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A critical ethnography of The Myrtles Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana with ruminations on hauntology

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A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE MYRTLES PLANTATION
IN ST. FRANCISVILLE, LOUISIANA
WITH RUMINATIONS ON HAUNTOLOGY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how ghosts perform and are performed in southern Louisiana, particularly in the eclectic Baton Rouge enclave of Spanish Town and at The Myrtles Plantation in St. Francisville. Although The Myrtles, considered “one of the most haunted locations in the United States,” served as the genesis for this project, I explore the continuities and discontinuities of the histories and historicities of these two distinct places and my journeys between them over a five year period. Using critical ethnography as a grounding framework, the study draws from literature in tourism studies, performance studies, and other related areas of research, to illustrate how these sites figure histories that are simultaneously informed and troubled by ghostly matters.

The study is structured as a performative journey. Chapter One establishes an itinerary, explaining the theory and methodological tools employed in the study. Chapter Two explores the performance of tourism and the ways in which it is inevitably bound up in increasingly complicated notions of home. As the beginning of the journey, it contextualizes the places that anchor the study. Chapter Three revisits Highway 61 and utilizes this liminal space to examine elided histories that will serve as a context and provide insight into the primary ghost at the heart of this study, Chloe, as well as the other ghosts she brings with her. Chapter Four provides a thick description of the grounds of The Myrtles and uses the categories of touristic performance to examine how tourists navigate the spaces prior to taking a tour. Chapter Five provides the reader with a tour of the house. Performed by three different guides, this tour illustrates how the guides function as mediums between ghosts and guests on the tour. In Chapter Six, I situate this journey in relation to how other scholars employ haunting and hauntology as a theoretical

perspective and methodological tool before heading off in another haunted direction that explores implications for future research.

CHAPTER ONE WHERE TO BEGIN?

The willingness to follow ghosts, neither to memorialize nor to slay, but to follow where they lead, in the present, head turned backwards and forwards at the same time. To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really. That is its utopian grace: to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to log for the insight of that moment in which we recognize . . . that it could have been and can be otherwise. (Gordon 57)

Billed as one of America's most haunted homes, The Myrtles is featured in numerous books, TV shows, and has been the subject of numerous paranormal investigations. Like me, thousands of people who come to Louisiana visit The Myrtles in hopes of encountering ghosts. I visited The Myrtles for the first time in March 2007, as part of a graduate seminar on tourism. On that trip, it occurred to me that the performance of enacting ghostly encounters—ghostly matters—at The Myrtles was a complicated affair indeed. Fascinated, I decided to continue studying and began doing ethnographic fieldwork at the plantation that fall. From the start of the project, I knew I wanted to study the site, the tourists and tour guides, and the ghosts as well. Not only did I know that I wanted to study the ghosts, I knew it was necessary. The ghosts matter. They are integral to The Myrtles and, likewise, The Myrtles are integral to the ghosts. Trying to separate the ghosts from the site or vice versa would be like trying to find the beginning or the end of a Möbius strip. Although I have been engaged with The Myrtles for over five years, I have had a difficult time pinning down what this study is and has been about.

In the simplest terms, this study is about performances, ghosts, and history at one of America's most famous and most haunted homes. It is about the ongoing performances that emerge *with* the haunted performative event that is The Myrtles Plantation. It is about the relationship between the work of histories and the work of preservation, with full recognition that every time one makes a decision about preservation, s/he is simultaneously making a choice

about what to preserve and what to elide. This study is about tourists and tour guides. It is about a green headscarf, cherubs, puddle drapes, a chandelier made out of Baccarat crystal, upside down keyholes, and *trompe l'oeil* fire places. It is about a refrain—"took her out to a tree/hanged her by the neck/weighted her body down with bricks and tossed her into the Mississippi." It is about Chloe. It is about the men who have surrounded her—historical figures like General Bernardo de Gavez, Governor Don Carlos de Grand Pre, Judge Clark Woodruff, and John James Audubon; and contemporary figures ranging from my favorite tour guide at The Myrtles, Robbie, to my father, my brother David, and my friend Brandon. It is about a mirror that refuses to reflect correctly. It is about ghosts—many, many ghosts. However, one particular ghost is central, Chloe. And even though she gets top billing both on the tour and in the press, she is not the only ghost. She was my first ghost, and once she found me—like when Patrick Swayze found Whoopie Goldberg in the film *Ghost*—she brought with her a host of other ghosts (because there is always more than one of them) who have haunted me since, and have made me do things I did not want to do and have complicated my life and this study. This study is about plantations, slavery, and the dangerous relations between the live oak trees lining the picturesque drive and the deadly oleander bush standing sentry over a white fence at the entry to the courtyard; it is about the difference between a manicured lawn and the surrounding swamp. It is about history/mystery, memory, and manners. It is about Baton Rouge and Spanish Town and St. Francisville. It is also, for better or worse, also about me. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon suggests that to be haunted is to be part of a ghost's story and, "for better or worse: the ghost must speak *to me* in some way sometimes similar to, sometimes distinct from how it may be speaking to others" (24). As this project unfolds, the ways in which I operate *with* and am implicated *within* these ghost stories will become more clear, but for now I

don't want to stray too far from the similar ways in which the ghosts at The Myrtles speak to, with, and among fellow tourists who travel to The Myrtles to (re)visit them.

The question most often asked by visitors at The Myrtles is “Are there really ghosts?” The question most often posed among tourists is “Do you believe in ghosts?” As a tourist and as neophyte scholar who must explain her research to virtually everyone she meets, I, too, find myself torn between these questions, interrogating the veracity/authenticity/realness of ghosts quite often. Is it *really* haunted? Are there *really* ghosts? Have you *seen* any ghosts? Do you really *believe* in ghosts? Quite frankly, when these questions arise I try to wriggle out of answering them, often to no avail. When I am forced to answer, my response is always the same, I slap on my Cheshire cat grin, deploy a mischievous glint in my right eye, and employ a rising inflection pattern that, hopefully, suggests a bit of mystery. “I don't know. It's possible.” I never claim to know the answer to the question, “Are ghosts real?” nor do I take the bait when someone asks me “Do you believe in ghosts?” for a variety of reasons. The relationship between *life* and *afterlife* are deeply personal, spiritual, cultural, and political for many people—myself included. Even though I refuse to commit myself on the question of the “reality” of ghosts, make no mistake, I am haunted.

Instead of attempting to parse whether ghosts are real or not real, or embarking on a ghost-busting mission in which I conjure ghosts only in order to exorcise them, I choose to occupy a space of curious ambiguity because that is the mind frame I most often occupy. “Are the ghosts ‘real’?” I don't know. It's possible. “Are the owners, guides, psychics, paranormal investigators, and guests making it all up?” I don't know. It's possible. Many other tourists visiting The Myrtles operate within similar spaces of ambiguity. Thus far, in conversations with other tourists, I have found some who are quick to proclaim the ghosts' existence and some who

are quick to write off the whole experience as silly and contrived, but most visitors occupy a space of ambiguity. Before and after tours, when I ask what they think about the ghosts, many respond, “I don’t know. It’s possible.”

“I don’t know. It’s possible.” I love that phrase. In it, ambivalence, doubt, humility, curiosity, willingness, and openness all huddle together in a succinct yet forceful statement. I *don’t* know. *It is* possible. The ghosts (who are co-performing *with* tourists, *with* the tour guides, *with* the site, *with* history, *with* other ghosts, and for better or worse, *with* me) open the possibility that “that which appears to not be there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (Gordon 8). The performative event(s) of/in/at The Myrtles Plantation open(s) up a haunted space for tourists, locals, guides, guests, and ghosts to engage *with*, to perform *with* each other. The ghosts at work at The Myrtles are engaged in the labor of haunting and the visitors to the site also engage in the work of haunting. This ongoing performance, this repetition, this re-presentation, holds open the possibility of a performance in which “critical skepticism [*I don’t know*] poised at the edge of wide-eyed wonder [*It’s possible*] sometimes creates possibility, [and] an opportunity to imagine and engage the world otherwise” (Bowman “Performing Southern History” 155). Moreover, the ongoing performance and re-performance, presentation and re-presentation, production and re-production of The Myrtles as a tourist site is predicated on doubt rather than certainty. The folks (ghosts included) constructing the performance of The Myrtles as a tourist site neither prove nor disprove the ghosts’ existence beyond the shadow of a doubt; instead, they produce and invoke doubt, that shadowy realm—that space between *I don’t know* and *It’s possible*—in which ghosts thrive. Although I am not necessarily interested in ontological questions regarding ghosts, I am still intrigued by them—the questions *and* the ghosts constituted by and/or conjured within such questions. To focus solely

on the “realness” of ghosts, or alternately the Real-ness of ghosts, would be a mistake, primarily because such a narrow, bloodless, empirical project would actively thwart creative possibilities in emerging histories or, worse, make bad typologies and encourage vain exorcisms.

Many theorists discuss haunting and ghosts as psychological forces and social figures. However, Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* and Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* serve as primary theoretical works that guide my understanding of specters, influence the ways in which I engage with specters, and shape how I write about/with specters in this document. Although Gordon and Derrida both elegantly and rigorously advocate that ghosts and hauntings are serious business and scholars should, indeed must, attend to both the specter and the spectral moment with great care, they do not come to the event of haunting through the exact same disciplinary “schools” or the same theoretical lenses (though there are overlaps to be sure). Put another way, although both scholars dance around similar injunctions, the stakes of each of their respective arguments are different. Derrida, who now rests comfortably within the pantheon of the great continental philosophers, delivered *Specters* in lecture format at a 1993 colloquium bearing the weight of the great, groaning, grandiose title “Wither Marxism?” Even though he includes a question mark at the end of the colloquia’s title, the whole event was dripping with exigence. When I read the title on the page and when say it out loud it seems to me several exclamation marks are, at the very least, implied. Wither Marxism!!!! Derrida’s lecture was highly anticipated by the inner circle of contemporary continental philosophers as well as any number of scholars across the globe interested in contesting and/or utilizing deconstruction specifically and poststructuralist ideas more generally. *Specters* was arguably Derrida’s most overtly political statement to date. The scope of his project is massive. In it, Derrida argues that deconstruction could not exist in a pre-Marxist space. He further contends that the deconstructive project, which

calls into question a metaphysics of presence, is indeed a political project. Derrida locates these politics in what he calls hauntology—or the logic of specters. He argues that learning to *live with* specters, to “*maintain now*” the specter(s), instead of exorcising them or conjuring them only to attempt to conjure them *away*, entails responsibility and must be done in the name of justice.

Derrida’s exordium on *Specters* urges scholars

to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*. . . . And this being with specters would be, but not only be, a *politics* of memory, inheritance and generations. (xix)

In short, *Specters* was, and still is, a big damn deal. Although I do not claim that this document is necessarily “properly Derridian,” I do cleave closely to the central spectral hypothesis operating throughout *Specters: Plus d’un*. Derrida pivots and plays on/within this term, which means both *more than one* and *no more one*. For Derrida, and for me, the specter is always plural—there is always more than one of them. I will visit and revisit this hypothesis and ruminate on other questions and critical injunctions functioning within Derrida’s articulation of hauntology throughout this project. Additionally, I am also quite moved (and inspired) by the way Derrida *crafts* his projects in terms of a

performative interpretation, that is, of an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets . . . [this is] a definition of the performative as unorthodox with regard to speech act theory. . . . (‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however is to change it’). (Derrida, *Specters* 51)

Avery Gordon, writing from and through the discipline of sociology, published *Ghostly Matters* in 1996, a little less than two years after Derrida published *Specters of Marx*. The projects are almost contemporaneous. Although Gordon herself, and the many theorists she draws upon, are clearly influenced by poststructuralism in general and deconstruction more specifically, she barely addresses Derrida’s work in *Specters* directly. In fact, Gordon only

explicitly mentions *Specters* twice, once in a direct quotation, and subsequently in a sincere, somewhat confessional and slightly defensive footnote that reads:

Jacques Derrida has now written a theory of the specter in direct engagement with Marx's texts in a moving and beautiful book about Marx's ambivalent yet obsessive relationship to ghosts. *Specters of Marx* (1994) is a very significant book of philosophy and a crucial political intervention by perhaps the most influential European philosopher living today. But it is not, I think, despite its similarly motivated distress at the claim of history's end, quite a theory of ghosts Horkheimer and Adorno would have written. (210)

Unlike Derrida, Gordon's project is not designed to reimagine ontology and/or a metaphysics of presence on such a grand philosophical scale. Nevertheless, her project is just as distinguished and ambitious. Gordon begins with the speciously simple twin claims that life is complicated and that ghostly matters are a part of social life, which through her robust and poetic investigation, illuminates the incredibly ambitious aims of her project. Gordon argues

If we want to study social life well, and if in addition we want to contribute, in however small a measure, to changing it, we must learn how to identify haunting and reckon with ghosts, we must make contact with what is without doubt often painful, difficult and unsettling. The book's ambition lies in asserting that in order to do this, we will have to change the way we have been doing things. (23)

Through her stunning ethnographic retelling of three ghost stories that intricately weave and spin through literary fiction, Gordon articulates an epistemology of haunting in which the interconnections of history and subjectivity make social life inevitably intersect with violence perpetuated within and by complex and often contradictory hierarchies of power endemic to modern life. Ghosts show up at these intersections, these crossroads. If we listen to the ghosts, if we learn to live *with* the ghosts, then perhaps we can learn to live Otherwise. Gordon's book explores three broad questions:

- 1) What are the alternative stories we ought to and can write about the relationship among power, knowledge, and experience?
- 2) How does the ghost interrupt or put into crisis the demand for ethnographic authenticity?
- 3) How can our critical language display a reflexive concern not only with the objects of

our investigation but also with the ones who investigate? (23-24)

Both Gordon and Derrida come to questions of haunting from different locations. Derrida arrives at a much-vaunted colloquium to deliver an address in response to the question, “Wither Marxism?” Gordon, in the midst of pondering the stake of a similar question, was on her way to a conference when she became distracted by a photograph and had to take a detour in order to follow the traces of a very particular woman ghost. Gordon’s work and Derrida’s work do not match up in a tidy parallel way. For example, Gordon describes ghosts as an absence that are a seething presence (8), whereas Derrida, always working against a metaphysics of presence talks about ghosts in terms of singularity (no more one) and multiplicity (more than one)—*Plus d’un* (*Specters of Marx* xx). Even though Derrida and Gordon approach ghosts from different perspectives, their work intersects at particular points: ghosts are important; ghosts are political/politicized/politicizing and, therefore, living *with* ghosts can lead us toward a future-to-come that is more just; and ghosts speak and, for better or worse, they speak *to* and *with* the person(s) and social/historical/political domains they are haunting.

In addition to the ethnographic practices I articulate more fully below, the way I go about writing about *The Myrtles* is also informed by the way both Avery Gordon and Jacques Derrida craft their significant spectral projects. Both are drawn to the ghosts through literature—or, at the very least, they produce writerly texts that openly engage the literary. This method appeals to me because part of my own disciplinary history emerges from the reading, interpretation, and performance of literature. In writing this ethnography, I integrate several narrative conventions and the works of several authors who fall within the genre of Southern fiction and, to a lesser extent, the works of other authors who have exerted a significant influence on my development as a scholar (creative and otherwise). If, as Gordon suggests, the ghosts speak and, for better or

worse, they must speak to me, then it is important for me to make clear that *these* ghosts, *my* ghosts, *our* ghosts speak to me with the lilt and rhythm of a southern accent that is both familiar and, for better or worse, familial (defined broadly). In addition to explicit literary texts, I also let multiple performances I have participated in over the past 10 years operate within the way I write this text. These performances continue to influence me, shaping my understanding of theory and praxis and the way I engage/make texts and performances. In short, both literature and performance activate and operate within this text, this project, and how I go about producing scholarly work on both the page and the stage within the discipline of performance studies.

I wholeheartedly agree with Gordon when she says, “Of one thing I am sure: it’s not that the ghosts *don’t exist*” (12). Myth and/or legend, fact and/or fiction, real and/or not, the ghosts act and are acted upon phenomenologically, discursively, and historiographically (none of which are mutually exclusive in theory or in critical practice). Moreover, if we grant the ghosts what Michael Taussig would call the sympathetic magic¹ they so clearly deserve, then it is apparent that the ghosts at The Myrtles labor intensely at a variety of intersections. Benjamin argues, “There . . . are crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day” (“Surrealism” 183). They move. They operate in the spaces in between. In full on, unabashed trickster frenzy, they trick the categorical boundaries of multiple, stratified regimes of truth: here/now, there/then, life/death, physical/metaphysical, absence/presence, fact/fiction, authentic/inauthentic, subject/object,

¹In *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Taussig argues that sympathetic magic is incumbent on the critic, that is, s/he should grant the object of study the power of its own representation. I contrast this move with an iconoclastic critical perspective in which the critic wants to expose and exorcise the supposed bad magic hiding within the object, the image, the representation. Taussig’s notion is similar to Appadurai’s claim in the introduction to *The Social Life of Things* that objects have agency.

² See, for example, Joshua Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead”; Joshua Gunn, “Mourning Speech: Haunting and the Spectral Voices of 9-11”; Joshua Gunn, “On Recording Performance, or Speech, the Cry, and the Anxiety of the Fix”; “Ben Powell and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, “On the Haunting of Performance Studies”; Lesa

visible/invisible, power/knowledge/pleasure, embodiment/ disembodiment, pleasure/pain, Apollonian Rationality/Dionysian Disorder, spirit/matter, sensuality, grace, terror, desire, performance, performativity, history, historicity. The ghosts scurry between all of these regimes of truth, charging gaps and discontinuities and, in so doing, throwing into question the silencing positivism of categorical imperatives. That is why I like them so much, and I am not the only one.

Jeffrey Weinstock argues that contemporary scholarship is in the midst of a “spectral turn.” He claims that “our contemporary moment is a haunted one. . . . It seems that ghosts are everywhere in our popular and academic culture” (5). Weinstock reiterates Derrida’s position that ghosts “suggest a complex relationship between the constitution of individual subjectivity and the larger social collective” (5). He goes on to suggest that ghosts’ penchant for fiddling with binary oppositions and problematizing dichotomous thinking has figured specters as “privileged poststructuralist academic tropes” (5). While I am not convinced that this contemporary moment is necessarily *more* haunted than other epochs, and while I am also uncomfortable with reducing specters to *mere* tropes, I do agree that many folks both inside and outside academia are very interested in talking *about* and sometimes *with*, particular ghosts, spirits, and specters that emerge—or, more accurately, begin again in particular historical moments. I concur with Weinstock’s claim that “the ubiquity of ghost stories . . . is connected to the recognition that history is always fragmented,” and that ghosts “signal epistemological uncertainty and the potential emergence of a different and competing history” (6-7). Moreover, this “spectral turn” (or, more accurately “turn and toss”) has also influenced contemporary scholars with a vested interest in the performance practices made manifest on the page, the street, the screen, and the

stage within the discipline of performance studies.² It is my sincere hope that this project participates in and contributes to the multiple spectral conversations arising and circulating within the discipline.

Because my understanding of hauntology is influenced by both Derrida and Gordon, I have a difficult time locating the specter to which Benjamin Powell and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer refer when they claim, “There is a specter haunting performance studies” (1). Based on my explorations, I am quite convinced there is more than one—*Plus d’un*. There has always been/there will always be more than one. When I started this project, I did not anticipate becoming haunted by specific specters. Nevertheless, when several showed up, I had to pay attention to them, to live *with* them, and to try to speak *with* them. They still haunt *me* and, I suspect, *us*.

Even though I refuse to commit myself on the question of the “reality” of ghosts, I am haunted. I will explore this concept a bit later, but for the time being, I don’t want to stray from the performance of ghosts at The Myrtles. While the ghosts still move, the tour guides still breathe, and (sometimes) the guests still scream, I give in. I give into the motion, the eventness, the embodied doing of things done long before I arrived on the scene. In short, I engage The Myrtles and the ghosts both *as* performance and *in* performance. Judith Hamera (2006) argues, “Performance is both an event and a heuristic tool. . . . Its inherent ‘eventness’ (‘in motion’)

² See, for example, Joshua Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead”; Joshua Gunn, “Mourning Speech: Haunting and the Spectral Voices of 9-11”; Joshua Gunn, “On Recording Performance, or Speech, the Cry, and the Anxiety of the Fix”; “Ben Powell and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, “On the Haunting of Performance Studies”; Lesa Lockford, “An Ethnographic Ghost Story: Adapting *What’s a Nice Commodity Like You Doing in a Spectacle Like This?*”; Sonja Kufinec, “[Walking Through A] Ghost Town: Cultural Hauntologie in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Mostar: A Performance Review”; Matthew Wagner and Chris Danowski, “Hearing Ghosts and Speaking Spaces: A Conversation with Performance”; Diana Taylor, “Dancing with Diana: A Study in Hauntology”; Justin Thomas Trudeau, “Specters in the Rear-View: Haunting, Whiteness, and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*.”

makes it especially effective for engaging and describing embodied processes that produce and consume culture. As event or as heuristic, performance makes things and does things in addition to describing how they are made or done” (5-6).

As I suggest above, The Myrtles is a multidimensional performative event in which I, too, am a co-performer. Echoing Dwight Conquergood, Soyini Madison articulates copformance as a “*doing* with deep attention *to* and *with* others” that maintains inter-animating tensions centered on dialogue (“The Dialogic Performative” 323, emphasis added). Foregrounding the eventness of The Myrtles in/as performances forces me to attend to the multiple, divergent, and shape shifting relationships emerging *among* the ghosts, visitors, owners, employees, and myself, among other relationships. In so doing, I strive to animate various cultural, historical, and political imbrications therein. This study elucidates multiple ways the ghosts function *with* guides, guests, and me, to performatively enact The Myrtles through the conditions of our own (dis)embodiment. In other words, we *do* (and undo) The Myrtles and in this *doing* (and undoing), performance threatens to undermine performativity. Elin Diamond points out the critical possibilities and the stakes involved in attending to the relationship between performance and performativity:

As soon as performativity comes to rest on *a* performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects all become discussable. . . . When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. (5)

To provide a quick example, which I will explore more thoroughly in Chapter Five, I note that when a tour guide departs from the sanctioned script, injecting his or her own history into conversation with the text itself and the audience members, that performance both reifies and subverts the history/mystery of The Myrtles and opens up a space in which a performance threatens to undermine performativity.

Cleaving closely to particular bodies and conventions of embodiment give rise to equally salient questions regarding conventions of disembodiment. I am particularly interested in the alliances between ghosts, historicity, and the generative haunted spaces the ghost can open up for performance historiography. Historicity, according to Della Pollock, is “where history works itself out, in and through and sometimes against its material subjects. It is where concrete practices not only ‘embody and perform differences’ but also contest claims for material agency” (“Introduction” 4). Pollock goes on to pose an exceptional question, “How do we make history *go* when it seems to be *going away*?” (“Introduction” 16). The Myrtles’ (dis)embodied ghosts, working in, through, and sometimes against material subjects, make constitutive claims for (im)material agency and, in so doing, the ghosts respond to Pollock with an equally exceptional question: “What if histories refuse to go away?” The ghosts seem to be signaling that they are not going away, that they are staying right there.

What are we to make of particular histories that refuse to go away? Whose histories are being worked out and how? Avery Gordon suggests, “the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Nicholas Mirzoeff further articulates Gordon’s claim by insisting on specificity in a way I find productive. He argues, “it is clear that no ghost is indifferent to the time and place of its hauntings. The specter is nothing if not historical. . . . The question is whose history, told in what way and at what time?” (249). One of the primary purposes of this project is to engage those dense sites where history and subjectivity create social life, while always keeping questions of whose history, whose telling, and at what historical moment in play. Through this study I hope to create a dialogic space that will help me elucidate

the multiple ways in which ghosts function *with* guides, guests, and me to enact The Myrtles performatively through the conditions of our own (dis)embodiment.

In studying The Myrtles, I adopt methodological perspectives and practices that rest uncomfortably and precariously between articulations of what some performance studies scholars doing ethnographic work call autoethnography and critical ethnography—or, more accurately, autoethnography *vs.* critical ethnography. Over the past ten years, I have heard and/or engaged in countless versions of the following conversation in graduate seminars, at conferences, and at performance festivals. The dialogue (or is it a dance) begins innocently enough. “What type of research do you do?” “Ethnography.” The tone shifts. “Oh really . . . what *kind* of ethnography do you do?” The subtext of the short exchange, this *pas de deux*, is anything but kind; it reads, “*Halt! Identify yourself! Friend or Foe? Capulet or Montague? Us or Them? Self or Other?*” It seems to me that many folks doing performance ethnography (critical, auto or otherwise) have settled staunchly into well-fortified, ideological (arguably generational) camps to which young scholars must pledge allegiance or risk charges of heresy and possible punishment (read: banishment).

To spin out yet another family metaphor, neophyte scholars experience the critical ethnography *vs.* autoethnography divide as an increasingly bitter family fight over a will. Someone has died. No will has been executed, nor will it ever. No matter how desperately the family desires it to be so. The contestation over the inheritance is fraught and the arguments over the identity of the legitimate heir has split the kin into factions. Neither faction seems to be listening to the other. Both sects are wounded, irate, and hell bent on forcing the unaffiliated progeny to pick a side, either implicitly or explicitly. If one does not pick a side or, worse, picks the “wrong” side, she runs the risk of being disowned, and her scholarship disavowed by the

other. What is worse, both sides ground these gut wrenching, guilt gilded, shame inducing, arguments in esoteric, didactic, twisted Derridian articulations of love and/or claims that one camp is more “authentically dialogic” than the other, as if love and care of/for Self and love and care of/for Other(s) were somehow mutually exclusive.³ Enough! At times, this palpable antagonism makes me want to throw up my hands, to quit, to surrender. On more than one occasion, I have found myself screaming, “Fine! Ya’ll win! All of you have got me so worked up about the impossibility of getting this right that perhaps I shouldn’t engage in performance ethnography at all!” Then, at that exact moment, I hear a (un)familiar voice, possibly a haunting voice, buzzing in the backside of my brain—for arguments sake, I’ll call this voice an iteration of a Conquergoodian conscience that I, too, have gratefully inherited—that whispers ever so gently, “tsk tsk tsk . . . skeptic’s cop out young scholar . . . skeptic’s cop out” (“Performing as a Moral Act” 8-9).

Conquergood argues that engaging in and performing ethnographic work is a moral endeavor, and the work of performance ethnography is fruitfully fraught with competing tensions between self and other, detachment and commitment, identity and difference. Performance ethnography is difficult. It is supposed to be difficult. Scholars from both sides of the contrived critical ethnography/autoethnography divide (many of whom still clamor to be anointed the legitimate heir) agree with the lion’s share of Conquergood’s corpus and yet are quick to write off the work of other scholars living under the same disciplinary roof by dismissing carefully conceived work as inauthentic, illegitimate, and trite. Unfortunately, because he is no longer available to settle the argument among his squabbling heirs, Conquergood is frequently conjured by both sides—as ghost of a/the father(s)—to legitimize their own work and to delegitimize the

³ I embrace a disciplinary queer identity on this question and stand with RuPaul, who frequently asks, “If you can’t love yourself, how the hell you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an Amen?”

work of their disciplinary siblings.

Derrida elegantly argues:

Let us consider first of all, the radical and necessary *heterogeneity* of an inheritance. . . . An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing* . . . means *one must* filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibilities that inhabit the same injunction. . . . If the readability of a legacy were given, natural transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. . . . The critical choice called for by any reaffirmation is also, like memory itself, the condition of finitude. The infinite does not inherit (from) itself. The injunction (it always says “choose and decide from among what you inherit”) can only be done by dividing itself, tearing itself apart, differing/deferring itself, by speaking at the same time several times—and in several voices. (*Specters of Marx* 16)

Given Derrida’s formulation, I choose not to choose, but to inhabit the between, the both/and. Is this document an act of autoethnography or an act of critical ethnography? Yes, and I do not now—nor will I ever—apologize for its being both/and. I specifically and strategically refuse to plant a colonizing flag squarely in either camp of heirs. I use methodological strategies from both sides of the divide. I am proud to stand with folks who also acknowledge and practice the heterogeneity of the inheritance bequeathed to us by one (and thank you, Derrida, for reminding us there is always more than one—*plus d’ un*) of our disciplinary ancestors. Furthermore, I am convinced that the specter of Conquergood (and company) would be amenable to the spirit (the Geist) operating within the hybridized method that I practice herein because both branches are heirs of his legacy, and scholars/siblings from both branches have produced robust, difficult, ethical work of which he would (and we should) justly be proud. Performance studies is my disciplinary home—or, better yet, my disciplinary polis—and I chose to be an active member of this body politic. I am not a child. I am a citizen. And, as such, I refuse to play the divisive politics of contestation that would require choosing a faction rather than choosing to stand with all of those who produce good work because they are carefully responding to the injunctions

which emerge from the heterogeneous inheritance offered to us by one (and, again, there is always more than one—*plus d' un*) of the most active and activating specters haunting performance studies.

Moreover, the framework of performance ethnography—auto and critical—is particularly salient to my study of The Myrtles because it provides strategies for investigating how particular specter(s) are functioning at The Myrtles and how tourists and staff interact and perform with those ghosts. In addition to co-performing with visitors, employees, and owners as Others who are always already subjects in their own right, performance ethnography forces me to approach and engage the ghosts as Other in a way that troubles subject/object binaries. Critical ethnography, as defined by Soyini Madison, “is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue towards substantial and viable meanings” (*Critical Ethnography* 9). Performance ethnography rejects positivist assumptions regarding objectivity. The performance ethnographer, auto or otherwise, knows she can never fully capture some discrete Other reality and then objectively represent that “reality.”

The ethnographic process of creating and representing knowledge cannot be divorced from the researcher’s own inevitably partial positionality in the field and in the world. H. L. (Bud) Goodall, Jr. charges ethnographers to question notions of objectivity and investigate and critique notions of subjectivity as well (*Writing the New Ethnography*). In addition to interactive fieldwork, interviews, and archival research, the method of production—the writing of the ethnography—is an important part of performance ethnography informed by important theoretical (and political) positions regarding how to critically re-present oneself *with* the Other on the stage of the page. My writing practices are informed by several theoretical positions

regarding the aims of writing in ethnography and performance. Specifically, I am relying on Clifford Geertz' articulation of thick description ("Thick Description" 3-32), Normans Denzin's discussion of messy texts (*Performance Ethnography* 224-227), John Van Maanen's impressionist tale (*Tales of the Field* 101-124), and Della Pollock's articulation of performative writing ("Performing Writing" 73-103). All of these authors advocate the use of writing techniques as ways to produce ethnographies (and scholarship more generally) that resist positivist and objective renderings of the complex and dynamic cultures of the Other and that force the researcher to become more reflective and reflexive about her own position as ethnographer.

Denzin advocates writing ethnographies as messy texts. He describes messy texts as many sided, intertextual, always open ended and resistant to cultural criticism . . . a place where multiple interpretative experiences occur . . . which stress the historical contingencies and social processes that shape and play the situations and persons [or subaltern entities] under study. The messy text re-creates a social world as a site at which identities and local cultures are negotiated and given meaning. (224-225, comments in brackets mine)

Van Maanen contends that impressionist tales rely on artistic, writerly techniques that convert the temporal nature of fieldwork experience into the spatial organization of the text so as to hold the "subject" and "object" in constant tension. He argues, "the epistemological aim is to braid the knower with the known" (102). Della Pollock asserts, "the critical and performative production of ethnographic scholarship should manifest given power relations in the poesies of their undoing, and . . . requires variously sensuous retellings and ongoing re-creations, in word and body" ("Marking New Directions" 325). She advocates the practice of performative writing as a means by which to work toward this end and positions performative writing as an "important, dangerous and difficult intervention into the routine representation of social/performative life"

(“Performing Writing” 75). Pollock articulates performative writing as relational, substantial writing that is evocative, metonymic, nervous, subjective, citational, and consequential.

In addition to methodological practices, performance ethnography requires that, the process, *the embodied doing*, of this kind of ethnographic work resists monovocality and didactic summation and instead requires the researcher to perform in the ever contested and shifting hyphen between participant-observer or, in my case, tourist-ethnographer. In short, performance ethnography is grounded in what Dwight Conquergood calls dialogic performance. Conquergood maintains,

A commitment to dialogue insists on keeping alive the inter-animating tension between Self and Other. It resists closure and totalizing domination of a single viewpoint, unitary system of thought. The dialogic project counters the normative with the performative, the canonical with the carnivalesque, Apollonian rationality with Dionysian disorder. Instead of silencing positivism, the performance paradigm would strive to engage in an enlivening conversation. (11)

From the onset, this approach seems theoretically sound, but practically how does one dialogically engage with ghosts as the Other when one cannot see them or talk to them? Madison poses a similar question. “How do we account for realities and ‘truths’ in a field we cannot observe or experience due to our own lack of cultural knowledge? Does this mean those truths or realities do not exist simply because we do not see them?” (*Critical Ethnography* 89). Drawing on the work of de Beauvoir and Sartre, she argues that the job of the critical ethnographer is to problematize

the discourse of stigmatization beyond definitions of oppression and disenfranchisement where Otherness is inherently an object only to be free when it crosses the boundaries of its own Otherness to enter domains where it can become an active and aware subject. The critical view understands that the Other is always already a subject in their own right and it is the ethnographer who must cross boundaries into the territories of Otherness in order to engage with the Other in their own terms. (*Critical Ethnography* 97)

While I agree with her position, there are certain boundaries, like the multiple boundaries between life and death, that I cannot cross, and frankly I find séances and Ouija boards scary; therefore, they are not my chosen method of contact. Of course, the tour itself eventually provided me with suggestions (clues perhaps) about where the territories of Otherness might be and how I might begin to engage the ghosts as Other on their own terms. Therefore, I am very interested in the inter-animating tensions between ethnography and tourism.

In order to study *The Myrtles*, it is imperative I acknowledge and embrace the fact that I, too, am a tourist. It would be ludicrous for me to try to distance myself from my position as tourist, particularly when the Other with whom I am engaging is located both materially and discursively inside a touristic domain. Indeed, much can be learned from performing in the hyphen between ethnographer-tourist. I concur with Michael Bowman's methodological position that "the task of analyzing particular discourses and sites of tourism involves . . . participation in the event as tourist/audience/reader/ consumer, sharing in the perceptions, sensations, emotions, and ideas generated in a given performance" ("Performing Southern History" 154).

Historically, the relationship between tourists and ethnographers is almost comically fraught. Early fieldworkers, irritated at having to share *their* research interests, were quick to distinguish themselves from tourists mucking up what might otherwise be a pristine research scenario. John Van Maanen points to Joseph-Marie Degerando's critique of tourists as an example of the contentious relationship between fieldworkers and travelers. "The first fault we notice in the observations of explorers on savages is their incompleteness; it was only to be expected, given the shortness of their stay, the division of their attention, and the absence of any regular tabulation of their findings" (65). The ways in which some ethnographers try to distinguish themselves from tourists has not changed greatly since Degerando penned his critique

in 1800. After all, “we” academics supposedly come to the field with keener skills, a stockpile of degrees and letters behind our names, more finely tuned instruments of observation, and a rigorous work ethic unsullied by quotidian ideologies of ease and leisure. “We” can bracket the vile influence of kitschy pop culture. Right? I am not so sure. The insidious assumption operating in the distinction between “we” ethnographers and “those” tourists is that “we” work harder than “them,” “we” are smarter than “them.” Not only is this assumption morally and ethically dangerous, it is methodologically unsound. As noted previously, I am intrigued by the inter-animating tensions between ethnography and tourism.

Perhaps one of the reasons ethnographers are so quick to differentiate themselves from tourists, and tourism more generally, stems from tourists’ bad reputation. As Michael Bowman quips, “everyone hates tourists, even other tourists hate tourists” (“Performing Southern History” 144). It is no secret that tourists occupy a position of ill repute. Popular stereotypes paint tourists as vulgar, superficial, cheap, and stupid. They are characterized as cultural dupes and moral morons trying in vain to escape their seemingly inauthentic lives. The tourist industry is vilified for being exploitative and kitschy and tour guides are often depicted as snake oil peddlers of “History” and “Culture.” Tourism does not fare well in much of the academic literature either. Adrienne Franklin points out that much of the early American sociological theory “problematized and tried to explain tourism almost as a deviant activity, a somewhat disturbing behavior resulting from the alienation and cultural disturbance of modernization and modern social relations”(29). Tourists make for easy straw figures, that is, until you actually start talking and paying attention to tourists. Although some of the criticisms launched at tourists and tourism are clearly warranted, writing off tourists and tourism in such broad strokes ignores the complex social/cultural/economic/political discourses enacted and resisted in the actual doing of tourism.

Adrienne Franklin argues “tourism is a . . . serious individual engagement with the changing (and fluid) conditions of modernity with implications for nation formation and citizenship, the rise of consumerism, cosmopolitanism, the natural world and globalization . . . and is a central component of modern social identity formation and engagement” (2). Methodologically, I do not distance my role as ethnographer from my role as tourist. I can’t. Like one’s own birth, I cannot recall the genesis of my becoming *as* tourist though there are pictures and stories that mark important occasions. When I think back on my childhood, tourism seems as organic as the process of growing. Tourism is almost inseparable from many of the pains and joys associated with childhood, adolescence, college, graduate school, romance, etc. As I grow older, my position as tourist is extremely salient in my understanding *of* and engagement *in* the world.

As tourists going on holiday or as ethnographers going into the field, we bring ourselves, our experiences, our positionalities, our histories (none of which are ever mutually exclusive or outside of sociopolitical domains) with us whenever we travel. I am convinced the contrived antagonism between ethnographers and tourists is ridiculous primarily because, when one actually examines the ways that ethnographers describe fieldwork and compare it to the ways tourists perform and describe their travels, it is readily apparent that tourists and ethnographers often experience similar phenomena and engage in similar practices.

Taking photographs, or making photographs as Edensor and Sontag argue, is a behavior tourists regularly perform. Just like writing on bathroom walls, it is a way of saying “I was here.” Ethnographers use photographs as evidence of documentation routinely in archiving as a way to legitimate and authenticate their studies. Similarly, tourists, owners, ethnographers, psychics, and ghost busters (among others) take/make photographs at The Myrtles to authenticate its status as a haunted site. Although all of the ghosts are functioning with the site and the owners to produce

and authenticate The Myrtles as haunted, Chloe and her ghost picture shoulder a majority of this work. The ghosts do not get equal billing at The Myrtles. Chloe, the ghost of a murdered slave, is by far the “star” of the show, primarily because of the now famous ghost picture taken of her by the current proprietor, Teeta Moss. The story of the picture is always told as part of the tour in preparation for the big reveal near the end of every tour. Guides inform tourists that in 1995, Mrs. Moss photographed the property for insurance purposes. The insurance company sent one of the photographs back with a letter stating it was unacceptable because a person was included in the photograph. Upon further examination, Moss realized the picture contained the image of a ghost, and she convinced herself the image was the ghost was Chloe.

One of the primary ways in which The Myrtles is authenticated as haunted is vis-à-vis Chloe’s ghost picture. Most tourists have seen Chloe’s picture before they go on the tour. If they have not seen the picture on one of the many television programs or in the guide books that include reproductions (and are available in the gift shop), there are copies for purchase in a couple of different sizes and formats next to the cash register where visitors buy their tickets. Moreover, both the History Tour and the Mystery Tour begin with the early history of the house including an evocation of Chloe, and both tours end when the guide reveals Chloe’s “original” ghost picture.

The performance of the reveal is important. Eric Cohen notes that tour guides occupy a boundary role between site (including owners, administrators, and other employees) and guest, and between guest and native (22). Moreover, as Barbara Kirshtenblat-Gimblet asserts, a site is limited in its ability to tell its own story and guides must try to show more than can otherwise be perceived in order to access its “invisible heart and soul” (167-168). It is primarily through the guide’s performance (which invokes other guides, guests, owners, etc.) that tourists gain bodily

access to the house, the ghosts, and the multiple historicities scurrying in between. The tour guide is a medium; it is through the guide's performance that the guests gain access to the specters and spirits haunting the home and its temporary inhabitants, the guests who tour as well as those who rent the rooms that are available for overnight stays.

If guests fail to see Chloe's traces in the haunted hallway mirror or fail to have their earrings stolen betwixt and between the men's and women's parlors or fail to see her blow out a candle behind Mrs. Stirling's gilded dressing screen, the tour guarantees that the tourist will have an opportunity to see Chloe's ghost when they reveal the "original" famous photograph. When the guide turns the frame toward the audience, it actually contains an image of the original photograph and its reproduction. And most of the tourists have seen it before. The performance here is significant; it must draw the audience closer and closer to the image, making it all the more mysterious when we arrive at the representation of the representation of the representation, which is a cropped close up of Chloe with red pen marks, scales, and measurements. The marks are unfamiliar and require the services of the medium/guide. According to the tour guides, *National Geographic Explorer* (or the FBI, or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—depends on the guide) has performed a "shadow density analysis," a test to ensure the photograph had not been tampered with, faked, or enhanced. The guides interpret the markings and summarize the tour: she passed the test, the photo is not faked. The performance authenticates the ghost, and the ghost legitimizes the performance. One tour guide, Robbie, quipped, "I could have told them she was real, I work here and those of ya'll crazy enough to stay the night ain't gonna need a shadow—whatever they call it—to figure it out." Everybody laughed. Thus, in the performance of this quick quip, Robbie legitimizes his work and the ghost

legitimizes the guide and his labor. Although I have not stayed overnight yet, I find the rather poetic term *shadow density analysis* quite generative.

A shadow is a region of darkness where light is blocked, a blind spot that is visible, an uncanny space where seeing and the impossibility of seeing play tag with each other, a place where things appear and disappear simultaneously. In the dense blind spot of her shadow, between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, subject and object, Chloe flickers.

In the academic literature on tourism, issues of vision and visibility loom large. John Urry's articulation of the "touristic gaze" has been extremely influential in the way people look at and analyze tourism (*The Tourist Gaze*). As Adrian Franklin notes, "For Urry the ultimate goal of tourists is to feast their eyes on different and unusual objects" ("Sociology of Tourism" 71). This maneuver essentially reduces tourists to a roving, often predatory, set of eyes. However, if we shift the conversation from the gaze to visual culture, and understand visuality (vision, seeing, looking, gazing, glancing, glimpsing, wincing, etc.) as contingent, sensual, and corporeal practices always imbricated in social/historical/political domains, then perhaps Urry's claim can be tweaked in a way that illuminates the practices and desires of some tourists at The Myrtles (and maybe those who take ghost tours more generally). My claim is simple; perhaps tourists do not go to The Myrtles *simply* to see different and unusual *things*, but also to see and be seen in different and unusual *ways*. Put another way, tourists do not go to The Myrtles *just* to see ghosts but also *to be seen by* ghosts.

As previously noted, the most oft repeated question at The Myrtles is "Are there really ghosts?" Inevitably, the initial question is followed by, "Have you ever seen the ghosts?" Thus, that pesky, occularcentric critique of vision and visibility, in which sight authorizes truth, seems to surface with cunning immediacy. However, if we accept the arguments coming out of the field

of visual studies that challenge conceptions of vision as occularcentric and inherently hegemonic and/or colonizing, then it becomes theoretically and methodologically imperative to engage the ghosts within the broader domain of visual culture.

In response to some of the aforementioned criticism of vision, W. J. T. Mitchell argues visibility in visual culture extends beyond vision and investigates the invisible, unseen, and overlooked including blindness, deafness, the tactile, and other sensory phenomenon. Mitchell contends, “visual culture is the visual construction of the social not just the social construction of the visual” (“Showing Seeing” 170). In general, ghosts can and should be engaged as (in)visible historical agents operating in complex, contingent, sensate, visual realms. In particular, the site/tour/guides at The Myrtles position Chloe to appear in multiple registers, which neither escape nor eclipse visibility. In the context of the tour, Chloe is best regarded precisely as an (in)visible historical agent operating in a complex, sensate, visual realm. James Elkins’ discussion of seeing and bodies and Carol Mavor’s articulation of the gaze of the invisible, are useful theoretical tools that help elucidate the ever emergent relationship between Chloe and the tours of the house, the performances of tour guides and tourists, photography, and photographic reproduction.

Tourists at The Myrtles and Chloe operate within what Carol Mavor calls “the gaze of the invisible” (*Pleasures Taken* 82). Mavor, in her work with Hannah Cullwick’s photographs, provides a useful vocabulary for analyzing ways of seeing at The Myrtles. Drawing on the work of Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, and Irigaray, and working against assumptions that the gaze is always hegemonic and colonizing, Mavor articulates the gaze of the invisible as “a sensate gaze from both inside and outside of a reticulated body, which must come at the cost of shattering the *visualized* construction of the subject object dichotomy” (“Touching Netherplaces” 197).

Moreover, the act of looking and seeing is not unidirectional. We don't just look *for* Chloe, she looks for us. Elkins claims,

There is a desire at work here, perhaps the most primal desire of all: we prefer to have bodies in front of us or in our hands, and if we cannot have them we continue to "see" them as afterimages, as ghosts. It is an exquisite and complicated subject, the way our eyes continue to look out at the most diverse kinds of things and bring back echoes of bodies. We want to see bodies move, motion is life, but it can also accelerate into pain and still into death. (132)

Drawing on Lacan, Elkins contends that not only do we look at objects but, in fact, they stare back at us. He says, "to see is to be seen, everything I see is like an eye, collecting my gaze, blinking, staring, focusing, and reflecting my gaze sending my look back to me" (51). This is a fertile and provocative way of thinking about objects that exist in metonymic relationships to Chloe's body (or, more accurately, the condition of her (dis)embodiment.)

If, according to Elkins, in order to see at all we must see bodies in everything we look at, then not only do all the objects in the house stare back at us, but they stare back at us as though they were somehow through her eyes, from her body. In fact, while I'm on tour, I am never out of Chloe's sight. She stares back at me (at us) from the 350 pound chandelier with its 14 tear drop Baccarat crystal eyes, from the coffee colored parlor doors with their highly reflective, glass encased mercury knobs, from the sewing kit seated politely in the corner of the room, from the shoe fly fan that once hung ominously over the dining room table but now slumps crumpled against the wall, and from the richly evocative, green velvet curtains that plunge from great heights to puddle on the floor. Everything possesses the aura of her reticulated body. Moreover, she is constantly in motion or at least the performance of the tour has taught our touristic bodies how to "see" her in motion. With every creak of the floor, every rattle of a window, with every jump, every bump, with every breath of over air-conditioned air, and with every twist of the story, I get the uncanny feeling she is, or at least could be, watching us. And sometimes, a

thousand little eyes—our collective goose bumps—look back for her or toward her, the distinction is difficult to parse. Mirzoeff poses and answers the question:

How do ghosts look? Not from a single point of view, what Donna Haraway calls the god-trick. Nor does a ghost see itself seeing itself. The ghost sees that it is seen, and thereby becomes visible to itself and others in the constantly weaving spiral of transculture, a transforming encounter that leaves nothing the same as it was before. (250)

Throughout the course of this document, the methodological and theoretical processes I employ will tack wildly across a variety of disciplinary enclaves and interests. I am particularly intrigued in the overlap between haunting, performance ethnography, history, and tourism, and I am convinced this project will speak to conversations arising in those arenas. In working on this project, I have found that no one theory or tool is adequate for talking about, through, and with the performative event that is *The Myrtles*. Theoretically and methodologically, I have been purposefully promiscuous. I do not apologize. I view this promiscuity as a strength. Therefore, I have embraced what Pollock calls a bricolage of perspectives to generate more nuanced analysis and engagement. Pollock claims that too often scholarly rigor is identified with wringing dry a single method; she goes on to suggest we construct, “other research modalities such that (a) any one method proves insufficient, (b) the excesses and contingencies of the field claim the emerging text, and (c) the tacit equation of unified textuality with scholarly rigor breaks” (“Marking New Directions” 326).

In the defense of her doctoral dissertation, Luce Irigaray responded to the question “What method have you adopted for this research?” with the statement, “A delicate question. For isn’t it the method, the path to knowledge, that has always led us astray, by fraud or by artifice” (Irigaray qtd. in Gordon, 39). In contemporary scholarship, questions of methodology are difficult because when it comes to the paths of knowledge, the stakes are high (as well they

should be). Working across and through a variety of heterogeneous vocabularies and disciplinary histories is risky business. Shannon Jackson argues, convincingly, that some folks working in newer fields and at the crossroads of emergent areas of study, “have a tendency to disavow their relation to particularly disciplinary histories” by homogenizing those traditions and types of analysis from which they depart (169). As always, there is much at stake when difference, either intentionally or tacitly, gets erased. I agree with Jackson’s claim that “we need to do a better job of differentiating how we differentiate—both in the perceptual analyses that we employ and in the relevant object histories that we deploy” (175). To expand on Jackson’s claim, I also argue that we also need to pay closer and more careful attention to the particular specter(s) we conjure and to *how* we conjure. Most importantly, we must learn *not* to conjure them in order to vanquish them (to conjure them away); rather, we must learn to *live with* the ghost(s), to spend time with them, to listen them, to speak to and with them because only then can we live towards a future-to-come that is more just.

