrought by the violence of world war.

Strikingly, a novel in each of my chapters features the trace of a dead veteran of the First World War. In *A World of Love*, veteran Guy's ghost haunts the women of Montefort. In *Delta Wedding*, Denis's absence is still deeply felt by the Fairchild family. In *The Orchid House*, the shell-shocked and drug-addicted Master is a ghostly presence even before his death. Even *The Likeness*, almost a century removed from the Great War, contains a sub-plot about Anglo-Irish soldier William March. With the exception of French, all of the authors studied here were born before the First World War and thus have firsthand memories of wartime. Bowen and Rhys were both married to veterans of the Great War who had suffered lung damage. Clearly the Great War was never far out of mind for most of these writers. While all the novels I study were written in the post-World War II decades, they do not turn to this conflict for their ghosts. I wish to conclude this dissertation by suggesting that this recurrence of dead World War I veterans is not merely coincidental, but indicative of how transatlantic women navigate the colonial past.

In his 1975 study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell noted a “striking phenomenon of the last twenty-five years is this obsession with the images and myths of the Great War among novelists and poets too young to have experienced it directly... These writers provide for the ‘post-modern’ sensibility a telling example of the way the present influences the past.”⁷⁶ Yet these young novelists and poets that Fussell studies are predominantly male. As the work collected here shows, women writers also engaged with the images and myths of the Great War. Nancy Huston has argued that “any war narrative will teach us...that there are a considerable number of supporting roles which get handed out to members of the female sex and which are essential to the unfolding of the plot.”⁷⁷ The women-authored text studied here, however, flip the script. Dead Great War veterans play the supporting roles while the women star. Yet these masculine supporting roles often prove illuminating as well.

In 1921, David Lloyd George proclaimed, “the War demonstrated – I might say revealed—to the world, including ourselves, that the British Empire was not an abstraction but a living force to be reckoned with.”⁷⁸ In their writing from the 1950s onward, Bowen, Welty, Rhys, Allfrey, and French knew that the British Empire would not continue its ascent—and that a new American form of empire would supplant it. Yet their novels are haunted with the ghosts of empire. These ghosts embody women writers’ ambivalent attitude towards the colonial past. As they haunt the margins of these novels, caught between life and death, they signify a desire to call up the colonial past while simultaneously laying it to rest. These ghosts of empire are no longer Lloyd George’s “living force” yet they still must be “reckoned with.” The novels studied in this dissertation thus depict a very unsettled settler colonial past.

⁷⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 321.

⁷⁷ Nancy Huston, “Tales of War and Tears of Women,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 5, no. ¾ (1982): 274.

⁷⁸ Quoted in David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014): 83.

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