Although I am convinced that for the purpose of this project I can, should, and indeed *must* work in and through the margins of other fields of study, I want to be perfectly clear that my scholarship is firmly rooted and invested in performance studies. As a discipline, performance studies is uniquely (and perhaps precariously) positioned to engage the hard and persistent questions involving paths to knowledge by strategically obfuscating the line between theory and practice, scholarship and artistry, knowledge and the production of knowledge. Although I am an avid academic tourist, performance studies is my home and my polis—in the many complicated senses that the word acquires in the contexts of ethnography and tourism. As such, performance studies is my point of departure and the place to which I will perpetually return, laden with new experiences and knowledge that makes me ever more aware of its critical

confines, yet no less allegiant to the sturdy foundation that it has provided me for these forays of discovery.

Organization of the Study

This study is written as a performative journey. From this chapter, where I introduce my method, myself, and the theories that propel me along the road to and from The Myrtles, to Chapter Six, where I draw conclusions and head off in another haunted direction, anticipating future research in performance, ethnography, and tourism, I acknowledge the generative messiness of this venture. I weave in and out of theory as well as the past, the present, and the future as I prepare to perform with The Myrtles.

Chapter Two establishes a frame, or better yet a loosely organized itinerary for the study, and explains how I came to study The Myrtles Plantation specifically and tourism more generally. As the old cliché goes, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. This chapter explores that initial step—the *doing*, the *performances*, of tourism that are inevitably bound up in increasingly complicated notions and practices of *home*. This chapter operates as a performance of *hom-ing* and deals with the labor in getting from my house, into my car, and on the road in order to make the journey to The Myrtles. This chapter not only contextualizes the spaces and places from which I depart to travel the 31.5 miles from my little shotgun rental house in Baton Rouge to The Myrtles Plantation, it also explores the historical relationships between Spanish Town, my Baton Rouge neighborhood, and St. Francisville as they relate to broader histories of the settlement and colonization of Louisiana.

Chapter Three recounts my experiences of the very specific route I travel to St. Francisville, Highway 61. In it I trek through the landscape, roadside attractions/distractions, and histories I have encountered along the way. I also provide the reader with side trips through the

environs of Highway 61 to provide context and insight into the multiple specters haunting the area as well as the ghosts haunting The Myrtles.

In Chapter Four, I explore the grounds of The Myrtles and the spaces on the property that tourist occupy or chose to occupy before and/or after they go on tour. I examine issues of authenticity and authentication and describe how tourists traverse the space using Tim Edensor's categories of tourist performance.

Chapter Five allows the reader to experience a tour of the home by recounting and retelling stories of tours in which I have participated throughout my studies at The Myrtles. This section specifically focuses the performances of three guides, Bri, Robbie and Mary, elucidating how guides function as mediums between ghosts and guests on tour. I argue that guides' performances are embodied critical practices that articulate a generative space in which performance emerges from the performative (Diamond).

In Chapter Six, I attempt to (re)turn to the place from whence this journey began—my beloved little shotgun rental house in Spanish Town. After beginning again so many times, however, the journey back to this so-called point of origin is functionally untenable because I am still haunted. I live with ghosts—because there is always more than one of them—and they quite literally send me packing. In parts of the chapter I engage in a summation of sorts, recapping the stories of the living *and* the stories of the dead. Recognizing them as stories *thus far*, I resist concluding in the teleological sense of the word because to do so might suggest that I am no longer haunted. I am. Time remains out of joint. The ghosts continue to refute the notion of linear time (past, present, and future). They exhort me to engage “the passage of this time of the present [which] comes from the future to go toward the past, toward the going of the gone” (Derrida, *Specters* 24). Anachronisms abound. Specters, constantly and consistently, begin again.

Thus, the final chapter, written in the future tense, highlights how listening to *these* ghosts keep me moving *toward* and moving *in* other haunted directions. By queering time, I point toward future research at the intersections of historiography, ethnography, and tourism that I trust holds open heterogeneous possibilities of densely haunted futures-to-come.

CHAPTER TWO SUGGESTED ROUTES: BEGINNING AGAIN

Whenever I ransack my memory I inevitably stumble upon—for want of a better term—my baggage. Although my baggage is almost thirty-five years old, it is not as worn and weathered as I suspect (and hope) it will one day become. It is not yet quaint or quiet. When I sit still and listen to the tenor of its rowdy contents, the sound is dissonant. And although I am rarely still in my busy day-to-day life, in my busyness I occasionally snatch a whiff of nostalgia drifting from its general direction, its rambunctious smell is pungent—like a tangle of stories (each of which is damn near sentient) haphazardly mixing together, a fluid, loud, and peculiar perfume indeed.

For better or worse, the lock is busted. As a result the stories often get out and scamper about my body. Sometimes I am surprised at the clever ways they show up—like the time when *Our Night On The Beach* stumbled drunkenly (and dangerously I might add) out of my mouth when I was in bed with someone else. And the way *Getting Mugged At The Basilica Sacre Coeur* always pokes painfully at the scar on my left inner thigh whenever I pass a wrought iron fence with fleur-de-lis finials (which was a frequent occurrence when I lived in southern Louisiana). Or when *That Time At The Texas State Fair* enchanted my nose and sent me scouring the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival for an hour tracking down a corny dog; then, upon finding the stand, the slippery little story snuck down into my hand and persuaded my fingers to dial up my father and tell him I loved him. Some of the stories refuse to be packed permanently away. In particular, a knot of Cuba stories has escaped and taken up permanent residence in many of my scholarly endeavors. Some percolate their way to the top and insist on my attention. At present, a relatively new web of ghost stories centered on The Myrtles Plantation is getting itchy and insistent.

Do I believe in ghosts? Tough question. Until the turn of this most recent century, it was a question I never gave much thought to until Halloween rolled around or until my friends invited me to scary movies. However, my ethnographic work at The Myrtles, a “haunted” plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana, has forced me to grapple actively and often with the question.

I was brought up in a large, evangelical Christian family, and my parents taught my brothers and sisters and me that ghosts, like demons, were evil. Well, almost all ghosts; there was the one notable exception—the Holy Ghost was a different matter, though they never addressed the difference (or the difference). Naturally, they wouldn’t let us watch scary movies or any television programming with even a whiff of the supernatural. My siblings and I couldn’t even watch *The Smurfs*, for example, because Gargamel, an evil wizard, terrorized the little blue creatures. At Halloween, we weren’t allowed to dress up like ghosts or witches or zombies or any other “evil” (or otherwise interesting) thing. At my Mom’s insistence, I was an angel until I was 12, when *finally*, after protracted and heated debates, she reluctantly “allowed me” to don a punk rocker costume. My family attended “fall festivals” at the church instead of going trick-or-treating. Trust me, my family never did anything that could be remotely construed by our vigilant “church family” as condoning—let alone celebrating—evil.

As an adult, my conceptions of spirituality differ radically from those of my parents. Nevertheless, *something* stuck. To this day, I am easily frightened. I hate scary movies and “haunted houses” (those commercial enterprises erected specifically for the Halloween season); 99.9% of the time I refuse to patronize either. They scare the crap out of me, and I don’t like being scared. I have a familiar mantra for my friends who try to entice me to go by telling me it’s not *real*: “I know it’s not real, but I don’t like it.” Oddly enough, the possibility of encountering

“real” ghosts in a “natural” setting like The Myrtles is less scary for me than encountering “fictional” ones in a contrived setting. With “fictional” ghosts I can always be confident that someone is hell-bent on scaring the shit out of me; with ghosts *in situ*, I can rationalize that *either* there are no such things as ghosts *or*, if there are ghosts, they probably aren’t very interested in me. They aren’t right? Most of the time, I am completely at ease at The Myrtles, but occasionally I get a little nervous. Part of me thinks I am far too rational to believe in ghosts, while another part of me entertains fantasies that those possibilities exist. At The Myrtles, I often find myself yearning for ghostly encounters and simultaneously chiding myself for engaging in such nonsense. So, honestly, when it comes to the question of ghosts, at least ghosts *in situ*, I try to remain open—to the possibilities. But, as is often the case, I am getting ahead of myself, or is it behind? Such distinctions are difficult to parse.

My travels between the two places that anchor the heart of this story—my home in the Spanish Town neighborhood of Baton Rouge and The Myrtles Plantation—span either four years or 8,000 years depending on where I chose to begin the story and how I choose to tell it. And there it is again. Pesky and persnickety, the word *beginning* always seems to pop up precisely at the moment when I want it to go away. So, perhaps I should deal with it sooner rather than later.

Beginnings are fickle. They are arguably dishonest because beginnings insinuate origins, and most folks working in performance studies acknowledge, at least implicitly, that the search for origins is a sketchy quest at best. Moreover, to try to start a ghost story at “*The beginning*” is particularly absurd because, if Jacques Derrida is correct, and on this count I am persuaded he is, the ghost is a revenant; that is, it *begins* by *beginning again* (*Specters of Marx* 11). A ghost begins by coming back. When one is trailing ghosts and attempting to tell their stories, temporality is tricked, even paradoxical, from the get go. Time with ghosts is always already out

of joint, dis-joint-ed. They create temporal intersections between the times of the living and the times of the dead. As Walter Benjamin tells us, ghosts show up at intersections (“Surrealism” 183). Can an intersection ever be said to have a beginning? Can an intersection serve as beginning? Or, if an intersection cannot be described—speaking strictly, literally—as a beginning, then can it serve as a starting point? In my case, it will have to suffice.

And so, I choose to begin again and, in doing so, I choose to begin *these* stories, her-stories, his-stories, their stories, our stories, my stories, tales of the living, tales of the dead, some ghost stories, some not, in the only way possible, *in medias res*—or, to stick with my previous geographical metaphor, at the crossroads. And, for *this* story, one always finds the haunting presence/absence of Chloe right t/here, in the midst of things. Her story is contested and fragmented. Nevertheless, Chloe, who has been framed by so many, provides a sort of framework—flimsy though it may be—within which we must operate.

Like The Myrtles plantation itself, Chloe, a young (African? African-American?) slave, was the possession of Judge Clark Woodruff. Woodruff, the second owner of the property known at the time as Laurel Grove, assumed control after its original owner, General David Bradford, died. Woodruff “took” Chloe as . . . what? What term should one use to describe this relatively common relationship between a white male master and his black female slave? His mistress? With the power differential at work in this transaction, this term is utterly inappropriate. His concubine? That term also implies a degree of consensual-ity that was absent from their . . . association. The English language seems inadequate to describe it unless we are willing to focus on *his* behavior, in which case the term serial rapist might serve. In any case, he “took” her sexually and he put her to work in the house as a nursemaid for his children.

Tour guides describe Chloe as nose-y, a gossip; one guide even used the word “uppity.” (The use of the term was somewhat ambiguous; the way the guide embedded the term in her story somehow managed to suggest that Chloe was both sassy to her white owners *and* displayed an attitude of superiority toward fellow slaves—a liminal position indeed.) The stories and their purveyors would have us believe that she eavesdropped on the goings on in the house and reported back to the other slaves. Her primary objective—according to some tellings—was to improve her position with the “family.” Her primary objective—according to others—was to demonstrate her superior status in relation to the other slaves.

One evening, Woodruff and several associates were in the men’s parlor discussing business and politics. Chloe, in the mirror-image women’s parlor, listened at the connecting door. When she cracked the door slightly in order to hear the men better, Woodruff caught her. As punishment, he cut off her left ear and banished her from the main house to the kitchen where she would no longer have direct contact with the family. From that point on, Chloe disguised the missing ear by wearing a green scarf around her head. Either to get back into the good graces of Woodruff and the family or to exact revenge on Woodruff—the attributed motive depends once again on who is telling the story—Chloe devised a plan. She baked a birthday cake for the children to which she added poisonous oleander leaves. She could have had no doubt that the cake would make the family sick. The question is whether she hoped only for sickness, so she would be called back into the house to nurse the family back to health, or whether she hoped to kill them. Whatever her motive, Chloe’s oleander-laced cake killed Mrs. Woodruff and two of her children. Chloe was hanged, either by Judge Woodruff as punishment for her crime or by the other Laurel Grove slaves to keep the master’s wrath from falling more generally on their hapless number. In either case, Chloe’s dead body was weighted down with rocks and flung into

the Mississippi River—once again, depending on who is telling the story—either by Judge Woodruff or by the faithful among his black retainers.

Given her story, Chloe is an ideal candidate to be a ghost if, as Benjamin asserts, ghosts show up at intersections. In life, Chloe occupied the intersectional terrain between Woodruff and his wife and children, between Woodruff and his other slaves, between house and kitchen, between domestic slaves and field slaves and, ultimately, between life and death. In death, as a ghost, she exists at the intersection of past and present. Caught as she is at multiple intersections of history and mystery, her story is a journey story that evokes here and there, now and then, Chloe and me, and multiple others, dead and living, encountered along the way. In this journey, I am not even certain whether I am a character in her story, or she is a character in mine.

In late February and early March of 2012, the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum and Tourist Information Center located in the heart of downtown St. Francisville hosted an event in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum on Main Street Project. The traveling exhibition, *Journey Stories*, was an easily transportable audio and visual display that explicitly tied travel and mobility to grand notions of American freedom. One panel of the display notes, “The Freedom to move is the freedom to be curious—to *explore* new places, *try* new things and to *develop* new ways to get there. The pursuit of *adventure* is integral to American Travel” (*Journey Stories*, italics in original). Directly below this text is a quotation by novelist, folklorist, anthropologist, and ‘Genius of the South’, Zora Neale Hurston. “Once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go” (Hurston 22). The exhibit also explicitly identifies the inability to travel, to move, as something both detrimental to and symptomatic of injustice—a point certainly not lost on Zora Neale Hurston. As grandiose as the rhetoric of the exhibit, the overall message linking freedom and movement gains further, sepia-toned

significance, as well as layers of texture and nuance when displayed in St. Francisville where, in the late 18th and majority of 19th centuries, the largest sector of the parish's population was legally considered immovable property.

Zora's mother fretted that some enemy of hers had sprinkled 'travel dust' on her doorstep on the day that Zora was born (Hurston 23). What was true for Zora is also true for me. In my academic life—as in all areas of my life—I, too, have wandering feet. I have spent the past ten years as part of a disciple dedicated to studying, tracking, and participating in practices associated with a term always on the move—performance. This study is loosely organized around the notion of The Myrtles *as* journey, or better yet, The Myrtles *as journeys*. This document, these dust tracks on an academic road, are an amalgamation of several haunted versions of journey stories—some are my own, some are others', many have been relayed to me by others who at some point or other in my journey intersected and intermingled with me and my Myrtles Plantation journey and its complicated and ongoing history. The information contained in these pages is by no means the whole story. This study can never even come close to being finished . . . final . . . done . . . whatever that means. This journey cannot come to a definite end because ghosts trouble the notion of beginnings and endings from the outset, and Chloe, the central but no means the only ghost to trouble these pages, is no exception. Hopefully, by the time the audience of this performance exits the theatre—this stage of the page—she or he will be left with the sneaking suspicion, or at least be open to the possibility, that the journeys recounted here have been guided, at least in part, by the anachronistic coming and goings of ghosts.

In the midst of such a long and ongoing journey, returning home is—for me—a sweet respite, comforting and necessary. The return, however, is also a complicated performance. When I return home, I both anticipate and dread telling others about my travels for one simple

reason: I never know where or how to begin. Events, experiences, and embodied encounters do not fit neatly into timelines, and the task of figuring out how to begin, let alone how to tell the “whole” story—whatever that is—is daunting, especially when that story borrows from and incorporates the stories and histories of so many others. The anxiety of telling seems particularly acute because I must also tell the tales of ghosts, spirits, and specters. Telling these stories, and telling the difference among the various types, is no simple task. Narrative is a complex temporal act/art, even among the living. When one traffics with ghosts, the complexities multiply. Specters arrange temporality according to their own, often competing, logics. And some specters—particularly the ones I have been conjuring—have no interest in keeping time with the tick-tock tenacity of the dissertation clock. At least for me, trying to *pen* down ghosts is almost as exasperating as the impossibility of *pinning* them down. Trying to hold onto specters that are coming as they are going, appearing as they are disappearing, is a damn near impossible undertaking and also an imperative injunction. Being-with-ghosts is not easy. It is exhausting. In attempting to keep company with ghosts one must be willing to leave reason at the rim of the rabbit hole and risk a bit of madness. Then again, she said with a Cheshire cat grin, we are all a bit mad here. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Or is it behind? Such distinctions are difficult to parse.

In the simplest terms and according to the most conventional, objective, and scientific measurements, the distance between my beloved little shotgun rental house in the Spanish Town neighborhood of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and The Myrtles Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana, is 31.5 miles. If one takes the most direct route, barring unexpected interruptions, one can make the drive in 41 minutes. Since I have never, by any stretch of the imagination, had a conventional, objective, or scientific mind, I have no talent for direct routes. I have come to

accept—some would say nurture—this character flaw over the years, but it is a bit maddening for friends and family because, at the very least, I always run late. To take a direct route I would need to focus on my goal, avoid distractions, eschew interruptions. In my experience, distractions and interruptions are often the most compelling parts of any journey.

For those who are fond of rubrics, who worship neat tables divided into precise columns and rows where every piece of data stays neatly segregated in its own cell, who crave tidy timelines and rigid borders, this tale may be maddening. Perhaps it will help to think of it as a poorly organized itinerary, or as an adventure that sends you traipsing about all over the place and, along the way, encourages you to wander about for a bit, to wonder where you are going, and to question why you started in the first place. As this journey unfolds, I implore you to remember my metaphors. Itineraries eventually get you somewhere. Adventures take you on journeys that chart previously unknown territory. While I concede the existence of straight lines, chasing ghosts has taught me that they may well detest them. Following the direct route or trying to get directly to the point can vex them into a sudden, stubborn silence, and there is nothing more terrifying than a silent, stoic specter. At least if they hum a humdrum tune, or steal your earring, or throw a book at you, you know they are still about, and we are on the trail of ghosts we want and need to be there. So in deference to the ghosts' proclivity for discontinuity, I must commit to telling the story slant (HopKins).

Although I am on the trail of ghosts, not all the stories and histories that surround them are ghost stories. The messiness results in part from the fact that although ghosts exist in their own time, they haunt individuals and places in ours. Consequently, their stories are mixed up with our stories, their histories with ours. Like the sign at the entrance of The Myrtles when I

began this project suggested—they are mysteries tied up in histories. You can't track one without tracking the other. And so, at last, I begin . . . (again).

Upon learning that I had been accepted into the doctoral program in Communication Studies at LSU, my best friend, Rebecca Walker, as well as many others in the department advised that “Spanish Town is the coolest neighborhood in Baton Rouge, hands down.” Their descriptions of the neighborhood were similar in both form and content to descriptions of Spanish Town that can be found in everything from historical documents to Baton Rouge visitors’ guides to talk on the streets. The narrow streets, originally designed for horses drawing relatively narrow carriages weighted down with cargoes of passengers or commodities or both, reluctantly usher traffic through the heart of the modern-day capitol. The tiny streets are a maze of nooks, crannies, and flamingo border zones guarded by expansive live oaks standing sentry over Spanish Town Road and the host of bungalows and shotgun houses that line it as well as the side streets that extend outward like veins from this central artery. Adding to the slightly overgrown aesthetic of the neighborhood is an insubordinate sass of incorrigible creepers and vines that double-dog dare the city to prune the irreverent lushness of the community. The vines and trees simultaneously shelter and shade, providing some cover for several of the older dwellings in danger of Historic District censure. Although the community boasts some large, beautiful old homes whose grandeur evokes a mythic past as well as a smattering of aging apartment complexes and subdivided houses, most of the brightly colored homes are single-family dwellings. The lots in Spanish Town are not small; rather, they are slender, elongated rectangular patches that tend to hug the sides of the houses that occupy them and extend for long distances in the back. It is as if the houses in the neighborhood are anxious about missing a passerby, and have crowded toward the street in anticipation. Gardeners abound in the district, and their showy

blooms compete with the vibrant colors of Mardi Gras floats in early spring, when crowds line the street for this most popular celebration in the city. Spanish Town, often called the French Quarter of Baton Rouge, is a unique, eclectic, tight-knit community, long known for its diversity, tolerance, and progressive politics.

In 2005, when I moved to Spanish Town, George W. Bush and Dick Cheney were in the first year of the second term of their administration. Over the preceding five years, due in large measure to the Supreme Court's *Bush v. Gore* ruling in 2000, the September 11, 2001 attacks, and their subsequent exploitation that ultimately led directly to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the administration had succeeded in creating a culture of fear. Although the Bush/Cheney administration admitted in early January 2005 that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Homeland Security Advisory System, colloquially known as the Terror Alert System, was still ratcheted up to fuchsia. The rhetoric of imminent mushroom clouds and potential terrorist attacks still monopolized most media outlets and the Bush Administration instructed patriots to be constantly vigilant—and to continue shopping.

In Louisiana, Governor Kathleen Blanco and Mayor-President Kip Holden of East Baton Rouge Parish, both inaugurated in January 2004, were still settling into their first terms. FEMA director Mike Brown and Mayor-President of New Orleans Ray Nagin had been in office for approximately two and three years respectively. *If* the political culture in Louisiana was anything like the that of the nation, the little liberal enclave of Spanish Town would provide respite from the cacophonous clatter of constant fear-mongering.

On August 9, 2005, 200 years after Governor Grand-Pre formed the colony that would become Spanish Town, my dad maneuvered the U-Haul carrying my possessions precariously around the narrow corner of Lakeland Drive and 7th Street, barely missing Miss Jean Shaw's

overgrown trees, a mishmash of vines and branches that, as Dad rightly noted, twisted perilously around power lines grown weary and sagging from years of neglect and the weight of Mardi Gras beads. Early that morning, my Dad and I had left my rental house in Denton, Texas, on a nine-hour trek to Baton Rouge.

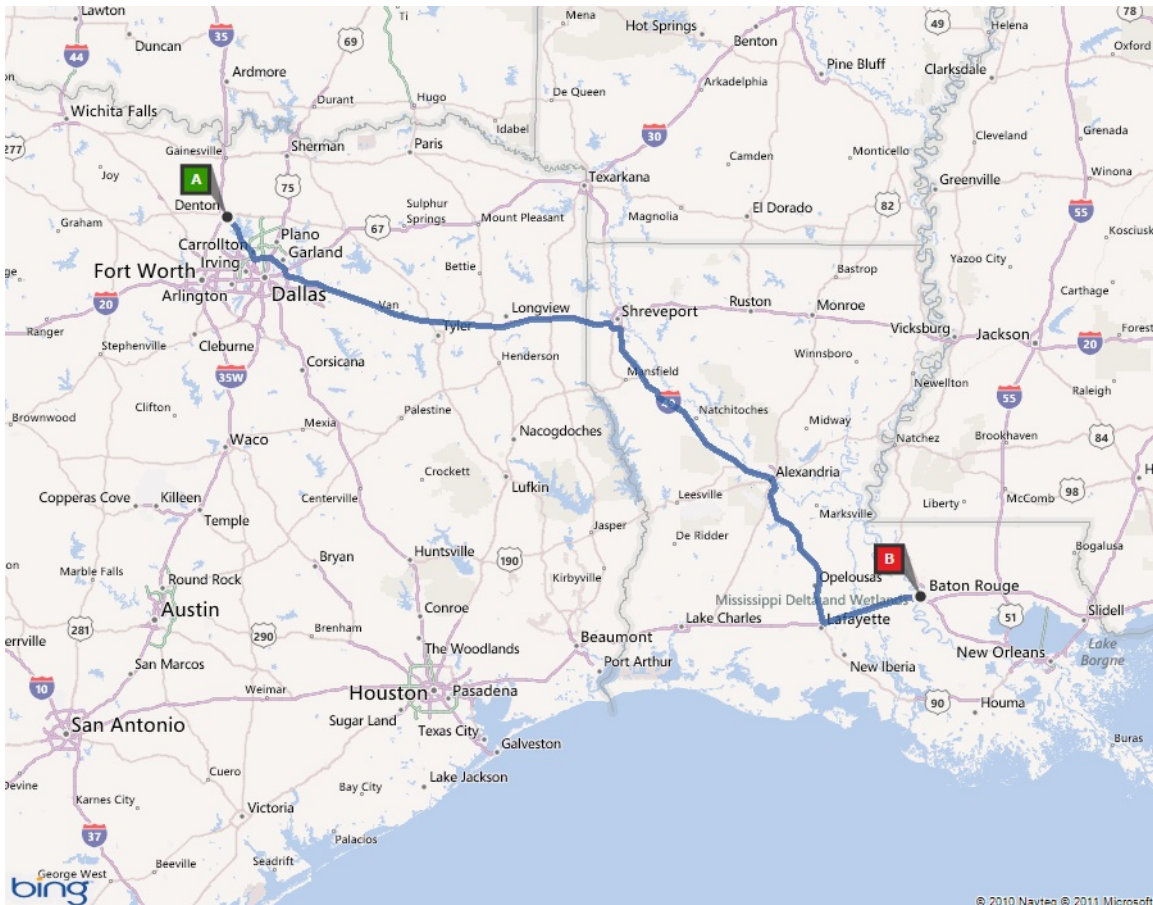


Figure 1. Beginning Again: 466 Miles to Home-ing and Haunting

As we parked the U-Haul, Rebecca Walker, who had been anticipating our arrival, rounded the corner and let out a squeal. Her squeal met my squeal and we shared an embrace six months in the making. In spite of the heat, the three of us unloaded the truck in record time; in spite of the uncertainty, I waved goodbye to my father two days later; in spite of the fear, I prepared to begin my doctoral work in Communication Studies at Louisiana State University. Twenty days later, Hurricane Katrina, one of the fifth or sixth deadliest Atlantic hurricanes

(depending on who you read), would make landfall in southeast Louisiana and eventually make its way from New Orleans to Baton Rouge and points beyond. It was my first hurricane. And that's part of it . . . I really think that's part of it . . . (Carver 49; *Fat Times Two*). The “it”—that indirect referent—stands for so many things that no single term can take the place of “it” to provide clarity. That “it” is a crossroads of disciplinary history, political history, the histories of the West Florida Republic that includes the histories of Spanish Town, St. Francisville, The Myrtles, David Bradford and Clark Woodruff, Chloe, and the tour guides who animate her story. I will attend to “it” throughout the dissertation, because “it” is what I am about, what I am after—wind and weather permitting, of course (*wind and weather permitting*).

The early history of Louisiana is a contentious amalgam of new world, European, colonial, and imperial politics, which are tangled up in complicated treaties, land grabs, border skirmishes, land grants, and strategic civilian settlements. The tiny enclave of Spanish Town, which literally melds into the grounds of the Louisiana state capitol, is the oldest neighborhood in Baton Rouge. Although it has been inhabited by the Tunica, Houma, or Coal Creek Indians whose burial grounds also lace the border of Spanish Town, its identity as a distinct neighborhood began when the Spanish controlled the area in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Control of the area changed hands several times during this period when the English and the French showed up, temporarily displacing the Spanish. The Spaniards issued land grants for both The Myrtles (previously Laurel Grove) and what would later become Spanish Town under the supervision of Bernardo Galvez. In 1796, General David Bradford, who was forced to escape from Pennsylvania because of his role in the Whisky Rebellion, received one of the Spanish land grants and built a home and settled in St. Francisville, which at the time was known as Bayou Sara. Since it was owned by Spain and not yet part of the United States, Bradford was able to

elude capture by General George Washington by settling there. In 1803, in spite of the Louisiana Purchase, the small area currently known as Spanish Town and points east remained under the control of Spain. In 1805, Governor Don Carlos de Grand-Pre officially commissioned a settlement in the vicinity of the Spanish Fort San Carlos. Originally called Aubert Town, the area was settled by Spanish colonists from the Canary Islands (Isleños) who accepted an invitation from Governor Grand-Pre to relocate from elsewhere in Louisiana in order to live in Spanish territory. The settlement later came to be known as Spanish Town after the language and heritage of its inhabitants (Sykes “Spanish Town’s Square 4” 2). Significantly, Spanish Town and St. Francisville, which are only 31.5 miles apart, share a history that is unique in Louisiana and in the United States more broadly. During a short-lived revolution in 1810, which led to the equally short-lived Free and Independent Republic of West Florida, Baton Rouge and the Felicianas became part of the same small sovereign country.



Figure 2. Rebel Rousing in the Felicianas

In the period just prior to the revolution, Fulwar Skipwith, who would serve as the first and only president of the Republic of West Florida, organized a meeting at The Myrtles, which was hosted by its second owner, Clark Woodruff, the son-in-law of David Bradford who had died two years earlier. Although the precise nature of his role in the 1810 Revolution is unclear, records indicate that Woodruff paid for ordnance and soldiers and horses that would be used in the battle to overthrow the Spanish government (Jennings n.p.). Woodruff also helped write a constitution for the West Florida Republic that was adopted when the rebellion proved successful. On October 27, 1810, only 74 days after having declared itself an independent Republic, West Florida, which included both Spanish Town and The Myrtles, was annexed into the United States (Jacobs).

In spite of these commonalities, the town of St. Francisville and the enclave of Spanish Town have been settled by people of quite different demographic profiles. In the period after the Native Americans were driven from the environs by the competing colonization efforts of the Spanish, French, and English, St. Francisville became the province of wealthy, white plantation owners along with the vast number of slaves that were required to run these large agricultural concerns. A number of the plantation homes built in this area survive to this day in St. Francisville, and serve as the primary economic engine of the town, whose primary industry is tourism. Spanish Town, on the other hand, became home to immigrants and the poor who frequently had to fight to preserve their hard won foothold. Many of the historical shotgun houses and cottages that survive in Spanish Town today were built during Reconstruction following the American Civil War when freed slaves settled in the area. In 1884, when LSU moved to the capitol grounds, many members of the African-American community took advantage of the rising property values to sell their property and relocate to other parts of the city (Sykes “A Brief History” 3). Today the neighborhood prides itself on both its economic and

cultural diversity, and is home to students, artists, legislators, lawyers, accountants, professors, and assorted crazies.

What follows is the description of a modern day sojourn. Although it is anchored primarily by two points that exist in relatively close proximity when viewed on a map—St. Francisville and Spanish Town—the distance between these two places and the journey they have taken me on are more complicated than a map could ever hope to suggest. My movement between these two places has been textured by an ever-increasing knowledge of their shared histories and distinct historicities that have led me to an intensifying determination to maintain the Spectres that I have discovered along the way (Derrida 1).

Suggested Route:

US-61 N via I-110

31.5 mi, 41 min

**633 Lakeland Dr
Baton Rouge, LA 70802**

- 1. Head west on Lakeland Dr toward N 6th St** 115 ft
- 2. Take the 1st left onto N 6th St** 371 ft
- 3. Turn left onto Spanish Town Rd** 0.3 mi
- 4. Turn left onto the ramp to I-110 N** 0.2 mi
- 5. Keep left at the fork, follow signs for I-110 N and merge onto I-110 N** 7.3 mi
- 6. Take exit 8C to merge onto US-61 N toward Natchez** 23.6 mi
- 7. Turn left** 0.1 mi

**The Myrtles Plantation
7747 US Highway 61
St. Francisville, LA 70775**

I could barely make my way through the antique glass double door in the entryway of my house and get into the car I inherited from my grandmother, Gloria Gene Lewis, who passed in 2009, to drive the obligatory 31.5 miles to The Myrtles without a whole host of others—some living, some dead—showing up. My grandmother, Glory, is not a ghost. She does not haunt *me*, or, at least she hasn't yet. Still, I miss her terribly, and am reminded of her, materially, on a daily basis because she bequeathed me her 1996 aubergine Lexus ES 300 with its matching aubergine leather interior.

Over the past few years, Glory's car has carted me back and forth between Baton Rouge and St. Francisville on scores of occasions. The car—whose color, now that I think about it, is almost identical to the color of the walls in the guest bedroom of her house on Wayne Street in Lubbock, Texas—has also shuttled me across a large swath of the southern and western United States. The aubergine leather, thin with wear, has contracted and cracked under the weight of heavy, humid Louisiana summers and the dry, high heat of California's Central Valley. Scratches and tears from luggage, boxes of books, random debris, and a menagerie of odd props used in various performances mark the interior and exterior of the car bearing witness to its lived history in a way that the miles measured by the odometer cannot. Even though Glory does not haunt me, I can hear her urging me, with her precise English-teacher diction, to get on with it.

Mile 1:

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 1. Head west on Lakeland Dr toward N 6th St | 115 ft |
| 2. Take the 1st left onto N 6th St | 371 ft |
| 3. Turn left onto Spanish Town Rd | 0.3 mi |
| 4. Turn left onto the ramp to I-110 N | 0.2 mi |

5. Keep left at the fork, follow signs for **I-110 N** and merge onto **I-110 N**

Juggling a stupidly large bundle of books and papers in the crook of my left arm while trying to fish my keys out of the abyss that is my oversized, red leather purse with my right hand, I stumble over the inevitable beer cans from last night's impromptu salon on the front porch, narrowly avoiding the bags of mulch stacked there. A freshly lit Parliament Light dangles from my lips as I rush out to my car, trying get to The Myrtles in time for the next tour. For my neighbors, this is a familiar sight. They have witnessed this scene numerous times. However, regardless of the rush, this *is* Spanish Town, an enclave of the Deep South, and one of the implicit rules in our community is that, unless you or one of your kin is bleeding out, you stop to “visit” with your neighbors when you run into them. Even if you are in a terrible hurry, you linger at least long enough to apologize for not being able to have a proper visit.

As I walk toward my car, David Brown yells at me from the chair swing on the front porch of his 1920s forest green Greek revival house for the umpteen thousandth time that I need to check my damn email. David is an environmental lawyer and activist, a founding member of the Baton Rouge Progressive Network, and the Chair of the Historic Spanish Town Civic Association (HSTCA). We know one another as neighbors as well as through our membership in the HSTCA. As I continue toward my car he crows that we have collected over 1,000 signatures on the petition and that Bones Addison has come over to our side in the fight against Richard Preis—a corrupt money-grubbing developer who is single-handedly trying to destroy historic Spanish Town—and plans to say so at the next Metro Council meeting.

I pull open the door of my car and recoil from the heat. After a moment I lean in and toss the armload of books and papers along with my purse into the passenger seat. Hearing a hollow knock, knock, knock, I stand up to see Mr. Ricky, a Spanish Town resident, tamping on the

sidewalk in front of my house—as if it was a door—with his big walking stick to get my attention. Leaving the car door ajar to let out some of the pent up heat, I walk toward the street. Mr. Ricky is a former truck driver who has opted to give up life on the road to earn a living by waging and winning frivolous lawsuits. Originally from Pierre Part, Louisiana, he moved to Spanish Town in the early 1980s, where he rapidly became a fixture of the community. Specializing in local gossip, he is hands-down one of the funniest people I have ever encountered, and one of the foulest mouths. He certainly knows how to turn a phrase. On his daily strolls past my house—morning and evening, regular as clockwork—he sports the big, wooden walking stick. Although it is not in his nature to talk softly, he is a staunch proponent of carrying a big stick. He claims that walking with it helps his back, but he also confides that he can use it “to beat a mutha fucka if need be.” Mr. Ricky keeps me apprised of the various nefarious activities at Hound Dogs, the neighborhood bar at 7th Street and Main, and provides me regular updates on the activities of the neighborhood crazies.

“Weelllll . . .,” he begins each story—the length of the word and the height of his rising inflection a clear indication of the salaciousness of the forthcoming tale. “Weell . . .” he says—by the relative brevity of the salutation I can tell that this tale will not be one of his spicier offerings—“last night I went ghost hunting with Terri McKinney and her crazy ass ghost club, TAPS or SPATS or whatevah the hell it’s called, up at the Old State Capitol. . . . Yeah, I knew you would be excited. There’s supposed to be the ghost of some old senator . . . Pierre something or other. . . . Hell no, I didn’t see anything, you’da thought for fiddy dollahs a person they coulda at least hired someone to go Boo. Soooo, I took it upon myself to make sure that everybody else had a good time Oh, don’t you look at me like that, you of all people should know that you can’t make a ghost do anything a ghost don’t want to do. I just figured that if old Mr. Pierre was

taking the night off *somebody* should step up and make sure all those mutha fuckas who paid fiddy dollahs had something to show for it. You know they take the thing so damn serious and all, with those recording devices and what not. Weellll . . . I would just be in the hallway next to the room somebody was in and start tappin' on the wall with my walkin' stick or start humming real ghost-like, you know. Terri was fit to be tied, but I didn't see nuthin' wrong with it . . . I mean, I just wanted to make sure everybody got their money's worth. Where you headed, Myrtles again? Weellll . . . have fun in St. Francisville. . . . Tell the ghosts I said hey."

Laughing, I wave Mr. Ricky off and return to my car. Leaning in, I feel the heat radiating off the dash and the seats as I retrieve the towel I keep in the car to cover every inch of the scorching aubergine leather. Before starting the car, I roll down the driver and passenger side windows not for the whisper of a breeze that might meander through, but because when I turn the ignition, hot air will boil out of the vents. I want to get moving before I sweat through my shirt.

1. Head west on Lakeland Dr toward N 6th St 115 ft

At the stop sign, I look to my right at the Painted Ladies—the four brightly colored apartment buildings owned by Ben Babin and his partner, Lance. Ben and Lance, who own three small apartment complexes in Spanish Town, have earned a reputation with the HSTCA and residents for being among the best landlords in the neighborhood. Graduate students in the Communication Studies department have lived in their properties: John and Dre Betencourt lived in the Painted Ladies here on the corner of Lakeland Drive and 6th, and Rebecca Walker rented an apartment in Prescott Place on 7th Street by the Capitol Lakes. Rebecca's apartment was located on the first floor, overlooking a small, but serviceable, pool that was a frequent gathering place for the residents.

I roll up the window of my car as the air-conditioner and the shade of the trees overhanging the narrow street make some small difference in the early afternoon heat. I am reminded of the heat the day before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, when Rebecca and I were lounging in and around the Prescott Place pool. We were nervous about Katrina, but in all honesty we were also more than a little bit excited. She would be our first hurricane and we were planning to ride it out together. We had followed all the preparation guidelines—the gas tanks of both cars were filled; we had purchased batteries, flashlights, coolers, and lots of ice; we had stopped opening the doors of her freezer to make certain it would stay as cold as possible so the frozen goods might survive a power outage; we had filled her bathtub with water and had gathered all of our essential documents and put them in plastic bags; we had even planned an escape route, should that eventuality become necessary. The only thing left to do was wait . . . and drink. So we did, in the Prescott Place pool.

Ben Babin had stopped by earlier in the day to sink the black wrought iron patio furniture in the pool. We shared the pool that day with most of the residents of the 18-unit complex, two tables, eight tall straight-backed chairs, and two lounge chairs. Although it was crowded, we were more than happy to share the pool with the wrought iron furniture because we were now confident in our knowledge—imparted by Ben Babin—that when the winds came, the furniture wouldn't blow through the apartment windows.

We consumed daiquiris by the pitchers-full as we sat on the chairs in waist-deep water. Mike, a junior high school science teacher who lived in the complex, had a talent for making daiquiris and telling stories. That day, he entertained us for hours with stories about Spanish Town and hurricanes past. “Don't worry,” he assured us, “it's never as bad as they say it's going to be. It doesn't all come at once.” I looked at Rebecca, who asked him, “And if it all comes at

once sometime?” Mike lulled us with his certainty, “It never all comes at once—but if it did, there would be nothing you could do but fling up your hands” (O’Connor 178; Walker & Vaughn 2). Mike exhorted us to “Drink up dahlin’s! Enjoy your first hurricane party.” Then he broke into a chorus of “Why Don’t We Get Drunk (and Screw).”

Throughout the day and into the evening friends and family of our neighbors, the early evacuees from New Orleans, trickled in, and the narrow streets of Spanish Town slowly filled with unfamiliar cars. Later that evening, John and Dre Betencourt called around and invited everybody over to the Painted Ladies for a barbecue. If we were going to lose power tomorrow for God knows how long, we might as well put some heat on the hog before everything went to hell. Latching on to that logic, we broke open Rebecca’s freezer and grabbed all the frozen perishables. And thus, a feast commenced. We rounded up all the Weber grills we could find and wheeled them, along with our coolers, up the street to the Painted Ladies. Everybody else had emptied their freezers, too, and massive amounts of meat were consigned to the flame that night. In the meantime, taking the sage advice of Mary Frances HopKins, we ate the ice cream first. Dr. HopKins was a life-long advocate of eating dessert first. We, on the other hand, were operating under a new found conviction: if the apocalypse is nigh, eat dessert first.

Our bacchanalia was medicinal. After the feast, we sat by the pond in the courtyard of the Painted Ladies enduring the early evening heat. Our bellies filled with barbecue, we dispersed in small groups and pairs and chatted and visited while we waited. In a semi-secluded spot in the shadows of the courtyard, I was engaged in conversation with a young man I had met earlier in the pool at Prescott Place. “He”—I would never learn his name—took a slug off his bottle of bourbon religiously every four to five minutes. His Aunt Vera lived in the apartment right above Rebecca’s. He, along with his mother, grandmother, brothers and sisters, with various cousins in

tow, had evacuated from New Orleans earlier that day. Their home was in the Lower 9th Ward. That night, nobody knew how politically charged the Lower 9th Ward would become.

He was beautiful and young and his sweaty, white T-shirt clung to his deep brown, absurdly fit torso. His oil-colored eyes, with their fixed faraway gaze, and his brutally short hair suggested he was someone who had seen far too much for a 21-year-old.

“Ain't this some shit,” he sniggered, taking another slug of the bourbon. “Two back-to-back tours in Iraq and I go on leave during a fuckin’ hurricane.”

After a pause, I asked where he was stationed.

“Baghdad.”

“Are you inside the Green Zone?”

“Ha!” he barked darkly, “not hardly.”

“When you getting out?”

“A year. If I don't get stop-gapped.”

“What you gonna do when you get out?”

“Hopefully, go to college on the G.I. Bill—the business school at Southern, like my aunt. That’s the whole reason I enlisted in the first place.”

After a lapse in the conversation, I ventured, “Can I ask you question?”

“Shoot.”

“Why do you think we’re there?”

Another dark chuckle, another slug of bourbon, “All I can figure is oil . . . fucking oil.”

Then he shared one of the most horrific war stories I have ever heard. The events he described were grisly, certainly—a roadside Improvised Explosive Device. His best friend’s body—ripped, shredded, and flying through the air. But the horror was in *how* he told it. As he

reached the climax, his tone became darker and more monotone. The few remaining members of his squad had hunted down the (supposedly) guilty “Haji,” severed his head, and mounted it to the front of their goddamn Humvee as they drove defiantly around the perimeter of Sadr City. There was no triumph, no satisfaction as he recounted the savage event. The true horror was apparently in surviving.

Katrina made landfall the next morning. Given what happened to New Orleans, the effects of the wind and weather in Baton Rouge were mild—widespread power outages, some broken windows, a few uprooted trees. The true effect of Katrina in Baton Rouge was the influx of evacuees from throughout southern Louisiana. With them, news of the devastation in New Orleans trickled in slowly, hour after hour. By dusk the following evening Louisiana would be a very different place. In Spanish Town, Lakeland Drive was crowded with cars, baking in the sweltering evening heat. Exhaust fumes perfumed the waves of heat rising from the parked, running cars and hung heavily in the air. Elderly people occupied car after car using their air conditioning systems to try to stay cool.

I was walking down Lakeland carrying a white bucket filled with ice water and astringent. I leaned in through the window of Charles Broussard's parked car, offering soaked towels to his elderly, infirm mother. A dark purple minivan drove by and honked. I looked up and my eyes locked on the oil-colored eyes of a far-too-old, 21-year-old. He waved. I waved back. The van paused at the stop sign at Lakeland and North 6th before turning left. The purple van would take another left onto Spanish Town Road and drive beneath the beaded trees, past Capitol Grocery, and turn left onto 9th Street. From there it would merge with the traffic on I-110 and head west on I-10 towards Texas. Aunt Vera told me later that the family had made it safely to Houston. Shortly thereafter, she moved out of Prescott Place to join them there. All I know for certain is

that they made it safely to Texas. I have no idea whether “he” was stop-gapped. I have no idea whether he made it back from Iraq alive. I have no idea if he ever made it to business school at Southern on the G.I. Bill.

Hurricane stories beget hurricane stories. Three years later Gustav would ride the Mississippi River up from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. The winds, which would fell a large portion of the city’s tree canopy, also wreaked havoc on its human-made structures. John Lebret’s 8th Street apartment, one of the few brick buildings in Spanish Town, seemed a logical place to ride out the storm for John, Rebecca, and fellow graduate student Brandon Nicholas. When Gustav blew the picture window of his living room in, the three spent the next two hours huddled in the bathtub of his tiny bathroom nursing a bottle of whiskey. Shortly after their escape to safer quarters as the storm began to abate, the apartment caught fire when rainwater soaked the floor and walls causing shorts in the apartment’s faulty wiring. In St. Francisville, 31.5 miles north-northwest of Spanish Town, Gustav would also blow out a window in the antique entryway doors of The Myrtles Plantation. The windows with yellow Spanish crosses in leaded glass, which purportedly protected the inhabitants from evil *and* yellow fever, would not withstand the insistent winds of Gustav.

Tap. Click. Tap. Click. Tap. Click. Tap. Click. Tap. Click.

The rhythmic tapping on my car window so closely matched the clicking of my turn signal that I initially looked at my dashboard wondering why it was suddenly so loud. Snapping back to reality, I turned and saw the curly salt-and-pepper hair and sly smile of Terry McKinney. I rolled down the window.

“Hey girl,” she said looking at me quizzically, “You lost or something?”

“No,” I replied, laughing nervously, “just lost in thought, I guess.”

Terri is a fellow HSTCA board member and active participant in the Louisiana Paranormal Society.

“Hey, I just saw Mr. Ricky and he told me about last night’s ghost hunting shenanigans at the Old State Capitol.”

“Did he tell you he was hummin’ and thumpin’ that damn stick all night?”

“Well, of course! Hilarious.”

“I know, right? He cracks me up, but I swear you can’t take that old asshole anywhere. Where ya headed?”

“Myrtles.”

“How fun! Seen any ghosts yet?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible.”

2. Take the 1st left onto N 6th St 371 ft

After the turn, I drive past The Quorum Call, an old navy blue house with splintering tan trim that locals say used to serve as a kind of meeting lounge for Republican legislators. Although unoccupied, the property is not without function. Its overgrown side yard is a favorite spot for Sappho, my cinnamon and sugar colored dog of mixed genetic heritage, to take care of her business. The dilapidated porch also serves as the primary domicile of Spanish Towns’ meanest stray cat, Kitler, who derives his name from the little, black, square patch of fur on his upper lip and for his proclivity for torturing other cats in the neighborhood.

I drive past Susan and Greg Bailey’s newly restored one story cottage on the left, which features original Spanish tiles. A small apartment building stands opposite with large, dark green wooden shutters covering the majority of the second floor. The façade is similar in design to St. Francisville’s Oakley Plantation, where John James Audubon rendered his famous naturalist

drawings in 1821. As I ease my way toward Spanish Town Road, I see Melissa Eastin planting her summer tomatoes, bell peppers, and basil. Melissa, an archivist at the state library and HSTCA board member, has a stunning, half sleeve tattoo of hibiscus covering her right upper arm. She raises the hibiscus and waves as I pass.

3. Turn left onto Spanish Town Rd

0.3 mi

As I roll past the stop sign of North 6th Street and turn on to Spanish Town Road, I notice all the Mardi Gras beads dangling from the tree branches that arch elegantly over the narrow thoroughfare. The beads lend a permanent festival atmosphere to the entire neighborhood. In the spring, at a particular time in the morning, the sun hits the trees at just the right angle and the entire street appears to dance and sparkle, as if a congregation of audacious disco balls have installed themselves in the trees, spinning wildly for a party that refuses to end. And sometimes, during the brief cold snap that passes for winter in southern Louisiana, when the trees have dropped their leaves and the dangling beads move gently to the strains of a wistful wind curling through the constricted passages between the creaky houses before waltzing on down the street, I swear you can hear spectral whispers of “*Throw me somethin’ mister*” echoing all along Spanish Town Road. The beads are a constant reminder that Carnival is never too far away and a promise that all the pretty pink people will soon come out to play again.

Despite its humble beginnings, Spanish Town Mardi Gras is an *event*, and has become the largest and most anticipated occasion on the Baton Rouge Mardi Gras calendar. Spanish Town Mardi Gras has a point of view—some would argue, an attitude. The floats, deliberately designed to be tacky, use sarcasm and irony to poke fun at authority figures and their foibles. The parade is a product of the critical attitude of the residents and it fosters that critical attitude; the relationship is symbiotic. My first Spanish Town Mardi Gras Parade occurred within a few

months after Katrina. I was smitten! The theme that year, a play on the phrase premature ejaculation, criticized the response of federal, state, and local governments to Katrina and its aftermath. I reveled in the carnivalesque celebration that spoke truth to power, and I loved all the pink people, their bawdy regalia, and the scathing satire that marked every float and marching krewe that trundled past along the narrow parade route. There was even a beauty queen: Queen of Spanish Town.

I am descended from a long line of beauty queens, but have always been considered the “cute” one. At 4 feet 10 and ½ inches, I have resigned myself to the fact that I am not the tall, willowy stuff of which beauty queens are made. Frankly, until I saw the Spanish Town Mardi Gras Parade, I had never had any aspirations to royalty. Queens of any variety—other than drag—played into stereotypical myths of beauty that perpetuated patriarchy and female subjugation. But this . . . this was different. Here was a title and a crown I coveted. Although I had never been willing to reign as the arbitrary winner of a popularity contest, I was more than prepared to hold court over an event based in criticism that celebrates sarcasm and irony. What could be more ironic than a 4’10 ½” beauty queen? Queen of Spanish Town Mardi Gras was a title I was willing to earn, and I immediately set about doing so. If I am honest—and I am trying my best to be honest—my initial desire for the title and the crown was driven by the spirit of the parade. Along the way, it grew to be something more. But that, is a different story.

I obey the stop sign at Spanish Town Road and 7th Street. To my left, I see the bright yellow home of Doctors Femi Euba and Addie Dawson-Euba, Professors at LSU and Southern University respectively. Femi, who was the inaugural recipient of the distinguished Louise and Kenneth Kinney Professorship in 2007, holds a joint appointment in the Departments of Theatre and English and specializes in Black Drama and Playwriting. Dr. Addie Dawson-Euba, an

amazing and evocative painter, is professor and chair of the Visual Arts Department at Southern University.

Although Femi has a reputation for being standoffish, we have established a friendly rapport based in our mutual love of gardening. When he learned I was a graduate student he began referring to me as “Young Scholar.” Although he probably referred to me this way because he could not remember my name, I grew quite fond of the title and his liberal use of it. When I purchased my first rose bushes—Angel Eyes and Neptune, fragrant purple varieties with complex blossoms—I asked Femi, who was famous for his roses, the secret of his success. He responded with, “Good pruning and constant vigilance. And that, Young Scholar, is the stuff of love.”

Their house is built on the original site of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church. The Reverend George Byrd, a native of Virginia, organized the African-American Church in Spanish Town in 1872 (“History of the Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church”). After LSU relocated from its temporary location at the Deaf and Dumb Asylum in Beauregard Town to the Pentagon Barracks in the vicinity of the current State Capitol Building in 1884, property values in Spanish Town began to rise. Taking advantage of the real estate boom, the church sold its property and relocated in 1918 to 14th Street, in another part of Spanish Town (Sykes “A Brief History” 3). Thirty-some odd years later, with the construction of the Baton Rouge Expressway in the mid 1950s, Spanish Town would be bisected, an action that would eventually condemn much of the larger portion of the original community—the portion stretching from 9th Street east to 22nd street—to urban blight and decay. In 1992, when Shiloh Baptist Church member Effie Carter, a real estate agent, sold the house at the corner of Spanish Town and 7th Street, she had no idea that it sat on the original site of her church (“Celebration of 136th Anniversary” 1). My first

event as a representative of the HSTCA was the dedication of the site and the instillation of a historic marker that was commissioned and paid for by the residents of the neighborhood. The ceremony, held on September 15, 2008, also commemorated the 136th anniversary of the church (“Celebration of 136th Anniversary” 1).

I drive through the stop sign at 7th and exchange waves with the usual cadre of people sitting at the little tables under the green awnings of Capitol Grocery. Established in the 1890s, or 1917, or 1926 (depending on which sign, shirt, or newspaper article you read hanging on the wall inside), Capitol Grocery is both the oldest operating grocery store in Baton Rouge and the heartbeat of Spanish Town. During the summers of 2006 and 2007, I worked at Capitol Grocery cutting lunchmeat, stocking and restocking the beer cooler, making sure the coffee was always brewing, selling Lotto tickets, and serving Mr. Barry’s homemade biscuits. Mr. Barry was the cook at Capitol Grocery. He made biscuits in the morning, a standard Blue Plate Special at noon, and pizza in the evening.

Mr. Mike, the owner-operator, who looks like Mario of Mario Brothers fame and is a sweet, soft-spoken man, took an interest in everybody who came into his establishment. A big supporter of the arts, he frequently attended productions at the HopKins Black Box theatre. He invited poets and musicians to use the space at the front of his grocery, which also doubled as a thrift store. Today as I drive past, Miss Jean Shaw is coming out of the store with a cold fountain drink. Even though she must have more money than god, she wears the same thing every day—beat up tennis shoes, faded black Capri pants, a washed out Mardi Gras t-shirt from 1998 tied up at the hip for flair, and a tan baseball cap with 50 gold, diamond, and otherwise bejeweled pins on it. In addition to three houses, she also owns a large tract of undeveloped land toward the back of Spanish Town that faces the Capitol Lakes. The house she lives in on the corner of Lakeland

and 7th is so overgrown with trees and vines that no one can see what it looks like, other than the fact that it is built on stilts. The story that circulates in the neighborhood is that house was originally built *in* one of the Capitol lakes, hence the stilts. Although she owned the property *on* the bank, she built her house *in* the lake, which is city property. When the city threatened to tear it down, she had it moved to the corner of Lakeland and 7th. In all fairness, the city probably should have stopped her *before* she was building the house in the lake, but, seeing as how Miss Jean Shaw is skeptical of government—big and small—and is morally opposed to getting a permit of any kind, the city probably didn't know what was going on until it was almost complete. In recent years, she has been in a nearly constant pitched battle with the city about the trees in front of her house on the corner of 7th. The city threatens to cut them back, she hires an attorney to try to get an injunction and, when she is unsuccessful, she lies down in the street or ties herself to a tree, which she has done on more than one occasion.

As I proceed down Spanish Town Road, which was originally built to accommodate horses and carriages, not cars, trucks, or oversized Mardi Gras floats, I struggle to pull on mental blinders. I try to keep my eyes straight ahead and concentrate my gaze on the stoplight at end of the beaded street, convincing myself that if I can make it to the highway, I will be able to focus on The Myrtles. As I am human and not horse, the struggle is futile. I see the street sign—Bungalow—and my focus shatters. The name of the street is an apt descriptor of the small, sweet homes nestled there, but that mellow term, one that evokes vacation-like dwellings, belies the experiences of a friend who lived in a little, pink clapboard cottage on a one-way nook that hooked off Bungalow. I remember the message from Baton Rouge that found me in Texas, in January 2010.

When I checked my phone and saw Mr. Mike had called, I thought it odd. It was Christmas break. He knew I was back in Texas, so something was amiss and I returned his call immediately.

“Hey Mr. Mike. Sorry I missed your call. What’s up?”

“Hey Hol,” he said, his sweet voice tinged with melancholy. “I don’t know if you’ve talked to anybody yet but I wanted to let you know about Miss Gene.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “What? Did she tie herself to a tree again?” I asked sarcastically.

“No. Not Jean Shaw. Gene Lee.”

“What happened?” The pause was a bit too long, so I knew what was coming. “Just say it Mike.”

“She’s gone. She killed herself.”

The remainder of the conversation was routine. Basic pentadic questions asked and answered. Obligatory condolences exchanged. I wish this ritual were less familiar in my experience. I have had this conversation far too often. Each time, it is accompanied by the same eerie, hard to describe sensation—shock without surprise.

I don’t like the word suicide. It leaves a sterile astringent taste in my mouth. I prefer a phrase my Uncle Mame used—checked out early. “Hon,” he explained, “sometimes some folks are in so much pain, physically or mentally, that they need to check out early.” I was not surprised that Miss Gene checked out early. She was always quite honest about the severity of her depression and the increasing frequency of major episodes. We had covered that topic more than once. It is an affliction we share . . . shared. I was first diagnosed with severe clinical depression at 19. It runs in my family. My uncle Mame used to tell me, “Look Hon, you’ve just

got the gene. You always gonna be running about a quart low on serotonin. It's not personal. It's chemical."

Miss Gene was a short, stout, redheaded woman with a wide Cheshire Cat grin. You see, we *are* all a bit mad here. We would joke about our common condition; the endless string of sophomore shrinks subjecting us to this or that strain of inane therapy, and the interminable number of meds we tried at the behest of said shrinks, and the variety of ghastly side effects we endured. She was a brilliant writer and poet who once studied and worked alongside Andre Codrescu. Then something happened and she couldn't write anymore. Something inside her just froze up. She confided that terrible story one night over whiskey, but it is not my story to tell or retell. Suffice it to say, when she could no longer produce the work she loved, she was consigned (or did she consign herself) to the status *technical writer*—HR manuals, mundane corporate manifestoes, procedures, instructions. Technical writing was a job she could do in her sleep, but one that ate her soul. For Miss Gene, it was a death warrant. She liked the way I described it—rotting from the inside out. Sometimes, after battling the blankness of the page for hours on end, I would give up and walk over to Hound Dogs. She would be sitting at the bar, scotch in hand, eyes slightly glazed, her short red hair somewhat disheveled.

"Well hey there, Holley! How ya doing?"

"Oh you know, rotting away. Same shit. Different day."

She would cackle and say, "Well belly up to the bar sister. We'll stink up the joint together."

Although I hesitate to drag out Freud's corpse and pitch it about the page, there is one way he describes the uncanny I find particularly apt, the doppelganger—a ghostly double of a living person especially one that haunts its fleshly counterpart. Me/not me. Fort-da.

A car honks, shocking me out of my second trance of the day. What is wrong with me? I toss up an apologetic wave and proceed towards 8th street. As I approach the intersection, on my left I see a narrow two-story, wood plank house with cobalt blue columns and blue and white trimmed windows on the second floor. The wide, welcoming front porch is equipped with a white porch swing, which harmonizes with the prominent row of windows trimmed in blue and white on the second floor above the porch. From this vantage point, it looks like a single-family dwelling. When viewed from the side, on 8th Street, you can see the multiple wooden staircases that announce the house has been fragmented into a multi-unit dwelling.

Like so many other houses in the neighborhood that have been subdivided, this house is a revolving door. I try to remember the succession of people who have lived there. Mr. Barry, Danielle and her current girlfriend Jenn, before Jenn it was Dawn. Like Miss Gene, Dawn checked out early, but I am not yet able to think or talk about it so I move on through the list: Marcus, Kathleen, Jarred and . . . Steven? I only met him once when I first started working at Capitol Grocery. He was as mean and scary as he looked. I remember his gaunt face, the lesions on his arms and neck, his emaciated body. He screamed at me when I didn't give him his change fast enough, then stormed out slamming the door behind him. Mr. Barry, the cook at Capitol Grocery, told me not to take it personally. He had full blown AIDS and had stopped taking his meds. He was angry and ready to die. A few months later he died alone in the second story apartment over Danielle and Jenn's. Evidently, in the end, he succeeded in driving everyone away. Nobody knew he had passed until a dark brown spot appeared on their bedroom ceiling and the whole fragmented house started to smell of death and rotting flesh.

If you were to turn left on 8th, a block further on, where 8th and Lakeland Drive converge, is the home of John Sykes and Jeff Duhe. John is curator at the State Museum, local

Spanish Town historian, long-time HSTCA board member, Board Member on the Foundation for Historic Louisiana, and planning and zoning commission representative, who also gives walking tours of Spanish Town for tourists. Jeff is his partner. With the precision of preservationists, John and Jeff painstakingly restored the 1860-something house to its original condition. In their house, at a HSTCA Board Meeting, I had my first encounter with a poltergeist.

Terri McKinney, Melissa Eastin, and I were sitting at the long mahogany dining table, in the bench style window seat sitting opposite John, Jeff, and David Brown discussing our next move in the fight against developers who were trying to encroach further and further into historic Spanish Town. An icy cold draft sliced through the still, stifling, Louisiana summer heat assaulting our ankles. Terri, Melissa, and I exchanged quizzical looks. Then, I felt a sudden tug at my left ear and my silver hoop earring shot across the table. Terri's earring then Melissa's followed in rapid succession. With baited breath Melissa said, "Holy shit!" Excited, because she believes that ghosts have as much affinity for her as she does for them, and because she has finally been proven right, publically, she says, "Y'all saw that just happened, right," as if she frequently encounters skeptics who refuse to believe their own senses. John Sykes interjects calmly, as if this is a common occurrence, "It's an old house. It happens from time to time." He slid his hands together gathering the earrings in his hands and shoved them back across the table to us. He proceeded with the meeting as if nothing had happened.

I pull through the 9th Street stoplight onto the overpass and turn on my left blinker as I approach the stop sign that marks the access road to I-110. Spanish Town Road proceeds straight ahead for a bit less than a mile until it comes to a dead end at North 22nd Street. Although Spanish Town Road continues, Historic Spanish Town ends at I-110. This was not always the case.

4. Turn left onto the ramp to **I-110 N**

0.2 mi

As I turn left and accelerate on the access road that will eventually deposit me into the flow of traffic going north on I-110, I am aware of the larger Spanish Town neighborhood, which used to extend all the way to 22nd street (“Spanish Town Historic District” 18). The pitted and pocked concrete highway on which I am driving—the original couple of miles of which were built in the mid 1950s—bisected the original community. The types of protection that would come with the National Register of Historic Places designation in August 1978, would not extend to the part of Spanish Town that was “lost” to the east when the first part of this highway—the stretch from I-10 to Plank Road originally known as the Baton Rouge Expressway—was constructed (“Spanish Town Historic District” 18). Although some homes on the east side of the highway have been maintained or restored, large plots of land that formerly boasted shotgun houses, clapboard cottages, and large southern colonial style homes lie empty now save for the crumbling remains of concrete foundations overgrown with grasses and errant foliage. Other blocks of not (but also not not) Spanish Town bear the much-maligned moniker “section 8 housing.” When the residents of these developments venture over to the “real” Spanish Town, they are quickly identified as being “from across the highway”; read: *them, not us, Other.*

5. Keep left at the fork, follow signs for **I-110 N** and merge onto **I-110 N** 7.3 mi

The designation I-110 baffles me. When you are driving a 2 digit interstate and you come to a three-digit offshoot, it is generally a bypass that leaves the original 2 digit interstate only to rejoin it after it has bypassed a city or business district. I-110 does not conform to this pattern. It leaves the primary interstate just as I-10 makes a 90-degree left turn to cross the Mississippi River and meanders much like a river, flowing north for 7.3 miles. Then, just as

suddenly as it materialized off the eastern flank of I-10, it comes to a dead end, depositing the northbound traveler, like silt, at U.S. Highway 61, which in the vicinity of Baton Rouge is known as Scenic Highway.

I prefer to think of I-110 as a shunt, which according to Merriam-Webster is: an act or process of turning aside or moving to an alternative course; a railroad switch; a passage between two body channels, such as blood vessels, especially one created surgically to divert or permit flow from one pathway or region to another. The bodies traversing this alternative path are routed around the center, the heart of Baton Rouge in order to avoid congestion at vital arteries or to circumvent an atrium deemed atrophied, diseased, or unsightly.

I merge into the flow of cars and trucks on I-110. As I accelerate north, I ponder the differences between Spanish Town and St. Francisville, which I have visited so often since 2007. On the surface at least, history is primarily of the capital-H variety in St. Francisville, and is largely a settled matter—at least in the minds of those who maintain a jealous grip on the reigns of power. Bolstered by the presence of an acknowledged local historian, preservation takes the character of maintaining an arrested romantic view of a certain privileged past—a view that is as mythic in its proportion as the tourism industry that has evolved to protect it. Alternate histories constantly threaten to mar the pretty surface of this bright, highly-polished History. A struggle ensues as a mighty machinery quickly steps in to attempt to smooth over any cracks that may appear in the otherwise pristine façade. In Spanish Town, history is less easily traced or charted. It involves a *mélange* of people who do not share a common, homogeneous heritage and whose stories have not been carefully preserved because, historically, the disenfranchised who settled there are not the type of people who have been selected to write a sanctioned history. Their stories, as a result, are much harder to mine. Preservation is a much harder, though no less

contentious, struggle when one is working to preserve parts of the past that are often at odds with a more romantic, sanctioned version of the Old South that makes for better copy in history books.⁴

As I drive along the elevated highway, through the intermittent screen of tree tops I see streets with Native American names, tribes—Osage, Iroquois, Chippewa, Pontiac, Mohican—as well as historical figures—Tecumseh, Osceola, Pocahontas, Hiawatha—passing below me. I know, or rather I think I remember, from an early American history class in grade school, that many of these tribes and figures are not native to this area. I am suddenly aware of how little I know, how little I have been taught, about the indigenous peoples of Louisiana. Most of the scant history I know was gleaned while living in Spanish Town and through my study of *The Myrtles*.

I am aware that over 8000 years ago during the archaic period, which predates the building of the great pyramids in Egypt, that Native Americans constructed the carefully conserved burial mounds on the campus of LSU. Yet, I know little of their history. I know that Baton Rouge, which means red stick in French, derives its name from the large cypress totem adorned with bloody animals that marked the boundaries of the hunting grounds between the Boyougoula and Houma tribes. I know that the ornate friezes atop the entrance to the State Capitol building, barely visible from the steps below, depict images of the French explorer Sieur d’Iberville in front of the totem pole with the chief of the Houma Indians. I know that the Houma

⁴ As David Lowenthal notes in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, “Recognizing the impact of the present on the past, we confront anew the paradox implicit in preservation. Vestiges are saved to stave off decay, destruction, and replacement and to keep an unspoiled heritage. Yet preservation itself reveals that permanence is an illusion. The more we save, the more aware we become that such remains are continually altered and reinterpreted. We suspend their erosion only to transform them in other ways. And saviours of the past change it no less than iconoclasts bent on its destruction. . . . While preservation formally espouses a fixed and segregated past, it cannot help revealing a past all along being altered to conform with present expectations. What is preserved, like what is remembered, is neither a true nor a stable likeness of past reality (410).

tribe was indigenous to St. Francisville and Bayou Sara when the early French explorers (Tonti and La Salle) first set foot in the Felicianas and that by the time the Spanish claimed control of the territory the Tunica tribe had violently overthrown the Houma. I know that former owner of The Myrtles, Francis Kerman, claims that the home was built on a Tunica Burial ground. I know that in 1779, during the revolutionary war when the British controlled Baton Rouge, which they renamed Fort Richmond, Spanish military leader Bernando de Galvez conscripted the Tunica to fight in the first battle of Baton Rouge. Together they bombarded and defeated the British with 12 cannons they set up on the Ceremonial Mound left by the Coles Creek Indians 779 years earlier. These indigenous peoples were central to the history of this part of the state, yet I do not find their tribes or leaders memorialized among the Native American street names in this area.

The elevated highway dips down to earth and I see the large, green highway sign that signals the exit for Southern University, the Historically Black University established in 1880, which is also the exit for the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport. I note that although I have been to and through the airport many times, I have never set foot on the Southern campus, even though one of my Spanish Town neighbors is Professor and Chair of the Department of Visual Arts. I look to my left where I know it is located and search in vain for any trace that would mark its place in the landscape, perhaps the stadium. Whenever you get within five miles of LSU, from any direction, the profile of Tiger Stadium is visible, standing sentry over the campus and casting the shadow of its excess over a campus foundering in the wake of recent budget cuts. I wonder how I could have lived in Baton Rouge so long without setting eyes on Southern. After all, my connection with this historically and culturally important place is not tenuous. In addition to my neighbor, I have taught hundreds of students at Baton Rouge Community College who plan to continue their education at Southern. I am reminded of my conversation with the young

man with the too-old, oil-colored eyes in the courtyard of the Painted Ladies the night before Katrina, and I wonder if he ever made it to business school at Southern.

As I travel along I-110 towards St. Francisville, predictable plumes of steam and smoke hang high in the sky to the west. Smokestacks and tall tangles of rusted iron from the oil and chemical refineries are, for better or worse, a permanent part of the Louisiana landscape. Evidence of the petro-chemical industry is pervasive in the capitol city, along the banks of the Mississippi as it winds its way south, as well as in and along the deep gulf waters beyond the southern horizon. When the refineries are burning off this or that chemical, the tall stacks shoot flames. Incremental levels of heat inspire incremental hues of red, white, and blue flames to flash about the firmament like candles or Bunsen burners or totems set ablaze.

I roll down a window, turn off my air conditioner, and light up a Parliament Light. I take a long drag and let the smoke roil around in my mouth before I inhale deeply and enjoy the burn. With the rush of nicotine, the metallic twinge at the back of my teeth abates, my clenched jaw goes slack, and my ligaments loosen as I watch the smoke casually curl into a question mark before the acrid oil-tinged air slicing through my open window whisks away the ethereal evidence of my worst vice. The tenor of the road changes as my car ascends with the highway to tree top level again. I hear and feel the clack of my tires reverberating against faltering concrete in dire need of repair.

I travel the remaining four miles along I-110 in the time it takes to smoke my cigarette. As I veer right to merge with the traffic on US 61, I toss the butt out the window. I know I shouldn't, but I figure with all trash littering the side of the road one more butt won't hurt, right? I realize that Glory would be doing backflips in her grave if she knew I was smoking *and*

littering. I consider leaving the window down, but the rubbery, oily smell is too much, so I roll it up.

6. Take exit 8C to merge onto US-61 N toward Natchez 23.6 mi

CHAPTER THREE
HIGHWAY 61 REVISITED

The I-110 shunt diverts me toward Scenic Highway 61, and I follow the road north towards St. Francisville and The Myrtles. Centripetal force always threatens to pull me back to Baton Rouge, so I step on the gas to exit the gravitational pull of Spanish Town and the capitol city. I put in my earbuds, plug them into my iPhone, open my albums, and find Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*.

Highway 61 Revisited

.01	Like a Rolling Stone	6:09
.02	Tombstone Blues	5:58
.03	It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry	4:09
.04	From a Buick 6	3:19
.05	Ballad of a Thin Man	5:58
.06	Queen Jane Approximately	5:31
.07	Highway 61 Revisited	3:30
.08	Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues	5:31
.09	Desolation Row	11:21

I punch shuffle and hit play. The traffic on Highway 61 is lighter and less frantic, but the rusted over, iron-clad, tentacles of the petro-chemical industry still twist and writhe along the west side of this stretch of the highway like a Bauhaus sculpture gone monstrously wrong. The lyrics to Dylan's "Desolation Row" seem to cling to the skin of folks milling about in the parking lots of disheveled convenience stores that mock the notion of convenience altogether. Railroad cars,

auto parts stores, scrap metal yards, and dilapidated trailer parks certainly sketch a particular scene along the highway; the adjective *scenic* can only be applied ironically for the first few miles. The occasional interstices of overgrown green lurking between ramshackle buildings press toward the road declaring promises and threats of possibilities ahead. Or is it behind? Such distinctions are difficult to parse.

Highway 61 used to be one of the longest continuous north-south roadways in the United States, running 1,700 miles from the Canadian border to its terminus in New Orleans. The expansion of the interstate highway system in the 1950s and 60s lopped off the northern most 300 miles causing the northern stretch of the highway to end in the town of Wyoming, Minnesota, well short of the Canadian border (Sanderson). Generally, US 61 snakes alongside the Mississippi River, which explains one of its alternate names, the Great River Road. Several architecturally outdated and faded motels and motor courts, popular with motorists prior to the coming of the interstate highway system, are notorious. In 1987 televangelist Jimmy Swaggart's ministry was brought to its knees after he was exposed for having sex with a prostitute in one of the seedy motels along the stretch of Highway 61 running through Jefferson Parish. The Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, is forever etched in the nation's collective memory as the site of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Highway 61 also served as a primary artery for the black diaspora, commonly called the Great Migration, whereby millions of African Americans fled to northern cities to escape the oppressive political, cultural, and economic conditions produced and maintained by Jim Crow laws in the south (Tischauer 59-81).

Also known as the Blues Highway, US 61 traces the paths of numerous legendary American musicians: Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley, Robert Johnson, Elvis Presley, Bessie Smith, and Bob Dylan, among others. Many grew up in the immediate vicinity of Highway 61 and/or

traveled back and forth between New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta region to Memphis, Tennessee, Chicago, Illinois, and Duluth, Minnesota. In their travels, they deposited their diverse musical heritages and traditions like fertile silt from which blues, jazz, folk, zydeco, rock and roll, and country took root, sprouted, flowered, germinated, and cross-pollinated.

In 1965, Bob Dylan released *Highway 61 Revisited*, an homage to the Blues Highway and its complicated historicity (Dylan). The highly acclaimed album is rife with metaphors about complex spirituality, ancestors, blood ties, and promises kept and broken. The most famous song on the album is the iconic, “Like a Rolling Stone,” which *Rolling Stone Magazine* accorded the number one position in its list of the 500 greatest songs of all time (“500 Greatest Songs”). In a 2004 interview, Dylan ruminated about his composition process. “It’s like a ghost is writing a song like that. It gives you the song and then it goes away, it goes away. You don’t know what it means. Except the ghost picked me to write the song” (Polizzotti 32).

Much like its famous east to west counterpart, Route 66, Highway 61 is touted as one of the great American road trips. Travel advisories in any number of publications offer myriad suggestions for “must see” stops along sections of the historic Blues Highway. In all of the time I have spent in St. Francisville, I have never seen or heard any mention of Highway 61 as the Blues Highway. Plantations homes and other tourist attractions in the area mark their location in relationship to “Historic Highway 61” or the “Great River Road” but never the Blues Highway, as if the histories of plantation country and the Blues Highway were not inextricably bound up in one another. Same road, one history privileged, one history elided.

I open my sunroof, turn up the volume, and sing at the top of my lungs.

You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
But you know you only used to get juiced in it
And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street
And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it

hmmm sumthin sumthin sumthin

OHHHH, how does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

On my right, I pass the gas station-convenience store-eatery where a friend and I stopped on a recent trip to The Myrtles to fill up and use the restroom. The station is surprisingly large for its relatively rural location—six bays with gas pumps framed crookedly by a faded bayou blue awning that looks as if it would leak buckets in a rainstorm and might blow away during the next hurricane. My friend slouched across the pocked asphalt on his way back to the car, shoulders hunched, hands in pockets, eyes cast down. His salt and pepper curls quivered as he shook his head in his trek across the parking lot. He got in the car quickly, slammed the door, and muttered, “Post-racial my ass.” He described the graffiti scratched into the layers of gloppy white paint on the bathroom stall walls: NAACP= N.iggers A.re A.lways C.ausing P.roblems; OBAMA= O.ne B.ig A.ss M.istake A.merica. His anger was fueled not simply by the overt racism etched into the wall; he was raised in the South, he’s seen it all before, he’s old enough to have lived it. *This* racism seemed targeted at the store’s employees, all of whom were black, from the middle aged woman behind the counter who, to his inquiry about the location of the bathroom had replied, “Just go down that hall there, honey, second door on the left,” to the five young women gossiping and laughing behind the fast food counter. When he finished his rant, we exchanged bathroom graffiti stories. I told him the story about teaching class in the bathroom on the first floor of Middleton Library on the LSU campus the day after the 2008 election where a whole constellation of graffiti had sprung up over night in response to the claim, “There’s not supposed to be a black man in the White House.” Among the occupants of Coates Hall, it was

commonly known that Dr. Andy King, the chair of the Communication Studies department, would arrive on campus hours early to clean the bathroom stalls so that Miss Georgia, the custodian, wouldn't have to scrub away racist graffiti.

I light another cigarette and crank up the volume another notch.

You said you'd never compromise
With the mystery tramp, but now you realize
He's not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And say do you want to make a deeeeeeeal? Bum bum bum
OOHHHH, how does it feel?
How does it feel?

To my left as I travel northbound, the twisted metal structures and storage tanks that creep closer to the road are kept at bay only by railroad tracks. The onslaught of storage tanks—row after row of huge cylindrical cauldrons—and distillation towers do not diminish as the miles tick by. Since 2010, when BP's Deepwater Horizon well exploded and spilled more than 4.9 million barrels of oil into the gulf, it is increasingly hard to ignore the eyesore. As my anger ratchets up, I force my attention to the more pastoral scenes to the right—open pastures and thickly wooded patches, marred, though less frequently, by broken down houses, stores, and light industry—and think of the beautiful sunsets of southern Louisiana that have been my frequent companion when I make this trip in the evening to attend one of the ghost tours at The Myrtles. The kaleidoscope of lavender, aubergine, and periwinkle etched through with shafts of yellow and orange move across the early evening skies, dazzling like a melancholy song. I try to remember the exact wording of my favorite Alice Walker quotation—about how it pisses God off when people walk by the color purple in a field and ignore it (*The Color Purple* 178). In my mind, I hear the slow drawl of my neighbor David, the environmental attorney and activist.

David says the breathtaking purple and gold sunsets we enjoy are just another byproduct of the petrochemical industry. I would like to think *that* pisses off God as well.

Warm sunlight beams down through the open sunroof at an odd angle illuminating the books, papers, and my oversized purse in the passenger seat. I pass the turnoff that would take me to Teddy's Juke Joint—a place not too many generations removed from Harpo's similar makeshift establishment in *The Color Purple*. Set back off the road, it is hard to find unless you are looking for it. Proprietor Teddy (Lloyd) Johnson identifies himself as an old school blues man and proudly bears the title 2010 Baton Rouge "Slim Harpo" Blues Ambassador even though he is not from, nor has he ever lived in, Baton Rouge ("About Us"). Teddy's is a little shotgun house where he was born and where he and his wife still live on the second floor since they turned the place into a juke joint in the late 1970s. The interior is jam-packed with random paraphernalia and lit primarily with Christmas lights, odd lamps, and the disco ball hanging over Teddy's DJ booth. A huge stuffed Winnie the Pooh sitting at eye level greets patrons when they walk through the old metal door. A small wooden stage sits about six inches off the floor and the space in front of it serves for dancing. Although some of the best blues musicians have stopped by Teddy's to jam, Teddy is not stingy with his platform. He frequently lets young, inexperienced musicians and bands take the stage. When there is no live music, Teddy mans the DJ booth in his signature white cowboy hat and a ring on every finger to spin an eclectic mix of music that always manages to arrive back at the blues.

As I proceed north along the Blues Highway, the right flank of dense foliage falls back from the road giving way to farmland. On the left, the train tracks continue their north/south route, holding steady against an encroaching battalion of trees. On the front lines of the forest you can see the wounded soldiers, limbs snapped and atrophied as the result of hurricanes past;

fallen comrades lay at their feet. The left flank of trees gives way to the road leading to the Port Hudson National Cemetery, site of the siege of Port Hudson, one of the longest military battles in American military history. The battle, which pitted roughly 30,000 Union troops against 6,800 Confederate troops, began on May 23, 1863. Forty-eight days later the Confederate forces surrendered upon learning of the South's defeat at the Battle of Vicksburg. With the fall of Port Hudson, the Union assumed control of the Mississippi River from its source all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. In the battle, the Union forces utilized the 1st and 3rd divisions of the Louisiana Native Guard, the first African-American troops deployed by the Union ("Port Hudson").

A car, engine roaring, passes me on the left, its right rear bumper flaunts an anti-Obama bumper sticker: Don't Re-Nig in 2012. Jesus Christ! Beyond the railroad tracks, a faded and rusting blue corrugated building pushes back the trees on the left, the parking lot out front is paved with crushed gravel. The building's size, like a small warehouse, along with the fact that it sits alone, draws my attention. Atop its pointed metal roof, a tall flagpole serves as permanent home to three faded and raveling flags—a black POW/MIA flag topped by the American flag topped by the Confederate Stars and Bars. Priorities. A mile further down the road on the opposite side, two pickup trucks are parked just on the verge. The first, facing the road, uses hand painted signs to hawk strawberries and peaches that are staged in pints and pecks on the hood of the truck. The second, not 50 feet away, has its face turned toward the open pasture behind it. The tailgate lolls like a tongue, and the windows of the truck topper on the back are sun-shielded by opaque elongated versions of the Stars and Bars. Two large white signs with camouflage green paint announce the availability of AMMO CANS, and there they are stacked in two perfectly symmetrical pyramids. It looks like the proprietor has not sold any of his wares, which makes me smile.

I flick my cigarette through the open sunroof and crank up the volume for one last verse.

You used to be so amused . . .
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he uuused
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse
When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceeeeeal.
OHHHH, how does it feel?
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

I pull off my earbuds, unplug the cord, and toss them into the passenger seat; they slide to the floorboard, which is littered with empty cigarette boxes, coke bottles, and students' ungraded quizzes. I wonder about the ghost that made Dylan write that song because *that* ghost seems different from the ghosts I know—the ghosts I've been conjuring. I think it's sketchy to claim that one can absolutely *know* a ghost because ghosts seem to play with the very categories that count as knowledge. They fiddle at intersections: between known *and* unknown, knowable *and* unknowable, visible *and* invisible, storied *and* un-storied, spirit *and* matter, life *and* death. Dylan says that a ghost wrote this song. So, I wonder why the ghost would say that s/he has no secrets to conceal, because s/he is invisible? Seems to me the fact that the ghost shows up in the first place troubles any easy notion of invisibility to begin with and, furthermore, the ghost had a whole bunch of secrets to reveal. Just because the secrets were coded or ambiguous doesn't mean they were completely concealed. Also, I don't understand how a ghost could be completely on its own because, in this case, the ghost is haunting someone—specifically Dylan and, if Derrida is correct in his assertion, there is *always* more than one. *Plus d'un* means *both* no more one *and* more than one. Then again, I could be totally wrong; Dylan's ghost wasn't haunting *me*.

This part of the drive lives up to the adjective *scenic* in the highway's nomination. The views whizzing past my windows contort colors and shift the stability of shapes. The landscape moves so quickly that fields and trees and cows and hay bales seem alive—like objects in a Van Gogh painting. In the pastoral portions of the drive, my mind wanders (more than usual) and I ruminate about ghosts—plural. In my economy, where there is one, there is always more than one.

Avery Gordon describes ghosts as an absence that is a seething presence (8). Derrida talks about ghosts in terms of singularity (no more one) and multiplicity (more than one)—*plus d'un* (*Specters of Marx* xx). And even though Derrida and Gordon engage the ghosts from different theoretical perspectives, they intersect at the primary points: ghosts are important; ghosts are political/politicized; ghosts speak; and, for better or worse, they speak to the person they are haunting.

I think of Miss Gene, who haunts me for a number of reasons. She haunts me because I am still learning how to mourn her and, frankly, I am uncertain whether I am going about the work of mourning in a way that is just. Haunting is bound up in mourning but it is ultimately about justice. She haunts me because when she emerges as a ghost, I see a bit of my-self that died with her, and I cannot begin to comprehend how to mourn *that* loss. She also haunts me because her ghost, like all ghosts, emerges amidst a whole host of other ghosts—other women who have tried to write their way through the world to no avail. Audre Lourde was right; “for women . . . poetry is not a luxury” (23). Twisting around language from which we are functionally excluded is how some of us go about the business of surviving. Poesis is not the way we make sense of The World, it is world-making and world re-making. The ghost of Miss Gene and the whole host of women writers—Woolf, Plath, Sexton, among others—that she conjures

for me, hold open, through haunting, the injunction to write, to create, to make. Their specters do not exist to be pinned down, and thus explained and exorcised, but to inspire excess, to advance the living toward a spirit of world-making.

Steven, the young man from Capitol Grocery, emerges as a ghost in his particular unfamiliarity to me. I hardly knew him, yet in death, much like the single and singular encounter we exchanged when he was alive, he screams at me. I possess so little personal, lived, embodied knowledge about the AIDS epidemic. My knowledge is clinical, medical, and historical. Steven's specter occupies the space as a shrieking medium generated by my lack of experience. Before Steven began to haunt me, I had the luxury of *not* thinking about HIV/AIDS. Even though I was cognitively aware of the extent of the devastation, HIV/AIDS *felt* figured out, past, not really on the move anymore, at least not *here*, not applicable *to me*. Although as an adult who identifies as queer and who had worked as an activist with various LGBTQ organizations and campaigns, I was cognizant but not haunted. Steven in his specificity calls forth a host of specters, and not simply scores of disembodied revenants articulated through panels of the AIDS quilt. He also calls to and calls forth the Spirit, the Geist, which still animates systems of power that continue to deny aid, health care, and access to life preserving knowledge *to* and *for* the living. The specter of Steven illuminates another operative Spirit that not only refuses to halt the march toward death, but is complicit in generating more ghosts. This Spirit works within and alongside global corporate oligarchies that willingly—if not consciously—sacrifice individuals on the altar of ignorance and condemn them to die alone. Thus the revenant arriving in Steven's image does not operate as a simple surrogation for HIV/AIDS victims, his specter also operates as a medium for dis-ease screaming at us that disease can never be exorcised but will always haunt us—and should. His scream re-members and reminds us to act up in the face of ongoing injustices.

“He” of the too-old, oil-colored eyes haunts me in his lack of specificity. Specificity and unfamiliarity are very different things. Even though He doesn’t have a proper name, He occupies the space of soldier, particularly American Soldier. And, interpolated as such, He is not only licensed but ordered to do things that he would never do otherwise—such as decapitate an equally unspecified “Haji” (read: terrorist; read: enemy). The production of War is contingent upon the production of, the doing of dis-identification. He calls forth not only American soldiers, he calls forth all those Others that don’t get counted among the dead. You understand what bodies count by what bodies get counted. In addition to the nameless American dead who are at least counted, what about the Afghan dead, Iraqi dead, Lybian dead, Somali dead who are not. He also calls forth the economic reality that it is those who already don’t count—the black, the brown, the poor, the otherwise disenfranchised—within American society who are sent forth into battle in the place of those who do count—those Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Congressmen, businessmen who have long had the power to ensure that they and their offspring do not have to fight the wars that they instigate. He and all those who have fallen un-remarked under the banner of war issue the injunction, “Say my name.”

Feeling a sudden, heavy *think think think* reverberating through the car and my chest, my adrenaline spikes and my hands involuntarily shoot back to 10 and 2. I pull the steering wheel back to the right, overcorrecting and drawing the car back hard into the right hand lane. I check my mirrors, relieved no other cars are around. The wrap around porch and stout columns surrounding a raised Creole Plantation home on the right side of the road catch my eye, and I am reminded that I am driving through plantation land, i.e., the fertile land of agricommerce that fueled the economic engine of antebellum Louisiana. Compared with the small shotgun houses I saw several miles back that shared the shoulder with the highway, this house sits back from the

road. The house looks similar to Laura plantation, farther up the road in Vacherie, which is marketed as a classic Creole plantation and is said to be the place where the Creole versions of the West African Br'er Rabbit were collected and written down in America. The Creole-style house to my right is painted white, as compared to Laura's yellow, and the columns lining this porch appear to be in the Greek revival style. This smaller version is a bit of an architectural patchwork—a little of this, a little of that.

The yellow tricycle lying on its side on the well-manicured lawn and the decisive lack of signage hailing tourists suggest that this Creole-style home is a private residence. Some newly planted Azalea bushes, which have recently dropped their spring blooms, outline the perimeter of the raised porch and contrast with the full-scale live oaks that enclose the house on three sides. The house looks staged, the highway serving as both proscenium and fourth wall. The land beyond the tree line evokes a different type of performance in which crops are raised and agricultural labor is enacted. I do not know who does the farming, since I don't see anyone working the fields; I only see row upon row of seemingly healthy crops.

This evidence of labor unseen reminds me that most of the countryside I have been admiring and reproofing for the past 20 miles was also once plantation land. The square footage of plantation houses, of which this house is a small example, paled in comparison to the acreage devoted to the agriculture that produced the cash crops that supported and sustained the planters and their families. Make no mistake, slaves performed that agricultural labor. Although some yeoman farmers and small planters of color eked out a living in West Feliciana Parish, they found it difficult to compete with the gentlemen planters in the large plantations, and frequently relocated. Prior to the Civil War, the Felicianas, along with the Red River and the upper Mississippi Delta, formed Louisiana's "Black Belt," a region of rich farmland where Blacks

historically made up more than 60 percent of the total population. Booker T. Washington explained the double signification of the term “Black Belt” in 1901.

So far as I can learn, the term was first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where the slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later, and especially since the war, the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense—that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white. (“Chapter 7”)

In the passenger seat, my red purse contains one of the many notebooks full of notes that I have filled while doing research for my dissertation. A little spiral notebook accompanies me everywhere. The one in my purse contains names, dates, and, census numbers, reference notes, and document citations from the archival research I have conducted over the past four years in my attempts to understand more about the history of The Myrtles and its inhabitants—ghosts included—as well as notes about historical documents regarding St. Francisville, the Felicianas, and Louisiana more generally.

I know, for example, in 1860, before the start of the Civil War, the total population of West Feliciana Parish was 11,671. This number included 2,036 white people, 9,571 slaves, and 64 free people of color (Historical Census Browser). Sarah Stirling, proprietress of The Myrtles Plantation at the time, owned 149 slaves. Other members of the Stirling family with property adjacent to or in the vicinity of The Myrtles owned an additional 278 slaves (“West Feliciana Parish”).

By comparison, when Chloe’s owner, Judge Clark Woodruff, owned The Myrtles Plantation in 1820, the total population in the parish was 12,732, with 7,164 slaves and 69 free people of color (Historical Census Browser). In 1820, Woodruff owned five slaves: one male under the age of 14, two males between the ages of 14 and 44, one female under the age of 14 and one female between the ages of 14 and 25. This document contains no names. Other

documents indicate that 81 female slaves named Chloe (or some derivation thereof) lived in Louisiana between 1719 and 1820 and 11 of that number are accounted for in East Baton Rouge and the West Florida parishes. *Plus d'un*. No more one; more than one.

I see the giant inflatable pig on my right next to Roadside Barbeque. I'm getting close and getting hungry. The hunger only seems to encourage my wandering. Pigs reminds me of bacon, which in turn reminds me of the story Jay Allison told me about the Performance Studies Division Business Meeting in 2011. According to Jay, when Fred Corey was invited to the podium to accept the editorship of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, he invoked Wallace Bacon, the journal's "founding editor." With this tiny speech act, Fred erased much of the history—or at least the pre-history—of the journal. Before the journal was taken over as a National Communication Association sponsored journal, it was a smaller publication—two issues per year. *Literature in Performance* was both envisioned and birthed by its actual founding editor, Beverly Whitaker Long. To demonstrate to NCA that performance studies scholars not only produced publishable scholarship, but produced it in a quantity that would make NCA support for a performance studies journal viable, Beverly and the four editors who followed her, Mary Frances HopKins, Paul Gray, Don Salper, and Alan Wade, begged, borrowed, and stole to produce the journal for nine years. To demonstrate the lengths to which the editors went to finance individual issues of the journal, Jay tells the story of sitting in Mary Frances' office as she called Charlton Heston to request that he underwrite a single issue of the journal in memory of his sister Lila. Heston declined, but Mary Frances, like Beverly before her and like the men who followed her as editor, managed to finance and edit and produce those 18 issues that proved the viability of a performance studies journal to the national organization. Their world-making was elided—

totally—for the entire division membership who, like many folks, are not particularly predisposed to the particularities of history. Is there a Pig in this Text? (Scholes 1985).

Occasionally, when my mind is otherwise occupied, I fail to notice the huge pig. Yet, even when I do, another, more recent, marker signals that I am approaching St. Francisville. A rhythmic shift occurs in the sound of the old road and the feel of the ride jerks slightly; it is an uncanny movement that swerves like needle cutting across an old record or the jarring disharmony of someone else switching the radio station mid-song; a rumbling, jazz arrangement with unpredictable jolts and bluesy ba da da daa riffs lurches to a sudden legato. The abrupt absence of the prior intonation and curt change in tempo shift my awareness to the smooth hum of a road newly laid, and to the congenial glide of my balding tires over a seemingly unscarred surface.

The blue road sign, rising proudly above the bright orange barrel-sized and shaped traffic cones, announces federal stimulus and state tax dollars at work—64.8 million dazzling dollars, all-waltzing in time towards a program of progress. The restored Highway behaves hospitably. Its resurfaced charm holds open the entryway to an expanded corridor, welcoming the driver from two cramped and crowded lanes to four new, shiny, freshly paved promenades rolling through Louisiana's enchanting plantation country all the way to the Mississippi border. During the festivities that marked the corridor's debut, Governor Bobby Jindal and Mayor Billy D'Aquilla offered celebratory speeches declaring it a great day for the city, the parish, and the state. Before slicing through a big, blood red ribbon, both claimed their administrations were committed to the promises of moving Louisiana forward. I am reminded that the difference between a promise and a threat can be difficult to parse.

As the tenor of the car shifts, I wonder whether there were any zoning and easements battles, fistcuffs concerning appropriate environmental studies, political skirmishes over the “compromise” of accepting federal stimulus money from the illegitimate POTUS, local bond initiative brawls, and shady contract scraps fought over and along this little stretch of progress. I’d be willing to bet 20 bucks of my recently disbursed student loan money there were. I’d bet another 20 that the fight probably wasn’t pretty. This rant is not intended as a harsh indictment of Louisiana or St. Francisville politics. The same argument could be made about most local politics—the process of creating, adapting, adopting, enacting, regulating, maintaining, and changing particular constraints within a particular polis. As fraught as these processes may be, this is the sweaty stuff of democracy and it is messy by design. The old axiom, all politics are local does not ring hollow. Politics—the doing of citizenry and the embodying of the body politic—is supposed to be scrappy and dirty and difficult. The implementation of budgetary policy and the distribution of wealth (i.e., the Audubon bridge and the TIMED corridor infrastructure projects) have real impact on real bodies. The stakes, as always, are high.

Another brand new, spit-shined road sign announces the opening of the John James Audubon Bridge, which connects St. Francisville to New Roads, the town just across the river. The building of this bridge is not only a fascinating study in engineering, it was also a long overdue infrastructure project essential to both cities—New Roads and St. Francisville—and both parishes—Pointe Coupee and West Feliciana. I let rip a big donkey laugh because, although I sincerely believe building this road and this bridge was a good thing, I also know in my bones that this brand new sign will confuse the hell out of tourists like me with an aptitude—some might call it a flair—for getting lost. You see, from Highway 61 going north, the turnoff for the shiny new John James Audubon State Bridge is about a mile or so before the turnoff for the old

Audubon Historic State Site, a major tourist attraction in the area which is just up the road a bit on Louisiana 965. If I were driving this way for the first time, odds are I would have turned off at the signs for the Audubon Bridge which would have taken me west and deposited me along the old back roads of New Roads, where I probably would have wandered around looking for the Audubon Historic Site for a good hour or so before I realized I wasn't going to find the green jalousie galleries of the Oakley Plantation on the west side of the river.

Actually, that sounds like a fun little side trip. Maybe next time, I'll try hard not to run quite this late so I can take the bridge and get lost on purpose. I've never been to New Roads, though I know it is an old French Creole settlement, which was primarily Catholic, whereas St. Francisville is an old Anglo settlement and primarily Protestant. As I see two signs—a brown road sign pointing the direction to the Audubon State Historic Site and another rectangular white sign with the map of Louisiana in Green marking State Road 965—the car instantly fills with the ethereal scent of my brother, David's, clean, crisp cologne.

I am transported back to 2009, two years after I “officially” began studying *The Myrtles*. We are driving along this same stretch of Highway 61—actually he is driving, which is my preference when I am in tour guide mode—and suddenly he emits the sweet, high-pitched squeal of excitement he has been famous for since infancy.

“Audubon House!” my brother squeals. “Oh My God, Sissy! The Audubon House!”

I am startled by the squeal and by the sudden burst of excitement. Bless his heart, I think, David is still smarting from last night's high times at Hound Dogs. His disinterest in my historic travelogue through the last leg of the weekend itinerary is surely feigned. I continue my *Highway 61 (Re)visited: Holley's Fact Filled Tour through the Felicianas/An Operator's Manual to The Myrtles Plantation/A Workshop* performance. His deadpan delivery of compliant, occasional

comments, such as “Uh-huh,” “Really,” “I didn’t know that,” and “No, please go on . . . I’d love to hear more about post Civil War gentrification patterns,” surely meant he was transfixed and deeply pondering the profundity of the information I was so generously shoveling in his direction.

I had just finished explaining how the Creole cottage we passed a mile or so back, was very similar to Laura, a truly *classic* Creole Plantation up in Vacherie, whereas the one we just passed—you know, just before the giant inflatable pig—well, *that* plantation had stout Doric columns, which is clear evidence of the Anglo’s penchant for Greek revival hodgepodge and certainly not *classic* Creole architecture. His jubilant shriek cuts short my monologue—in which I would have dutifully described the land we were driving through as plantation land, where slaves had tilled the soil and tended the crops to sustain the wealth of the planter class whose plantation homes we were about to tour in St. Francisville.

“AUDUBON HOUSE! Audubon House?” my brother repeats, as if I have somehow become instantly dimwitted. “God, Sissy, really?” Then he says it again, more emphatically, “The Audubon House!!!” He makes a hard right onto Louisiana 965, fishtails, and then steps on the gas as he regains control of the wildly careening car.

Startled, yet sort of impressed and intrigued, I pause for a brief intake of breath, change tracks, and start in again. “Why yes, David, you’re exactly right. This is the site where, finding grand inspiration from the flora and fauna of the Felicianas, John James Audubon began work on his famous ornithological tome *Birds of America*, but the actual house on the property is called Oakley”

“Shut up dumbass,” he snaps, “a) I already know that, and b) that’s not what I’m talking about!”

“Well, what are you talking about?” I ask petulantly as he speeds down the two-lane blacktop. He has, after all, interrupted my attempts to edify him—pearls before swine.

“The film! Harriet Tubman! With Dad! Don’t you remember? This is where we filmed!” He is right. I have been here before, when I was 16. For some reason, I have completely forgotten that trip until David’s histrionics jar my memory.

“Holy shit! You’re right.” I whisper under my breath as he barrels down the road toward Oakley House and the Audubon Historic Site. Somehow, I have completely forgotten about my first trip to St. Francisville, and possibly The Myrtles, sixteen years earlier—almost exactly half my lifetime ago. A levee breaks as names, locations, sights, smells, sounds—moments that move—flood the breach (Gumbrecht). It was my first trip to Louisiana: Thibodeaux—the African American congregants from the local church playing extras in the field, my first bowl of gumbo, the constant buzz of mosquitoes; Donaldsonville—the creepy bayou at night, the story the funny sounding Cajun boy told me about the *loup garou*, the African American museum; New Orleans—sneaking out of our hotel room and going to Bourbon Street; St. Francisville. We filmed in St. Francisville, at the slave quarters out in back of Oakley Plantation and around the grounds of the Audubon Site. We stayed at the Ramada Inn up Highway 61, the building—still there—looks the same, but the name has changed. We ate at Sonny’s pizza—the same place I had taken my classmates after we took the Mystery Tour at The Myrtles as part of my final project in the graduate ethnography seminar. I remember now that I had the identical reaction to Sonny’s at age 16 and 32—service is slow but the pizza is worth the wait.

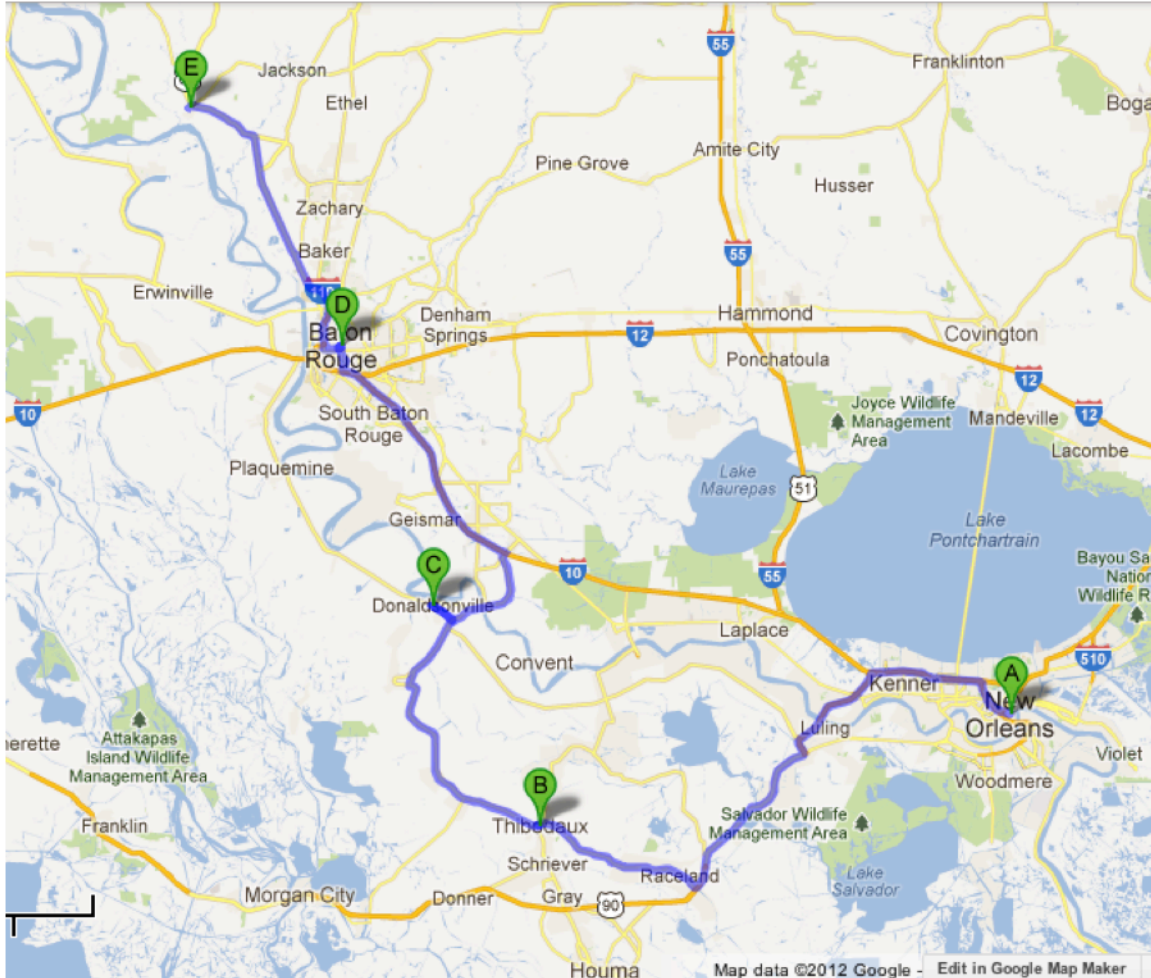


Figure 3. In Medias Res: Circuitous Routes to Chloe

My father was producing an educational film about Harriet Tubman and The Underground Railroad. He enlisted two of my younger brothers and me to work on the crew. At 16, still in braces, I served as the assistant script supervisor and helped in the costume department; my brothers, 14 and 15, worked as production assistants. I had been driving to St. Francisville to go to the Myrtles regularly for the past two years. Why were all these memories only surfacing now? The effect was uncanny. A shroud of dissonance enveloped my very being as icy hot tingles of un/familiarity raced scatter shot across my synapses. *Deja-vu* in retrograde. Here/not here. Me/not me. Fort-da (Freud *The Pleasure Principle* 12ff)

David brakes hard as we almost pass the turn off to the Historic Audubon Site. Cranking the wheel sharply to the right, the contents of my oversized red leather purse careen across the floorboard as we skid onto the gravel road. A low split rail fence skirts the road, guiding us to a stop in front of a gray gate that is closed and locked. It is dusk and the place is already closed for the day. “Damn, too late.” My brother snorts, “Typical Vaughns.” He parks the car and we wander up to the grey gate that callously bars our spontaneous sojourn down memory lane. We look longingly down the charming path winding off into lush, leafy walls glowing a mystic moss green in the light of the purple and gold streaks from the setting sun. Audubon was right. It looks supernatural. The brilliant foliage hides the path’s progression, which careens out of our sight, obscuring any hope we have of glimpsing the grand green jalousie galleries of Oakley House, much less the slave quarters out back with which we are more familiar. “Damn.”

“Weeeelllll,” I ponder out loud. He can tell from my rising inflection exactly what I am thinking.

“Weeeelll,” he responds matching my mischievous intonation.

“You know . . . we coouuld . . .” I let the end of the sentence dangle between us as I step up on the bottom rail of the low wooden fence, steadying myself with the help of a thick splintery post.

Following my lead, David steps up on the first rail as well. “Yup . . . we suuure could. . . .”

We perch on the gate for a minute playing that silent game so popular among siblings, “You First. I’m not going to go first, you go first. No, you first.” Sensing the eminence of either a draw or criminal trespassing, my brother pipes up, “Or . . . we could put on our adult pants,

admit that neither one of us has the money to make bail, and forgo the felony . . . you know . . . just this once . . . and still make it to The Myrtles in time to get a beer before the tour starts.”

“Well . . . if you say so,” I chide impishly, my Cheshire cat grin implying that we should be clear, *he* is the one who has chickened out. Then, by way of concession, I hop down from the gate first.

“Deal,” he responds, grateful I think that he will not be forced to rise to the bait of a dare from a *girl*—and actually sounding relieved. He, too, dismounts.

We turn around, giving Audubon’s landscape one last look before we climb into the car and make our way back up the gravel road to Louisiana 965.

David says, “Hey do you remember when the equipment truck got stuck in the mud and what’s his name . . . Scott’s . . . horribly cheap toupee got sucked under the tire when they were trying to dig it out?”

We both let rip a melodic series of donkey laughs—which believe it or not is in and of itself a complex genealogic song whose familiar arrangement of chords flows easily from years of practice. I take the high register; he takes the low. The rhythm of my “haws” come more from my mother’s cackle and his breathy “hees” more resemble my grandfather’s giggle—the harmony renders a contagious little tune that is sometimes hard to stop. Setting each other off, we repeat the sidesplitting song that used to get the two of us in trouble at church.

As we drive the gravel road, we volley fragments of long lost yet suddenly familiar stories back and forth as my Lexus, its aubergine color matches streaks in the early evening sky, slowly twists back to Louisiana 965. As we round the last curve we pass a historical marker, throbbing like an inflamed incisor, at the mouth of the road—something I also apparently missed at the beginning of this side trip. Before I can even focus my gaze on the small text, a name

suddenly shrieks from the shackles of the moss green marker and assaults my eyes. I scream at the top of my lungs, “Oh my god!” The tires slide along the gravel as my brother slams on the breaks, stopping short. “Jesus Christ! What is it?” my brother yells as I spring from car, making a beeline towards the shadow underneath the weathered marker. The sign reads:

Oakley Plantation, 3 miles east, where John James Audubon painted 32 of his *Birds of America*. It was built in 1799 by Ruffin Gray and acquired as a state park in 1947, from Miss Lucy Mathews.

Ruffin Gray! The sign reads Ruffin Gray. My black converse sneakers turn quickly on the grassy surface of the shoulder as I race back to the car. I scour the floorboard, rifling through the contents of my purse, frantically trying to fish out the little notebook I always carry with me to record dates and such. My hand seizes the cool spiral coil, and I sprint back toward the sign as if it might somehow run away if I dawdle. My brother, refusing to play this game, hollers, “What the hell? You scared me to death!”

“Oh my God, Bubba. That’s him!”

“Who?” my brother asks.

“Ruffin Gray . . . Ruffin Gray Stirling. . . . They’ve got to be related!” I squeal.

“Wait what? Who’s related to whom?” he says, sounding slightly annoyed.

“Ruffin Gray Stirling—third owner of The Myrtles!”

“Is he the one cut off what’s-her-name’s ear? ”

“No,” I reply impatiently. “That was Judge Woodruff, the second owner. And her *name* was Chloe. Woodruff sold the property to Ruffin Gray Stirling *after* Chloe killed his wife and two of his kids, James and Cornelia Gail.” I continue rotely as I scribble down the text of the sign.

“But the sign doesn’t say Stirling. It just says Ruffin Gray.”

“Why yes, I see that.” I counter sarcastically still scribbling, “but there has to be a connection of some sort, right?” Finishing the transcription I flip the page of my spiral and write in bold letters, Audubon/Myrtles?, and draw a big circle and add stars. The stars are my shorthand for “What is the connection between Oakley, Audubon, and The Myrtles?”

My tour guide monologue forgotten, I blather incoherently about connections, trying to match up dates as David drives us back to Highway 61. “Ruffin Gray bought what would become Oakley Plantation and the Audubon Historic Site in 1799. That would have been three years after Bradford bought Laurel Grove and built The Myrtles in 1796. Audubon was at Oakley house in 1821, roughly four years before Chloe supposedly killed Ms. Woodruff and the children, which would have been about the time Woodruff sold the property and the slaves to Ruffin Gray Stirling. You can’t have two similar habitats of Ruffin Grays this close to each other without them being part of the same ornithological migration pattern, right? I mean there is the delicate bone structure to consider. You know what they say about the flocking patterns of birds of a feather. . . .”

My brother points out that I am mumbling incoherently to myself and completely ignoring him as I flip through the pages of the spiral notebook and the various sized scraps of paper stuffed among the pages. “Sister, you can either start using nouns and verbs that relate to each other and at least try to make a scrap of sense or, God as my witness, I’m gonna turn on, tune in, and turn up Rush.” His bemused tone indicates that he is only half joking, so his threat produces the reaction he intended. “The Hell you will!” I pipe up. “Over my dead and rotting corpse will you defile our grandmother’s car with that man’s hateful voice.”

I am glad David has come to see me, but the memories he unlocked and the forgetting he exposed trouble me. When we finally make it to The Myrtles, David insists that we all—my dad, my brothers and I, and the rest of the film crew—visited The Myrtles on that first trip. His certainty about that fact is something I can neither confirm nor deny. Do I remember a feeling of *deja vu* when I came here in 2007? Surely I would have remembered coming here with my *father* 16 years ago! Is it possible that The Myrtles and its ghostly inhabitants have been haunting me for half of my life? Maybe I have just come here so often that the specifics of when, which time, and with whom all bleed together as the repeated visitations grow more ambiguous, diversified, unpredictable—haunted? I’m not ready for that yet.

As I make my way into the small town of St. Francisville, the store front for Audubon Audio signals a continuation of the John James Audubon theme. The name Audubon carries some currency throughout southern Louisiana. From The John James Audubon Bridge, Audubon Audio, and The Audubon Lounge and Packaged Liquor Store in St. Francisville, to Audubon Park and Audubon Self Storage in Baton Rouge, to Audubon Regional Library, Audubon Riverboat Tours, and Audubon Zoo in New Orleans, the Yellow Pages list literally hundreds of businesses featuring his moniker.

During the tour of The Myrtles I took with David that evening, after the tour guide informed us about the significant expansion of the home and the extensive and expensive renovation performed by the third owners of the property, Ruffin Gray Stirling and Mary Catherine Cobb Stirling, I meekly raised my hand and interrupted the flow of her speech.

“Excuse me,” I chirped. “Sorry to interrupt, but earlier, when we were driving here, we saw the historic marker in front of The Audubon Historic Site that says Ruffin Gray started to build the plantation out there before he died. . . .” Her forced fixed smile just barely masked her

disdain for what she perceives as my apparent rudeness. “So . . . ,” I continued quickly, “do you know if that Ruffin Gray is related to Ruffin Gray Stirling?”

“Well . . .” she said, her mouth stretching into a polite smile through what seemed a superhuman effort on her part. “I don’t know. It’s possible. ‘Round here, everybody’s related to everybody somewhere down the line. Moving on. . . .” The exceedingly pleasant tone of her response indicates to me and all of the other folks on the tour that anymore annoying interruptions are ill advised. But I can’t move on. Some specter hanging out in the space between “I don’t know” and “It’s possible” won’t let me. If Derrida is correct, and on this count I am also convinced that he is, haunting is a politics of memory, inheritance, and generations. Lineage is on the line. Besides, I have never backed down from a challenge, especially one issued by an upstart tour guide tied too closely to her carefully memorized script.

As I pass the little green sign welcoming me to St. Francisville proper, I turn off the air conditioner and roll down the driver’s side window. The inrush of warm air whisks away the scent memory of my brother’s cologne along with the memory of our visit to Oakley. The sticky heat momentarily assuages the prickly goose bumps. I’m not ready—not yet.

For those who feel inclined to dismiss St. Francisville as “just another tourist trap” or to slap down some half-academic self-congratulatory consumerist critique, I think it important to remember two key points. First, specters are still about, and we will not conjure them in order to exorcise them with our arrogance, vanquishing them in service of academic vanity. Second, the dollars generated through the tourism apparatus are of vital importance to the folks living and working in St Francisville specifically and Louisiana more generally. Lest we forget, Louisiana has the second lowest per capita income and the second highest poverty rate in the United States. The 24.1 million visitors to Louisiana each year sustain the 9.4 billion dollar tourism industry

that, in turn, directly or indirectly employs over 200,000 people. To be clear, the public monies spent on promoting tourism generate a 17:1 return on investment. Without the 850 million dollars the state earns annually in tax revenue from the tourism industry, Louisianans would pay, on average, 550 dollars more each year in state taxes (“About Louisiana Office of Tourism”).

The tiny town of St. Francisville sits on a bluff overlooking what used to be Bayou Sara, but that is another story with different, albeit related, ghosts. About two square miles in area, the town, which has a population of around 1,700, and its economy are heavily reliant on tourist dollars. Many in the tight knit community actively participate in the re/presentation of its/their/the town’s histories, and local business owners rely on the income produced through providing various goods and services to the many tourists who flock to one or more of the seven plantations in the vicinity. In fact, many of the local charities, preservation societies, and business owners generate much of their annual revenue during peak tourist seasons. The two major annual events in St. Francisville—The Audubon Pilgrimage Festival and Halloween at The Myrtles—draw so many tourists that the town’s population more than doubles during the festivities.

The tourism industry in Louisiana is massive, and St. Francisville exerts quite a bit of force in multiple cultural and economic domains within that structure. Positioned as such, the tourism industry is not above critique; however, a nuanced, critical analysis is warranted. When a scalpel is required, an axe cannot render appropriate incisions. In such cases, it is imperative to consider carefully the embodied *doing*, the actual labor performed by folks—locals, tourist industry workers, tourists, and ghosts—who participate with, in, and alongside multiple articulations of production and maintenance specific to these performative events.

The flashing light at Commerce Street signals the possibility of a turn toward historic downtown St. Francisville. Intersections require a choice, and they are spaces where ghosts meddle “with taken for granted realities” (Gordon 8). As I have noted before, “There . . . are crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day (Benjamin “Surrealism” 183).” I decide to stay on my present course. Decelerating through the light at Commerce Street on Highway 61, I see the corrugated red tin roof that tops a rectangular building, which looks like it could have been constructed of giant white Legos, jutting out just beyond the intersection. An equally rectangular white sign with red script reading Audubon Packaged Liquor Store comes into focus. I thought all liquor came in some sort of package when purchased, so I am confused as to why the store’s proprietor felt it necessary to specify that said liquor was indeed packaged. I contemplate unpackaged liquor sales. Isn’t unpackaged liquor just liquid?

As I turn my head to examine the block structure more closely, it appears more aged and dirty-blond than pristine white, as if the Legoist chose not to wash his hands before starting construction. There, on that grubby exterior wall, I see another sign, The Audubon Lounge, where, in all likelihood they sell unpackaged liquor—liquor by the drink. How clever and convenient—a lovely living example of the ever excessive, unfurling, durational relationship between the container and the contained (Bergson *Time and Free Will* 2ff). The Audubon Lounge and Packaged Liquor Store has all of the qualities I require in a good dive bar: it is weathered (well worn, worn down, worn out), the dense fumes of dirty bar mats are sensed before the actual olfactory assault that would certainly be a sensual part of this experience, and the constant cloud of cigarette smoke that seeps from the cracks around the splintered red door have made stale smoky strands like garland that hang in perpetual swags—regardless of the

season—from the eaves of the red roof overhang. The fact that the building is multifunctional—bar *and* liquor store—makes it all the more exceptional. The pink and blue neon signs blink a nimbus-shrouded invitation through the smeary windows.

Open

Open

Open

Who could possibly resist this dive bar equivalent of an engraved invitation?

On another trip to The Myrtles with my friend Brandon, we squeeze in a visit.⁵ At the time, Brandon was my suite mate in the little green shotgun house on Lakeland Drive in Spanish Town and a fellow graduate student in performance studies at LSU. Growing up outside of New Orleans, he had heard about The Myrtles and had even watched a few specials about it on TV, but he had never visited. After a significant amount of arm-twisting, nagging and, ultimately, bribery, I finally convince him to accompany me on a Saturday night Mystery Tour. Persuading him to join me had been tough because, in spite of the fact that he is 6 feet, 4 inches tall and weighs at least 17 stone, he is a great big old scaredy-cat. Of course, given my prior confessions, I really can't talk trash—we both hate being scared, a by-product, we are convinced, of our shared evangelical upbringings. Needless to say, when the rest of our friends invite us to The 13th Gate—the celebrated Halloween haunted house in Baton Rouge—Brandon and I opt for George's Place on St. Louis Street, a divey little gay bar with which 13th Gate shares a block-wide parking lot. George's Place is a kind of scary Brandon and I can appreciate.

To get Brandon to accompany me to St. Francisville, I assure him that if I, a fellow scaredy-cat, can handle The Myrtles then he can, too. I also promise to treat him to post-tour

⁵Brandon Nichols performed his version of this story in Jade Huell's production *Black Body Business* in the HopKins Black Box Theatre in February 2010.

drinks at the Audubon Lounge. I am confident that the promise of free drinks at a shady local watering hole rather than the pleasure of my company at a haunted plantation is what finally sealed the deal. After the tour, which Brandon found fascinating and not the least bit frightening, we are knee deep in a critical analysis by the time we pull into the pocked parking lot of the Audubon Lounge less than a mile back down Highway 61.

Brandon is particularly interested in Mrs. Stirling and class issues as they are performed at the site and on the tour. We are at the edge of comparing Mrs. Stirling's story to Chloe's when I turn off the ignition, and Brandon shifts his gaze to the smoke swaged entrances of the two Audubon establishments—Lounge *and* Packaged Liquor Store. “Oh my god, YES,” he cackles loudly, “Everything about it . . . just, Yes!”

“I know, right!” I concur, happy that he, too, finds the seedy aesthetic of the place as irresistible as I do. Walking up to the Lounge, he reaches to open the red door only to find it locked. We look at each other, each with a look that conveys “Weird.” The parking lot is crowded with a wide range of vehicles of various cylindrical capacities and in assorted shades of horsepower. From inside the sealed building we hear the strains of Hank Williams' ode to Cajun Louisiana. From these signs, we interpret that the place is open for business, even if it is not unlocked. We circumnavigate the dingy white box and enter the unlocked door of the Liquor Store where we are greeted by unforgiving flickering glare of fluorescent lights. The cashier, who does not look up from her pulp-paper tabloid hawking the latest Brangelina triumphs and tragedies, drawls mechanically, “How y'all doin'?”

“Great, thanks,” I respond. “Where's the entrance to the lounge?” She needn't have answered because as I made my request I smelled the combination of smoke and booze oozing from the commercial glass door with the horizontal metal push bar just a few paces away from

the door we had just entered. From her stool behind the register, she waves absently toward the same door without raising her eyes from the celebrity rag. The dark vinyl film tinting the glass door renders it almost completely black save a few bubbles and gashes where the peeled-away film reveals slivers of the scene beyond. I assume the darkly tinted glass shields the lounge patrons from the harsh sallow lighting of the store. Even the divest of dive bars avoid subjecting their customers to the punitive glare of fluorescents until closing time, when they use them as a weapon to drive out the dawdling drunks. In the moment, the black slashed door strikes me as a sort of reverse image or, more accurately, a negative of the haunted mirror hanging in the entrance hall at The Myrtles.

With Brandon towering over and behind me, I push open the door and a noxious blue-gray haze of smoke welcomes us into the dim dank bar. The handlebar mustachioed bartender winces in the sudden onslaught of light, and two burly men in t-shirts, jeans, steel-toed Red Wing work boots, and ball caps instinctively turn in our direction to discern the identities of the new customers entering their territory. As the door creaks closed—slowed either by some form of pneumatic arm or, more likely, an accretion of dirt, smoke, and grease—my eyes, aided by the neon blue light emanating from the corner jukebox and the red and yellow glimmer from the adjacent video poker machines, adjust to the comparative darkness of the space. In the few moments it takes for the door to seal us inside and for my vision to become attuned to the low general wash, I sense something skewed. None of the three men has looked away; their eyes remain firmly glued on us. While nothing is unusual about folks doing a double take when someone new enters a bar—I do it unconsciously all the time at Hound Dogs—this is different. The two men at the long rectangular bar directly in front of us stare (or glare, it's difficult to be certain in this light). As they slowly take our measure with their eyes, the other patrons' chatter

fades slowly to a halt as others sense a sea change in the fetid atmosphere of the bar. Gradually, the spotlight of the joint gaze of the fifteen local patrons pins us where we stand. Even Hank Williams seems complicit; he belts out the last few bars of “On The Bayou” and goes silent in the jukebox.

Smiling, I turn my attention to the bartender and mouth a quick greeting, but he just sucks on the toothpick jutting out through his impressive mustache. This is St. Francisville, the heart of the Deep South—deeper, in fact, than Spanish Town—and I find this collective rudeness shocking and a bit unsettling. I wonder if I have missed a sign somewhere along the way—the locked outer door to the Lounge, perhaps—indicating “Locals Only!” or “No Tourists!” I suspect I have lived too long in college towns, which has made me a little slow on the uptake. What’s happening here suddenly dawns on me and, when I look at Brandon, I can see that he is well ahead of me. This is a replay of the scene from *Blazing Saddles* when Cleavon Little as Sheriff Bart first enters the saloon in Rock Ridge.

When called upon to complete paperwork that requires demographic information, I check off the following boxes: Single, Female, Caucasian. Although my dark hair, dark eyes, and olive skin that tans easily sometimes raises questions about my ethnic origins (Mexican? Cuban? Portuguese? Spanish? Italian? Greek?) when I travel outside of the United States, no one has ever assumed I was of African descent. In general, most folks read me phenotypically as white. Although Brandon has confided that while growing up his black classmates sometimes chastised him for “acting white,” no one has ever assumed he is white, nor would anyone believe him if he chose to check the Caucasian box on a form.

As we move past the long bar to a low open table near the jukebox, the burly men slowly swivel back to their Bud lights. One of them, I can’t tell which now that their backs are turned,

says brusquely, “Well . . . that ain’t right.” Before I can even process what he means, the other mutters audibly, “N double A C P.” Without looking at one another they both affirm their assent with matching gruff grunts. Clearly they are not randomly invoking the name of the civil-rights organization; more likely they are referencing the racist rendition of the acronym displayed on the stall walls in the gas station at the beginning of desolation row. The “ain’t right” in that statement—assuming I’m not loosing my powers of cultural interpretation, and I am confident I am not—suggests they think Brandon and I are a couple and find the idea of a white woman and a black man appalling. Inbred ideas about miscegenation die hard. Post-racial my ass.

Having fully realized what is going on, I feel my ears redden and a slow guttural rumble of rage rises in my throat as Brandon and I sit down at the sticky table. Slack-jawed, I inquire, “Did that just happen?”

“Um . . . yeah. That just happened.” Brandon responds decisively.

“Well FUCK that!” I say, a little too loudly—on purpose. “Wanna make out?” I ask defiantly.

He grins, “Um . . . no.” The steadiness of his voice suggests that he is not scared, and I don’t think he has a problem with PDAs. I am left to assume that he has refused my offer because it isn’t his normal practice make out . . . with *girls*.

“I promised you drinks. You want one?”

“Sure.” he replies resolutely, “Miller Light.”

“You got it,” I say.

He sits stoutly in his chair, settling into our defiant little sit in, as I make my way to the bar, cash in hand, readying myself for the bartender to tell me that he don’t want my money. Using the footrest at the base of the bar, I hoist myself up onto the high stool and lean forward,

propping myself up on my elbows and looking directly at the bartender. When I have satisfied myself that he is intentionally ignoring me, I bark sternly, “Hey!” No response; he doesn’t even glance in my direction. “Excuse me.” I declare loudly. It is not a question. He meets my glare and reluctantly makes his way over, not saying a word. “Two. Miller. Lights.” I spit. We stare each other down. He breaks first, reaches into his cooler and slams the two bottles down on the bar without opening them, snatches the ten-dollar bill out of my hand and slams it into his register. “Really?” I seethe. “You charge five buck for domestics... *here?* I’ve got some change coming.” I dare him to challenge me. Begrudgingly he rings open the register and tosses four ones on the bar in my general vicinity. “Why thank you so very much!” I hurl sarcastically as he turns his back grumbling incoherently. I jump down from the stool and make my way back to the table, daring anyone to make eye contact. None do. As I put the beer down in front of Brandon, I can feel the stares of the disgruntled crew at the bar boring into my back, but I resist the urge to turn on them.

As I sit back down, I wish the jukebox would start up again. The uncomfortable quiet that has settled over the bar only magnifies the tension in the room, and the music would at least provide acoustical cover for our conversation. In spite of the melodic dearth, another of Dylan’s Highway 61 songs—“Ballad of the Thin Man”—loops mercilessly through my brain.

You walk into the room
With your pencil in your hand
You see somebody naked
And you say, “Who is that man?”
You try so hard
But you don’t understand
Just what you’ll say
When you get home.
Because something is happening here
But you don’t know what it is
Do you . . . ?

As Brandon and I strike up the conversation we left unfinished in the car, a middle-aged blond who is a little worse for wear turns toward us from the video poker machine where she has been sitting and attempts to salve the strain in the room.

“So, where y’all from?” she asks leaning toward us on her stool.

“Baton Rouge,” we reply in unison.

“Y’all just up here visitin’?” I realize she is reaching out to us, but I also wonder if she is not making some point for the listening crowd—what I’m not sure.

“Umm . . . yeah, I guess so,” Brandon replies, then sips his beer.

“We were just up at The Myrtles taking a tour,” I add.

“Ha!” she says, “Is that right? Did y’all see any ghosts?”

Brandon and I exchange a glance trying to negotiate who should answer this seemingly straightforward question. He leans back in his chair, shrugs his shoulder and makes an open palmed “after you” hand gesture in my direction, deferring to my expertise in ghostly matters. I respond with what has become my stock answer to this frequent question. “I don’t know. It’s possible.”

She goes on to tell us that she took her kids up there last Halloween, you know, just for kicks. The boys, she says, took a bunch of pictures on their phones and even got a few blue spirit orbs in a couple. The three of us continue in this vein for a bit longer, but it becomes obvious that her kind attempt to alleviate the tension in the bar is having the opposite effect. The other patrons seem to grow quieter and more anxious as our conversation continues. She ends the conversation congenially and with an apologetic tone.

“I really do hope y’all come back to St. Francisville. It really *is* a nice place, with really nice people.” Through her tone and emphasis, she insinuates that this experience is exceptional

and that it is important that we understand her point. Then, she turned back to the video poker machine. Brandon and I speak quietly as we finish the beer. When he drains his bottle, I ask if he wants another, indicating that the duration of this minor protest is entirely up to him. He shakes his head and says, "Let's just go." The tone of his reply registers somewhere between disgust, despondency, and exasperation.

We leave our empties on the table and, as we walk past the bar on our way to the glass door, the asshats in ball caps mutter something to each other under their breath that I choose not to hear. Though his face and stance are as immobile as a portrait, the bartender's eyes follow us as we cross toward the exit. I throw a scathing glance in his direction and shake my head. For a moment I pause, peering through the claw marks in the film on the door into the bright florescent interior of the Liquor Store. A figure passes. I fling open the door. The cashier, hearing the door, mutters, "'Night, y'all," without looking up from her tabloid. Brandon raises his hand in acknowledgement, which remains unseen, as we walk back out into the still, sticky St. Francisville night.

You ask, "Is this where it is?"
And somebody points and says
"It's his"
And you say, "What's mine?"
And somebody else says, "Where what is?"
And you say, "Oh my God
Am I here all alone?"
But something is happening here
But you don't know what it is
Do you . . . ?

As I pull out of the parking lot and head south down Highway 61, I am still trying to wrap my head around what has just happened. I am angry and shocked and I want to talk about it. Stupidly, I open with, "Holy Shit. Nothing like that has ever happened to me." Brandon sits for a moment, looking straight ahead, and then says, somewhat quietly, certainly not cruelly, "Well . . .

lucky you.” He turns his face toward the passenger side window. I pause. My impulse is to apologize, but I don’t—not because I am not sorry for the gross insensitivity of what I said (I am), and not because I am not sorry for the whole sorry situation he (we?) has just been through (I am mortified by it). The gesture would be hollow—at best. More than that, though, to apologize would be almost dismissive (I’m sorry that happened, let’s not think about it). The term, after all, derives from the Greek (or is it Latin) *apologia*—to speak in one’s own defense. To apologize would be to preserve the logic of the infraction; to reify and re-inscribe the so called logic of the cultural hierarchy that is our common heritage in this region as well as in the fundamentalist religions into which we both were born. For me, it is important to dwell in this moment, not to elide it with an apology that might allow me to forget to remember my privilege. It is a gift. After several reflexive breaths I say, “Good point.”

That night, for the first part of the drive back to our little liberal enclave in Baton Rouge, we gave a requisite—almost reverent—space in which silence could operate. Then, as we turned on to the I-110 shunt, illuminated by the ghostly incandescent light and shadows of the petrochemical plants, Brandon shared a beautiful story about how his grandfather visited him in his bedroom a few nights after he died. Not all ghost stories are scary. As my grandmother’s aubergine Lexus slows to an easy purr on the 9th street exit ramp from I-110, Brandon looks at me squarely and says jokingly, “Umm, look bitch . . . I believe you promised me drinks—plural.” I cackle, “I did . . . I did indeed! To the Dawg?” He nods. “Hound Dogs it is.”

Driving along the stretch of Highway 61 that passes through St. Francisville, one would never guess the historical town prides itself on quaint and beautiful heritage sites. In addition to the Audubon Lounge, the highway here is littered with gas stations, fast food joints, and a sprinkling of locally owned businesses, none of which would qualify as quaint. To see the

charming part of the town one would have to turn left on Commerce Street at the light before reaching the Audubon Lounge and Packaged Liquor Store. Oddly, the turn on Commerce is a turn away from the corporate commercial. After passing the local hospital and a church at its inception, the street becomes pastoral, winding its way through stands of trees with shrubbery furbelows until the gradual appearance of houses and buildings signals the arrival of old St. Francisville. A right at the light at St. Ferdinand takes you past a small car dealership, which is followed in rapid succession on the right by the Town Hall and the West Feliciana Historical Society, which houses a museum dedicated to the history of St. Francisville and Bayou Sara. It looks like an old General Store—the gray paint is fresh, the white trim pristine, and the flowerboxes are always in full bloom. It wouldn't surprise me to see Mrs. Ingalls walk out of the store with Laura and Mary in tow, carrying a bolt of calico.

“Can you park here?” is the perennial first question guests ask when I take them to visit St. Francisville. I always respond affirmatively, though it does feel like parking in the street. A matching set of Wedgewood blue double doors flank the bay window in the center of the façade. The display in the window changes with the seasons, but most often features merchandise that can be purchased within—a clear indication that, like most museums, this is also a commercial establishment. I cross the deep front porch to the set of wooden double doors on the right; the top half of each door is a huge expanse of glass. The matching set of doors on the left side of the porch add symmetry to the walk-up, but are useful only as a place to display posters and flyers for upcoming local events. As I open the door and step up into the building, a bell rings alerting the docent to come to the counter and add a tick-mark in a big ledger sprawled on the counter. Her task complete, she greets me and asks if she can be of assistance. She is well equipped to help. In addition to her individual store of knowledge, bookcases containing histories, cookbooks,

biographies, and coffee table books flank her counter. Kiosks containing any number of pamphlets and brochures designed for the needs of tourists traversing Plantation Land surround her. For those without cameras, postcard racks stand sentry on the counter next to the ledger. Whenever she receives a request for directions—her most frequent task—she lifts a cream colored map with maroon print pinpointing local attractions from a large stack to her left. The maroon print is a close match for the script on the signs outside the building. After handing over the map, she encourages guests to look around the museum. I always oblige.

The museum is a single, large, high-ceilinged, rectangular room; three square wooden columns bisect it lengthwise, creating two larger rectangular spaces. Six metal brackets, two on each white column, hold flagpoles from which hang six historical flags that have supposedly flown over the Felicianas. All of the flags look weathered from long display; their whites have gone cream colored, their gold fringe clogged with gray dust. The place smells faintly of mothballs in old closets; it smells like sepia or, more accurately, the way I think sepia would smell. The warm hue reflecting off the polished, wooden floorboards adds to the sepia-toned ambiance of the place. The horizontal wood boards that line the walls have been painted white, making the dark wood of the glass display cases pop.

The west wall is devoted entirely to a history of St. Francisville and Bayou Sara. Although the location of the display has not changed, the panels have been periodically relocated and updated. The initial display was comprised primarily of sky blue foam core boards, upon which white mats framed with what appeared to be mimeographed copies of images, documents, historical maps, and text; the whole thing looked as if it might have been executed by the members of an Advanced Placement history class. Recently, these panels have been replaced by slick, professionally produced panels of various sizes devoted to historical accounts, some of

which are printed in white text superimposed over old maps, pictures, and drawings of historical St. Francisville and Bayou Sara. Half way down the wall a tombstone sits on a low table propped up against history. Its French script, barely legible, commemorates a Catholic family from Point Coupee brought to St. Francisville after their deaths by Copernican monks for burial on the high bluffs.

The history stretches beyond the tombstone to the corner, where it continues in a different, less abridged form. A set of tall open bookcases hosts a library of old books containing histories of Louisiana. Next to the bookcase, a flip rack of metal frames—like the ones you would find in Spencer Gifts at the local mall displaying black light posters and blown up photographs of celebrities to hang on your walls—displays fragments of local history. Letters, deeds, photographs, maps, and even blown up copies of the pages of the Constitution of the Republic of West Florida are available for perusal. A hallway that leads back to the restrooms and some doors to rooms not open to the public cleaves the back wall.

I wander among display cases of a variety of shapes and sizes that occupy the center of the room, arranged around and between the bases of the square columns. The largest of the cases is at least nine feet tall and seven feet wide; it houses one male and one female mannequin dressed in antebellum costumes. The face of the woman reminds me of the bust that sits on the table in front of the haunted mirror in the entrance hall of The Myrtles, which is to say she looks Victorian—as does this costume—but the accompanying text assures me it is antebellum. A couple of cases shaped like A-frame houses made of glass and wood sit among the columns. One contains fragments of pottery and clay figurines that have been found in the area and brought to the museum. They serve as concrete reminders of the Native American tribes that occupied the area before the arrival of the Europeans. Two smaller cases elevated on tall wooden plinths that

flank the foremost column in the room contain *papier mâché* dolls depicting Martha Barrow Turnball, an early prominent citizen of the community, and Don Juan O'Connor, an Irish settler. Any potential connection between these two historical figures remains unexplained. They remind me of the goat-herder marionettes from *Sound of Music*, though I cannot detect any strings. Another set of cases encircling the column at the back contains dioramas of rooms from plantation homes.

I look up and find myself facing the large window of the docent's office that overlooks the museum. It sits on the right hand side of the hallway. The expanse of glass is shielded on the inside by a set of blinds that are slightly open. Through them I can see a photocopy machine in the garish florescent light. A large table to my right sits below the Bonnie Blue Flag of the Republic of West Florida. There are bookcases beneath it and turned perpendicular to the wall, framing a research space. I wonder if the museum allows patrons who find interesting tidbits in the volumes housed there to use the photocopier. Rounding the bookcases, I am startled by a display of items that, according to the accompanying placard, come from the Jewish immigrants who settled in the area. In addition to a stunning sterling silver menorah, a teapot, several pitchers, and some objects I cannot identify, there are newspaper articles about the history of the local Jewish community. One from 1903 marks the dedication of Temple Sinai; the author notes that both Gentiles and Jews attended the dedication of the sacred building.

Behind the counter where the docent greets visitors is a space that serves as a gift shop. Though anchored in a specific spot, its boundaries are malleable. Some of the items for sale are located on and in front of the docent's counter, others—most notably a cumbersome rack of art prints that include the Audubon birds—moves to wherever it seems most out of the way. The items in the gift shop are predictable. The inventory includes any number of books, many by

local historian Anne Butler. It also has children's books, T-shirts, and a random menagerie of fleur-de-lis paraphernalia—candles, knick-knacks. Most of the items are fairly standard fare that you could find in the gift shops at any of the area plantations—coffee mugs, thimbles, shot glasses, matted 4 x 6 pictures of plantation homes, swamps, and a random alligator thrown in here and there. It is baffling to me why people collect these things, but given the inventory here and elsewhere, they obviously do.

For me, the most fascinating item in the gift shop is a flat, rectangular basket sitting on a shelf at eye level that contains a number of small dolls and stuffed animals. A brown fuzzy bear dressed in an LSU cheerleader outfit is partnered with a bear in a New Orleans Saints sweater—a gold fleur-de-lis on a flat black background. He is slightly larger. You can tell the cheerleader bear is a girl because she is wearing a skirt and has a gold bow tied around her right ear; the second bear is clearly a boy because he is not wearing any pants. Surrounding this likely south Louisiana duo are four handmade dolls, three of which are pickaninnies. The single white doll—a blonde—carries a bag full of turnips. There are pictures of turnips on her dress. One of the black dolls wears a skirt of the same material. She is wide-eyed. It is difficult to tell if her expression has been brought on by the fact that her skirt and the white doll's dress are made of the same material or because a white bear looms over her left shoulder. None of the black dolls have bags of produce, which makes me wonder if these black dolls have selflessly picked these turnips for the white doll?

Abruptly, in the middle of this facetious narrative I am concocting on the spot, I realize that although I have seen references to the French and Spanish and Irish and Native Americans, to Protestants and Catholics and Jews, I don't recall any reference to Africans or African-Americans anywhere in the museum other than in this basket. This discovery makes me turn on

my black Conversed heel and scurry—no, sprint back to the panoramic history displayed on the west wall. Clutching the mouth of my oversized red purse in both hands as if it was a basket, I gaze down into its vast abyss of my bag (or is it my baggage?) searching for the dingy white edge of my little spiral notebook and rummaging with my eyes for a writing instrument of any pedigree lurking somewhere in the murky depths. Lost in my search, I almost careen into the lovely dove haired docent cooing a stream of soothing answers about the cemetery at Grace Episcopal Church to a visitor bellied up to the other side of the counter. I sense rather than see the startled look on the face of the inquiring tourist and the semi-indignant glance of the usually helpful docent. Suddenly aware of their attentions, I mutter a disingenuous, “Sorry. . . . Excuse me. . . . So sorry,” as I make my fumbling way towards the something I am certain I simply failed to witness in my earlier perusal of the Plantation Land History inscribed in words and images on the west wall.

In a parallel mental space, I am flooded with gratitude that I am not in a library (another locale where I tend to engage in inadvertent, yet nonetheless, inappropriate behavior such as sprinting through the stacks hot on the trail of . . . something or, like my brothers gathered around the flickering televisual hearth during football season, I find myself cursing out loud at theoretical or philosophical calls with which I vehemently disagree). If this were a library, I am quite sure that I would be shushed, shunned, banned, or otherwise chastised. Perhaps my relief is unfounded. Glancing back over my shoulder, I have an eerie feeling that if the otherwise occupied docent were not knee deep in a thick description of the landmarks and other points of interest lining the three tenths of a mile along St. Ferdinand Street between the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum and Grace Episcopal Church cemetery that my dissonant behavior might draw comment. Over time, I have learned that in St. Francisville—particularly at the

Historical Society—they like their history sweet and unblemished, like the sweet cream cheese icing on a Red Velvet cake. This sudden obtrusive performance on my part must seem like an embarrassment of rich ruby red crumbs that threaten to blemish the frothy surface.

You hand in your ticket
And you go watch the geek
Who immediately walks up to you
When he hears you speak
And says, “How does it feel
To be such a freak?”
And you say, “Impossible”
As he hands you a bone.
And something is happening here
But you don’t know what it is
Do you . . . ?

Rounding the counter, I compound my previous sins by clipping the metal wing of the rack of Audubon art prints standing sentry by the first of the three columns that bisect the large room into eastern and western rectangles. The iron corner snags my shirtsleeve and, switching the trajectory of my momentum, spins me in the opposite direction. In an attempt to maintain my balance, my body instinctually performs a sloppy pirouette and I find myself face to *papier-mâché* face with the creepy, glass encased, stringless marionette of Martha Barrow Turnball. I stop short, let out a quick gasp, and drop my basket. I am so startled I scarcely notice the change clattering out of my bag and rolling about the floor. There is another figure trapped inside the glass case with Turnball that I had never seen until now. I mouth the words, “Holy. Mother. How. Did. I. Miss. This?”

There is a child in the glass—a little black boy who is the spitting image of *Little Black Sambo*, the title character in an old children’s book that my grandmother owned when, as a whole, white people were less troubled and hence less circumspect about issues related to race. Before my grandmother turned my father’s childhood bedroom museum into a sewing room, I

think I remember seeing the spitting image of this pop-eyed black face on a well-worn yellow cover of a book that shared the bookshelf with a dusty little Lincoln Log house my father had built; little altars everywhere to other times.

Martha Barrow Turnbull has the boy by the scurf and appears to be dragging him somewhere. It must be winter because he is wearing a coat over his green sweater and she is draped in a shawl. His wide eyes look up at her and his faded pink lips form an oblong O, but I cannot tell whether his expression is one of admiration or fear. Her eyes are cast down toward the ground and the only way I can describe the expression on her face is blank—just blank. Who is this child and where is she taking him? I glance at Don Juan O’Conner to see if he can provide any answers but he, in his separate glass case, keeps his back turned against the pair as if he is deliberately ignoring the scene. I check the marker on the pedestal for further explanation. It reads:

Martha Barrow Turnbull. 1810-1896. Born at Highland Plantation, the daughter of William Barrow III and Pheraby Hilliard Barrow, she was educated in Philadelphia and married Daniel Turnbull in 1828. A wedding trip to Europe inspired the Turnballs in the name and garden design of their new home Rosedown Plantation built in 1834. Martha was a passionate gardener and importer of many ornamental trees and shrubs and many varieties of roses. She kept a garden diary delineating the activities of each day, often completing her entry with the words, “My Garden is in perfect order.” She is seen here surveying her garden in the fall, pensive, as she plans next year’s plantings. Her garden is in perfect order.

—Ref. portrait by Sully at Rosedown, *Reflections of Rosedown* by Ola Mae Ward

I, too, am an avid gardener, though my gardens are minute compared to the massive gardens at Rosedown; and I, too, keep a journal noting what was planted when, and where things were planted, fertilized, divided, and what I am planning to plant next season. One of the many things that gardening has taught me is that the notion of “perfect order” (or simply “order” for that matter) is not only fraught from the outset but complete and total bullshit (and by bullshit, here, I am referring to discursive malarkey and not actual bullshit; actual bullshit makes very nutritious

fertilizer). Although I take issue with Turnball's notions about gardening, the sign's explanation of her gardening system is not what troubles me. Who is this child? What is his name? Where is she taking him? Why is his presence in the glass case completely absent from the description of the contents of the case? Turning these questions over in my mind, I bend down and scoop up the scattered change, dump it back into my purse, take out my little spiral, and head west toward the wall in search of answers.

Well you walk into the room
Like a camel and then you frown
You put your eyes in your pocket
And your nose on the ground
There ought to be a law
Against you comin' around
You should be made
To wear earphones.
Does something is happening
And you don't know what it is
Do you . . . Mister Jones?

The display on the west wall depicts the history of Bayou Sarah and St. Francisville, as composed by local author and eighth generation owner/operator of Butler Greenwood Plantation and Bed and Breakfast, Anne Butler. The display includes historical photographs and drawings of the daily life and business in and of the area, departed residents of St. Francisville and Bayou Sara, as well as maps, paintings, and drawings figuring rural life and plantation life in the Felicianas. All of these texts are interspersed with the contemporary photography of Darrell Chitty, who has collaborated with Mrs. Butler on several books. Embedded within the texts upon texts, Anne Butler includes quotations from her out-of-print book, *The Spirit of St. Francisville*.

By this point in this project, I know I am, without question, haunted. Specifically, Chloe, the ghost of a murdered slave woman who is missing an ear, haunts me. So I am intrigued by the

title *The Spirit of St. Francisville*. My initial impulse is to correct the initial noun. In my economy it should read *Spirits*—plural. *Plus d'un*. There is always more than one of them and, although I will not belabor the point here, in Derrida's articulation of hauntology the relationship, the *différance*, between spirits and specters is paramount. However, as I look at this wall of words and images erected in the name of *The Spirit of St. Francisville*, she has included no discussion of specters. Of course, this elision does not mean that the ghosts are not t/here—they are always t/here meddling with taken for granted truths, realities, systems of knowledge—but it appears that Mrs. Butler, the primary speaker in this bricolage of texts, has performed a conjuring trick of sorts. She has raised a Spirit, a Geist, in an attempt to exorcise the ghosts of history that come with it. Nothing is wrong with the fact that Mrs. Butler serves as the primary authorial voice of the history of St. Francisville and Bayou Sara on display in the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum; however, it is important that we be aware that a particular narrative voice has shaped *what is told* in this particular history and, perhaps more importantly, *what is not told* in the history she has chosen to tell. Moreover, it is important to understand that the folks who curate the West Feliciana Historical Society are further legitimizing this particular history through their powerful institutional voice within the community.

That being said, I also want to acknowledge that all historical accounts are partial, are told from particular historical locations, and are activated by people who are also enmeshed within complex webs of power/knowledge—including the histories that I am activating in this document. There is no such thing as a god's eye view—try as we might to pretend otherwise. As Foucault and Nietzsche still extol from the asylum, the grave, and the page, the search for origins (*Ursprung*) is a sketchy quest, a discursive convention, which operates to legitimize a supposed

a-temporal essence or truth that maintains the authority of those who benefit from its conservation or reclamation.

Linearity's feeble body, a corpse (or is it a corpus?) worked into a curve after centuries of use and misuse, enters the stage an already discredited and downtrodden character stripped of narrative primacy. A dissociative creature stumbling about the stage, swatting at ether thick with ghosts, muttering various permutations of "Beginning. Middle. End. Middle. Beginning. End. Middle," s/he deliriously tries to stabilize the pattern of a Spirit, a Geist, s/he once witnessed not so long ago. And yet, I find myself sympathizing with Linearity's disgraced character because I, too, know what it is like to stutter and struggle with structure from time to time. Time to time . . . therein lies the conundrum, no? From What time to Whose time? From Whose time to Which time, and from Which time to How's time, and from Why's time to When's time, etcetera, *ad nauseum*.

I do not know whether the huge panels of history displayed along the west wall of the historical society are intended to illustrate evolutionary history (a tradition of progress in which the past is good and life has been getting better and better ever since) or de-evolutionary history (a tradition which constructs the past as the good old days from which we have digressed, but should take measures to restore).⁶ I do not know. *It*, as always, is difficult for me to parse. The more I look at these huge panels stretching along the wall in front of me the more convoluted "it" becomes. As with a kaleidoscope, the images overlap and bleed into each other. Audubon's birds careen into the faint outlines of moss-draped crepe myrtles like misguided moths. Numerous cream flesh-colored text boxes feature black text—which, lest we forget, is yet another flesh color—frame privileged histories against a backdrop of pixilated supporting images upon which

⁶These concepts are differentiated by Michel Foucault in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History."

documents—pictures, illustrations, maps—appear to be invisibly pinned. And everywhere, everywhere you look are what appear to be the shadows of these documents, as if their edges are curling up and casting shadows on the panels. Technically, they are not “actual” shadows, but rather pictures of shadows; this surface is flat and the appearance of texture is an illusion, *trompe l’oeil*, a trick of the eye. However, lest I forget one of the important lessons Chloe continues to teach me, pictures of shadows and their relative density carry quite a bit of weight. A shadow is a region of darkness where light is blocked, a blind spot that is visible, an uncanny space where seeing and the impossibility of seeing play tag with each other, a place where things appear and disappear simultaneously. In the density of these shadows, between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, subject and object, ghosts operate. Regardless of how slick, smooth, and smoothed out this history actually is, shadows still abound and where there are shadows, there are ghosts.

The first section of the paneled wall features the black and white image of the exterior wall of an old unspecified building—gray wood and peeling pale paint. A long, thin whitewashed wooden plank with stout block lettering that simply reads “St. Francisville” is nailed atop a beam roughly two feet above a window. Perhaps this building is the visage of an old train station; we are not told. The text superimposed over the image in shades of white and cream reads: Welcome to St. Francisville. The text of the first panel not only welcomes visitors, it also establishes a prism that projects the history of St. Francisville and Bayou Sara through a spectrum of categories that, at first glance, seems to progress from black and white and the early muddy roads of then, to the four-color pristine, preserved, gingerbread house lined streets, and year round tourist attractions of *now*. The historical narrative that follows, which is quite literally writ large along the west wall, is organized in a way that is somewhat topical and somewhat

chronological. The categories of the sweeping history include panels about The Land, The First People, The Early Settlers, The Republic of West Florida, The Glory Days and Bayou Sara, The Great Flood, Plantation Life, The Immigrants, The Civil War Destruction and Despair, John James Audubon, and a final section entitled The Past is Present.

The past is framed as largely romantic and is personified as such through images of “ancient live oaks” and “glorious galleries” of plantation homes. St. Francisville is a “magical” place that merits appreciation and preservation. The section entitled The Land focuses mostly on the Mississippi River, which is appropriate because—until the advent of large-scale engineering—the river gave shape to the land rather than the land giving shape to the river. A quote from *The Spirit of St. Francisville* praises the Mississippi’s life-giving majesty and laments its seemingly random bouts of violence; the subtext seems to equate the river with the Almighty—‘the good Lord giveth and the good Lord taketh away.’ The text also evokes mourners who are drawn to the river, like folks who visit a cemetery, to grieve for loved ones lost and land sacrificed to the mighty body of water and to contemplate the nature of life and death. Living less than half a mile from the Mississippi in Baton Rouge, I understand the visceral draw of the river. I have watched the exalted splendor of the sun rising and setting from its banks, and have experienced sheer terror at the sight of feeble sandbags straining mightily against the river’s unfathomable strength. The awe, fear, and sublimity that the Mississippi River evokes is something I could spend much of the rest of my life pondering and never come close to anything that would approximate understanding. So, I am sympathetic to the grand poetic language Mrs. Butler uses to describe living with and dying by the river. But standing in front of this westward facing wall in the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum contemplating the life and death along the river, a single refrain loops so loudly in my head that I can focus on little else.

Took her out to a tree.
Hanged her by the neck.
Weighted her body down with bricks. And tossed her into the Mississippi.

Another section of the wall just a bit further north, features another quotation from *The Spirit of St. Francisville*: “It was the terrain that determined who the settlers would be. . . .” I think to myself, “Ha! Not quite!” I’m fairly certain that the systemic extermination of the indigenous peoples, Spanish land grants, the Louisiana Purchase, American colonization and the legal fortification of the institution of slavery (to name a few) were equally significant determining factors as well. As my eyes dart back and forth along the wall, things get more and more fuzzy and what at first glance seemed to be small shadows, little gaps in knowledge have morphed into huge, dense, dark gaping holes. The panel describing The First People names the Houma as the first known inhabitants of the area, and then states that the Tunica “displaced” the Houma; I can only assume the displacement involved violence. Nothing here indicates who “displaced” the Tunica; yet, the same assumption applies to them.

The Early Settlers are defined as Spanish Capuchin Monks and Anglo-American tidewater planters from Virginia and the Carolinas—but definitely *not* the French. In fact, the text almost boasts that unlike the rest of southern Louisiana, French culture *never* took root here—despite evidence to the contrary: the actual tombstone of a French family sits just a few yards away, leaning against this otherwise slick history; a picture in the preceding First People panel that features the bust of the first non-native to set foot in the Felicianas, French explorer Rene Robert Cavalier Sieur de la Salle. So apparently the (*definitely not French*) “first people” are not to be counted as either settled or settlers and the Anglo peoples are not to be considered immigrants. Another panel, in fact, discusses The Immigrants to St. Francisville. From what I can gather from the information provided, the factors that distinguish Immigrants from Early

Settlers are roughly forty years and the fact that they were Jews escaping religious persecution in Europe. Neither The Early Settlers nor The Immigrants panels discuss Scottish families, such as the Stirlings, who also crossed the Atlantic and established large plantations in St. Francisville. The only thing that is most clear in all of these panels is that Africans are definitely neither First People or Early Settlers nor Immigrants. Perhaps the most glaring elision along the wall are the histories of the enslaved peoples of St. Francisville and Bayou Sara.

Generally, each panel works to valorize the Anglo residents of antebellum St. Francisville as virtuous recipients of the moniker “Feliciana,” which is Spanish for “happy land”—a title bestowed on the region by Spanish Governor Bernardo de Galvez. Although I am sure that many folks living during the historical periods depicted along the wall were indeed happy and virtuous, I am equally convinced that many were considerably less happy. This conclusion is bolstered by the panel describing the events that preceded the West Florida Rebellion, where the text states, “Feliciana settlers, *unhappy* under Spanish rule, revolted in 1810. . . .” Another panel that describes how Bayou Sara was completely wiped out of existence in the great flood of 1927, confirms my infelicitous suspicions. Moreover, the panel that discusses the Civil War frames the mood of the community as one of hardship and despair—definitely not happy.

The Glory Days of the region are positioned decisively as pre-Civil War. Head cocked, eyes squinted, right index finger tapping against my right temple, I openly—audibly—question the claim. “Glory days? For Whom? For. Whom?” My own voice reverberates from the glossy milk paint of the wooden walls, to the sepia toned open space between thick splintered ceiling joists, to the highly polished cypress floorboards, then returns, expanded and distorted to both of my ears as an echo. I realize I am talking to myself . . . in public . . . again.

You . . . this one-eyed midget
Shouting the word “NOW”

And she says, "For what reason?"
And he says, "How?"
And you say, "What does this mean?"
And she screams back, "You're a cow
Give me some milk
Or else go home."
Because something is happening
But you don't know what it is
Do you, Mr. Jones?

The panel entitled Plantation Life begins with "They were a hardy and courageous bunch, these Anglo settlers who migrated down from Pennsylvania, Virginia and the Carolinas," and concludes with a flourish, touting the area's "flourishing" economy that by the early 1800s supported a hotel, a newspaper, a library, a Masonic lodge, and Louisiana's first Episcopal congregation outside of New Orleans. Of the 16 grandly penned sentences on the panel describing "elegant" plantation life in the Felicianas and the "magnificent" plantation homes in the area, only two and a half sentences mention the enslaved population whose labor sustained the nearly "self sufficient" system. Mrs. Butler waxes poetic about the "excellent" semi-tropical climate and the "perfect" fertile soil that sustained the cotton and indigo crops, the "mainstay of the plantations," and posits that the settlers of the area were so happy because the "rolling hills and deep hollows reminded them of home." In what reads to me like a half-hearted admission, her reference to the enslaved population concedes, "The plantation relied on slave labor." Yet, in the very next sentence she appears eager to grant their labors a dignity associated with having a known and valued place within the plantation hierarchy. "On each plantation there were field hands as well as skilled blacksmiths, builders, tanners, wheelwrights, furniture makers, gardeners, accomplished seamstresses, spinners and weavers among the slave population." In the space of 34 words, Butler manages to expand the romantic ideal of this "magnificent" and "perfect" paternalistic system to include all of God's creatures.

I walk slowly toward the next panel expecting that this romantic, partial description of plantation life will surely come to an end. The war is looming and, given the issues that fueled the war, odds are most of the folks living in West Feliciana Parish at the time anticipated the war as well. I look up, and the title of the panel confirms my presupposition; it identifies the period of the Civil War as a time of destruction and despair, but other than these two words, precious little in the following text explains or qualifies these designations. I am a bit confused as to what Mrs. Butler is referring—specifically—in choosing these words. Were families turned out of their ancestral homes? Were the homes themselves looted and burned? Were the crops destroyed by marauding troops? If such atrocities occurred in West Feliciana, they are left to the reader’s imagination; they surely are not described. In fact, the following text boasts of the great wealth of the region and claims it was due to West Feliciana’s “ideal location along the river and its agricultural-based economy.” The next three sentences go on to explain, “According to 1860 census data, slaves constituted approximately eighty percent of the total parish population and their labor produced tremendous wealth in the parish prior to the civil war. By the start of the war, total assessed property values in West Feliciana Parish were estimated to be 8.2 million dollars. The parish was considered one of the wealthiest regions in the state.” That is it; three sentences. In fact, on this entire wall of history the word slave is written explicitly only four times. Jesus Christ! Talk about a sin of omission. It is not *simply* that the enslaved peoples’ *labor* contributed to the wealth of the region. In fact, their very bodies constituted the largest portion of those 8.2 million dazzling dollars because their very bodies *were part of the assessed property value* under the American Black Code—the operating juridicial standard at the time. Enslaved bodies were legally considered *immovable* property—*real* estate. One can only assume, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that the destruction and despair to which Mrs. Butler refers

is, indeed, the loss of property—slaves—and the despair into which the owners were thrown by the loss of a particular way of life.

There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South . . . Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow . . . Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave . . . Look for it only in books for it is no more than a dream remembered. A Civilization gone with the wind
(*Gone With the Wind*)

The music swells and the opening credits of *Gone with the Wind* crawl through my head as I prowl back and forth along the large wall. I seethe at the absences of people strategically and systemically forgotten who are so clearly presenting themselves *en masse*—swarming with the fervor of a righteously indignant and unapologetic mob of unjustly elided and disenfranchised specters. I am acting like a crazy person . . . in public . . . again. By now, this is par for the course. So what. Begin again. I barely (just barely) mutter one of my Uncle Mame’s favorite idioms, which have become part of my habitual exasperated speech patterns, “Weelll . . . Hell’s Bells! What did you expect sister?” I choose to compose myself and return, once more, to the Civil War panel.

After a short description of the men who “eagerly volunteered” to join up with the Confederacy, the text focuses on two events that occurred in June 1863. The first event worthy of notice is the Battle of Fort Hudson; the second, a funeral service for Commander Jonathan Hart, in which both Union and Confederate soldiers laid down their weapons and jointly buried the Union commander—with full Masonic rites—in Grace Episcopal Cemetery. The event, dubbed “The Day the War Stopped,” is faithfully reenacted every year as a “moving tribute to this brief moment of civility and brotherhood.” Rejecting the notion of brevity, the celebrants have stretched the memorial into a two-day event. This notation about the events of June 1863—well before its conclusion—concludes the discussion of the Civil War and its impact on the

inhabitants of West Feliciana Parish. There is no discussion of Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. There is no acknowledgment that the South lost the war. Moreover, there are no mentions of Reconstruction or Sharecropping or The Great Migration or Jim Crow or the Civil Rights Movement in the area—or elsewhere—even though as the next panel states, the West Feliciana Historical Society was established in 1969, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. To be honest, the panel doesn't mention the Civil Rights Movement. I supply that fact. Perhaps this coincidence is a ghostly matter.

Other than the panel describing the Great Flood of 1927 that wiped out Bayou Sara, which appeared several panels back, the history *presented* on this wall stops at 1863. The section following the Civil War jumps to a stunning four-color panel that lurches backward in time to 1820 and features, yet again, John James Audubon, Oakley Plantation, and the birds he drew during his short four month sojourn in the Felicianas. I understand why the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum—which is after all a tourist center—focuses so heavily on Audubon. The annual Audubon Pilgrimage, a three-day event, is a massive draw for tourists to the area. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to wrap my head around how and why Audubon's four month stint and 32 drawings consistently trump and elide—in terms of time, money, and focus—the broader 200 year history of the Felicianas in which the enslaved population played such an important role. As I pace back and forth in front of this wall, I am struck by how little information is provided, and how little I have been able to learn about slavery, slave life, or the free people of color in West Feliciana Parish.

Although I have been able to learn that in 1860, 9,571 enslaved people and the 64 free people of color lived in West Feliciana, I do not know how many of those people were born to other slaves in the region or survived the Middle Passage or had been moved to the area from

other locations in the Americas. Of the 9,571, I know that 128 were owned by Mary Cobb Stirling, then owner of The Myrtles, but all I have been able to determine is their sexes and ages as listed in the 1860 slave schedule. I do not know their names. I do not know anything about their lives. What were the landscapes and soundscapes that served as backdrops for their lives? What of their dwellings? How did they feel about the rolling hills, deep hollows, semi-tropical climate or fertile soil of which Ann Butler waxes rhapsodic from the future? I do not know how the entire population, slave owners and slaves, of the parish felt about or reacted to Louisiana seceding from the Union on January 23, 1861. I do not know how soon they learned about the Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, or how they responded to it once they heard. After they were freed, I do not know how many of the newly emancipated slaves of West Feliciana Parish, if any, made the approximately 16 mile trek to join up with the Third Division of the Louisiana Native Guard in 1863, to fight alongside the 30,000 plus Union soldiers in the battle of Port Hudson. I do know they wouldn't have been eligible for the First Division of the Louisiana Native Guard because it was comprised of free people of color. I do not know how many, if any, decided to fight along side the 6,800 Confederate soldiers in that same 48 day bloody confrontation in June 1863. And what happened to them—the ones who survived—after that? The record is sketchy and, therefore, difficult to parse.

Of the 10,666 people enslaved in West Feliciana Parish in 1850, I know that Ruffin Gray Stirling, then owner of The Myrtles, claimed 107 of those men and women as his property. The 1850 slave schedule lists the sex and age of each those 107 people, but that is all I know. I do not know their names. I do not know how many of those people were born to other slaves in the region or survived the Middle Passage or had been moved to the area from other locations in the Americas. I do not know how they felt about the rolling hills, deep hollows, semi-tropical

climate or fertile soil of the Felicianas. I do not know how many, if any, of the enslaved peoples or the 106 free people of color worked alongside, for, or traded with the Jewish population who migrated to St. Francisville to escape religious persecution in Europe in the early part of the 1850s. I do not know how many of the 90 people counted among the dead in West Feliciana during the yellow fever epidemic of 1853 were free or enslaved. I do not know how the people of the parish reacted to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854. I do not know how the free and enslaved peoples reacted to the subsequent violence, known as Bleeding Kansas, that erupted between pro-slavery “border ruffians” and anti-slavery “free-staters.” I know this event served as a proxy battle between free states and slave states, which was one of the key events setting the stage for the Civil War. I do not know how slaves, free people of color, and slave owners living in St. Francisville, felt about or reacted to the state law passed in 1857 that prohibited emancipation of any kind. I do not know how the free people of color in West Feliciana Parish reacted to the law passed by the Louisiana legislature and signed by Governor Robert C. Wickliffe in 1859 that “allowed” and “strongly encouraged” freemen of color to pick a master and “voluntarily” re-enslave themselves.

The 1840 census provides the only information I know about the 141 slaves owned by Ruffin Gray Stirling, then owner of The Myrtles; it tells me their sexes and their age ranges. I do not know their names. I do not know anything about the landscapes, soundscapes, or dwellings of the various places that the 8,755 enslaved people in West Feliciana Parish thought of as home in 1840. I do not know how many of those people were born in the region or survived the Middle Passage or had been moved to the area from other locations in the Americas. I do not know how they felt about the rolling hills, deep hollows, semi-tropical climate, or fertile soil. I know the Creole slave rebellion occurred in 1841, on a slave ship bound from New Orleans to Virginia.

Nineteen slaves commandeered the ship and took it to Nassau in the Bahamas—a British colony at the time—where they were detained for a while and ultimately given their freedom. I have learned that in 1843, Norbert Rillieux, a Creole black man, invented the process for boiling sugar cane in a vacuum to produce sugar crystals. The process made sugar cane production extremely profitable and, because it required a large labor force, increased the number of slaves that were imported to Louisiana to meet the demand (Rilleux, Norbert). I do know that cotton was declared King in Louisiana in 1848, and in that same year, free men of color in Louisiana founded the first African Methodist Episcopalian Church in New Orleans.

I do not know anything about the landscapes of the various places that the 6,345 enslaved people in West Feliciana Parish called home or thought of as home in 1830. I do not know how many of those people were born in the region or survived the Middle Passage or had been moved to the area from other locations in the Americas. I do not know how they felt about the rolling hills, deep hollows, semi-tropical climate, or fertile soil. I do know that in 1830 the Louisiana legislature passed a law prohibiting the teaching of reading and writing to slaves. I do not know how slave owners reacted to the law. I do not know whether or how many continued to teach their slaves. I do not know how many slaves, under threat of punishment, continued to teach reading and writing to their fellow captives—but I am confident there were some. Nevertheless, from that point on, the majority of the information related to African American history and culture would have to be conveyed from generation to generation through the oral tradition (Timeline/Episode 2). I know that the Nat Turner slave rebellion occurred in Virginia in 1831. I wonder if the slaves in Louisiana knew that Turner believed he was ordained by God and had waited for a sign of the sacred day, which appeared to him when the sun turned a bluish-green color on August 13, 1831. Whether or not the slaves or their owners learned the particulars of the

Turner prophecy, news of the revolt spread so quickly that slave owners throughout the south became nervous. In Louisiana, as elsewhere in the nation, slave owners separated house slaves from field slaves, creating a sense of hierarchy and distrust among the slave population (Aptheker 368-374). I know that in 1837, a depression affected the entire United States but was particularly hard on manufacturing in the south and led to harsh rationing practices for slaves. I have learned the cash poor planters could not afford to pay for their own needs, let alone proper food and clothing for their slaves (Follett 90-93).

I do not know anything about the landscapes of the various places that the 7,164 enslaved people in West Feliciana Parish called home or thought of as home in 1820. I do not know how many of those people were born in the region or survived the Middle Passage or had been moved to the area from other locations in the Americas. I do not know how they felt about the rolling hills, deep hollows, semi-tropical climate, or fertile soil. When Congress passed the Missouri Compromise in 1820, I have no idea how slaves, free people of color, or slave owners felt about this measure that was an attempt to balance pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions in the United States by not allowing slavery above the 39th parallel of the former Louisiana territory (Timeline/Episode 2). I do not know how many of the enslaved people of West Feliciana Parish John James Audubon encountered during his four-month stint in the parish at Oakley Plantation.

I do know that in 1820, Clark Woodruff owned five slaves: one male under 14, two males between the ages of 14 and 44, one female under the age of 14, and one female between the ages of 14 and 25. Although I can locate no documents that bear their names, I have heard the stories of one of Clark Woodruff's slaves, a woman named Chloe, whose ear was severed. Later, after she was accused of murdering his wife and children, she was taken out to a tree, hanged by the

neck, her body was taken down and weighted with bricks, and she was tossed into the Mississippi.

Coming out of my reverie, I realize I have walked closer and closer to the wall until I am standing directly in front of The Early Settlers panel. I am leaning in so closely; I am squinting. I feel the first sharp stabs of a headache building against the back side of my eyes. I step back further and further trying to take in the entire wall in a single panoramic view. The more I look at the panels from this angle the more this assemblage reminds me of Picasso's *Guernica* or a Pollock painting in which different fragments of history have been alternately spattered and drizzled onto canvas. The paneled wall, in spite of its imposing presence, does not a historical monolith make. Despite its smooth surface, it is full of gaps, discontinuities, elisions, and shadows; it is a "field of entangled and confused parchments . . . that have been scratched over and recopied many times" (Foucault 139). I cannot straighten it up, clean it up or render it tidy—as if I, or anyone else for that matter, ever could. It is not my job to save this paneled past from itself or ask it to, in some way, save me . . . us . . . plural. Suddenly a white rabbit in a waistcoat darts across the stage, shocking me out of my reverie, and from the wings the performance studies bag lady cackles, "So what? We are all a bit mad here! Get back to it. Begin again."

You've been with the professors
And they've all liked your looks
With great lawyers you have
Discussed lepers and crooks
You've been through all of
F. Scott Fitzgerald's books
You're very well read
It's well known.
But something is happening here
And you don't know what it is
Do you, Mister Jones?

My exit through the double doors of the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum is not grand. Trying to escape unnoticed, I slink down and skulk out. The little bell on the door gives me away, interrupting my plans for a clandestine departure and cues the docent's mechanical (cuk)coo, "Have a nice day."

With my back turned rudely and my inflection pattern poised at the edge of snark, I mutter, "Um. Yeah. Thank you." I teeter on the edge of guilt for my ill-mannered retreat but the sudden bright, sharp, saturated, high definition glare of St. Ferdinand Street quickly spins my attention toward other things. The blast of asphalt-tinged heat is a welcome reprieve from the nerve-wracking, squinty, sepia toned headache I have managed to acquire (or perhaps induce) in the stuffy, air-conditioned atmosphere of the Historical Society Museum. As I mosey toward my car, which is only a few yards away, I stop on the porch and look down at the series of flowerboxes positioned between the three white wooden columns accented with deep maroon paint. White petunias, in full bloom, spill over the banks of the containers that strive to contain them. As is my habit, I bend down to inspect the flowers closely. If healthy, the green leaves framing the blooms should be lush and somewhat sticky or viscous to a heavy touch. The foliage facing the street gets full, unrelenting, summer sun and is starting to look withered and brittle. In my opinion, a spattering of spent blooms need to be deadheaded so that the plants can put out one more good show of blossoms this season. I resist the urge to pinch back the white wave of petunias and stifle the desire to move the long rectangular flowerboxes a few feet off center so they get a tad more shade. These flowers are not, however, mine to tend to as I see fit. As I straighten up, my gaze flits to the old shotgun house across the street. I've noticed the house before in passing but never thought much about it. The shift in my angle of vision forces me to rack focus, and I notice something else I have never seen before. A historical marker sits just

back from the edge of the property. This one is different than other historical markers I've examined in St. Francisville. Unlike other state markers that are elevated on cylindrical metal posts, this one is stout and square and sits about three feet off the ground on a square, white wooden post. I can't read the sign from the porch of the Historical Society so I cross the street to get a better look.

This historical marker is different than the others I have found in my sojourns in southern Louisiana. I am familiar with the wrought-iron stylings of the State of Louisiana historical marker crowned by an outline of the state that serves as background to a regal pelican; I am equally familiar with the Baton Rouge historical markers whose information is topped by an elaborate BR in red script. This deep-green historical marker made of a thin metal was not provided by the State of Louisiana or by the city of St. Francisville. Instead, it was authorized by the United States Bicentennial Commission and was placed here sometime in the decade prior to the national celebration in 1976. It simply notes, "Old Benevolent Society founded in 1883. Oldest Black Burial Insurance Lodge in Parish."

I note the faded green building that, with a few more years of wear, might be difficult to distinguish from a robin's egg blue. The house sits up on sturdy, short red brick columns, which at this angle are visible under the porch and along the side. The once pristine white trim appears to have a greenish moldy moss creeping around the edges of every surface sitting in shade. The overall impression is the place could use either a serious power washing or to be sanded and a new coat of paint applied—base paint and trim. Although the house is clearly locked up, there is no sign indicating to passersby that it is not open to the public. I imagine some errant tourist (of color) wandering across the street, climbing the creaky steps to the front porch, and attempting to open the door only to find his or her entry barred. Although, finding the door locked, s/he might

have been tempted to look in one of the dust caked windows, the jiggling of the door handle has raised a swarm of wasps from one of the multitude of nests that ring the eaves of the house and the porch—a type of (un)invisible fence ringing the perimeter of the house. The irony that this place is defended by an angry swarm of WASPS is not lost on me. Escaping the defense shield of wasps and making his or her way back toward the garage where the horse-and-carriage-drawn hearse used to stand sentinel until called to duty, the errant tourist is met with a chorus of vicious barking from unseen dogs who nevertheless make their presence known. Everything about this property—save the historical marker in the front yard—reads Do Not Disturb.

Although this place is marked as historical, this building and its history are not accorded the same type of Historical treatment, Historical authorization, Historical legitimation, Historical privilege as the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum directly across the street. I pull out the map I received in the Historical Society Museum to see if the Benevolent Society building is listed or if more information is offered, but it is not even on the map. Instead, the building that is shown directly across the street from the Museum is called The Shanty Too, which is a quaint, kitschy specialty shop that sells gourmet foods, Audubon prints, antiques, and antique reproductions. Their website says, “Fay selects the best of the new to complement the finest of the old” (Shanty Too). I try to keep my wits about me. After all, as de Certeau reminds me, “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (129). But, the Oldest. Black. Benevolent. Society. In. Southern. Louisiana. Is. Not. Even. Freaking. Listed. On. The. St. Francisville. Historical. Society. Map. I would welcome one story, any story that would help me locate this missing history. Where are these stories, and why the hell is the West Feliciana Historical Society blatantly ignoring this—no—these histories? Quite literally, two historical facades face one another, squaring off from opposite sides of the street. The deliberate neglect of the benevolent

society contradicts the claim that the West Feliciana Historical Society makes in the summative panel on its historical wall—entitled *The Past is Present*—which claims “the spirit of St. Francisville looks forward as enthusiastically as it looks back.” I don’t disagree that history is and should be Janus-faced. It looks forward and it looks back. But what it sees when it looks forward, and what it sees when it looks back is contingent on who is writing the history. The question is, as always, “Whose history, told in what time, and in what way?”

As I get back into my car to drive less than a mile down the street to Grace Episcopal Cemetery—because all signs on the goddamn map point in that direction—I try to shake off the gnawing, growling, grating agitation stirring in my gut. In a ridiculous attempt to calm myself, I breathe deeply trying to focus on broader, supposedly more “noble” concepts, such as grace and benevolence. After all, these performances of histories and mysteries that I am both bearing witness to and participating in have, quite clearly, presented a scene in which benevolence and grace are implicated within each other. I struggle to parse how they relate to and differ from and defer one another, but it is too late. I’m already riled up and just plain ole’ pissed off. And therefore, as I am wont to do when I am all hopped up on righteous indignation and irate at some (perceived or actual) injustice, I commence to hollering obscenities into thin air, having full-blown arguments with the ether, and start shadow boxing with a wide range of imaginative sparring partners. I’ll spare you the entirety, but I began with, “F*#@#ING POST-RACIAL MY ASS,” followed by several more emphatic, astute, explicative-laden, fairly predictable (though probably not entirely fair) points, and ended with something along the line of, “SOMETIMES THERE AIN’T NOTHIN’ YOU CAN DO ‘CEPT THROW UP YOUR HANDS!” Ended is not the right term; I did not arrive at any substantive conclusion. Instead, I am interrupted by a host of robust voices that arise unexpectedly from over my shoulder in the back seat of my purple car,

much like family members who show up at my house unannounced and start bossing me around. “Good Lord! Simmer down sister! Is it really worth stroking out over?” my Uncle Mame interjects, the grain of his smoky voice somehow registering shock, sarcasm, and sincerity in simultaneous, perfect three part harmony. Another voice, which sounds so familiar and foreign at the exact same time, says with the diction of an elocutionist, “Tsk, tsk, tsk, so cynical and so skeptical. You are on dangerous ground young scholar. Perhaps you should rethink the trajectory of your current course instead of simply, ‘throwing up your hands.’”

I respond to the voices in my backseat (or are they in the back of my head) with a “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know, Skeptic’s Cop-Out. I got it.”

Later I will learn some of the stories that cut across what is left off the Historical Society Map. I will find several oral histories collected by local high school students from older African Americans in St. Francisville, some of them preserved on the Web in oral versions that allow me to hear their voices. This research, conducted by Teresa Parker Farris, which was funded in part by local foundations and community members, is documented on the local public school website (Oral History Project). I will learn about baptism and religion from Zach Cavilear, Ellen Hardy, and Elizabeth Lee. Rosea Pate and Sally Smith will describe schooling and education in the African-American community. Louise Williams will describe quilting and its role in the social order. I will learn about sharecropping and the insufficient income it provides from Travis Carter and Turlie Richardson. From Alice Johnson and Geraldine London I will learn that they had to leave school early each day to pick vegetables and cotton. I will learn about segregation and civil rights from George Norflin. Robert Sterling will describe taking his voter registration test and waiting for the results. William Gilmore will recount how he worked at the Afton Villa Plantation, collecting money from tourists at the front gate. I will learn how Sally Whitfield

Mackie experienced working as a domestic in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I will learn about the funeral expenses that were paid for by the Benevolent Society from Travis Carter.

I will also learn—later—that the majority of the black population is buried in Pilgrim’s Rest. I do not find this cemetery on the Historical Society map; I will find it later, on another map, and I will also discover that the land for the cemetery was donated by the Williams family—who owned The Myrtles from 1889 until the 1950s—in the early 1900s (Oral History Project). Though I have not yet been there, I will see pictures that reveal it is marked by the same American Bicentennial marker that stands in front of the Benevolent Society. Perhaps another sort of pilgrimage is called for, one that doesn’t involve John James Audubon, though I don’t know how these folks or their descendants would feel about tourists traipsing through their cemetery.

Later, I will read Anne Butler’s blog, which will tell me about the role of benevolent societies in St. Francisville and more generally in the post-Civil War South. And, although I will take issue with her paternalistic tone and fervently disagree with the premise of her claim that “with today’s equal access to standard insurance coverage for medical and funeral costs,” the services of benevolent societies are no longer “vitaly necessary” (Old Benevolent Society). I will, however, wholeheartedly agree with her contention that “Perhaps the house could be used to exhibit black history and culture and that the structure [the Benevolent Society House in St. Francisville] deserves to be preserved as a reminder of the significant role that benevolent societies played in black society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (Old Benevolent Society). Her implicit point in this blog entry is that somebody really *should* do something. I agree. However, exactly *how* that “something” gets done and *who* that “somebody” is merits careful consideration. Perhaps a local author and historian with strong ties to the West Feliciana

Historical Society should reach out to researchers such as Teresa Parker Farris who has strong connections with organizations such as the West Feliciana African American Heritage Taskforce, the St. Francisville Area Foundation, and the Davis Family Foundation—all of whom have supported her work with students in documenting the histories of African Americans in West Feliciana Parish and who openly avow an interest in developing African American heritage tourism in West Feliciana Parish. It seems fairly reasonable that such a dialogue should be possible.

I slam on my breaks as I realize that I am about to pass the entrance to the driveway leading through the cemetery and up to Grace Episcopal Church. I pull into the circular drive and into the shade of the live oaks that get increasingly large as one looks through the cemetery toward the church that was originally built in 1827. The red brick Gothic structure, the second oldest Episcopal Church in Louisiana, is beautifully preserved. Although it was heavily damaged during the Civil War, the structure has gone through an extensive and careful process of historic restoration, which is a point of pride for the St. Francisville community. The driveway is in the newest section of the cemetery. I can tell this section is the newest because it includes a massive columbarium that holds the ashes of some of the more recently deceased members of the community. Getting out of the car and beginning my trek through the cemetery, I also notice headstones outside a crumbling, rusted-over wrought iron fence—an ineffective barrier between the old and the new—which are more modern in design. Their marble and granite is more highly polished, and these newer gravestones frequently feature pictures of the deceased worked into the monument. Many are encumbered with mementos, presumably reflecting favorite pastimes or hobbies of the deceased. These all too inanimate artifacts—a baseball here, a domino there, a child's toy—weather and fade at a glacial pace even in the sweltering heat of a Louisiana

summer, animating the all-to-embodied and seemingly endless process of mourning endured by the living.

Every time I come to this cemetery, I seem to move more slowly—perhaps reverently. The quiet here is broken only by the buzz-song of cicadas that rises and falls in a hypnotizing metronomic tempo that seems to slow time. As I walk toward the oldest part of the cemetery, which surrounds the church, I take baby steps, leaning back slightly as I descend into the depression just outside the wrought iron fence. I am aware of my toes squinching against the scuffed white rubber toe of my black Converse sneakers. The pressure eases as I take a few big steps, shifting my weight forward as I ascend the hill and pass through a gap in the broken fence marked by odd-angled posts with fleur-de-lis finials that no longer anchor the crossbeam of the fence—the welds have broken. I note with caution the rusted points of the finials as a twitch in the scar on my inner thigh reminds me that I am really too short climb fences. Many of the tombstones in the oldest part of the cemetery are so weathered that the inscriptions on them are difficult to read. Batches of tombstones in varying sizes are grouped together in family plots around one center monument bearing the family name; other family groupings are marked by stone coping that segregates in from out—those that belong from those who do not. I wander slowly among the gravestones wondering exactly what I am looking for.

Whenever I am in Grace Episcopal Cemetery, I am reminded of *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*—one of my favorite books by Alice Walker. Her circuitous search for Zora Neale Hurston, documented throughout the book, sends her traipsing all over the Georgia countryside and into the wilds of central and south Florida, a tale that she figures against the complicated backdrop of race in America. Along the way she re-experiences her childhood home (and Flannery O'Connor's), learns to talk to her mother about their different understandings of

God and Spirit, meets neighbors who tell fragmented and contradictory tales about Zora's fate, and ultimately discovers a fellow researcher and enthusiast who escorts her to a neglected cemetery to search for Zora's gravesite. My favorite part is the journey's end, when Walker describes wading through the overgrown cemetery, waist-high in grasses and brambles, braving snakes and other vermin, exhausted, scared, overwhelmed, and (arguably) a little bit pissed off herself. Walker hollers for Zora to reveal herself. She's not going to stand out here much longer, she warns. She's only going to call a couple of more times, she yells. Then Zora shows up.

Often I walk around this cemetery tempted to holler out, "Chloe, where the hell are you?" I never do. Logically, I know that would be futile. Chloe stories, which I have gathered in bits and pieces over the years, all bear one striking similarity: she was never given a proper burial—much less one in an Anglican Episcopal cemetery. Without benevolence, without grace, her body was taken out to the river, weighted down with bricks, and tossed into the Mississippi. This time . . . this time . . . inspired by Walker, I holler out anyway. "Chloe, what is it exactly you want me to do?" I feel like an idiot and I am glad that nobody else is in the cemetery, at least nobody else that I can see. I turn the corner and make my way toward the back of the church to wander around a part of the cemetery I have never visited before. Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see something. Stopping short and turning quickly on my black Conversed heel, I scan the graveyard for whatever it was that caught my attention. Seeing nothing, I look down and come face-to-face with the name William Drew Winter deeply etched into a tall, pawn-shaped, moss-covered stone. The smaller house-shaped headstone to its left reads Sarah Stirling Winter. "Holy shit," I say to myself, "it's them." William Winter was the fourth owner of The Myrtles plantation. He married Sarah Mulford Stirling, daughter of Ruffin Gray Stirling, who was the third owner of The Myrtles, who purchased the property from Clark Woodruff shortly after

Chloe supposedly murdered his wife and two children. William Winter was shot on the front gallery of the plantation home, and supposedly climbed 17 steps up the staircase where he died in his wife's arms. William and Sarah are also both said to haunt the plantation. I am more than a little shocked to be looking at the grave of one of the ghosts said to be haunting the house. I look around at the other graves in the immediate vicinity. From where I am standing, I can see Mary Cobb Stirling and Ruffin Gray Stirling. The Turnballs and the Barrows, owners of Rosedown Plantation, are just around the corner. I know that Chloe will not be here, but I also do not find a grave for Judge Clark Woodruff or his wife, Sarah Bradford Woodruff, or their children, Cornelia Gale and James. I do not know where they are buried. They are not here but, like Chloe, they are not not here at the same time.

This discovery is enough for one visit, and I make my way back to the car. On my trek back, I note the graves of several "historically significant" members of the St. Francisville community dating back to the late 18th century. I know the stories of many of these figures are performed annually during the Audubon Pilgrimage. One of the most anticipated events of the pilgrimage is "Graveyard Tales," a candlelight performance in the cemetery where local citizens costumed in period attire perform the stories of 15 former prominent citizens of the parish (Graveyard Tales). I have never been to the Audubon Pilgrimage. However, that is not the only pilgrimage event in St. Francisville. Thousands of people make another pilgrimage to St. Francisville, usually around Halloween to visit one of America's most haunted homes in hopes of encountering one of America's most famous ghosts, the ghost of a murdered slave woman named Chloe and the whole host of other ghosts that come with her.

Arriving back at my car in the shade of the branching limbs of the live oak, I climb in, slam the door, and turn the key in the ignition. Before I shift the aubergine Lexis into reverse, I

grab my iPhone, cram in my by earbuds, press shuffle, press play, and head back toward The Myrtles.

I wish I could write you a melody so plain
That could hold you dear lady from going insane
That could ease you and cool you and cease the pain
Of your useless and pointless knowledge

Mama's in the fact'ry
She ain't got no shoes
Daddy's in the alley
He's lookin' for food
I'm in the kitchen
With the tombstone blues.

CHAPTER FOUR
SURROUNDING THE MYRTLES:
GROUNDS FOR CONSIDERATION

The large white sign with blue and black script that marks the entrance to The Myrtles always seems to sneak up on me. The sign is not small or inadequate; it just hangs back from the road a bit, in the deep green shadow of the surrounding trees. Perhaps it is hiding or, if not hiding, loitering in the dark shade of the limbs of the ever-encroaching live oak trees. No other roadside markers warn visitors of the upcoming entrance to their destination, so the requisite hard left across two lanes of oncoming traffic and the sudden sharp turn into the property can be rather precarious. The relative rapidity of the turn into the property is followed in quick succession by another shift—a shift in pace—that undermines the notion of speed entirely, like the third slow step in a Texas two-step—fast, fast, slow. The over-arching oaks produce a slight drop in temperature and a membrane through which the every day hustle bustle of the Blues Highway begins to drift away.

The shrill whistle that heralds the beginning of Dylan’s “Highway 61” screeches in my ear buds as I make the turn, so I yank them out. The din seems inappropriate for this space which, after many visits, my senses mark as set apart, liminal; entering this space is like crossing a threshold to a different place, another time or, more correctly, an Other’s time. The short portion of driveway leading from Highway 61 to the fence that marks an inner boundary to the property serves as an antechamber to the site that ushers me into a particular quietness of softer light and sound—like a gentle hush, after the hurry-hurry to get to church on Sunday morning—like slowing into ritual after the turbulent rush to get there on time. Ritual is the right word. It feels like ritual—maybe even a pilgrimage of sorts. Separation? Definitely. Transition? Clearly. Transformation? Communitas? Possibly.

In the passage to the boundary fence, I pass yet another cast iron Louisiana State Historical Marker with the familiar pelican emblazoned above the script. I note the double voiced signification of the almost indestructible *aspidistra elatior* plants (common name: cast iron) encircling the base of the sign. Cast iron surrounded by cast irons. Looking around, I see the sturdy plants shackle the fence, every tree in sight, and the historical marker to the ground. The encircling plants, which look like wreaths of magnified ill proportioned oleander leaves, visually foreshadow Chloe.

Another element in the landscape catches the eye, a large, white, two story, hexagonal tower with faded robin's egg blue trim and matching door that sits back off the right side of the driveway. It is reminiscent of something out of a fairytale, like a castle fragment—a watchtower or a turret—that has been ripped off some neighboring castle by a passing giant and plunked down here. The hearty stand of cast iron plants encircling the base, however, tell me that it is not a recent addition, that it has in fact been here for some time. Nevertheless, at any moment I expect Rapunzel to swing open the round window of the second story to fling down her blonde mane for a passing Prince. Alternately, the little door at the bottom might swing open to emit a deluge of dwarves off to the mines. Never happens. The tower has such commanding presence, however, that sometimes folks stop and wait for an attendant to come out to provide them with instructions or to sell them a parking pass, even though the gate ahead is wide open. The scalloped white picket fence extends along behind the tower and serves as the boundary proper for the property. All three structures—historical marker, tower, picket fence—alert me to multiple competing interpellative operations in play at the entrance.

Any number of scholars of tourism, performance, and culture explore the practices, locations, and objects of tourism as they relate to conceptions and practices of “The Nation” and national identity. Tim Edensor argues that iconic sites and ideologically loaded landscapes are

highly selective, synecdochal features which are held to embody specific kinds of characteristics. Typically these spatial symbols connote historic events, are either evidence of past cultures, providing evidence of a ‘glorious past’ of ‘golden age’ and antecedence . . . or they are monuments erected—often within larger memoryscapes—to commemorate significant episodes in an often retrospectively constructed national history. (45)

Arguing from a similar perspective, Adrian Franklin notes that tourist sites often operate as spaces of special national significance and serve as locations for national pilgrimages. Drawing on Althusser’s definition of interpellation as a process of hailing an individual into an ideologically loaded, preexisting subject position, Franklin posits that the objects of these heritage sites interpellate individuals into the idea of a nation and also bind them into particular communities. He states, “the interpolative [*sic*] power of objects consists not only of pulling individuals into an idea, it also suggest lines of association and alignment with untold others; it suggests, in other words, an identity and corporation” (132). The issue with interpellation, as pointed out by Michael Crang, is that the process is not easily controlled and is, therefore, always underdetermined (348). These three structures at the entrance illustrate the vague and ambivalent process of interpellation at The Myrtles.

If the historical marker, the tower, and the white picket fence are intended to hail a particularly Southern identity or call forth mythic notions of the Grand Old South then they fail to perform—at least for me. I associate the physical and discursive structure of white picket fences with a 1950s American mythology of impossible suburban bliss, not with plantation homes. The tower, on the other hand, signals another fairytale of a different but related type, one associated with Disney princesses or—on better days—tales of the Grimm variety. Most people

probably don't even notice the historical marker in the foreground. Even if they did it would be impossible for them to decipher unless they pulled over, got out their car, walked over, and actually read it—which, of course I did. The next car careening into the drive almost sideswiped mine, coming within inches of taking off my driver's side-view mirror. The inscription on the marker reads: House of famed Gen. David Bradford, leader of the Whisky Rebellion. The Myrtles was built in 1796 on a Spanish Land Grant. The architecture, elaborate plaster work, and lacy ironwork make this 20 room mansion one of Louisiana's most unusual plantation homes. (National Park Service 1978). Of the three structures, this marker is the one that works on me in perhaps the way it was "intended." I am taken back to the turbulent birth of the nation, to the first time the U.S. federal government used its military against its own people in the Whisky Rebellion, and to Governor Don Carlos de Grand Pre and General Bernardo de Galvez who issued the contentious land grants in the West Florida Colonies. However, when the sign is juxtaposed with the mythologies of white picket fences and Disney princesses, it fails to read. I recognize that most people, if they read the marker at all, would be confused because it contains no mention of the ghosts for which The Myrtles is now famed.

At the gate of the scalloped white picket fence, I like to imagine Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep leaning against the fence discussing the ritual aspects of the space. (Of course, they didn't appear until the twentieth of my more than fifty visits.) They are enamored with the way the tour follows a temporal progression associated with rites of passage—separation, transition, and reintegration—and, as both are wont to do, they hone in on the transitional phase. Van Gennep scratches his head and asks aloud, "But is it sacred? Are they *really* changed when they come out the other side?" To which Turner quickly responds, "It is

liminoid not *liminal*, Arnold. Van Geneep looks unconvinced so Turner adds, somewhat emphatically, “If a pilgrim is half a tourist, then a tourist is half a pilgrim” (1978 20).

I interject myself into this imagined interaction. “Obviously,” I say, “as visitors enter the property, they begin to transition from their ordinary and quotidian social space and activities.” When guests first arrive, they are free to wander about the grounds—they walk to the bridge and maybe over to the gazebo and mill about in the courtyard. If their desires lean toward consumption, they can either graze the gift shop—the first structure built on the property that has served over time as dwelling, lawyer’s office, and kitchen for the main house—or patronize the Carriage House restaurant, which at the time it was built housed actual horses and carriages. This time before the tour operates as a type of onboarding, an intermediate step between their separation from quotidian life back on Highway 61 and the tour itself. In this intermediate phase, some of the activities associated with the everyday—dining, shopping, purchasing tickets—are still available to them.

When the guide announces the tour, he or she literally waves an arm in the air and hollers for everybody going on the tour to meet on the large, covered back porch. By assembling there, visitors are once again marked as a particular kind of visitor to the property—different from those who have come merely to wander the grounds or eat at the restaurant—they are the *tourists*. As they cross the inner threshold, the actual threshold into the house, some (though certainly not all) make another transition—perhaps a magical transition. Geneep wonders if this “magic” is actually sacred. I assure him that it is a space and time where the normal boundaries between life and death are sometimes suspended, whether it is magical, let alone sacred, is for the one who experiences it to decide. Turner suddenly interjects that *communitas* may occur in this place. Yes, I aver, though it doesn’t always. We all agree that at the end of the tour, when guests are ushered

out of the house and reintegrated into the other more “normal” spaces and activities of the property and then, when they leave The Myrtles altogether—choosing to turn left on Highway 61 to head north toward Natchez or right to head south toward Baton Rouge—they are reintegrated back into their everyday social structures.

As their interaction evolves into a more heated discussion about the differences between liminal and liminoid experiences, I return to my car. Passing through the picket fence, a jumbled fragrance of Confederate jasmine, swamp water, and freshly mown grass drift in through my open windows. I lean forward and look upward through my windshield at the live oak canopy above. In places the swags of Spanish moss further dapple the sunlight that manages to filter through the leaves. I note that in their haphazard trek across this part of the state, the hurricanes have largely spared the ancient trees on this site—a stark contrast to the tortured trees lining the corridor of the Blues Highway a few miles back. I remember David Brown, after Katrina, telling me about the adaptive strategies of live oaks. Live oaks have evolved to survive, he said, when a major storm approaches, they shed their leaves and hunker down—like all the people in the path of an approaching hurricane. The succession of live oaks is interspersed with grand crepe myrtles from whence the property derives its name.

The newly paved driveway literally snakes among the trees, and the romance of the view nearly mutes the ominous clank of the cast iron plants that anchor the low wooden guardrail as it meanders along the right hand side of the driveway. The scene is steeped in elegant Victorian visions of death and beauty. This analogy seems apt but odd, since we do not use that adjective in the Deep South; we prefer antebellum, but Victorian feels right. The daintily frayed bark of the crepe myrtles in the gray green filtered light and the weathered face on the concrete figure of a woman, with a subtle blush of moss on her cheeks that only partially succeed in concealing the

pits and pocks of time, add to that mystique. Only the ubiquitous, heavy cast iron plants, ringing the base of everything, wars with the image. Another statuesque female figure drifts up on the left, wearing the predictable cast iron anklets that affix her firmly in place. The hazy aesthetic quality of the panorama is lovely but slightly sinister. It doesn't read as generic Old South, but more specifically as haunted Louisiana. I am reminded of Anne Butler Hamilton, a local St. Francisville historian, and her rumination on The Myrtles from the early 1990s.

When the morning mists swirl through its grove of ancient live oaks and the breeze stirs the curling gray strands of Spanish moss, The Myrtles has a haunting beauty, yes . . . “haunting” in the sense of evocative images recurring with pleasurable regularity among cherished memories. But “haunted”? No. It doesn't *need* to be. (Hamilton “The Exorcism” 40)

I appreciate that first descriptive sentence, but couldn't disagree more with the last. She seems to have overlooked the omnipresence of the cast iron plants. Yes, this place *does* need to be haunted and, for any number of reasons, it needs to be haunted by Chloe.

The white two story English-style planter's cottage with a wide wrap-around porch and faded robin's egg blue intricate New Orleans style wrought iron embellishments comes fully into view only as I round the last bend in the drive and climb the subtle incline. The house itself is smaller than Rosedown or Oakley House, other plantation homes in the area, but despite its smaller stature the façade does not disappoint. When I bring other tourists with me to The Myrtles, this moment when the we round the last bend is when I am accustomed to an outpouring of *oohs* and *ahhs* or more elaborate exclamations along the lines of “Oh my gosh, that's lovely!” Sometimes my compatriots remark that the house is either smaller (or larger) than they expected or that it looks exactly like it does in the pictures or television shows they have seen. As I continue towards the parking lot, the temporary enchantment of the shade from the live oaks and crepe myrtles retreats as the relentless summer sun beats down on the blinding white gravel

parking lot. The sudden brightness causes me to wince at the sudden glare and I pull my sunglasses down from the top of my head to shield my eyes.

The white rock lot is relatively full for a Wednesday and, among the cars, I see a tour bus and several large white 15 plus passenger vans in a variety of institutional colors—mainly white. Damn, group tours! They are going to be busy, I think, and hope the tours for the rest of the day aren't already sold out. Driving towards the back of the parking area, I whip quickly into the only available slot in sight and lean over to gather the contents of my red leather purse, which have spilled out all over the front seat in the course of the journey. I slam the driver's side door and rush towards the bathroom; it has been a long drive and I'm about to pee my pants. I skirt the picket fence framed by tall oleanders that are spectacular in full bloom, and head for the graffiti free public restrooms, which for some reason remind me of church camp, grateful that they are located near the parking lot at the edge of the courtyard.

Exiting the restroom, I take a left and make my way across the courtyard to the gift shop where the tickets for the tours are sold. The expansive courtyard is paved entirely with dull red paving bricks. Huge crepe myrtles and massing flowerbeds that are peppered with concrete statues of children and cherubs line the right side of the courtyard and provide a shady buffer for the verandah lined with white rocking chairs at the back entrance of the house. A fountain rises in the exact center of the courtyard; its base is built from the same paving bricks to a height of about two feet. The constant gurgle of the water serves as a base line from which the melodic conversations of guests rise and fall according to the tempo of excitement or boredom of the various scattered groups. Numerous wrought iron tables and chairs, whose silver-gray filigree almost match the painted iron work of the home, ring the space and are positioned in the shadier areas. The courtyard is large enough for moderate sized bridal showers or wedding receptions,

which are frequent occurrences on the property. Depending on the time of day and the season, the courtyard may be crowded to the point of suffocation or sparsely populated. Today, I see several small groups (some obviously families), a larger group of seniors, and what appears to be a Girl Scout troop milling about the space.

As is probably evident by now I like The Myrtles very much but, just in case I haven't made it clear yet, let me lay all of my cards right out on the table: I am enamored with the place. I like the lay of the house and the distinct smell—like lemon oil and air conditioning—that hits you when the tour guide first opens the door. I like the people who work here—those who work here now and those who worked here when I started this project but have since moved on: Kevin, the grounds keeper, who taught me about crepe myrtles and who personally ran (then Governor-elect) Bobby Jindal off the property; Mr. Glenn, who was always busy, grumpy, sometimes mean to tourists, and never bothered to learn my name; and Miss Dorothy, who still gives tours even though she is shy and hates it. I am smitten with Miss Hester, the Grande Dame of the place, who has worked here for over 25 years under multiple owners and who calls me baby (probably because she doesn't remember my name either). I am very fond of Chloe, and all of the other ghosts, real or not, who act and are acted upon historiographically, phenomenologically, discursively, and performatively. I like the slow, sad moss dripping from the live oak trees that line the front drive and the ominous oleander growing by the white fence at the entrance to the courtyard. I like the twelve dollar chicken cordon bleu sandwich in the restaurant and the fact that you can get Abita Strawberry here long after it has been sold out everywhere else because most tourists aren't aware of the how awesome the frosty beverage is or that it is such a hot seasonal commodity. I like the click-clack of the high-heeled bridal parties as they walk back and forth between the courtyard and the bar. I like the hand made gris-gris bags, excessively scented

candles, various Down home/Cajun/Southern-style cookbooks, and the predictable fleur-de-lis paraphernalia in the gift shop. I am fascinated by the complex politics of the whole thing jutting up through a thinly veiled guise of propriety. I like the tour guides I have come to know, particularly Robbie and Bri; they remind me I love performance. I like most of the tourists I've met as well. They also remind me how much I love performance and demand that I take their performance of/as audience seriously. I like that none of this liking, this care, forecloses generative, critical engagement.

As I step up onto the porch of the gift shop, I smile and nod hello to the thirty-something, black-clad, amulet carrying, Goth couple rocking in the white chairs adjacent to the door. Swinging the door open, I narrowly miss hitting a patron standing in line to purchase a ticket. Shit, there's a line! The small building is packed with people and, in a futile attempt to evade claustrophobia (or is it agoraphobia), I maneuver my way toward the far corner of the space next to the serving table and sink where one of the African American women on the domestic staff that I do not know is polishing silverware. I pretend to peruse the cluttered knick-knack shelf until the crowd in the room thins. I hear other tourists discussing whether the house is haunted and smile to myself. They voice their hope that Chloe will make an appearance on the tour while they shuffle through the 5 x 7 black and white photographs of Chloe's famous ghost picture and juggle copies of the DVD in which the The Atlantic Paranormal Society experts from the Travel Channel's popular television show *Ghost Hunters* confirm that The Myrtles is, in fact, haunted. Chloe's image, fame, and potential manifestation are what caused these tourists to appear in the first place. They want to meet her, to see her, to experience her and, in turn, they also wish to be seen, to be experienced, and to be met *by her*.

As the space begins to clear, I return the little handmade mammy doll that I had

unconsciously picked up to the basket with her sisters and make my way to the cash register to purchase a ticket for the next available tour. The staff is sporting matching shirts—a change since my last visit, which admittedly has been a while ago. Lately, I have spent the majority of my time doing archival research on the property and its former inhabitants—a scenario⁷ that has, ironically, kept me from visiting for the past six months. The cream short-sleeved, polo shirts worn by the staff have The Myrtles embroidered in green and gold above the left breast, high enough so that the employees’ nametags can be pinned just below. I bet Robbie hates the new get-up; it will cramp his sartorial style. I see Miss Hester—the grandmotherly African American woman who serves as the de-facto manager of the property—behind the wooden barricade that partially hides the cash register yet signals the space where commerce overtly transpires. She is crowded there with Lauren and another woman I do not recognize. Although Lauren is only a teenager, she has changed—grown up—a great deal since last time I visited, when I took her tour. The unfamiliar woman with a short, messy, grey blonde bob regularly raises and lowers her face to adjust her line of sight through the large glasses with a visible bifocal line she is wearing as she flips through receipts. Miss Hester is working the register.

“Hey, baby,” she says to me and smiles. “How can I he’p ya?”

“Hey, Miss Hester,” I respond, returning her smile. She looks slightly confused as she struggles to puzzle out how she knows me. Even though she is not wearing a nametag, I have called her name in a way that presumes familiarity. Clearly, she does not remember me, even though I have introduced myself to her any number of times on my visits.

“Sorry, I’m Holley. We had a conversation last Halloween. I’m the LSU student doing

⁷Instead of thinking of the archive as a set of finalized, immovable documents, I engage the archive as a scenario, which is how Diana Taylor uses the term in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, as a performative framework by which to view human interactions.

research on The Myrtles and tourism in Louisiana,” I remind her.

“Oh! Right, right!” she says politely. She clearly does not remember me, but seems relieved to be able to categorize me so that she can safely return her attention to the business at hand. “Well, glad you came back to see us! How can I he’p ya, baby?” she repeats, returning to a familiar refrain.

Although my apparent insignificance leaves me slightly crestfallen, I let it go. “I can see y’all are real busy. Are there any more spots open for the tour?”

“Well, we’ve got some big groups, so the next few are full. Do you want to wait for the five o’clock?”

“Perfect! That’ll give me time to grab a bite in the restaurant. I swear I have dreams about that chicken cordon bleu sandwich.”

“I know, it’s the best!” she concurs. “But they got some new crawfish beignets over there that’ll curl your toes!”

“I’ll be sure to try them.”

“That’ll be eight dollars, baby.”

As I hand her my credit card I ask, “Do you know who’s gonna be givin’ the tour at five?”

“You’re gonna be with Miss Mary,” she replies, gesturing with my credit card toward the older woman in the bifocals, who looks up at me and smiles. Miss Hester hands me the receipt, which will serve as my ticket. I notice that it no longer has a pixilated picture of the cherub statue by the gazebo on it.

“Great! See ya in a bit!” I say, smiling at Miss Mary.

I toss the receipt and the credit card into my purse and head out of the gift shop. The Goth couple has just vacated the rocking chairs and is stepping off the porch. I follow them down the

stairs but turn off to the right, making a bee-line for an empty table. Since I am going to have to wait for my tour, I might as well have a cigarette before I head to the restaurant. The back of my legs stick to the hot metal seat and beads of sweat form on the bridge of my nose as the humidity threatens to fog my oversized sunglasses. I reach into my purse and fish for a lighter. Good Lord! I've got to start carrying a smaller bag! Locating the lighter, I reach across the table to drag the ashtray closer. Out of the corner of my eye I watch the Goth couple with matching blue-black dyed hair meander across the lawn towards the bridge and wager that *they* might actually cross. "HA!" I guffaw aloud, exhaling a stream of smoke, when they turn back from the bridge toward the courtyard, proving me wrong and underscoring the veracity of that old saying about assumptions.

I view the layout of the property in terms of three "zones." The first zone begins at the mouth of the property, and flows up the drive and encompasses the front lawn and the immediate exterior as well as the interior of the homestead. The second zone, where I am sitting, cuts through the middle of the property behind the house and includes the parking lot, restaurant, courtyard and back lawn, and the office/gift shop. The third zone begins at the picket fence at the back edge of the lawn and extends over the pond to include the gazebo. I divide the property this way for a specific reason; the ghosts seem to function differently in those domains and, therefore, tourists' tend to engage these zones differently as well.

The second or middle zone that I currently share with the Goths and a number of other groups is primarily a space for commerce and utility, a place where ghosts are marketed rather than encountered by the masses. Tourists seem to know how to negotiate this space instinctively, and they function more comfortably in it than in either of the other zones. They park their cars, go to the bathroom, grab a drink, mill about the gift shop, sit around and chat in the courtyard,

and yell after their children here. The way tourists move through this space matches up nicely with Edensor's categories of tourist performance: walking, gazing, making photographs, and narrating/reminiscing (*Tourists at the Taj*, 8). A clowder of cats, ghostly reminders perhaps, roam freely through this space; the black ones, in particular, spook and startle many of the tourists.

The other two zones are more explicitly tied to the ghosts. Clearly, the main house—the first zone—is the primary ghostly domain. The third zone is intriguing. It is white picket fenced off from the rest of the property and although nothing explicitly marks it as a ghost area, it is eerie in the pretty yet Southern Gothic sense of the word. The space has the unmistakable air of the cemetery in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. A sharp contrast from the highly manicured back lawn, this area is a little too wild, too unkempt, and startlingly quiet, save the occasional burp of a frog or buzz of cicadas. A tiny island hunches in the middle of a stagnant pond that is ringed on the house side by wild yellow irises that flourish to a height of six feet in the edges of the murky water. A white gazebo from which one can sit and survey the property crouches at the center of the island. Sitting in the gazebo, you are surrounded by cypress knees rimming the island that seem either to be marching up out of the murky water onto land or to be leaving the island for the security of the pond. To one side stands a lone statue of a devilish cherub shaded by cypress trees. The island is connected to the rest of the property by a rickety ornamental bridge.

Tourists seem puzzled by the space. Of the tourists who strike out across the lawn to this area, many hesitate at the mouth of the bridge as if uncertain whether they should cross. Some traverse it, others do not, choosing instead to simply look across to the gazebo before returning to the domestic familiarity of the courtyard. At twilight and dusk, many return quickly after a mere

glance across the bridge. Outside of the aesthetic quality of this area, I think tourists regard this zone as eerie because it is so ambiguous and underdetermined. Tourists know how to behave in the middle zone, and they know the house is going to confront them with the possibility of ghosts, but they do not really know what to do or make of the third zone.

Snapping out of my reverie, I glance at the filter of the Parliament Light balanced between my fingers and notice the long cylinder of intact ash that would impress even a seasoned smoker like Bette Davis. Holding my wrist taught, I attempt to maneuver the extinguished cigarette to the ashtray, keeping the ash intact. Missing my mark, the ash falls and lands lightly on the top of my sandaled foot. I kick the ash free as I gather my belongings and scoot the heavy metal chair closer to the matching table with my hip, wincing as the metal scrapes across the brick that is bruised by the scatter of ashes. I offer a knee-jerk apology to the inanimate objects and to no one in particular. Manners are an ingrained habit, and a mystery. I cross the courtyard, pass the fountain, pass the bay windows from the restaurant's dining room that frame a lovely view of the back yard, and enter the Carriage House Restaurant through the small backdoor bar entrance avoiding the early dinner crowd waiting to be seated in the dining room.

The Myrtles is a multifunctional site and, as such, facilitates a variety of events that have precious little to do with the ghosts. The restaurant distances itself (purposefully, in my opinion) from the ghosts. Most of the functions and events tangential to the ghosts happen in this space. The chef promotes the restaurant's upscale, award winning food and atmosphere over its location at The Myrtles. Arguably the nicest restaurant in St. Francisville, it attracts many local diners and plays host to events for local businesses as well as wedding receptions and bridal showers. Much to the chagrin of tourists, including me, the Carriage House is often closed in the evenings for private events during the busy season. The restaurant is reasonably priced and it is common to

see tour groups in the buffet line with police officers, construction workers, families, and groups of ladies who lunch or women on girls' nights out.

I cross to the bar and take note of a new bartender, who is busily scouring water spots from wine glasses behind the tall, highly-polished mahogany bar with the brass foot rail. I throw my purse on one available barstool and grasp the edge of the bar as I use the foot rail to hoist myself up into another of the tall barstools. I greet the bartender—Jack, according to his nametag—and say, “Party of one, here. Is it okay if I eat at the bar?”

“No problem,” he says, returning my smile, and handing me a menu. “Can I get you something to drink? Coke? Tea? Water?”

“Beer—Abita Strawberry if you have it,” I say, and instinctually begin fishing for my driver's license. He doesn't know me, yet, and I'm sure I look much younger than my 30 some-odd years, in this too-tall highchair of a barstool.

He gives my license a quick glance, and says, “Abita Strawberry it is! Would you like a cold mug?”

“Love one, thank you.” It is always irritates me how my voice rises an octave whenever I greet someone new. When he returns with my beer, I order without looking at the menu. “I'd like the Chicken Cordon Bleu sandwich please, fried, on croissant, dressed, no lettuce,” I rattle off rotely. Although I'd love to try an order of the crawfish beignets Miss Hester recommended, I think better of it since I am never able to finish the plate-sized sandwich that I have ordered.

“You sound like a lady who knows what she wants,” he says, taking down my order.

“Well, I don't claim to be a lady, but I do know what I like,” I say, flashing a smile as I reach into the depths of my purse and pull out a notebook and a stack of books.

According to conventional definitions, The Myrtles Plantation falls under the rubric of

heritage tourism sites. The National Trust defines heritage tourism as “traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. It includes historic, cultural and natural resources" (Cultural Heritage Tourism). As is probably evident from this vague and overly broad definition, nothing is easy or convenient about pinning down the exact nature of heritage tourism. In fact, heritage sites, in particular, and the scope and purview of heritage tourism, in general, are contentious issues that play out within the tourist industry, in arguments surrounding federal and state allocations of resources to departments of tourism and culture, and in the pages of scholarly journals. As Michael Bowman aptly and succinctly points out,

Debates over heritage tourism . . . revolve around concepts of “authenticity” and “commodification.” Many of these debates falsely present the matter as one of either/or, suggesting that such places are serious or frivolous, educational or entertaining, authentic or inauthentic, and historically accurate or devoted to nostalgia and kitsch, thus neglecting the ways in which visitors ascribe meaning to and inscribe their own practices within heritage sites. (“Tracing Mary” 193)

Echoing Edward Bruner’s concerns, Bowman goes on to argue that,

such criticism is misplaced insofar as it betrays an essentialism which assumes that “authenticity” is a stable, pure, prediscursive quality or state rather than an emerging, shifting, differentially constructed one. Moreover, it often begs the question of whether “authenticity” is what a heritage site should strive for, or whether it is in fact what visitors and tourists actually seek from heritage sites. (“Tracing Mary” 210)

Tensions between heritage and history come into sharp relief where ghosts and ghost tours are concerned. As Robert Thompson notes in his exploration of ghost tours at Gettysburg avowed tensions often exist between folks conducting supposedly “silly” ghost tours and historians advocating for purportedly more “serious” history (as if silliness and play are somehow not serious business and claims *to* and *for* an all-encompassing History writ large are not seriously ridiculous). Thompson reports that in discussions he has had with several Gettysburg historians, the historians opined that the ghost tours were mostly lies and when he

asked, “what ghost tour they recommended to tourists, the historians said ‘none’” (81). The same tension is evident between the purveyors of ghost tours at The Myrtles and the advocates for the supposedly more serious and pristine History tours advocated by local historians in St.

Francisville. For example, in 1990, mortified local historian and eight generation owner of the competing Butler Greenwood Plantation, Anne Butler Hamilton penned an article entitled “The Exorcism of The Myrtles.”⁸ The title alone gives me a version of what one tour guide at The Myrtles describes as “the shivers.” In it, she both laments and lambasts what, in her mind and the minds of the residents of St. Francisville who are quoted in the piece, The Myrtles “has become.”

The scenario would tax the talents of even the most widely imaginative soap-opera scriptwriter. . . . If it all sounds a bit much for any one location, it *is*. . . . This meticulous and romantic restoration in the midst of “English Louisiana” somehow endured one entire embarrassing decade billed as “America’s most haunted house, “ attracting a steady stream of psychics and curiosity seekers, most of whom cared nothing for its *authentic* history. Now a return to elegance is in the air, with owner John Lambert Pearce taking up residence at the Myrtles and determined to exorcise the ghostly hype and histrionic hogwash.

If anyone can do it, he can. The quintessential country gentleman with a courtly cosmopolitan flair, John is a cordial host whose entertainment for fellow Feliciana landowners and friend . . . harken back to a more gracious era when lavish formal dinners and grand soirees filled the dining room and elegant, echoing parlors of the Myrtles with soft strains of period music and muted tones of refined conversation in the antebellum glory days. (36 emphasis in original)

Hamilton goes on to recount the sanctioned history of the home, beginning with General David Bradford, and continuing through the Woodruffs and the Stirling family reign—a healthy balance of tragedy and triumph, mystery and manners. However, she attributes the deaths of Sarah Matilda Bradford Woodruff and her two children to yellow fever and is quick to discount the existence of Chloe (or Cleo as she calls her). To bolster her argument, she quotes Lucile Lawrason, a living descendent of the Stirling/Winter dynasty, who vaguely recalls the story of a

⁸This author is the same Anne Butler who continues to serve as the unofficial historian of St. Francisville. Hamilton was her married name; she has since divorced and reverted to Anne Butler.

woman in a green “bonnet” haunting the place. Mrs. Lawrason swears up one side and down the Other that she thought it a joke. Borrowing from the supposed valid “authentic” history of the home, according to herself and Ms. Lawrason, Hamilton goes on to render James and Frances Kerman Meyers responsible for the “rewritten” and “disgraceful” historical status of the home as haunted (39). Hamilton strives to make it abundantly clear that The Kerman Meyers were *Californians* (read Other/Them/Not Southern/Not Us) merely passing through on a riverboat tour when they, apparently haphazardly, purchased the property and promptly commenced to pimping out “inauthentic history” to ostensibly vile “psychics and curiosity seekers,” thus sullyng the home, its former inhabitants, and St. Francisville in general. Her rhetoric thus issues a warning to any interloping tourist daring to “go native.” John Pearce, the much-lauded owner of the Myrtles at the time the article was published, readily declared the house to be haunted in other media sources and interviews. In any case, he sold the property shortly thereafter.

The ghost picture taken by Teeta Moss in 1992 seems to have silenced local historians and undercut any specious claims that ghosts are exorcised by “authentic” History. Although it is neither my place nor position to adjudicate right and wrong, guilty and innocent, tacky heritage and authentic History, this skirmish over the supposed super-duper authentically authentic authenticity of this heritage site demonstrates that Mrs. Hamilton doth protest too much.

Edward Bruner argues that, “authenticity is a red herring, to be examined only when tourists, the locals or the producers themselves use the term” (5). I agree with Bruner’s further contention, “that the issue of authenticity has been overdone in tourism literature” (209). But when it comes to The Myrtles, its haunting and historicity, the folks involved in the mobile, contingent, and emergent performance *of* and *with* the sites *and* its ghosts both invoke and conjure the term authenticity in a way that I cannot ignore. However, following Bruner’s lead, I

am more interested in shifting the conversation from issues of verisimilitude, genuineness, and originality to issues of power and authority by investigating the following questions:

- 1) Who has the right, the authority, and the power to authenticate The Myrtles?
- 2) What processes, institutions, apparatus, systems, discursive norms, generic conventions, and technologies do those with the power to authenticate activate in the construction of The Myrtles?
- 3) How do specific tourists, staff, and even the site itself, resist or disrupt power dynamics operating in authentication?

Given these concerns, I am interested in how current proprietors John and Teeta Moss produce and police The Myrtles' public image, and how they work to authenticate the site as haunted. I am also interested in the relationship between the ghosts and notions of ownership more generally. The broadest answer to how the ghosts function with tourists, employees, owners, and management is speciously simple. They function differently with each group. The more time I spend at The Myrtles (going on tours, talking with tourists and employees, writing about ghosts, and researching the property as well as its former owners and inhabitants), the more these differences rip through the seams of any neat ordering or accounting I attempt to stitch together. Given the messiness, it is not possible to write *the* history of *the* ghosts at *The* Myrtles; one of my primary functions as a researcher is not to find a way to tidy up the contested and contentious histories but, instead, to find ways to articulate difference in a manner that, while imaginative, remains "as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced" (Pink 18).

Current owners, John and Teeta Moss, no longer live in the state and only come to the site for major events or to deal with specific problems. Teeta Moss generates and handles much

of the site's publicity and often appears in the media as The Myrtles' spokesperson. In order to begin addressing questions related to authenticity, I compare how Teeta Moss discusses The Myrtles and the ghosts in various interviews, websites, and other media outlets to my general observations while doing ethnographic research on site.

The production of The Myrtles is slick not by chance, but by design. In 1992, the Mosses purchased the Myrtles, which had been converted to a bed and breakfast sometime during the early 1980s. Although I have not been able to learn how successful the B&B was during previous periods of management, I have discovered that the Mosses take a great deal of the credit for having had The Myrtles declared one of America's most haunted homes and one of Louisiana's most celebrated tourist destinations, which has increased the site's profitability. In terms of notoriety and visibility within various apparatuses of the tourist industry, the Mosses—particularly Teeta—ensure The Myrtles receives top billing. The multiple producers of The Myrtles—the Mosses, the tour guides, the tourists—simultaneously situate the site within the domains of “heritage” tourism and, what John Lennon and Malcolm Foley might call, “dark tourism” or “thanotourism” (3). As Teeta Moss routinely says in interviews, “Come to The Myrtles! We've got History and Mystery!” (Moss).

The two types of tours offered at the site, History Tours and Mystery Tours, reflect the ways producers negotiate the discursive tension between the supposedly “lighter” heritage and the supposedly “darker” paranormal. Both tours are designed to legitimate the home as “authentically” haunted and as an “authentic” antebellum plantation. The ghosts are certainly operating in/on both the history and mystery tours. The principal difference between the two is a matter of punctuation, delivery, and performance. Although their content is remarkably similar, the guides on the history tour adopt a more “objective” pose whereas the mystery tour guides

adopt a more “subjective” pose. On the history tour, for example, the objects in the home (i.e., period furnishings) and the home itself (e.g., the architectural detail) are foregrounded and discussed somewhat separately from the ghosts; with some rare exceptions, staff’s and tourists’ experiences with the ghosts are mentioned generally in passing. On the mystery tour, in contrast, the ghosts seem to animate the house and the objects in the house overtly; staff’s and tourists’ experiences with the ghosts are brought to the fore. From my perspective, the only “darker” aspect of the mystery tour is the fact that the tour is only offered when it is dark outside. In tone, the mystery tour is frequently somewhat lighter than its historical counterpart. Simultaneously positioning the site in the domains of history/heritage and haunting/mystery allows the producers to appeal to a broader range of tourists’ interests. In the actual *doing* of The Myrtles, however, the distinctions between history and mystery inevitably break down.

Many of the publications, documentaries, guidebooks, and tourist pamphlets about Louisiana and its ghosts that I have found and/or collected feature The Myrtles. Books such as Jill Pascoe’s *Louisiana’s Haunted Plantations* and Barbara Sillery’s *The Haunting of Louisiana* recount stories about The Myrtles as their opening chapters and in so doing signal the significance of the home in the context of other haunted homes in Louisiana. If I were to stage a production entitled “The Ghosts of Louisiana” based on the research I have collected, the ghosts at The Myrtles would, of necessity, be prominent figures in the first scene of the first act. As Jill Pascoe notes, “Ghosts and Louisiana seem to be synonymous. . . . There is an old saying in Louisiana that every respectable plantation has at least one good ghost” (8). I recall watching an episode of *Ghost Hunters* where a gentleman made a strikingly similar remark, “It’s not a decent theater if it doesn’t have a ghost.” Clearly, Pascoe’s observations point to the importance of ghosts in the imaginings and performances of Louisiana plantations. Her statement also describes

a phenomenon that is often a dilemma for tourist sites. The producers of such sites must negotiate a novelty/predictability double bind by adhering to particular generic conventions, while simultaneously positioning the site as somehow unique in the face of those conventions. Antebellum plantation homes that operate as tourist attractions must conform to and enact certain preexisting historic and popular images and imaginings of the Old South in order to appear “authentic.” In terms of tourism, the fact that these homes were, in fact, constructed in a certain historical period is not sufficient to make them significant tourist sites. As Pascoe’s observation indicates, the presence of ghosts seems to be one of the means by which the process of authentication takes place for plantation homes. Teeta Moss participates in this process of authentication for The Myrtles when, for example, in an interview with *ghostradio.com*, she claims that one of the reasons she and her husband bought the property is because, “tourism is a big thing and everybody has to have a marketing hook and this thing has the ghosts. . . .”⁹

I honestly cannot count the number of different plantations I have toured over the years. In all that time, I have never heard a guide claim that a house *wasn't* haunted. “What, this old place? Haunted? Nope. No ghosts here!” is a statement I can guarantee no tourist will ever hear on a plantation tour. One of the major risks for the antebellum plantation tourism industry is that a monolithic image of the Old South, plantation life, and ghosts will be endlessly repeated from tour to tour and from home to home. The emergence of such a narrative would be detrimental in attracting tourists. The danger, as Michael Bowman points out, is that tourists may develop a “if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all” mentality (“Performing Southern History” 151).

⁹In *Adventures in Paranormal Investigation*, Joe Nickell claims that Teeta Moss “admitted to me that the ‘haunted thing’ (the idea that the place has resident ghosts) was the ‘hook’ to bring in business” (9). Moss also refers to the haunting as a hook in her *ghostradio.com* interview. In this context, however, she is explaining how when she and her husband first purchased the property they assumed it was simply a tourism hook only to discover that the home was indeed haunted.

In the small town of St Francisville alone seven plantation homes are open for public tours and their producers actively compete with one another for tourist dollars. To remain commercially viable, each of these sites must simultaneously adhere to certain generic conventions *and* attempt to differentiate themselves from one another. On one visit to The Myrtles I overheard an exchange exemplifying this tension. An older man, annoyed with having to accompany his wife on yet another plantation tour, grumbled, “Do we really have to hear about hoop skirts, puddle drapes, and shoo-fly fans . . . again?” To his exasperated question, she responded reassuringly, “Honey, this is The Myrtles. It’s different.” The primary way the producers of The Myrtles differentiate it from other area plantation homes is through haunting or, more specifically, through a particular *density* of haunting. If every decent plantation house has at least *one* ghost, The Myrtles distinguishes itself from others on the basis of the *number* of ghosts that haunt it. The quantity of ghosts that wander its halls and grounds depends on who tells the story. One guidebook enumerates seven; one tour guide claims 13, while another counters with 30; one psychic/paranormal investigator/blogger insists that hundreds of ghosts haunt the site. The precise number of ghosts is not as important as the fact that a large gathering or, better yet, a certain *density* of ghosts occupies The Myrtles.

In 1995, when Teeta Moss photographed the property for insurance purposes, the insurance company returned one of her photographs with a letter stating it was unacceptable for their purposes because it included the image of a person. When she examined the photograph, Teeta realized the picture contained the image of a ghost and convinced herself that the ghost was Chloe. The capturing of Chloe’s image and its subsequent authentication were catalysts for a sharp rise in popularity for The Myrtles. The image piqued the interest of various groups invested in paranormal phenomena and paranormal research as well as mainstream media outlets.

The Mosses seem to have courted the attention of groups interested in paranormal activity as well as psychics of varying levels of notoriety (Hawes, Wilson, and Friedman 138). The interest of paranormal and psychic investigators, quite apart from any findings they might disseminate, worked to add legitimacy to the idea that the plantation is haunted, which in turn piques the interest of tourists. The simple fact that paranormal television now constitutes a reality television *genre* suggests the level of popularity, to say nothing of the commercial viability, of ghosts and haunting. Thus far, the Mosses' formula for success seems to be working. Of particular interest in the Mosses' marketing strategies is the way Teeta Moss works to frame the ghosts and characterizes the particular nature of haunting at The Myrtles. Moss' frame, which appears in books as well as in media interviews intended for broader audiences, is largely ignored by the guides who lead tours at the site (Pascoe *The Myrtles Plantation*; Sillery *America's Most Haunted Home*; Moss).

In all of these venues Moss talks extensively about her experiences with the ghosts. She describes her encounters in terms that are consistent with Christian conversion: first she was a nonbeliever, she denied the existence of a voice that spoke directly *to her*, she experienced an epiphany when one of the ghosts saved the life of her son, she became a believer and wonders how she could have ever doubted their existence, and now she believes the spirits guide and protect her (Moss). Although she never refers to Christianity explicitly, she claims the ghosts provide her with a sense of peace and selflessly nurture her and all those who visit; she calls them benevolent and repeatedly compares them to guardian angels that are there to help and to protect; she describes a covenant of sorts she made with the ghosts. She claims to believe that as long as the family owns the house no harm will come to her or her family (crazyhorseghost; Moss). Like the Holy Spirit, the ghosts bring clarity and healing warmth. These ideas are echoed

on The Myrtles Plantation website, where the ghosts are described as harmless and the property as peaceful. Moss frames the ghosts as fundamentally good, almost holy, and rejects claims that the ghosts fall outside of Christian belief structures, such as reincarnation. Moreover, she believes in evil and the idea that evil spirits looking to do harm could upset the balance of things at The Myrtles. She associates certain practices of communicating with the dead, specifically séances and Ouija boards, with evil. Consequently, she has explicitly banned séances and the use of Ouija boards on the property (Brittain and Caulk; Moss; Scheets). Perhaps her beliefs about the ghosts informed the decision to position the site in terms of “history and mystery,” as opposed to the equally catchy and alliterative phrase, “history and haunting.” Although I met Teeta Moss once when she was in town for the massive Halloween event, I have never had the opportunity to conduct an in-depth interview with her.

Moss’s accounts of the ghosts are starkly different from how the ghosts (and the Mosses) are framed by the tour guides. Although the guides do not depict the ghosts as evil, they certainly do not characterize them as “harmless” and “peaceful.” Guides often tell stories about people being extremely frightened by the ghosts, noting the frequency with which guests leave in the middle of the night and go stay at the Best Western down the street. They tease tour members who are overnight guests, asking if they are crazy or gluttons for punishment. Alternately, they praise the guests’ bravery sarcastically, and then provide tips about how to deal with the ghosts who frequent particular rooms. In jest, they warn groups that if anyone sees a ghost while on tour, “Don’t come running to me unless you plan on catching me, ‘cause I guarantee I’ll be the first one out the door.” Guides describe the ghosts as tricksters who continually disturb visitors and their belongings—and the owners.

One of the stories told at the beginning of some tours is that Teeta Moss had a rather unpleasant encounter with a ghost the day the Mosses moved in—an encounter that caused her to pack up and move out the next morning. Moreover, overnight guests frequently have confirmed their use of Ouija boards and/or their participation in séances, both activities reportedly performed with varying degrees of seriousness.

Performances—the *doing*—of The Myrtles by guides, guests, and tourists often disrupt and/or exceed the proprietors’ design and avowed vision for the site. On a meta-discursive level the ghosts trouble the notion of ownership more generally. The majority of ghosts in the house are former owners (or would have inherited the property had they lived), and many of them met their demise at the hands of, or as a result of, the actions of another human being that they “owned.” This statement is specifically true of Chloe, the ostensible “star” of the show.

“You still working on that or are you done?” I look up momentarily from my notes as Jack, who is now slicing limes and refilling his garnish stand, looks at me apologetically as if he is uneasy about interrupting my train of thought. Mistakenly thinking that he is referring to the unruly spiral in which I have been alternately reading and scribbling and the small sprawl of dog-eared books now littering his pristinely polished bar top, I let out a long, equally apologetic, sigh and say in half jest, “Good Gawd, I don’t think this project will ever be done.” In response to what I perceive to be a gentle nudge to vacate the space, I say, “Sorry. I’m junking up your bar,” and hurriedly begin busing what I have made my makeshift office.

He smiles and interrupts me, “No, no, no . . . you’re fine where you are.” He points to the partially finished sandwich on the plate in front of me, “Can I get you a box?”

I let loose another contrite sigh, “Of course. Sorry. That would be great.” He hands me a small Styrofoam box and asks if I would like to close out my tab. I pick up my phone and check the time.

“Actually,” I say, “My tour doesn’t start for about another half hour. I’d love another beer before I close my tab. I can take it out to the patio if you need the space.”

“I’m not that busy,” he says, clearing my plate, “feel free to stay here if you’d like.”

I gratefully take him up on the air-conditioned offer. When he returns with my beer, I ask, “Does Robbie still wait tables in here from time to time?” Robbie is hands down my favorite tour guide and the last time I spoke to him, which was admittedly far too long ago, he told me that he was picking up shifts in the restaurant to make extra money. The bartender looks as if he is scanning through a series of mental photographs of the people that work here as he mumbles, “Robbie . . . Robbie . . . Robbie . . .”

“Tall guy, like 6’ 4”, super skinny . . . black guy . . . funny . . . big, flamboyant personality, wears a homemade gris-gris bag and an amulet around his neck. He also works as a tour guide,” I offer, trying to jog his memory.

“Don’t think I know him, but I haven’t been here that long and mainly work nights.” He turns his attention to opening an oversized jar of maraschino cherries.

I go back to my notebook wondering if Robbie has moved on, thinking what a loss if he isn’t giving tours anymore. I smile to remember the number of times the two of us sat in the courtyard after Robbie had completed a shift, his lanky framed draped across one of the chairs as I alternated between listening intently and scribbling notes. During that time, his hair morphed from a short buzz to a forest of porcupine nubs that were the beginning of dreadlocks. His feline comfort in his own skin contrasted with his sparky personality and the quirky sartorial splendor

he chose to display because at the time the guides chose their own garb as opposed to being straight-jacketed in uniform polo shirts. Frequent animated hand gestures punctuated our conversations as he told me about his grandmother being a healer, or explained the difference between live rocks and dead rocks, or described the process of making the gris-gris bags they allowed him to sell for a tidy profit in the gift shop. The one that hangs from the rear-view mirror of my car is a constant reminder of my determined resistance to his insistence that I buy them as Christmas presents for my fundamentalist family members.

Bri was another of my other favorites, though I know from prior visits that she has already moved on. She was a heavy set, twenty-something Caucasian woman with a sassy confidence and a sharp tongue, which she had pierced, a rarity for this rural area of Louisiana. I often wondered if she had done so to ornament one of her finest features as well as to remind herself that she sometimes needed to keep it in check. After we got to know one another, she told me that she was constantly butting heads with Mr. Glenn, the manager. As high-strung as they both were, I wouldn't have wanted to cross either. Since neither of them work here anymore, I wonder who outlasted whom. Whatever the answer to that question, I am certain that neither emerged from their many skirmishes free of scars. The last time I talked to Robbie he told me that after Mr. Glenn had several nasty run-ins with guests that he had intervened. Robbie personally called North Carolina and said, "Miss Teeta, you have got to come down here and take care of your plantation. Mr. Glenn is running off your guests. Mr. Glenn was wearing her patience dry, so she eventually let him go."

Although I have been on tour with numerous guides over the past few years, I got to know Robbie and Bri best and toured with them most frequently. After their shifts, they were willing to sit with me in the courtyard and talk about their experiences working at The Myrtles. I

try to bracket the slow rumblings of nostalgia climbing up the backside of my brain to avoid peppering the bartender with a thousand questions about the current staff since he is obviously busy—and new. I sip my beer and flip through my notes about tours and tour guides past. As is usually the case with a guide who is unfamiliar to me, I am excited, curious, and a little bit nervous about the upcoming tour with Miss Mary.

CHAPTER FIVE PERFORMING TOUR GUIDES

Academic Overture

Much contemporary scholarship, across a variety of disciplines, embraces performance-centered approaches for analysis and criticism of social phenomena. Indeed, performance as a metaphor for investigating human behavior often proves a highly calibrated, sensitive, and generative tool for critically engaging the world. But, as Tracy Stephenson Shaffer points out, “*performance*-centered analyses are not always *performer*-centered” analyses (141, emphasis added). In this chapter, I pursue two goals. First, I analyze two tour guides/mediums/performers, Robbie and Bri, exploring the ways in which they explain and enact the job of tour guide as performative endeavor and investigating performance and performativity on tour. Second, I tour the Myrtles, changing tours (from history to mystery and back again) and tour guides (from Bri to Robbie to Mary) as I progress through the house. I employ this methodological approach for several reasons: first, it allows me to explore on the stage of the page the multiple ways in which Chloe haunts the house, the guides, the guests, and, hopefully, the readers; second, it gives me the opportunity to re-enact “the tour” as an amalgamation of the numerous performances I have witnessed and participated in with multiple guides over the course of my research; and, third, it permits me to illustrate the multiple contingent factors at work and at play in the context of The Myrtles as a haunted tourist site that is continually (re)constituted through performances of multiple spect-actors.

At the time that I met them, Bri had worked at The Myrtles for approximately a year and Robbie had worked at the site for approximately 10 months. My analysis includes descriptive accounts drawn from any number of Bri’s and Robbie’s tours. They are *not* direct transcriptions. Audio and video recordings are explicitly prohibited on tour, so I have been unable to document

the tour guides' performances in those ways. At first, the inability to document the tours through these traditional means made me incredibly nervous about the process of collecting the material I would need. I even entertained the idea of slipping a digital recorder in my pocket and sneaking it in; however, I quickly came to the conclusion that such an action would be ethically sketchy at best and, if I were caught, I would at the very least lose my credibility with the staff or, more likely, I would be banned from the premises. I have witnessed Bri, in particular, evict guests by interrupting her tour to escort them out of the house for breaking the "no audio, no video, no pictures" rule. In the long run, I found the inability to document the tour in conventional ways generative as opposed to limiting. One of the benefits of not being able to rely on traditional documentation technologies is that I have been forced to spend more time in the field. I have had to go on tour more often, and to learn the stories slowly, bit by bit, as they are delivered—ever-changing—through an oral medium. It is like trying to learn a song by listening to different artists' versions and renderings of the song, knowing all the while I will never fully know and understand "*THE SONG*." My inability to record the tour constantly reminds me that ethnography can never fully capture some discrete Other reality and then objectively represent said "reality." As Sarah Pink argues,

ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture, and individuals) that is based on the ethnographer's own experiences. It does not claim to produce an 'objective' or 'truthful' account of reality but should aim to offer versions of the ethnographers experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced. (18)

Instead of recording the tour, I pay close attention to the tour guides' performances as performances. I try to discover the rhythms and gaps. I must attend to what gestures and aspects of delivery are frequently punctuated and repeated from performance to performance. I must concentrate on how stories change and shift depending on what tour is being given (history or

mystery), the dynamics between audience and guide, and the mental and physical strains on the guide as performer. I agree with Strine, Long and HopKins' contention that "performance is an essentially contested concept" and I engage the tour guides' performances as such (83).

When I first visited The Myrtles in March 2007, as part of a group project in a graduate seminar on tourism, Robbie was our tour guide; unbeknownst to us, he was new to the job and newer still to the role of tour guide. We were one of the first few tours he gave independent of supervision by a seasoned guide. After the tour, my classmates/fellow tourists discussed the tour; Robbie figured prominently in the discussion. Criticism was not directed toward The Myrtles as a tourist site, but rather at Robbie. Moreover, the critiques of Robbie's tour were not based on a perceived lack of content or accuracy (none of the group really expected accuracy in the first place) but rather focused on his performance. My colleagues said they liked him but they felt he was "trying too hard," "he was over the top," "the jokes didn't work," "the narrative seemed forced," etc. My friends were less concerned with whether the house was actually haunted than with his performance as a tour guide. Most of them said they would go back to The Myrtles, but they wanted a different guide. I found the entire conversation frustrating, not because they were criticizing Robbie and not because they were criticizing performance. I was frustrated because I was bored. We were supposed to be scholars! We had spent an entire semester talking about theories (subjectivity, performativity, absence/presence, historicity, singularities, multiplicities, liveness, mediatization, spectacle, simulacra—take your pick) and the only conversation we could muster was that the damn tour guide didn't land his jokes! I wanted grand theory building, discourse salted with five-dollar words and peppered with intellectually masturbatory name-dropping! I was frustrated because we were having a conversation that *any tourist* would have. Later, I realized how flawed my thinking was. When I reflect upon that initial tour, I recognize

that in my frantic rush toward trying to be a critical scholar of tourism, I forgot to be a tourist. Likewise, in my rush to be a performance studies scholar, I forgot performance. Sometimes, when we move from experience to theoretical language too quickly, something dies.

When I returned to The Myrtles the following semester to begin my ethnographic work, I made myself slow down, be a tourist, and pay attention to the performance in front of my face. Robbie guided the first tour I took after my return. The difference was remarkable. He was funny, sincere, engaging, and simultaneously complex and critical. By the end of the tour, guests were talking to each other about the house, the ghosts, the histories; they were sharing stories about their backgrounds and beliefs. Numerous people from the group, myself included, thanked him. After the tour, I talked to Robbie. I think I said something along the lines of, “Wow. You’ve gotten really good at this!” He thanked me and told me it took him a while before he started to figure it out and he was still working on it.

When guides are hired, they must memorize written accounts of the history (ghost tales included) of the home. They do not, however, construct their performances solely from the given historical texts but also from watching other guides’ performances. A two-week period is set aside for new tour guides to shadow more experienced guides before they are permitted to give their own tours. Both Robbie and Bri said they learned more about the home, the ghosts, and how to construct their own performances by shadowing other guides rather than by rote memorization. Thus, many aspects of the performances, of the stories that get told, pass orally from guide to guide. The guides’ performances are highly crafted in and through performance. Consequently, they are neither fixed nor stable but dynamic. I’ve never witnessed a guide give the same tour twice. Though there are oft-repeated elements, sections, intonations, and gestures, differences surface on each tour. Performances change over time through a never-ending trial

and error process that takes place in front of a live audience. In turn, different audiences shape the emergent relationships between guide and guest, and the guide must adapt his or her performance for particular audiences.

Guides' performances, and their virtuosity as performers, also play an integral role in organizing social relationships among guides. The way guides regard their own performance abilities and other guides' performance abilities, tacitly position them in hierarchical relationships. Guides rank order themselves and each other in terms of who gives "the best tour." Moreover, financial incentives result from being a good performer. The guides at The Myrtles make only six dollars an hour. Although they never expressly say on tour that tips are welcome or encouraged, many rely on the relatively sparse tips to supplement their income. The "better" guides make more tips. Moreover, guides are allowed to give private tours for which they collect a portion of the ticket sales. The better performers are usually offered private tours first, and guests often specifically request the better guides because they have either been on their tours before or they have heard about their tours from other guests. Miss Hester, who has worked at The Myrtles for over 25 years, sits above the entire hierarchy because of her longevity; she is well liked by the entire staff although she rarely gives tours anymore. Rather, she works in a more administrative capacity and runs the gift shop. Bri confided that if Miss Hester does give a tour, it is usually a specially requested private tour or, during the busy season, she will fill in if an emergency arises.

The several examples below illustrate the way in which the relationships get discussed. Among the guides, everyone agrees that Robbie's tours are the "best." Bri remarked,

Robbie is the best. Everyone *luves* goin' on Robbie's tours.
Even I love goin' on Robbie's tours. He . . . it's like he. . . .
I don't know I can't describe it.
It's like people come off his tour feeling sorta euphoric or something.

He pulls in crazy tips, too.
He gets at least, like, forty bucks a tour
even on the History tour.

Guides often include stories of other guides as part of their performance on tour. Lauren, the teenager from the gift shop, is one of the younger and more inexperienced guides. During one of her tours, she began to tell a story about one of Robbie's experiences in the house, she interrupted herself and remarked,

Robbie? Y'all know Robbie right?
The guy at the register in the gift shop?

Several guests nod. Some respond, "Oh yeah, that guy we bought the tickets from."

He's great. He's really, really good.
If you ever get a chance, you should take his tour.
Anyway, as I was saying . . .

Another time, while purchasing my ticket, Dorothy, an older guide who has worked at The Myrtles for years but is very shy and nervous about giving tours, humbly remarked,

Bri is running late, so y'all got stuck with me.
Sorry, her tour is really much better.

Robbie and Bri seem to sit at the top of the hierarchy primarily because they give the "best" performances. Unlike Lauren and Dorothy, both of whom admit to being a bit uncomfortable or nervous about performing, Robbie and Bri enjoy performing. When asked about their favorite part of working at The Myrtles, both quickly responded, "The tours!" Both were also quick to complain about other aspects of the job, such as dealing with the owners of the property and being understaffed and underpaid. Robbie and Bri explicitly stated the tours were the most fun part of the job because they got to perform. They like interacting with new people and both enjoy the "rush" they experience when a tour goes well. Bri enjoys the way in which her performance merges with the history of the house.

It's such an old, important house. With such a long history.
It's cool telling people about it.
It's cool that I
kinda
get to be a part of that.
If I give a good tour
maybe people will remember me
when they think about the house.

Both guides often talk about their tours in terms of performance. After tours, they often go back into the gift shop/office and talk to other guides and employees and, frequently, they evaluate the tour they have given in much the same way that performers evaluate their performances. If the tour went poorly, they say things like,

I don't know WHAT is *wrong* with me tonight.
I keep tripping over all my words.

or

Man
I was off on that one.

or

I totally blanked in the dining room
completely blanked!

Many times their conception of the success or failure of a performance is contingent on their connection, or lack thereof, with the audience. Often, they express frustration when a tour group is not responsive, in much the same way that seemingly apathetic audiences baffle performers.

One of Robbie's comments characterizes this frustration,

Nothing! I got nothing!
I tried everything I could
Pulled out all the stops
Still nothing!
Whatcha' gonna do?

Conversely, if a tour goes really well, they are often quick to attribute the success to the dynamics of the audience. The audience is characterized as “cool,” “a good group,” or “fun.” The line between a “good” audience and an “annoying” audience is apparently a fine one that is drawn on the basis of what the guide sees as appropriate participation and excessive participation. According to Bri, good groups consist of guests

Who are into it
but not *too* into it.
You’ve been on the tour.
You know what I’m talking about.

I laugh and respond, “The talkers, the screamers, the know-it-alls, the dude with a million questions.”

Exactly!

I do know what she is talking about, not simply because I am conducting an ethnography at The Myrtles, but also because I am a frequent tourist at the site. For some reason, at least for me, the beginning of a guided tour feels like walking into high school again. People clique up, eye each other judgmentally, stereotype other guests, snicker behind their hands, whisper to other members of their clique, and roll their eyes when someone asks a stupid question. MacCannell observes that tourists are often self-conscious and perhaps even embarrassed about their own status as tourists, and will engage in a rhetoric of “moral superiority” in their attempts to set themselves apart from other tourists (9-10).

Through their performances, Bri and Robbie often work to undermine this impulse and try to build cohesion within a group as well as between themselves and individual tourists. For example, on one of my initial tours (before I revealed I was doing ethnographic research), I overheard a group of women standing behind me and whispering to one another about my “disgusting” nose ring. I felt more than a little bit vindicated when Bri winked at me, flashed her

tongue piercing, and proceeded with the tour. Although I did not bond with all of the other tourists on the tour, a feeling of consubstantiality emerged between Bri and me as well as among some of the other people on her tour. Fine and Speer note, “tour performance always is emergent to some degree and the potential for *communitas* may or may not be actualized” (87). My own experiences, confirmed by the guides I have interviewed, suggest that the potential for *communitas* is thwarted most when tourists interrupt the guides’ performances too frequently. When individuals ask too many questions out of their enthusiasm for the tour, or pose snide questions seemingly out of spite, or when folks disrupt tours by talking among themselves, both guide and group become uncomfortable. Richard Bauman asserts, “through his [*sic*] performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it” (65, qtd. in Fine and Speer). When tourists interrupt the guide too often or at inappropriate times, the energy of the performer and the audience dwindle noticeably. Both Bri and Robbie attempt to manage unanticipated interruptions at the beginning of their tours by asking guests to hold their questions until the end. Thus, they establish expectations about the boundaries between performer and audience and, thereby, attempt to create a space in which *communitas* can occur through the tour performance.

However, at times, interruptions cause a slippage in the tour guides’ performances, which can increase intimacy on tour as well as facilitate critical distance between audience, guide, and site. I use the term slippages to describe performative hiccups that mark the guides’ performances as constructed and rehearsed for both audiences and guides. Or, to describe this phenomenon in another way, slippages are the spaces where performance emerges from the performative. Elin Diamond describes slippage as generative. “When performativity materializes

as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique" (5). These slippages manifest most obviously when the guides slip between their front stage/onstage persona and their back stage/offstage persona.¹⁰ On several tours with Bri, I have noticed that she gets distracted from her performance and engages in jovial, impromptu exchanges with tourists, after which she has to negotiate a transition back to her narrative. Laughing, she usually says something along the lines of, "Y'all are too fun! Stop it!" or, she will say jokingly, "Y'all are SOOOO bad! You're distracting me!" Then, she attempts to transition back to the tour by saying something along the lines of, "I've got to put my tour guide face back on now." Robbie usually says, facetiously, "Y'all stop makin' me laugh!" or, he will playfully wipe the smile off his face and continue from where he left off.

On one hand, these moments of slippage seem to increase intimacy between tourists and guides as well as among tourists and other tourists, thus increasing the likelihood that *communitas* will occur. On the other hand, I have seen the slippage backfire. On one tour in particular, group members worked in collusion with one another to try to make Robbie "break character." For Robbie, this behavior is acceptable only up to a point. When this group became too disruptive and disrespectful, Robbie reasserted his authority by adhering tightly to a "flatter," "less genuine" version of his tour guide persona. His altered performance reminded me of the

¹⁰See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* for a more extensive discussion of front stage/back stage behavior. For more explicit discussions of this phenomenon in relation to tour guide performances, see Anja Schwarz, "Not this Year!" (439-442) and Robert C. Thompson, "Am I Going to See a Ghost Tonight?" (85-88). Although neither explicitly discusses front stage/back stage behavior, they use other theorists (e.g., Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Diana Taylor) to explore the performative politics and negotiation of self that occurs for guides on tour.

Queen's Royal Guard who, in response to tourists' attempts to make them smile, only further fix their stoic masks. In Robbie's tour performance, for example, he usually reveals that members of his family once worked as slaves on the plantation. On this particular tour, he omitted this part of his performance. After the tour, Robbie was visibly frustrated. I spoke with him briefly about what transpired. When I asked him if he was okay, he responded,

Yeah. I don't get why they gotta be such assholes.
Some people just weren't raised right.

I told him I noticed he left out some things he usually discusses on his tour. Before I could specify that I was referring to his family and slavery, he cut me off with a knowing look and a gruff laugh.

Man,
Fuck them.
They don't get to know *everything* about me, my family, my people
'Specially if they don't know how to act right.

Although he discussed slavery while giving the tour, he purposefully omitted his specific connection to slavery at The Myrtles in this performance. By not allowing *this* tour group, which he deemed rude and unworthy, access to the historical conditions under which his family experienced slavery, he performed a nuanced cultural critique that surfaced between his particular historical body and the supposed a-historical conventions of embodiment for tour guides. In this instance, by refusing to let the mask slip, Robbie successfully and performatively marks his performance in multiple ways. He uses the slip as a tactic for maintaining his authority as tour guide as well as a strategy for exercising agency over his own historicity.

Bri, on the other hand, maintains her authority on tour by not only letting the persona slip, but by flinging it forcefully away. Bri does not tolerate being disrespectful and/or impolite towards the house, the ghosts, other tourists, or the tour itself on her tours; she also does not

tolerate any breaking of the “no audio, no video, no photography” rules. If guests breach either—the implicit respect contract or the explicit rules—Bri does not shy away from confrontation. Under usual circumstances, her performance tends to be upbeat and energetic with just a slight tinge of sarcasm; however, when she feels that tour members are undermining her performance, she abandons her nice tour guide persona and becomes assertive and, at times, aggressive. On one tour, when a group of women continued to whisper and giggle within their group, Bri stopped mid-sentence and spat out sardonically,

Excuse me, ladies. I’m trying to give a tour here.
Is something funny?
If so, please, by all means, share it with the rest of us.

After an uncomfortably long pause, she continued tight-lipped, addressing the entire group.

Ladies and gentlemen,
I don’t go to your job and disrespect you,
So please don’t come to my job and disrespect me.

Incidents like this transpired on several of the tours I participated in at The Myrtles. On two occasions, Bri escorted people out of the house. In all instances, the remainder of the tour was uncomfortable, if not weird, because, for the most part, she could slip so easily back into her role as guide; the guests, on the other hand, cannot return to the innocence of their former touristic performances. Instead, they try to overcompensate, to prove to the guide that they should not be confused with these “bad” tourists. Both Robbie and Bri utilize these slippages between front stage/onstage and back stage/offstage personae deliberately, as a tactical maneuver, to both enhance identification and intimacy with their audiences as well as to maintain some degree of agency and authority on their tours.

Eric Cohen notes that guides occupy a boundary role between site (including owners, administrators, and other employees) and guests, and between guests and natives (22). The

guides often negotiate these boundaries inside the performance proper. On tour, guides talk about their own experiences as guides, as well as the experiences of other guides, in relationship to the ghosts (natives). As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, a site is limited in its ability to tell its own story and guides must try to show more than guests can otherwise perceive in order to access its “invisible heart and soul” (167-168). Tourists gain access to the house, the ghosts, and the multiple histories scurrying in between primarily through the guides’ performances, which invoke other guides/guests/owners.

Bri recounts stories about hand prints appearing on a bedspread and on the couch while giving a tour, about finding mysterious, long, blond strands of hair in the chandelier while hanging Christmas ornaments, about children who see and talk to the ghosts during tours, and about a man who saw and talked to his dead wife on tour. Robbie tells stories about Chloe, the ghost of the murdered slave, taking out women’s earrings while on tour, about doors slamming and shaking inexplicably, and about seeing blue orbs of light move across the rooms. They tell the ghost stories of other guides and stories of other employees’ experiences as well the experiences of guests staying overnight in the house. Both Robbie and Bri underscore and legitimize their expertise and virtuosity as guides by telling about scary incidents that made other guides quit their jobs. In both of their performances they frequently say, “Not many tour guides stay here for very long.” Additionally, in their performances, guides sometimes recount the ghostly experiences other guides have told as if they were their own experiences.

Although as an ethnographer I note how these stories change as they float from guide to guide and tour to tour, I am not interested in labeling the stories (or the ghosts for that matter) as “real” or “contrived,” “true” or “false.” Edensor points out, all performances have involuntary effects, and one can never predict how a performance is likely to be read (78). In my

conversation with other tourists, some are quick to proclaim the house is haunted, some are quick to write off the whole experience as silly and contrived, but most are ambivalent. If I focused on trying to figure out what parts of guides' performances were "true" or "false," then I would miss a great deal. Like, Trihn Minh-ha, I, too, am nervous of attempts to parse out cleanly so-called facts from so-called fictions. Trihn argues,

story-writing becomes history-writing, and History quickly sets itself apart, consigning story to the realm of tale, legend, myth, fiction literature. Then, since fictional and factual have come to a point where they mutually exclude each other, fiction not unfrequently, means lies and fact, truth. DID IT REALLY HAPPEN? IS IT A TRUE STORY? Which truth . . . the question unavoidably arises . . . Truth. On the one hand each society has its own politics of truth; on the other hand, being truthful is being in the in-between of all regimes of truth (16, qtd in Pollock).

Whether these stories (or the ghosts) are "true" or "real" is not the point for me or for ethnographers more generally, or even for many tourists. Attempting to designate them as such thwarts creative possibilities in history. In tour performances, stories about guides' experiences function to legitimate The Myrtles as haunted but they also hold open an ambiguous space—a space for "skeptical assessment as well as wide-eyed wonder" (Bowman "Performing Southern History" 155).

Tour Guides: A Movement in Three Parts

First Movement: Bri

In terms of the tours at The Myrtles, as well as ghosts tours and tourism more broadly, action and agency abound for guests, ghosts, guides, the site itself, as well as the material objects operating within and on all parties involved. As I hope is abundantly clear by now, tourists are not vapid, empty, cultural containers simply waiting to be filled; rather, they are active participants in the events in which they chose to partake. In a similar vein, as Modlin, Alderman, and Gentry aptly point out,

Tour guides are not disembodied uninterested parties. Traditional studies tend to view tour guides in monolithic and categorical terms, emphasizing the extent to which they serve as mere ‘mediators’ of the tourist experience. More recent studies focus on the agency and cultural politics of tour guides, how they participate in the social construction of destinations, and actively shape the meanings. (4)

Like tourists, tour guides have agency. Noel Salazar further contends that the stories guides perform on tour, “are not closed or rigid systems, but rather open systems that are always put at risk by what happens in actual encounters” (848). In working through the much discussed metaphor of tour guide as *mediator*, Sharon MacDonald argues,

tour guides do exercise agency, ‘positioning’ themselves in relation to the official narrative, the organization or industry for which they work, and the wider social and political context of tourism. This agency includes both how they deal with the ‘social dynamics of the tour group’ and also the ‘materiality of the [tourism] site.’ (qtd in Modlin et al.)

I readily agree with this claim but when it comes to performing the work of tour guide at a site openly avowed as haunted, perhaps a more apt metaphor for guides is that of *medium*. Guides not only have to negotiate the social and political relationships between owners, industry, and guests, they must also navigate visceral relationships with the ghosts whose effects are material, historical, discursive, and phenomenological in scope, content, context, and experience. On every tour I have taken at The Myrtles, the guides themselves claim to be haunted; they have experienced the effects of haunting and influence—affectively—the many ways in which tourists experience haunting as well. Having made that point, I think it important to clarify that the guides are not merely puppet masters of the ghosts. On the contrary, the ghosts have agency and how the ghosts—specifically Chloe—go about performing haunting, intersects *with*, performs *with*, the constellation of complex social configurations that emerge within the performative event, the here and now, of a particular tour.

Avery Gordon eloquently articulates the contours and stakes of this relationship between the ghost and the particular person(s) the ghost(s) haunt(s).

The ghost has an agency on the people it is haunting and we can call that agency desire, motivation or standpoint. And so its desires must be broached and we have to talk to it. . . . In this sense, the ghosts figures what systematically continues to work on the here and now. When a ship, a bridge, a face, an inert object, an ordinary building, a familiar work place, a patch of grass, a photograph, a house becomes animated, becomes haunted, it is the complexities of its social relations that the ghostly figures. This sociality, this wavering present, forces a something that must be done that structures the domain of the present and the prerogatives for the future. (179)

As I wait to begin the tour, the sociality of this particular present moment is stifling. The heat from the late afternoon sun radiates into and through the shade of the wrap around porch in relentless waves. Looking out over the courtyard, I see the ether wavering in the mirage-inducing Louisiana summer swelter.

The veranda with the faded robin's egg blue floorboards is plenty wide, so why the members of this tour group are all squeezing together like spooked cattle is completely beyond me. Good lord, it is hot as hell! Don't these crazy tourists know that if everyone would just spread out we might all stand a better shot at catching the corner of an errant breeze? A hot pink sequin from a sash identifying one of a gaggle of girls as the bride, scratches my arm. It is obvious to everyone which members of our tour group are part of the bachelorette party. If their similarity in size, age, hairstyle, and costume didn't give them away, then the fact that they exude Eau de Merlot would. The awkwardness of our little cramped gathering makes me fidget—and I am not the only one. In an attempt to maintain some semblance of personal space, I back up until my backside is touching the white wooden boards of the wall closest to the door I know we will be entering. In the courtyard, a clattering of sticky children scampers about shrieking, playing scare and be scared. Their nerve-wracked mother grits out, "Boys! Enough! Git over here RIGHT NOW!" She offers an apologetic laugh to the gathered group that peels like

paint. Scratched, chipped, and quaint though they may be, I don't know how much longer I can feign fascination with either the floorboards . . . or my toenails. Can we just get on with it, please! If hell is other people then I'm in hell. (I choke back a chuckle. Did I really just tell myself a Sartre joke?)

This is the point at which I secretly, blasphemously, wish I could drop the participant part of participant-observer and the tourist part of tourist-ethnographer. In situations like this, I find myself agreeing with MacCanell who quips, "Tourists dislike tourists" (10). Is it any wonder? You have to get all up next to people you have never met, and then, when you can no longer look at the floorboards or your toes, you have to make . . . (ugh!) . . . small talk. My left ear catches the gusty spittle from a menthol tinted, high pitched sneeze. I sense rather than see the age of the nose from which the sneeze departed by the peculiar sweet and sour bouquet of liniment, cold cream, some nameless but common perfume, hard candy, and Vicks VapoRub that enwreathes women of a certain generation. So, before I even turn around to say, "God Bless You," I am certain I will be meeting the eyes of a grandmother. I am correct about her age, but am surprised to see that she is wearing a pair of navy blue Capri pants and a bright multi-color top in a geometric print. The outfit in and of itself is quite fashionable, though it clashes with her orthopedic shoes and her knee-high stockings. (Even she wouldn't be wearing panty hose under pants in this heat.) Her husband is dressed more typically—or at least in something more consistent with my expectations for someone his age—a pair of khaki pants and a short sleeved polo shirt beginning to stick to his chest and underarms where the sweat splotches are clearly visible.

I try not to act weird while politely trying to ignore the fact that my ass is jutting awkwardly to the right to avoid his cane, which I'm fairly certain he uses more for effect than

necessity. But perhaps I'm just being unkind because I'm so uncomfortable. My northern cheek muscles assume the performative position—charming, sincere, warm, maybe just a dash of mischief. I open my mouth and listen as the obligatory stale question scuttles sideways across my tongue and out of my mouth before I can stop myself, “So . . . y'all think it's haunted?” My voice instinctually rises about an octave and my accent inadvertently thickens, a habit I resort to in uncomfortable situations when I am forced to interact with strangers. The couple exchanges a series of grand gestures performed completely in silence through a practiced set of glances. His eye roll is followed by her warning glare, which is followed by his feigned befuddlement that is, in turn, followed by her cautionary cutting squint. The *pas de deux* is completed by a wide-eyed but silent, “WHAT?” I can see, and almost hear, the years of muted conflicts and resolutions in those moments of ocular exchange. Having finished their familiar dance, their eyes unlock. Acceding to her superior stare, he gives in, grins, and snorts, “We'll see . . . We. Will. See.” She elbows him half in jest, sighs conspicuously, and explains, “We live just down the road a ways in Baton Rouge, and I've been dying to come here for years and see for myself if it's haunted . . . you know, Chloe and all . . . but my husband—well, he's just skeptical about everything.”

I see Bri coming out of the gift shop, making her way across the veranda towards the tour group, and feel relieved the rest of the conversation will be cut short. She hollers out across the courtyard, “Four o'clock tour is starting now.” As the group shuffles even closer to the double doors anticipating an entrance of one sort or (an)Other, I flash the couple a last dazzling grin and say, “Well, if y'all see anything let me know!”

Bri, whose voice jingles like change, welcomes us to The Myrtles. She politely but firmly asks everyone to pull out his or her cell phone. Although those who are unfamiliar with pre-performance rituals are a bit confused as to the reason why, we all comply. She asks us to hold

the phones up so she can see them, and twenty some odd-hands wave twenty some-odd cell phones in the air as if they are searching for an elusive signal. “Samsung, iPhone, Samsung, Nokia, iPhone, iPhone, iPhone . . .” Bri ticks them off, then, “Ohhhh . . . new swanky iPhone.” The group titters. She smiles and continues, telling everyone holding up a phone to raise their other hands into the air and extend their index finger in a pointing motion. The group mimics the gesture she has just modeled for us. “Now,” she says a bit sarcastically, “take that finger and apply it to the off button of your phone and firmly apply pressure.” Everyone laughs as twenty something cell phones buzz, chirp, vibrate and otherwise signal their compliance. Bri explains that NO photography, NO video recording, and NO audio recording are allowed on the tour except at one point. She assures us she will let us know when we can get out our cameras. Her tone insinuates we should not test her on this directive. So until the promised singular instance of digitized, mediated vision, we will have to be content to see in other, more corporeal ways. We have arrived at the *Beetlejuice* scene of the tour—that moment when Geena Davis and Alec Baldwin turn their bodies inside out and put their eyes on their fingers or in their mouths. This moment, as the tour begins, is like that—except less poppy and bright. Bri’s keys jangle. And with one deft click, the entryway door creaks open. In turbulent silence, pressing tightly against each other, we cross another threshold.

The heat from our bodies dissipates as the large group begins to disperse itself in the coolness of the entryway, which is wide enough to drive a carriage through. People shuffle about the space trying to puzzle out an appropriate place to stand among the furnishings in the room, until we decide, in a surprisingly collective moment, that a semi circle would be best. Settled, we look around at the antique delicately flowered wallpaper and the opposite set of double doors with their leaded-glass panes with yellow Spanish crosses. More small talk ensues while folks

continue to file into the room, folding themselves into our semicircle. “Oh my gosh, Mom, that’s the haunted mirror!” a ‘tween girl squeals pointing at the semi reflective surface in the ornate gold-leaf frame on the north wall. Opposite it, a piano crouches underneath the staircase leading to the second floor. Bri crosses to the staircase, grabs a small gilded picture frame from a marble-topped side table, and climbs midway up the red carpeted staircase so that everyone can see and hear her. Thus positioned, she begins the story of the house and its inhabitants. She swings the small gold frame toward the audience, revealing what looks like a quick pen and ink sketch of a man with muttonchops wearing an ascot. It looks like the kind of sketch an artist might make before painting a proper portrait. Hoisting the picture above her head, she says, “The Myrtles was built in 1796, by *this* man, General David Bradford.” With that brief preamble—named, framed, elevated—the site (or is it sight) sacralization begins . . . again (MacCannell 43-48). The already overly excited ‘tween blurts out, “He owned Chloe right?” Chloe, her potentiality is like the ever-present yet fleeting wisps of confederate jasmine in the courtyard. Somewhere between amusement and annoyance, Bri cautions, “Simmer down, we’re not there yet,” before proceeding.

The tenor of the tale moves back and forth—at least in my imagination—between a slow southern drawl and a clipped Creole pidgin depending on where Chloe is standing in the story. “Beginnin’ with General David Bradford, or as we call him ‘Whisky Dave’, and continuin’ on through the Woodruff family. . . .” In all of its noble tragedy—a healthy balance between scandal and propriety, mystery and manners is properly discussed—Chloe is standing off in the corner, waiting her turn.

Despite her fame, Chloe doesn’t saunter into the story, she dashes in—as if just a little behind cue—but meekly. Her rushed entrance is juxtaposed with the staircase banister, whose wood grain flows slowly down the staircase, like molasses. The start of her story tastes as bitter,

acid, and astringent as Ms. Woodruff's attitude toward the precocious slave girl. With one word—mistress—the tale slides down the contours of Chloe's body, animating her all too female flesh. Although she says it with a slight matter-of-factness, Bri also leans in, looks the tour group in the eyes, and lingers on the word a bit, as if she has no intention of letting anyone off the hook. I've noticed that when she does this, many of the people on her tours, myself included, tend to avert their eyes; they glance at each other or glance down. A bit farther on in her script, Bri pauses once again before thrusting the word—mistress—into the thickly sexed ether of the netherworld. A short wince and guilty shudder spreads through the group like a yawn. Bri's performance reminds us that many women who were slaves became "mistresses" by force rather than by choice. The all too fleshy image of her as a slave but more than just a slave—a sex slave—would impel us to act but we cannot act; the space between the here of now and the there of then becomes charged with our impotence. In our impotence, we wince. I know there will be additional wincing to come.

Bri continues, "*Some* people describe Chloe as a nosey gossip who would eavesdrop on the owners so as to improve her status amongst the other slaves." Her emphasis on the word *some* insinuates that she is not one of *those* people and that she doesn't buy the characterization of Chloe as simply a meddling prestige whore who would stoop to any depths to improve her standing among Woodruff's other slaves—a narrative promulgated (minus the whore terminology) by Teeta Moss (Moss). Bri intimates that an alternative history is afoot and that an alternative explanation for Chloe's behavior is more plausible—though she does not choose to share it with us. Instead her double voiced performance of the sanctioned narrative opens a gap that we tourists are invited to fill. It is not difficult to come up with an alternate account for Chloe's actions. With precious little control over their own fate, slaves knew the importance of

knowing as much information as possible about the business, temperament, and future plans of their owners. Eavesdropping was not merely an action that provided fodder for gossip, it was a strategy for survival and not *just* for Chloe but for the multitude of unnamed ghosts of slaves her ghost story conjures. *Plus d'un*. No more one. More than one.

Bri continues, “Well, one night after dinner, the men retired to the gentlemen’s parlor to drink brandy, smoke cigars, and talk business and politics—at the time it was considered impolite to discuss such things in front of ladies. The ladies were still in the dining room, and Chloe was cleaning up in the women’s parlor. As the conversation got heated, she put her ear against the door to hear what they were sayin’. Suddenly Judge Woodruff opened the door and caught her. He was so angry that, then and there, he dragged her out to the courtyard and cut off her left ear and banished her to kitchen work. From then on she wore a green turban around her head to hide the missing ear.” Some in the group wince again, sucking in a sympathetic gasp. The ‘tween grimaces and rubs her ear in empathy. Noticing the young girl’s response, Bri nods, acknowledging her sympathetic gesture. “I know! Harsh, right?” With her hand still cupped over her ear, the girl nods.

Bri proceeds, “Now kitchen work was hard work. Not as hard as working out in the fields, of course, but it was still a big demotion for Chloe who was used to working in the house. She missed the children particularly. So Chloe came up with a plan to get back into the good graces of the family. She knew Mrs. Woodruff’s birthday was coming up so she volunteered to make the cake.” Bri walks back down the stairs to the marble topped side table and scoops up a green glass vase of green leaves with a single blossom poking out the top. Vase in hand, she gestures toward the leaves and blossom casually. “Does anyone know what this” She doesn’t have the chance to finish.

“Oleander!” the young girl cuts her off.

“Works twice as fast as arsenic,” Bri confirms. “Chloe ground up the leaves and put them in the cake so that the family would become sick and would call for their old nursemaid, Chloe, to come and nurse them back to health.” Zipping past the past, in clamorous summation, hurrying to get on with it, she blurts, “Miscalculating, she killed the two children and Ms. Woodruff. She was hanged somewhere on the property, her body was weighted down with bricks and thrown into the Mississippi.” The passive voice both masks and marks the elisions. How did they know Chloe did it? Who caught her? Which tree? Who tied the noose? Who put it around her neck? Who was party to the lynching? Who cut down her lifeless body? Who weighted down her corpse? Where did they get the bricks? Who carried her the mile and a half from here to the Mississippi?

The skeptical older gentlemen with the cane that I met on the veranda raises his hand but Bri cuts him off before he can ask his question. “Sorry, sir, but I’m running a bit behind, if you could hold your questions till the end of the tour I’d really appreciate it. Thanks.” Clearly displeased, he grumbles something under his breath and his wife once again elbows him, shushes him, and gives him a warning look. Bri replaces the vase on the marble topped side table and opens the door next to it. “Now,” she says, “if you all would move on into Mrs. Stirling’s day room please. . . .”

We all squeeze into a smaller, peach colored room at the base of the stairs. The room is full of gold glided furniture—a canopied day bed, an intricately stitched settee, a massive mirror hanging over the fireplace that doubles the colossal chandelier dangling in the center of the room, and a dressing screen with elaborately embroidered panels topped by glass. The screen seems impractical unless the woman using it was my height or shorter, otherwise she would be

revealing all of her business to anyone else who happened to be in the room. The room looks like something straight out of Versailles, though a bit less well preserved and on a much smaller scale. I long to take pictures because this is the type of gaudy French shit my Uncle Mame adores. All of the furnishings in this room were handmade in France around the time period that the Stirlings owned the plantation, Bri assures us; however, the only pieces original to the house in this room are the dressing screen and the Napoleon Bonaparte bumble bee tea set on the side table next to the bed. The only other pieces original to the house, according to Bri and *all* of the other tour guides, are the gold mirror and the chandelier in the foyer, which she will tell us more about in just a bit.

On the last tour I took, the guide told us that other than the gold mirror and the chandelier in the foyer, the only original piece of furniture in the house was the mahogany side table banished awkwardly to a corner of the day room behind the door, upon which sat a small portrait of Clark Woodruff glaring at our backs. On a previous tour, yet another guide informed us that the only original piece, outside of the mirror and the chandelier in the foyer, was the black lacquered sewing stand with its intricate mother of pearl inlay in the women's parlor. So apparently, outside of the mirror and the chandelier, the only other "authentic" pieces in the home vary from tour to tour and from guide to guide, which suggests that "authenticity" is more a matter of the guides' tastes and preferences rather than "Historical Truth"—whatever that means.

Standing beneath the mirror in the day room, Bri informs us that when Judge Woodruff lost his wife and two children he was so distraught that he sold the property to Ruffin Gray Stirling (a recently married Scottish gentleman, and wealthy planter in the area). Moving to New Orleans with his only surviving daughter, Mary Octavia, Woodruff never returned to The

Myrtles again. “The Stirlings, using their considerable wealth to renovate to the house, added this day room and the entire second floor,” Bri tells us. Before recounting the history of the Stirlings, Bri advises us that there are three things we need to remember about Mrs. Stirling: she married up, she was superstitious, and she was superficial. Even after 150 plus years, pretention is pretention; or, as Bri puts it, “new money *is* as new money *does*.” Some folks in the group nod knowingly, while others look confused: Insider/Outsider; Native/Non-native; Southerner/Not Southerner. Bri doesn’t clarify. Just trust me, her breezy attitude suggests, it would take too long and we are already running behind schedule.

Bri grasps the gilt edge of the dressing screen and proceeds with an antebellum gender analysis. She explains that it was inappropriate for the lady of the house to go back upstairs after she had dressed for the day and ventured downstairs, though she doesn’t explain why. This room served as Mrs. Stirling’s command center. From it, she would issue orders to her house slaves and carry out the business for which she was responsible on the plantation. If necessary, Mrs. Stirling would nap on the daybed—hence that name—and change for dinner behind this dressing screen. She points to the top of the dressing screen and taps on the glass. “Now you may be wondering, Bri says, why the top of the screen is clear glass. What is the point, you are probably asking yourself, of a dressing screen if you can see through the top half, right?” Bri goes on to explain that during this time period “a woman’s cleavage and her breasts, called her *décolletage*, was not considered very sexy if you can believe it.” The ‘tween titters at the very mention of sex and breasts. Her mother cuts her eye at the girl, who immediately falls silent. “The sexiest part of a woman’s body,” Bri confides, “the part that *always* had to be covered, was her ankles!”

“What! That’s crazy!” the ‘tween cannot contain herself in spite of her mother’s ongoing efforts to silence her with a pointed gaze. Despite the mother’s efforts, everyone in the room

silently agrees with the young girl's assessment. Bri gives the 'tween a sly wink and gestures towards the bottom of the screen.

Going colloquial, Bri says, "Notice there ain't no glass here." Bri points directly at the sneezy grandmother in her Navy blue Capri pants and says, "Back in the day, you would be considered quite the hussy in that get up!" The grandmother clutches at an imaginary strand of pearls at the neckline of her stylish geometric top. Her husband leans forward with both hands on his cane and belts out, "I WISH!" Following his lead, everyone in the group adds their voices to his rumbling belly laugh, as his wife turns bright pink and gives him a faux stern look that is nevertheless full of fondness.

"Now as I said, Mrs. Stirling, much like many other people at the time, was very superstitious. She was well aware of the tragedy that befell the previous owners of the plantation and so, while she was executing the enormously expensive renovations and ordering elaborate decorations for the house—you will remember she was hell bent on showing off her money—she made sure she built in protections against any evil spirits that might still be lingering in the home. I'm sure you've noticed all of the statues of cherubs and angels around the property as you came in. Yes? Mrs. Stirling thought that the cherubs would protect her so she put them everywhere she could." Bri calls our attention to the angel motif in the mirror frame, in the plaster shield from which chandelier is suspended, on the bed frame, and in the pictures hanging on the walls. Looking up at the ornate chandelier hanging above our heads, she prompts us to notice the four nuns in the plasterwork at the ceiling: one facing East, one facing West, one facing North, and one facing South. "Mrs. Stirling wanted to make sure that the holy sisters had all the bases covered, so to speak." Given that St. Francisville was—and still is—one of the few primarily Protestant communities in Southern Louisiana, and the fact that the Stirling's are buried in Grace

Episcopal Cemetery, which confirms their identity as Protestants, I'm confused by the presence of Mrs. Stirling's Catholic nuns. Then again, when it comes to The Myrtles, I've grown quite accustomed to confusion and conflicting narratives. Having taken Bri's tours before, I know what is coming next. "You probably didn't notice, but if you will look at the door of the room you will see that the keyhole is upside down. As we go through the rest of the house, notice that all of the keyholes on all of the doors throughout the house are installed upside down. Mrs. Stirling was convinced this move would confuse any evil spirits trying to get in from the outside. Clearly she was mistaken."

Bri caresses the gold frame and runs her fingers lightly over the tiny, almost invisible knots in the dainty, pink-flowered, blind-stitch embroidered panel, thus redirecting our attention back to Mrs. Stirling's dressing scrim. "I want to share with you another story about this dressing screen. One Halloween, before I came to work here, the owners at the time hired actors from a local theater company to perform different roles during a candlelight tour of the property. The actor playing Chloe was standing behind this screen waiting for the next tour group to arrive. The candle in her hand was the only light source in the room. All of the sudden the room got as cold as an icebox and she saw a blue orb in the top corner of room." Bri points toward the ceiling above our heads to the right. "The orb glowed and got bigger and bigger as it moved closer to her," she said tracing its path with a finger from the ceiling to the center of the room. "When it reached the middle of the room, it hovered there for a second, before it dissolved into a green mist out of which the image of a slave woman in a green headscarf emerged. The actress was so terrified she couldn't even open her mouth to scream. She knew, without a doubt, it was Chloe. Looking straight at the young woman, not saying a word, Chloe smiled. She approached the dressing screen, put her finger to her lips as if to calm the performer, and then blew an icy cold

puff of breath toward the glass. The candle on the other side of the glass instantly guttered out, leaving the performer in complete darkness except for a blue light emanating from Chloe's image. Then, just as quickly as she had appeared, Chloe morphed back into a mist and disappeared as warmth returned to the room. When the woman playing Chloe's counterpart finally found her voice again, she screamed at the top of her lungs, dropped the smoldering candle, and ran out of the house at a dead sprint never to return again. True story," Bri assures us. Then she quips, that she guesses the cherubs and the nuns had decided to take that night off.

Bri gestures to the left side of the room behind our heads. "I'd like to point out one more thing in the room before we move back out into the foyer. Notice the oil painting above that mahogany side table. (She doesn't point out Clark Woodruff's picture sitting on the table.) Now, does anything look a little bit odd to you about that picture?" After looking closely at the sallow skin, bulbous forehead, and bulging, close-set eyes, I think to myself, that it looks like the progeny of a family with a penchant for playing in the shallow end of the gene pool.

"Yeah," the 'tween pipes up, "it looks like a little boy's head on a little girl's body."

"Exactly," Bri proclaims. Frankly, until Bri pointed out the painting on this particular tour—she hasn't on any previous tour I've been on—this boy/girl gender collage never registered with me. Maybe it's because I assume that gendered dress varies from time period to time period, or maybe it's because I'm a performance studies person who, on top of that, lives in Spanish Town, where pushing gender boundaries is par for the course. Bri continues. "Although we are not sure who the little boy is, he could have been James Woodruff, who Chloe accidentally killed, or one of the Stirling boys, we only know that the head and the body don't match." Hmmm, I think to myself, sounds like my first ex-fiancé. "During that time period portrait artists traveled around the area to the mansions of the rich plantation owners hawking

their wares and selling their services. Time, as they say, is money, so the artist would pre-paint generic bodies and then custom paint the heads and faces of their patrons onto those half done pictures. You would guess by the boy's face that he's about 7 or 8 years old, but the body is that of a toddler in what looks like some sort of christening gown for a little girl." Damn. I was so hoping for a crazy story about pseudo-aristocratic inbreeding or, at the very least, an antebellum tranny baby.

With the completion of this story, Bri opens the door and asks us to gather in front of the mirror in the foyer. "As you pass the staircase you'll notice an inlaid mother of pearl button on the newel post of the banister. That is called a brag button. When a house was completely paid off, the owners would drill a hole in the banister, stuff the deed to the house down inside and seal the top with a jewel or some sort of fancy plug so that everyone who came to visit would know they owned the house outright. As I have already pointed out, Mrs. Stirling loved showing off her money so, of course, she made sure all the guests who ever came to The Myrtles—including y'all, some two hundred years later—would know that she was a rich property owner without her having to say it out loud. As y'all walk by be sure to give it a rub; it's supposed to bring you good luck in real estate." As we all file back into the foyer, most of the guests hop up onto the first step and fondle the smooth white eye atop the brown cypress post, whose unblinking iris gazes permanently towards the heavens as if in perpetual prayer. I hear one guest say in half jest, as he kneads the banister with both hands like a ball of dough, "Lord, in the middle of this housing crisis I'll take all the luck I can get!"

I do not choose to rub the brag button for complicated reasons. It is not because I do not believe in luck (I do), or because I do not believe in talismans said to bring it (I own several), or because I do not hope luck befalls me when it comes to housing (Trust me, I'll need it). Given

my small stipend, making rent is sometimes difficult, and the sheer volume of student debt I have wracked up may put home ownership well beyond my fiscal reach for decades. I do not rub the brag button because I am uneasy about the history of property that is elided on Bri's tour, though to be fair no tour guide has dealt explicitly with the property issue that concerns me. The Stirling's property included people, specifically the people they owned, slaves who fell under the juridical purview of real estate per the American Black Code during the time period the Stirling's owned and operated the plantation. As Judith Kelleher Schafer points out in her considerable tome regarding the ambiguous legal status of slaves in Louisiana as persons *and* as property, the American Black Code established in 1806 and the Civil Code of 1825 defined slaves as immovable property specifically tied to the land like a building. In other words, slaves were real estate. The Black Code states, "Slaves, though moveable by their nature, are considered as immovable, by the operation of law. . . . Slaves shall always be reputed and considered real estates" (qtd in Schafer 25). This history of slaves and/as real estate is significant and I wish tour guides discussed it more overtly. If they did, I am quite certain it wouldn't be in conjunction with the brag button. As even the apologists are aware, slavery is nothing to brag about; in fact, it should make us wince. Moreover, given that Chloe haunts *this* house, *this* land, *this* prized piece of real estate that is once again turning a profit for yet another white family, I'm not so sure caressing the newel post encasing a deed to the property to which she was legally bound in life and is still bound in death is necessarily a harbinger of good luck. Regardless of Bri's declaration, I am unwilling to test Chloe's resolve on the measure, but evidently that's just me.

Bri stands in the doorway to the day room and waits patiently for everyone who wants to take his or her turn rubbing the brag button. Closing the door, she herds the group into a semi-circle around the large mirror opposite the staircase in the foyer. Rounding the side of the group,

she stands next to the mirror and looks at us looking into the mirror. In front of the mirror sits another table, a bit larger than its confederate across the room, with a bronze bust of a Victorian looking woman in side profile wearing a hat like the pink hat I wear in one of my Facebook pictures; unlike mine, hers is an actual hat, not a tutu turned inside out. “This is the famous haunted mirror of The Myrtles. You’ve probably heard about it.” The ‘tween can no longer contain her excitement. Apparently, this is what she has been waiting for. She appears surprised, though she can’t be; she identified it when she walked past it on our first trip through the room. “Hey look, Mom, there’s the haunted mirror.” As she begins to squeak, Bri gives her a look and begins, again.

“The frame of this mirror is over two hundred years old and dates back to the time when Clark Woodruff owned the property. When you look at the mirror itself, it looks like it is dirty, right? I assure you it is not, we clean it all the time. The frame is original, but the mirror itself has been changed at least ten times. Every time we change the mirror, in a matter of days or weeks, these exact same markings reappear.” She sets about the process of patiently interpreting what looks to be an old mirror that needs to be re-silvered. As she points things out, particular images come into relief.

Almost touching the mirror, Bri says, “If you look here, you will notice what looks like the side profile of an antebellum woman . . . or a slave.” She makes this statement as if the people who occupied those two classes in the antebellum South could ever look alike. With her index finger, she traces out what becomes under her touch a forehead, eyes, a nose, lips, a chin, and the elongated neck of a woman. The image that she traces almost mirrors the bust sitting on the table below. Bri even points out what might be a hat on the top of the woman’s head. “Now, when Chloe accidentally killed Mrs. Woodruff and the two children, and was then killed herself,

the house was in such chaos and disarray that they neglected to cover the mirrors. At that time, it was a custom to cover the mirrors when someone in the house died because people believed that the souls of the dead, when rising from their bodies, could become confused at the sight of themselves and get trapped in the mirror as opposed to ascending/descending to their appropriate afterlife. So, the woman in the mirror could be Mrs. Woodruff . . . or it could be Chloe . . . we don't know. All we know is that whoever she is, she always comes back. Now, if you'll also note the three marks underneath her face. Can you see the three slanted lines that look like gashes, as if someone is trying to claw her way out of the mirror?" Bri doesn't offer an explicit interpretation of who might be attempting such a violent escape from the mirror. Instead, after pointing them out, she looks meaningfully at the group, choosing to let the group members make what they will of the ominous markings. Instead, she draws our attention to the lower right corner of the mirror; she asks us to look closely and describe what we see.

The crowd leans in, searching, and someone, not the 'tween this time, blurts out, "They look like children's handprints."

"Exactly," Bri says. "They could be the handprints of James and Cornelia Gail, who were killed by the poisonous birthday cake. But," she interjects, "the kids cause so much mischief in the house all the time, I don't think it's possible that they could be stuck in the mirror." Pointing upward along the surface of the mirror in a direct line, she calls our attention to a series of vertical lines. They are not as prominent as the gashes. They look, in fact, like the traces of some liquid that has trickled down the glass. "Some people believe these are the tears of Sarah Matilda Woodruff, the Judge's wife who was killed after eating the poisoned cake. Others say it is blood, or Mississippi River water." Bri concludes her discussion of the mirror by reiterating that "The creepiest thing about this mirror is that no matter how many times we change out the mirror,

within a matter of days, the images show up again.” Bri turns and faces her audience. Looking them squarely in the eyes, she says, “Now, this is the one part of the tour—*the only part of the tour*—where you can take pictures. Please feel free to take as many as you like, and then we will meet in the dining room to continue the tour. She walks to the door next to the mirror, opens it, and stands in the threshold monitoring as the flashes of multiple cameras light up the mirror.

This part of the tour used to be my favorite. I would rip my camera out of my bag and take as many pictures as I could in the time allotted. Now it is the part I have come to hate. I dread it the way you dread ripping a Band-Aid off a slowly healing scab. It’s squinty and sharp, like when someone flips on the florescent lights after watching a movie in class. This is the part when everyone snatches out their cameras and tries to catch her as she squirms about in the glass or dashes about the room with thirty flashing eyes in hot pursuit. So this time, I close my eyes. In a flash, everything goes green—green like the threadbare scarf she used to conceal the consequence of her so-called “uppityness”; green from the nauseating price she paid, not for the act of listening, but for the desire to hear and to be heard in turn; green like pine freshly cut for ominous boxes; green like the leaves on the live oaks lining the picturesque drive with the hanging moss twisting and dangling from their powerful branches; green like I feel as a scholar; green like a bright, bitter paste of ground oleander; green like the sound of a buck being turned. Hue upon greenish hue cloud the back side of my eyelids as the pixels pop and fade leaving ephemeral traces. I bring myself back into the moment as Bri prompts, “If we could all put away our cameras now and move into the dining room.” I feel my shoulders begin to go slack as she guides us in turning down our intensity.

As the group shuffles into the dining room, one of the Eau de Merlot bridal crowd is drawn to the small birds-eye maple, glass topped case half hidden by Bri’s ample frame. “What’s

this?” she asks, as if she is congenitally unable to resist the draw of baubles, beads, and bling of any kind. Clearly from her appearance, accessorizing is a priority, if not a thoughtful one. “Oh, that,” Bri says, “those are some of the earrings we have found on the property. Chloe likes to steal them. You’ll have to take the Mystery Tour to find out more.” Bringing up the rear, I look into the case and notice a small pink and blue stained glass angel brooch—faceless—with the name Chloe written on it in black script. I have studied the menagerie of earrings before. This piece is not only new—it is not an earring. I point to it, look at Bri, and quietly ask, “What’s that? That’s new?” She looks down at the case, smiles, and says, “Oh, yeah, that’s new. It’s sweet. A little girl sent this to us—or rather she sent it to Chloe—so we put it in the case.” Fascinating, I think, the gesture is sweet.

Suddenly we both see, out of the corners of our eyes, a forbidden flash in the dining room. I think, “Oh, Lord, here we go!” Abandoning me, Bri zeroes in on the perpetrator who is wobbling on her heels over the dining room table. She is preparing to take another picture—a close-up of the ornate filigreed base of the tall silver candelabra that serves as the centerpiece of the dining room table—when Bri pounces. “Excuse me,” she says to the semi-buzzed and beaded bridesmaid who was drawn to the jewelry case only moments before. It is not a question. “No photographs, I’ve made that very clear.” The half-drunk bridesmaid, recoiling from the lash from Bri’s sharp tongue, pulls her camera back and without thinking it through responds, under her breath, “Well, excuse me.” Bri shoots back, looking her directly in the eye, “You *can* be excused from this tour, if you like.” The statement is a simultaneous threat and promise. I watch as everybody’s shoelaces become endlessly fascinating. Turning her back on the bridesmaid, Bri catches my eye and rolls hers in anger. She knows that I know she’s pissed, and if this girl were not part of a larger bridal party, her ass would be out the door. Simultaneously, I see the rest of

the bridal party rolling their eyes in exasperation once Bri's back is turned. Remembering the scratch of the hot pink sequin on the verandah, I momentarily consider tattling. In the end, I think better of it, though I know it could be fun.

Bri rounds the table and takes her position at the threshold between the dining room and the women's parlor—I realize in the moment how often the guides speak from thresholds. Before reaffixing her tour guide smile, she gives the bridesmaid a last stern glance, clears her throat, and says, “Are we ready?” Everyone nods assent as their eyes travel north from their shoes. Although they dare not meet her gaze just yet, they welcome the reprieve from the recent unpleasantness. Having witnessed this type of scene on prior tours with Bri, I simultaneously anticipate and loathe these Julia Sugarbaker moments. She always impresses me with her ability to drop back into character as if nothing untoward has occurred. Nevertheless, we all are as clear as the crystal chandelier hanging over our heads that another breach of etiquette will result in a full-blown battle rather than the mere skirmish to which we have been witness. We are equally clear as to the identity of the victor.

Bri gestures to the clearly fake cake sitting on the plate at the head of the table, its aged icing contracting to reveal the green Styrofoam beneath and, with a practiced rising inflection says, “I wouldn't try a piece of that cake if I were you. Don't worry, it doesn't have oleander in it, it's just fake.” Everyone except the bridal party fake laughs at the joke, hoping to reestablish themselves, once again, in her good graces. Pointing to the fireplace to her left, behind the head of the table, she drones, “The fireplace, although it looks like travertine, is actually made of cypress. The technique is called *trompe l'oeil*.” I am confused. It doesn't look like travertine at all. It is shades of green and sort of marble-esque. It looks like a DIY project on a really bad episode of *Trading Spaces*—the British version. “Mrs. Stirling, as I have pointed out before, was

anxious to conceal anything that might be considered low brow or low class. At the time, nothing was more common than cypress. She had no choice but to try to church it up.”

Without pause, Bri turns our attention to the drapes on the outer wall. They are the same green velvet, gold-fringed monstrosities from which Mammy crafted that perfectly cut, bodice-cinching, scarcely-appropriate-for-prison-ministry dress that Scarlett hoped would help her separate Rhett Butler from his blockade-running treasure. In case anyone has missed this connection with the film, Bri obligingly mouths it. In a moment of inspiration, before he can be silenced by a swift sharp glance from his wife, the elderly gentleman uses his cane to point to the drapes—confirming my suspicion that it is, in fact, largely for show—and undermines any whiff of moonlight or magnolias with a flat, “More like Carol Burnett.” The group—even the bridesmaids—gives itself over to a hearty laugh, finally dissipating the earlier tension. Despite the levity of the moment, despite the fact that Bri has made this part of the tour about Mrs. Stirling and her class pretensions, I sense Chloe looking at us. I feel the table shake as her tentative hand silently slips back after serving a slice of cake. I see her homespun green scarf cinched around her now asymmetric skull—a small swatch, a tiny threadbare remnant—that doesn’t even try to compete with the yards of heavy fabric puddling ostentatiously atop the cypress wood floors that Mrs. Stirling did not think to cover. I cannot escape the blank stare in her mahogany brown eyes peering out from the corner of the room as she mechanically pulled the chord of the . . .

“Shoo-fly fans,” Bri intones, slicing through my reverie, “like the one sitting in the corner over there were hung over the dining room tables of rich planters’ homes. Slaves would pull a long ornamental chord causing the large wooden paddle to swing gently, creating a breeze for the family while they ate and warding off moths, mosquitoes and, of course, flies, as the family

dined.” As she goes on to explain the obvious—that this particular shoo-fly fan is much too large for this space—she is oblivious to the larger point: Chloe and her story, as well as all of those she brings with her, are also far too large to be contained in this space, by this house. The legacy of slavery, the history we inherit, cannot be effortlessly shooed away. The fact that Bri does not talk about Chloe in this room, at this time, does not mean that she is not here. Her absence is a seething presence (Gordon 17). An elision does not an exorcism make.

Bri steps back on her right foot in a three-quarter turn that is quite graceful for a woman her size. Motioning us forward with a sweeping gesture of her right hand, she invites us into the women’s parlor, which she identifies as the “spiritual vortex of the house.” The bridesmaids flanking each end of the table pivot, and standing shoulder to shoulder, lead the group two by two into the women’s parlor as if they were making their way toward the altar. I linger for a moment running my hand along the curved top of the mahogany shoo-fly fan and, as I follow the group into the next room, I rub the dusty remnants of her story between my thumb and forefingers.

Second Movement: Robbie

Avery Gordon assures us that “the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Furthermore Nicholas Mirzoeff argues,

The ghosts of history, overlooked and unseen by the endlessly evoked History that depends on displacing what might be called its own transyness. . . . The ghost sees that it is seen and thereby becomes visible to itself and others in the constantly weaving spiral of transculture, a transforming encounter that leaves nothing the same as it was before. . . . The specter is nothing if not historical. . . . The question is *whose* history, told in what way and at what time? (249-250)

I am convinced that any attempt at doing so must engage in and with the contested concept that is performance (Strine, Long and HopKins 183). Specifically, one of the performances that I

witnessed at Halloween at The Myrtles performed by Robbie, a young African American tour guide, contested hard and fast lines between live and dead, here and there, then and now, visibility and invisibility, and self and other. All the while, his performance, foregrounds the question, “Whose history, told in what way, and at what time?”

The officers directing traffic at the entrance to the property and in the parking lot blow their whistles with a peppy staccato rhythm to keep the traffic moving. Try as they might, they capture only the edge of the attention of the eager and bustling crowds who are anxious to get parked and cross the crushed gravel of the parking lot without getting run down. The usual serenity of the courtyard is upstaged by carnival—concerted carnival. Jambalaya is being served from the biggest pots I have ever seen. Makeshift bars serve beer, whiskey, and wine to a crowd sloshing around in a kaleidoscope of masks and costumes. The steady thump of the frenzied pitch falters only momentarily when one of the many guides for the Halloween Mystery Tour yells loudly to be heard above the crowd, “Next Tour Starts In Five Minutes!”

Halloween is a big deal here. During the month of October, The Myrtles does more business than the rest of the year combined. At the height of “the season,” the number of people visiting the site each day can exceed the population of St. Francisville. Clearly, the performance of the site must change to accommodate the carnival it produces. On Halloween, guides do not conduct groups through the house. Rather, guides dressed in what pass for period costumes occupy particular rooms and, when they have completed their portion of the tour, send the group on through to the next room and the next guide. This Halloween, Bri, dressed in a shabby, make-do hoop skirt, greets guests as they enter the entrance hall from the front porch, where she provides her usual narratives about the foyer and Mrs. Stirling’s day room from her History Tour

before sending the group through the dining room to the next guide who, she tells us, will greet us in the women's parlor. The dining room remains unmediated on the Halloween Mystery Tour.

As we pass through the dining room and cross into the women's parlor, I am vaguely aware of the presence of a guide, but am concentrating on trying to situate myself as the room fills and the group overflows into the men's parlor. The group is big and cannot fit in one room or the other; I make an almost complete circuit of the rooms before getting stuck on one edge of the threshold between the men's and women's parlors, where I can't see anything except the backs of the very tall couple who are chatting in front of me. I deploy a "Sorry-to-interrupt-but-I'm-super-short-and-can't-see-do-you-mind-if-I-move-past-you? Thanks-so-much" nonverbal gesture I've perfected over the past 20 years, and nudge my way towards the front of the group. I stop cold. Robbie has costumed himself as Chloe for Halloween. The effect is uncanny. Robbie's comic costume wars with my knowledge of the violence of the forthcoming story. I can hear Flannery O'Connor, looking at Robbie from over my right shoulder, pointing out that the look of this is wild for a reason. It is "both violent and comic because of the discrepancies it seeks to combine" ("Some Aspects of the Grotesque" 43). It's not not him and it's not not her at the same time.¹¹ Live and dead, guide and ghost, seem to be playing tag with each other.

Robbie has wrapped a piece of green felt around his head so that it covers only his right ear; from the left, a cheap, oversized, clip-on pearl earring dangles. His homespun white blouse, well-worn green cotton skirt, and black ballet-style slippers remind me of the detritus one might find in the costume closet of a particularly impoverished theatre troupe. Although the costume is clearly makeshift, the effect is mysterious. People whisper. The whispers spread and gather in

¹¹In *Performance Theory*, Richard Schechner quotes Winnicott, a child psychologist, to express the process of theatrical development "from *me*, to *not-me*, to *not-not-me*." In Robbie's performance, he is not Chloe; he is also, in this context, not-not-Chloe.

intensity. A name repeatedly floats up atop the murmur, “Chloe.” Looking straight at us, not saying a word, he stands there, setting in motion a queer moment of uneasiness. Some people flinch at the sight of him/her. A Cheshire cat grin appears. “I am not a ghost. I am not a girl.” This is not a pipe.¹² Transy indeed.

Robbie slowly lifts his arms, motioning people to fill in spaces in the two rooms but stops short and grabs and lifts his fake, water balloon boobs as if their presence has caught him off guard. With the energy and verve of Chris Tucker and the timing of Richard Pryor, his performance is like edgy stand up comedy in not-quite historical drag. He coughs, chuckles, and tosses off the line, “Ladies, I don’t know how ya’ll walk around with these things.” We burst into laughter and the tension of sudden recognition in the room dissipates—for a moment.

Leaning slightly forward with his elbows out, in a posture that suggests a defensive basketball maneuver—despite the obviously awkward ruffles cuffing his wrists—he launches headlong into Chloe’s story. “Now some people think that Chloe was a nosey gossip,” his tone of voice implies that he, like Bri, is not one of those people. “One night, when Chloe was cleaning up, after Mrs. Woodruff and the children had gone to bed, Chloe heard a murmur of voices as the Judge and his friends talked business and politics in the men’s parlor. . . .”

She recognizes the muted clink of the crystal brandy decanter being placed back on a silver tray in the corner of the men’s parlor. The pungent tang of cigars drifts through the crack at the doorjamb along with the heated but hushed male voices discussing some untold crisis of business or politics or the business of politics—the unknown but potentially knowable draws her to the threshold. This act, she knows, is much more than a breach of etiquette. She struggles to

¹²A reference to Magritte’s famous painting, *La trahison des images* [The treachery of images] that contains the famous phrase “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” [This is not a pipe], which points to the fact that what is contained in the painting is not a pipe, but an image of a pipe.

make out their words over the rapid thump of her own heartbeat reverberating in both her ears. She breathes through her mouth in an attempt to control the volume of her bated breath. She puts her hand down to steady herself and slow her descent as she crouches so that the cypress wood floorboards won't give her away. She reaches up slowly with her other quivering hand, turning the mercury glass knob ever so slowly to amplify the crack just a bit more so that she can hear more clearly the content of a conversation that—because her very being is the business of politics—explicitly concerns her. She falls forward in the petrifying moment when the Judge flings open the door. Her entire body tingles as the coppery taste of terror explodes her mouth; she feels rather than sees his fevered anger; she dares not meet his eyes. She remains stooped in submissive genuflection. She feels rather than sees his iron grip as he rips her from the floor. Her voice tears at her throat as she howls that she hasn't heard anything—that she wasn't listening. She begs for his mercy, as he drags her to the courtyard. She feels the textured grain of his leather boot on her neck as he draws his swift dagger from its sheath, and she screams for her life. She traces the redressive pressure of the blade as it travels up the nape of her dark neck. With a surgeon's skill he administers the swift dismembering cut, meeting out his version of (in)justice. Her screams crowd out all other sound as she sees rather than hears her severed ear thud cruelly yet gently against the hard-packed earth of the courtyard.

As the warm blood drips from her chin to the ground, she is flooded with a warped feeling of momentary gratitude and due process in her sudden realization that he has spared her life. She has been disfigured, but she is alive. Her schism from the family and her banishment to the kitchens becomes immediate reality as soon as the judgment leaves the Judge's galvanizing tongue. Lying on the ground, her right cheek scratched by the abrasive dry grit, staring at her severed ear, she is surprised she can even hear. Call the verdict what you will—a maniacal

felicitous utterance or an irrevocable iteration or the place where performance arises from the performative. Regardless of the terminology, the event sets to work a future to come: his future, her future, their future, our future. “What will become of me?”

The pressure of that single question reverberates until her mind bears down on the tail end of the question like teeth, shattering the pronoun, and sending it barreling ahead of us. Or, is it behind? Such distinctions are difficult to parse.

“Of course,” Robbie insists, “Chloe was scared. Who wouldn’t be?” He grabs his right earlobe in the fingers of his right hand, leans forward, and uses his left hand to point at the ear as he says, eyes bulging, “He. Cut. Her. Damn. Ear. Off!” Robbie continues with a warning, “Now ladies—and gentlemen, too, for that matter—anyone in here who is wearing earrings, y’all be careful. Chloe likes to steal ‘em, but she generally only takes one. I guess she figures if she can’t wear two earrings then y’all cain’t neither!” he opines with a chuckle. “I’ve seen it a hundred times!” he swears. “She always tends to do it when people cross between the men’s and women’s parlor, so I’d hold on to my earring if I were you.”

I hear some of the people behind me muttering their disbelief. Robbie cocks his head and arches his brow, “You think I’m kiddin’?” he asks. “Didn’t y’all see all those earrings in that glass case in the hall?” He shoots me a quick wink and a smile, and before I have a chance to protest nonverbally, he singles me out with a nod, “Ask her if you wanna. She knows.” With that all eyes turn toward me as I flush and smile demurely. I attempt to deflect the attention, abjuring the expertise Robbie is according me without undermining his credibility. “Dammit, Robbie,” I think to myself, “I wish you would stop doing that to me.” In an effort to deflect the questions that will inevitably come from my fellow tour members, I offer up my best Cheshire cat grin and slyly shrug my shoulders trying to communicate nonverbally, “I don’t know. It’s possible.”

Although Chloe has never personally tugged at any of my earrings on a tour, I have had that experience; so, although I don't know about Chloe's proclivities at The Myrtles, I do know. It's possible. I wonder about the identity of the ghost who snatched my earring—and Melissa's and Terri's—at John Sikes' house back in Spanish Town. I don't know if that was Chloe. It's possible. I have never witnessed anyone's earring come flying off while on tour, but I have watched as the number of earrings displayed in the glass topped, birds-eye maple case change and grow over the years. Did Chloe steal all of them? I don't know. It's possible. Did tourists just forget them while staying overnight? Did they drop them accidentally while touring the house or wandering the grounds? Did they drop them on purpose? I don't know. It's possible.

Whatever the case, the clarion call that I cannot ignore is that at The Myrtles, and specifically for Chloe, ears and the losses associated with them are important. In a story that Teeta Moss tells, Judge Woodruff only cut off the lobe of Chloe's ear and did not completely sever the appendage (Moss). In her story, Moss attributes both a motivation and legal justification for the Judge's actions; he disfigured Chloe to punish her for eavesdropping and to mark her body through a mutilation that would be publically legible, should he choose to sell her, to other potential buyers. More immediately and more practically, he severed her ear as a warning to his other slaves. The French Code Noir does, in fact, explicitly list the severing of ears as appropriate punishment for specific infractions.¹³ *Plus d' un*. No More one. More than

¹³XXXII. The runaway slave, who shall continue to be so for one month from the day of his being denounced to the officers of justice, shall have his ears cut off, and shall be branded with the flower de luce on the shoulder: and on a second offence of the same nature, persisted in during one month from the day of his being denounced, he shall be hamstrung, and be marked with the flower de luce on the other shoulder. On the third offence, he shall suffer death.

XXXIII. Slaves, who shall have made themselves liable to the penalty of the whip, the flower de luce brand, and ear cutting, shall be tried, in the last resort, by the ordinary judges of the inferior courts, and shall undergo the sentence passed upon them without there being an appeal to the Superior Council, in confirmation or reversal of judgment, notwithstanding the article 26th of the

one. Any number of competing codes—the American Black Code, the French Code Noir, or the Spanish *Las Siete Partidas*—governed the treatment of slaves in the region at the time.

Regardless of the jurisdiction, what he chose to do with and to his property was not legally a crime.

Chloe, it would seem, is explicitly interested in ears and the trinkets that adorn them. At the very least, they invoke dis/embodiment. I am struck by the indexical quality of the earrings on display; they index bodies and refer to another body. The earrings index the tourists who once wore them; they refer to Chloe's severed ear. They also ostensibly point to her hand and her power and her presence—whatever the force is that enables her to remind us of her presence by the tangible absence-ing of our possessions. The display of these possessions—our possessions that are no longer ours but not actually hers—function to authenticate the home as haunted, and haunted specifically by Chloe.

I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the story of Chloe's ear and its relationship to other stories about missing ears: Van Gogh's self-severed ear as apparent evidence of his madness (but we're all a bit mad here); Peter's severing of the ear of the Roman soldier in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Christ's grace in restoring it (but the South, as O'Connor reminds us is no longer Christ centered, it's Christ haunted), Carolyn Forché's poem, "The Colonel," and Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, where severed ears figure as grotesque trophies (but this is nothing to brag about). But this story is Chloe's story. Ultimately, I have to let Chloe's ear *be* Chloe's ear, because that trauma is the space from whence she issues her spectral injunction: Listen. She urges us to lean in, dangerously close to the parlor door, and *to listen*. She has my attention. I give her my ear. I continually struggle to listen to what she says,

present code, which shall be applicable only to those judgments in which the slave convicted is sentenced to be hamstrung or suffer death.

to what must be heard, to what remains to be done. Even if I do not know how to respond properly . . . justly . . . I am obliged to listen.

Robbie releases the cheap oversized earring dangling from his ear and continues, “Now, as I was saying, Chloe was scared. She thought the judge was going to kill her right then and there, but he didn’t,” he confirms, straightening to his full height and folding his hands together in front of him. “Instead,” he says, pointing in the direction of the gift shop that once served as the kitchen for the big house, “he banished her from the house and sent her to work in the kitchen.” He pauses momentarily as he lowers his arm back to his side and says, “His version of mercy, I guess.” He brackets the term mercy with huge nonverbal scare quotes, clearly implying that the Judge was, at best, a hypocrite. “She was his MISTRESS!” Robbie reminds us, pointing his finger in our faces, insisting through his tone, volume, and emphasis that Chloe had every right to be enraged—on both counts. “Well,” he says, nodding in our direction and adopting a tone as if letting us in on a secret, “Chloe disagreed.” He pauses and looks at us meaningfully. “Now *some people say* that she wanted to get back in the good graces of the family,” implying, again, that he is not a member of that camp. “You have to remember, he cut her damn ear off.” He insinuates, but does not say, that in such a situation *his motives* would not lean toward the merciful. “While working in the kitchen,” he says, “she devised a plan. . . .”

Her eye is caught by the shriveled white petals of the oleander flower that tops the wilted stalk clinging desperately to its emaciated green leaves. They dangle limply against the water ringed rim of the green glass bud vase that crouches in the corner of the sterling silver serving tray cluttered with the napkin, the soiled flatware, the bone china plates, and the scraps of food from Mrs. Woodruff’s breakfast. The bobble of the bud vase and clink of the plates as she carries the tray to the washbasins are familiar, mundane, rote; they give her no pause. She does this

daily—now. With the proficiency of an expert, she plunks down the tray and scrapes the plates. Throwing the dish cloth tucked into the waistband of her apron over her shoulder, she dunks the plates in the warm slippery water and grabs the horsehair scouring brush as her resolute arms fall into the routine rhythm: scrub and rinse, shake, shake, drip, drip, wipe, wipe; scrub and rinse, shake, shake, drip, drip, wipe, wipe. She feels her facial muscles sag as she stares blankly across the wide open lawn, past the swamp, and into the tangle of cypress trees marking the threshold to . . . to . . . too much! She averts her gaze from the im/possibilities. Scrub and rinse, shake, shake, drip, drip, wipe, wipe. She casually scoops up the smooth green glass vase in her rough-skinned hand but before she can dump the dying bloom, yard cats clutched in the heat of sudden sex erupt in a strident blood-curdling duet below the window where she stands. The competing feline screeches spook her out of her habitual cadence. Her shoulders tense instinctually, her sinews involuntarily clench and the sudden intuitive sharp gasp for air forces her entire body to jerk violently. Before she can process what has happened she sees the green glass vase, which has slipped from the normal precision of her grip, tumbling in slow motion, end-over-end, to the ground. Her horrified eyelids slam shut, an automatic reflex to shield her eyes that have already seen too much, from the inevitable spray of piercing green glass shards as her exposed ear registers the cacophonous crack of the vase against the brutally hard brick floor. Adrenaline shoots through her veins, and before she opens her eyes to examine the evidence of what she knows will be another punishable offense, the all-too-familiar, terrifying question begins its traumatic trance-inducing loop through her brain. “What will become of me?”

Slowly she opens her eyes and surveys the tiny shards of glass littering the floor, and quickly glances around to see if anyone has witnessed this unintentional clumsiness. Seeing no one, she couches down swiftly and deftly sweeps the broken slivers of glass into her hand, sliding

them into the deep front pocket of her apron. She reaches for the oleander and a tiny bead of blood that has bubbled to the surface of her freshly pricked index finger stains the wilted white bloom. She stares. Something shifts. Something is sinking and surfacing simultaneously, like the slow guttural rumble of revenge rising. She hears shuffling footsteps approaching, straightens to her full height, and crosses her hands in front of the slight bulge in her apron pocket. Turning quickly on her heel, she lowers her gaze in anticipation of the owner of the advancing footsteps. Has she heard? Another kitchen slave—an older woman stooped with age—appears, her stout frame casting an ominous shadow in the doorway. Busy with her own work and noticing nothing unusual, she scolds Chloe for standing idly. They haven't got all day, she grunts. The cake has to be got ready by supper. Never stating it directly, she nevertheless assigns Chloe this task. Chloe responds with a cool murmured, "Yes'm," and sets to work.

What follows is both a quiet revolt and a methodical series of actions pregnant with purpose: the determined clip of her quick gait to and from the flowering white bush a few short steps from the kitchen door, her dark calloused hands massaging the green tendrils, the gingerbread snap of the leaves as she cracks them free from the stalk, the metronomic tick-tock precision as her pestle pounds the mortar, her resolute grip on the whisk, the whirring mix of batter against a perfectly angled pot held against her hip as the silent Louisiana heat permeates the kitchen chilled with righteous intent. She completes the cake in record time and stands guard over her cheesecloth covered creation as it cools while staring blankly out across the expansive yard where the green grass turns a goldish hue in the slant of the low sun as the shadow of the purple streaked sky looms at the edge of dusk. Her gaze blasts past the stagnant swamp water, green with envy, as the restless and rushing sound of its fast moving cousin can almost be heard from the distance of a mile and a half. She stares intently at the moss dangling from the Cyprus

trees peppering the perimeter of the land granted her “lover” by the Spanish, which marks a threshold to . . . to . . . too much. She averts her gaze from the im/possibilities. What will become of me? The question hangs dangerously in the dense, Confederate jasmine tinged air.

I wish this story were crafted by Alice Walker; it is not. Chloe is not Miss Celie and no Shug Avery is there to stay her hand. This is Chloe’s story, or, more accurately, this is my account of Chloe’s story as channeled through Robbie. I am no Alice Walker; Robbie is no Chloe; where is Shug Avery? No one stays Chloe’s hand and the rest, as they say, is history. “*Whose history told in what way and at what time?*” As this is Robbie’s tour, I leave him to (re)tell it, that is, tell it again *and* tell it his way. As I listen, I feel myself tumbling down the rabbit hole, where polarities give way to spectrums of possibility, where that which was hidden shimmers briefly into spectral (in)visibility, where we glimpse the story as a collection of deep green shards glittering deeply in a dark apron pocket. This is not a vase. And though, like Alice Walker, we must always be *after* the whole story (“Beyond the Peacock” 49), we are no longer troubled by the realization that we can never hope to know the whole story because we are increasingly convinced that it never existed. Nevertheless, we quest, confident we can see more than we have—but only if we listen.

Robbie adds detail upon detail, his energy, verve, accent, and gestures become more and more emphatic. Following the deaths, he climbs toward the climax, placing the violence squarely in Judge Woodruff’s hands. “He took *her* to a tree. Hanged *her* by the neck. Weighted *her* body down with bricks. And tossed *her* into the Mississippi!” Accompanying his recitation, Robbie performs a series of gestures—almost an etude—that consists of a pointing motion, a hanging

pose, and a tossing movement.¹⁴ Robbie's delivery is funny, even playful, yet something is sinking and surfacing simultaneously. The look of it *is* wild, it is both violent and comic because of the discrepancies he is working to combine. The audience (at least most of the audience) laughs.

He moves on to talk about plantation life at The Myrtles in "the olden times." Robbie frames "the olden times" as the period when the Stirlings owned and operated the plantation. Like Bri, he positions Mrs. Stirling as a superficial, social climber whose sole desire was to "look rich." He tells us that every morning Ms. Stirling would gather all her "servants" to give them their daily orders. He seems to be responding directly to Teeta Moss who, in one of her interviews, insists on the difference between servants, who worked in the house, and slaves, who worked in the fields, as if this was a caste distinction, based in envy, made by the black plantation population (Moss). Sarcasm drips as Robbie spits out the word servants, bracketing it with huge scare quotes. He reveals that the fate of those "servants" who failed to complete the tasks Mrs. Stirling assigned them was no different from that of the "slaves." Beginning his increasingly familiar etude, he intones the familiar refrain. She . . .

Took *them* out to a tree.
Hanged *them* by their necks.
Weighted *their* body down with bricks. And tossed *them* into the Mississippi!

The question becomes *whose* history is being told in *this* time and in *this* way? He goes on to talk about daily life and labor on the plantation, decorum, and the stratification of social relationships along the lines of race, class, and gender. At the end of each recounting, he reiterates, the consequences for slaves who disturbed the order.

¹⁴Created by Vsevolod Meyerhold, a Russian actor, director, and theorist, a biomechanical etude is a storyline in three parts—intention, realization, and reaction. For discussions of Meyerhold and the use of the etude, see Robert Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*.

*Took them out to a tree.
Hanged them by their necks.
Weighted their bodies down with bricks. And tossed them into the Mississippi!*

Before long the audience (well, some of the audience) begins to participate. Picking up on Robbie's cues, they join him, bumbling their way through the refrain.

*Took them out . . . tree.
Hanged . . . by their necks.
Weighted down . . . bricks. And tossed them into the Mississippi!*

As the performance continues, the audience is transformed into spect-actors who work hard (well, some of them work hard) to understand and enact their roles in the unfolding drama (Bowman "Stonewall's Arm" 104). Soon thereafter, Robbie refrains from speaking the lines altogether; instead, using the etude, he conducts:

Pointing motion:	Took them out to a tree
Hanging pose:	Hanged them by their necks.
Tossing movement:	Weighted their body down with bricks. And tossed them into the Mississippi!

Excusing his way through the audience, Robbie walks over to a side table in the corner of the men's parlor where a big chunk of molding sits on the table. He points to the ceiling above that marks its place of departure. Over time, this particular section of the molding could not maintain itself within the order. He reveals that the proprietors cannot repair the molding because of some archaic rules about historic restoration in antebellum homes and replication of the appropriate materials and processes. He says something else that I miss entirely because the tall couple standing behind me is *ohh*-ing and *ahh*-ing—again. Robbie's body frames the gap in the molding. Pointing, he begins to lift up his arms, but stops short and grabs his fake water balloon boobs as if caught off guard, again. He coughs, chuckles, and tosses off the line, "Seriously ladies. How ya'll do it?!" The audience (well, some of the audience) bursts into laughter.

His homespun costume comes a bit loose in the transaction. He straightens her felt headwrap as carefully as one straightens a portrait. Something shifts. S/He grants us permission to inspect the molding. We touch. It is heavy and surprisingly rough under our eager fingertips. We feel what we cannot see when looking at the molding that hangs at the height of the room—the pieces of practical straw and the tangling dark horsehair hiding just out of our sight beneath the not-quite-smooth, carved, white surface. In the quiet of our inspection, Robbie continues, suddenly, yet matter-of-factly. The molding, he tells us, was hand-made on the property, and might well have been the work of one of his own family members who were slaves on this very plantation. We stop short, no longer quite so anxious to touch this past. History and time are queered. Robbie spins quickly on his black, ballet-slipper heel, leaving us in the turbulence of his wake, and crosses to the Other side of the room. The effect is uncanny.

The question is whose history, told in what way and at what time?

We bumble across the room as he continues, something about a marble fireplace, cherubs, and an injured confederate soldier. His verve is climbing towards a now familiar fevered pitch; we all know the cue is coming. But this time, the response is markedly different. Many do not respond at all; some only mumble out their lines while inspecting their shoelaces. Only the children on tour seem excited about repeating the refrain. Looking straight at us, not saying a word, he stands there—transy indeed. A Cheshire cat grin appears as he says, “Now if everyone can move into the last room, they’ll show you the *original* picture of Chloe’s ghost.” He channels us through yet another threshold. I hang back, my eyes frantically dart about the room trying to catch a faint glimpse of an Other shape shifting, of a Cheshire cat grin (dis)appearing. Outside, above the din, I hear someone holler, “Next tour starts in five minutes!”

Third Movement: Miss Mary

Stating the blatantly obvious—a risky task that is nevertheless often not easy—Buzinde and Santos point out that “slavery is arguably still an unresolved issue in America. It is not only part of the past, but also the present social order” (“Representations of Slavery” 484). Frankly, I don’t think that slavery and our history of slavery can ever be *resolved*. There is no *resolving* our history of slavery. There is no *resolution* to slavery; it is our bloody, messy inheritance and we are not now—nor will we ever be—*done* with or *absolved* of it. The specter(s) of slavery still haunt us with good reason. The ghosts of slaves and masters are not going anywhere, try as some folks might to exorcise them. Discussing our ongoing collective inheritance of slavery and enduring issues of racism in America, and across the globe, is both hard and imperative. We—all of us—must continue to learn to live *with* these ghosts and to live *toward* a future-to-come that calls forth a promised working-toward-justice.

Plantation tours are places where the current owners, operators, tour guides, guests, and ghosts work through these histories and embodied historicities in different ways. Buzinde and Santos go on to claim, “the plantation is not a neutral locale, but rather a political space operating as an historical system of meaning in which collective memory obliges the present and the social construction of the past as heritage” (“Representations of Slavery” 470). As numerous scholars who have studied plantation tours have demonstrated, the histories of the people enslaved on the plantation are often minimized or left out all together, through a variety of discursive strategies that amount to a sort of re-presentational inequality, in favor of the histories of the planters/owners. Additionally, many folks who have both studied and participated in the extensive cultural and economic apparati associated with tourism also acknowledge that more and more plantation sites have changed or are changing the way they discuss the lives of slaves

on tours and how slave life and history are represented visually and memorialized at heritage sites.¹⁵ Even in St. Francisville, where the elision of slave life has been perpetuated and maintained by organizations like the West Feliciana Historical Society for generations, things appear to be changing—slowly. For example, Rosedown Plantation and The Audubon State Historic Site now participate in displays related to enslaved life and participate in special events, if only during Black History month. Additionally, as Modlin et al. point out, “Some African-Americans actively seek to reclaim their plantation heritage . . . [by] producing counter-narratives that bring the slave struggle front and center within the re-telling of the Old South” (4-5).

Despite these changes, the histories of slavery and black life on many plantation tours are either overtly or tacitly elided. Because of these elisions, the specter(s) of slavery haunting these locations both threaten and promise to rip through the seams of simplistic stories of the good old days or the Mythic South. The ghosts are important, they intervene at the exact places and times that History and Historians seek to elide them. Moreover, the people on the tours and/or the people giving the tours can no longer—try though they often do—simply shrug off or barrel through the complexities of the past. Echoing Edward Bruner’s contention that slave related heritage sites confront us with interpretive dilemmas regarding contested histories of slavery,

¹⁵ See, for example, Derek H. Alderman, “Surrogation and Politics of Remembering Slavery in Savannah, Georgia”; Ira Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice”; David L. Butler, “Whitewashing Plantations”; David L. Butler, Perry L. Carter, and Owen J. Dwyer, “Imagining Plantations”; Christine N. Buzinde, and Carla A. Santos, “Interpreting Slavery Tourism”; Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery*; Glen W. Gentry, “Walking with the Dead”; Stephen P. Hannah, “A Slavery Museum?”; Steven Hoelscher, “Making Place, Making Race”; Steven W. Litvin and Joshua David Brewer, “Charleston, South Carolina Tourism and the Presentation of Urban Slavery in an Historic Southern City”; E. Arnold Modlin, Jr., “Tales Told on the Tour”; Helen A. Regis, “Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line”; Anja Schwartz, “Not this Year!”; Robert C. Thompson, “Am I Going to See a Ghost Tonight?”

Buzinde and Santos claim,

Social tensions are bound to occur when strategies of denial, concealment, and trivialization are administered in the name of present and future social cohesion/harmony. Although numerous societal examples illustrate positive changes, albeit due to public objection, the holistic integration and representation of the controversial past is still an ongoing struggle within numerous slave related heritage sites. (“Representations of Slavery” 484)

I take a last drag off my cigarette as I see the Girl Scout troop exiting the house and, from past experience, I know that the next tour will start in approximately five minutes. I stub out the butt and make my way to the verandah as I watch the girls posing for pictures in the gap between the main house and the gift shop that has been opened up and charged with significance since Chloe’s chose to appear there in 1992. After every camera click, the girls clump together, eagerly devouring the images on the digital screens to see if Chloe has joined them in the latest picture. Alas, it seems, not even Girl Scouts can lure her into the open—at least not this time. They don’t seem overly disappointed. The anticipation that she might appear evidently outweighs their disappointment that she has failed to do so. They cross the short wooden bridge to the gift shop porch and clatter down its stairs, filling the paved brick courtyard with hoots, and hollers, and shrieks of laughter that drown out the gurgling fountain once again. They unselfconsciously hold hands and lean into one another—in the way that girls only do in the absence of boys—as they make their way to the bathrooms behind the restaurant in preparation for piling into the institutional vans for the ride home.

After the troop has cleared the courtyard, only a handful of visitors remain as potential participants for the final tour. Even if they all have tickets, which is unlikely, this tour will be small. Miss Mary, the gray, bespectacled guide Miss Hester introduced me to in the gift shop a few hours earlier, exits the shop and takes the few short steps across the courtyard to the back porch. She waves her hand and, in a voice raspy from years of smoking, summons the final tour

group to the verandah. A group of about five, including me, assembles and she asks that as we enter the house we show her our receipts. From the amount of time she takes fumbling with the long slick pieces of cash register tape, checking dates carefully, and failing to ask folks to turn off their phones, I suspect that she is a relatively new guide. I censor my impulse to ask my fellow tourists to turn off their cell phones, but make a big show of digging mine out of my purse and turning it off, hoping they will follow suit. I consider myself a good performer, so I am surprised that my nonverbal attempts at instruction either go over their heads or unheeded.

Although I am next to last to enter the house, I make my way directly across the entry hall to the foot of the staircase, knowing that this is where the tour will begin. This move provides me the opportunity to observe the path that the other guests take as they introduce themselves to the space. They peer at the piano hiding under the staircase, at the pocked face of the haunted mirror, at the jewelry case that has moved to the opposite end of the gallery and crouched next to the double doors that open to the front porch with their leaded yellow Spanish cross panes. After closing the door, Miss Mary lumbers across the room and ascends the first three red-carpeted steps before stopping short and turning back around, evidently remembering that she has forgotten *the* picture that all guides use to begin. Snatching it up from the table to my left, she clambers back up the stairs once more. She draws in a few short breaths, either because the short trip up, down, and back up again has winded her or because of performance anxiety. It could be either—or both. I try to keep in mind the lesson I learned on my first visit in 2007, from that initial tour with Robbie: I will withhold judgment; I will see how the guide negotiates the performance; I will note the transactions among guests, ghosts, and guides; I will repeat the mantra: performance is emergent, performance is emergent, performance is emergent. Although the guests appear comfortable (or at least glad to be inside where it is air conditioned), Miss

Mary fidgets; she is not just winded, she is clearly nervous. She reminds me of inexperienced students in an introductory speech course in those terrifying moments before their first presentation before their peers.

Without preliminaries, without introducing herself or even greeting her guests, she leans into the banister and launches in to the sanctioned story of *The Myrtles*. As she fixes her gaze on the wallpaper above and behind our heads, I want to interrupt if only to explain that this trick works only with groups of 500 or more, but this is not my class. For a group this size, it might be more effective for her to imagine these folks in their underwear, but then again, perhaps such an image would only fluster her more. She speeds through the beginning of the story, clutching the picture of General Bradford to her ample chest, never once revealing it to her audience. Swiftly moving on to Judge Clark Woodruff and Chloe, she informs us that Woodruff took Chloe as his mistress and specifies “it was a common practice in their day.” I’m not certain how to interpret this statement—particularly her unique turn of phrase. It is not inaccurate, but the way she says it—particularly her use of *their*—suggests that Chloe had some choice in this matter, or, even more offensive, had somehow participated in a joint decision. “Maybe I’m being too prickly,” I think, “too judgmental.” Nonetheless, I cannot shake the feeling—my dis-ease—with the idea that she just let Woodruff off the hook far too easily.

“Now Chloe,” she continues, “was a bit uppity.” A sudden sharp intake of breath by the African-American couple standing directly in front of her forces her—finally—to exchange a series of uncomfortable glances with the members of her audience; her eyes dart to and from the African-American couple. Her face registers the shock with which the term “uppity” has been received within this small group. I bridle at this description of Chloe, but at the moment I am more curious about whether she has ever used this term before with different results. As if

suddenly seeing herself for the first time through another's eyes, she quickly recalibrates and interjects, "It was a word commonly used at the time." Judging from the looks on everyone's faces, including hers, I'm certain that no one buys this frail attempt to appease. It seems to have worked better for Clarence Thomas. Mirzoeff's question, "Whose history told in what time and in what way?" loops in my brain.

To fill what is becoming an increasingly awkward silence, she launches into the story of Chloe listening in "on the Judge's business at the doors between the women's and men's parlors. Chloe must have made a noise or something, because the Judge caught her and dragged her out to the courtyard, where he cut off her ear for punishment and banished her to the kitchens. Wanting to get back into the good graces of the family, Chloe came up with a plan. She made the famous oleander cake," she says, rubbing the flat of her palm across the top of the picture frame that she continues to clutch at her breast, "and accidently killed Mrs. Woodruff and two of the children. She confessed what she had done to the other slaves, hoping they could protect her from the Master's wrath. Instead, trying to avoid trouble for everyone, they took matters into their own hands. They took her out to a tree, hanged her by her neck, weighted her body down with bricks, and tossed her into the Mississippi. Denied a Christian burial, she still haunts the plantation."

As she stumbles down the stairs, she apparently realizes that she hasn't shown us General Bradford's picture. She suddenly lofts the line drawing above her head and then, without explanation, returns it to the table. "Now," she says, opening the door at the foot of the stairs, "if you'll follow me I will show you Mrs. Stirling's day room." Once everyone has made their way into the room, she looks back over her shoulder before closing the door firmly behind her. She stands with her back firmly against the door and begins by pointing out the requisite talismans

protecting the room: the cherubs, the nuns, the upside down keyholes. She tells us that Mrs. Stirling “put them there to ward off The Evils.” Her determined tone suggests that she takes this idea seriously, though she offers no explanation as to what “The Evils” might be or why they are plural? *Plus d’un?* I remain unconvinced. She tells us that this is the room from which Mrs. Stirling would give daily instruction to her servants, but quickly stammers to a stop and attempts to correct herself, as if caught off guard by her use of the word or, more likely, the way the word might be received. “I’m sorry, we’re not supposed to say that anymore, they’re called um . . . um . . . um”

“Slaves,” suggests the African-American gentleman, who is now to my left. He reiterates forcefully, “They were called slaves.”

“Why, yes, of course, thank you,” Miss Mary says, struggling to recover. She proceeds to tell a truncated version of the story about Chloe’s ghost blowing out the candle, and then suggests that if we would like to go and stand in the corners of the room facing the walls with our arms outstretched and sing a few bars of “Amazing Grace,” Chloe is likely to come and give us “the shivers.” She laughs nervously, clasping her own hands behind her back. This story is one I have never heard before and I find it fascinating on several levels. Scenographically, I find the idea of a group of tourists—even a group this small—standing with their arms extended into the four corners of the room singing “Amazing Grace” a fascinating image. Historically, I am struck by the song associated with this conjuring trick. “Amazing Grace” is a hymn written by John Newton, a minister of God who was formerly the captain of a slave ship during the Middle Passage. I hardly think it an appropriate tune to lure a slave into the open. I don’t know. It’s possible. I guess anything’s possible. Psychologically, the whole sketchy scenario ends for me in personal disappointment—not with the proverbial bang, but with a whimper. When no one takes

her up on the offer, I realize that I am being deprived of the enactment of this potentially hysterical spectacle, as well as my opportunity to learn what constitutes “the shivers.”

Pointing across the room to the mirror above the fireplace, she tells us it is “the oldest mirror in the house, and that it, along with all the other furniture in the room was purchased special by Mrs. Stirling in France and shipped over.” The smart student in me wants to correct her—actually she wants to yell, “Bullshit,” but I restrain myself. According to every other tour guide, the haunted mirror in the foyer is the oldest in the house, and most of the furnishings in the room—other than the dressing screen—are “authentic” only to the *time* of Mrs. Stirling, other than the Napoleon Bonaparte bumble bee tea set. I know that I am not now, nor have I ever been, concerned with what is Really Historically Accurate. I should know more than anyone by now that the search for authenticity is a sketchy quest. So I am bewildered and more than a bit befuddled at my knee-jerk reaction. Perhaps the explanation is speciously simple: I don’t like her tour. I remind myself to bracket the slapdash critique and to remain open for the remainder of the tour.

As we leave the day room, she pauses in the entry hall again only to shoo us ahead of her into the dining room. She does not even glance at the haunted mirror; she completely ignores the earring case. In the dining room, she does not mention the cake displayed so prominently on the table, or the green drapes, or the shoo-fly fan. Instead, she prattles on about the chairs and the silver and the *trompe l’oeil* fireplace. As we skitter into the women’s parlor, she urges us to stand in the threshold between it and the men’s parlor so that she can discuss both spaces at the same time. She begins with the actual marble fireplaces in both rooms but notes the contrasting artwork for the men and the women. Whereas the women have a painting of Mary to contemplate, the men have a print of a naked Venus on the half-shell. Drawing our attention to

the floor-to-ceiling windows in both rooms, she notes that for parties, these windows could be opened completely so that guests could circulate freely from parlor to parlor and onto the wrap-around porch. In speaking of them she almost leans on one of the mercury glass doorknobs on the doors marking the threshold between the men's and women's parlor, but apparently thinks better of it. She points out what she describes as a black lacquered *papier-mâché* sewing stand with mother of pearl inlays on its lid and a rather non-descript secretary desk in the women's parlor. Pivoting, she indicates the plaster crown molding in the men's parlor. It almost makes me sad to see that it has been repaired and that guests no longer have the opportunity to trace its ornate pattern with their fingers, feeling the bits of straw and horsehair squirming just below its surface. She does point to the seams that mark the recently completed repair work, but she manages to keep us from getting too close by suggesting it may not be safe to step onto the newly replaced, but as yet unvarnished, floorboards that hold a small side table beneath the fresh repair.

I find myself becoming increasingly impatient and irritated with each verbal and experiential omission. "Why is she rushing," I ask myself. Thus far, she has not given Chloe a fair shot to haunt the house, the tour, or the guests. But I know that, despite this shitty tour, Chloe will make an appearance in the final room as she does on every tour. She cannot *not* show up. The final room on the tour, the final gesture of the tour, is the ghost picture reveal. By the time Miss Mary prepares to lead us there, I find myself longing for Robbie or Bri or any of a number of other tour guides with whom I have toured the house over the last five years—if not for myself, then for these other folks who do not share my wealth of experiences in this space. Given what has happened thus far, I am confident Miss Mary will muddle the last room, but I am equally certain that at the very least she will not be able to ignore Chloe.

I always anticipate the last room on the tour, which, as if in overt homage to Chloe, is painted a deep green. In the corner, a picture rests on a table with its face turned away from the guests toward the deep green wall. It is the only thing that escapes the God's eye view of the large, round, convex chaperone's mirror hanging above the fireplace. Repeatedly, I have watched guides gently scoop up the picture and, in a practiced move, turn it towards audience. It's *the* picture. It's *her* picture. All of us (or almost all of us) have seen it reproduced—on the website, in books, on TV, in the gift shop, in these very pages. We know before we begin that we will see it again at some point on the tour—a knowledge that only serves to heighten our pleasure, like the way one anticipates the favorite scene of a favorite movie. With practiced detachment, guides calmly describe other objects in the room all the while wearing a slight, sly Cheshire cat grin, which both acknowledges our anticipation and teases out the length of our wait. At this point in every tour, guides slowly inch their way over to the side table and caress the back of the large black frame. Then, in a well-rehearsed move, they loft the frame above their heads and say, “This is the famous picture of our Chloe, I'm sure you've all seen it before.” In that one practiced move, Chloe is named, framed, elevated, enshrined, produced and reproduced; the site is sacralized. Even though we knew the reveal was coming, we are nonetheless excited and even surprised by the way the event unfurls. Guides then lower the frame and invite us to gather in closer. Our bodies press closer and closer together; we oblige. They point to a second picture in the frame. It looks similar to the original, but Chloe's magnified image is a little darker and red-penned scales and measurements crowd around her. The tour guides describe how the professional analyses confirm the photograph's authenticity; they reveal that it has been subjected to a test called a shadow density analysis. If her image remained at the conclusion of

the test, the picture was not a fake, they assure us. “Y’all, she stayed in the picture.” Tour groups are invariably impressed with this information. *It’s possible.*

Our gang of five has remained fairly unresponsive throughout Miss Mary’s tour, and has grown increasingly restive as she leads us into the final room. Someone who has never been on the tour before mutters under her breath, “Why did I pay eight dollars for a 15 minute tour?” I stifle an impulse to tell her—to tell them all—the tour is usually 20 minutes longer and much, much better, but it is not my job to intervene. Besides, I know something that they don’t; they will get to meet Chloe in this final room, or at the very least see her famous picture. Albeit a bit naïve on my part, I am convinced that Chloe’s image can and will perform spectrality in a way that Miss Mary’s tour has completely failed to do.

Miss Mary begins by describing the portrait of the Confederate soldier hanging over the Civil War era sword unearthed somewhere on the grounds; she explains that the wedding ring on his pinkie indicates that he was a widower. She identifies another portrait—Clark Woodruff—but she fails to reiterate Teeta Moss’ claim that his eyes follow you as you navigate the room. She points out the portrait of Kate, the Stirling’s granddaughter who died from Yellow Fever, and notes that the black doll in her arms signifies death; she doesn’t reveal that half of the portrait was painted before and the other half after the child’s death or how one can tell this fact from looking at the picture. Only at the end does she demonstrate how the convex chaperone mirror hanging above the fireplace reproduces a skewed version of everything in the room. In clamorous summation, she blurts out, “And that concludes our tour. Thank you for coming to The Myrtles.”

My reaction is physical and visceral. “That’s it! THAT’S IT?” I scream in my head. She isn’t going to mention Chloe at all? She leaves the ghost picture with its face turned toward the

wall, as if Chloe has performed some shameful act for which she must be punished. I fight my overwhelming impulse to stop the group from exiting the house so that I can complete the tour myself—to name, frame, elevate, enshrine, produce and reproduce Chloe’s image. I long to sacralize the site—or is it her sight—in some way, shape, or form.

The elision is just too much to bear, at least for me. When she opens the door, I storm across the courtyard, over the white hot gravel of the parking lot, to my 1996 aubergine Lexus with matching leather interior. I yank open the door, fling my oversized red leather purse into the passenger’s side floorboard, and climb into the driver’s seat not bothering to position the ever-ready towel to protect my thighs from the blazing heat of the leather. As the heat scorches the back of my legs, the temperature ratchets up my temper. “Goddamn it, Mary!” I scream, slamming my open palms repeatedly against the steering wheel. “Don’t you know that changes everything?” I crank the car and slam it into gear; I push the gas pedal to the floor, spraying gravel as I careen toward the blacktopped drive. The statues, the live oaks, the crepe myrtles, the cast iron blast by in a flash as I roll down my window and open the moon roof. Shooting through the scalloped picket gate, I brake at Highway 61. As I look quickly to my left, I am momentarily arrested by the white and robin’s egg blue sign I know by heart: “The Myrtles Plantation. Home of Mystery and Intrigue. America’s Most Haunted Home.” I pause for a moment. Although I know this will be the last time I will see this sign for a while, its promises are permanently imprinted in my psyche. I glance left again, down the highway, to see if any cars are coming. Several are, but I stomp the gas pedal and turn right, accelerating rapidly to keep the oncoming traffic from having to slow their speed to accommodate me but also to escape the gravitational pull of The Myrtles. My efforts will be futile; ghosts don’t give a damn about gravity.

I am fuming at Mary as I whiz back through the freshly paved portion of the Audubon Corridor. As I make my way south down the Blues Highway, the gris-gris bag I bought from Robbie, which hangs from my rear view mirror, ticks back and forth like a metronome keeping time . . . to something . . . the rhythm of the stories thus far, perhaps . . . and lulls me into reflection. Perhaps I am being too hard on Mary—way too hard. Maybe she was moving—no, sprinting—through her house tour because she was scared. Perhaps the way that Chloe showed up in that particular performance, with that particular audience, in that particular spectral moment made Mary so uncomfortable that she was doing her dead level best to try to outpace Chloe and the host of other ghosts that accompany her. Mary is not the only one terrified by Chloe and her spectral cohorts. If Chloe weren't a threat to folks interested in preserving an "Authentic History" of West Feliciana Parish, then they wouldn't work so hard to try to exorcise her. By extension, the History of the South and slavery in this country often get the same moonlight and magnolias treatment. While in this study, the elider-in-chief is the West Feliciana Historical Society, plantation tours in general whitewash history by ignoring or minimizing the history of slavery *and* the history of particular slaves who lived and died on these plantations. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that many of the people who come to visit The Myrtles Plantation and the ghosts that inhabit it do so out of a social need to engage those particular histories. It is difficult to talk about race and the history of race relations in America. It is true for Mary; it is true for me; it is true for so many of us. It is difficult for Mary to negotiate the issue when it comes up on tour; however, try as she might to avoid the issue and run away from the ghosts, Chloe and her cohorts are not going anywhere. They will remain at The Myrtles. It is important for Mary, for me, for tourists in general, to live with these ghosts because there is no just future without them.

CHAPTER SIX
ROUTE 66:
AN EPILOGUE ON BEGINNINGS

Although I know I am headed back toward Baton Rouge, and my beloved little Chloe green shotgun rental house in Spanish town, I do not know what lies ahead, or is it behind, or perhaps a few steps willy-nilly to either side. The distinction, as always, is difficult to parse. I pull up in front of my little house, grab my purse, grab the ungraded quizzes—why did I take them in the first place? did I think I was going to grade them in the bar at The Myrtles?—and my big red leather purse, and scoot out of the driver’s side door, slamming it shut with my foot. Sapph is barking at the door as I make my way clumsily up the steps, instinctually dodging bags of mulch. I manage to get in the door and drop my load in the front hallway amidst a menagerie of cardboard boxes that I have acquired in anticipation of my move west. I am exhausted just looking at the mess in front of me—there is so much left to do.

Later, I sit cross-legged, covered in dirt and dust, surrounded by the rubble and debris of almost a decade's worth of graduate school. Unlike Walter Benjamin, I am packing my library. There is nothing whimsical or nostalgic about this process. I am rushing. I am leaving in a hurry. I am getting out of town. These are my books. I am stealing away and I am taking them with me. I anticipate my next adventure, but there is no whimsy. But there was nothing really whimsical about my library in the first place, really. My books are unaccustomed to being ogled, pampered, or treated like precious trinkets. Don’t get me wrong I fancy each of them, but I view them as tools. I use them to work. From broken bindings, and ripped pages to dog-eared chapters crammed full of sheets torn from legal pads, they are littered with scrawling on scraps of paper and on the pages themselves. My scrawls are in inks of varying shades—whatever was at hand—and the handwriting exhibits a range of levels of readability depending on my emotional states—

from panic, to excitement, to vehemence. They wear their labor well. In fact, the most well worn volumes seem to shimmer with the deep tired satisfaction of a job well done.

I am putting them into boxes based on level of tatter. The most disheveled get top priority, a one-way ticket to California. The most pristine go to the curb. Most of the fiction goes to storage. I pack the fiction last. I contemplate lingering longingly for a bit and waxing nostalgic, but it is late and I am exhausted. Packing quickly becomes far too generous a term for what I am doing. Dumping is more accurate. A red flash from a paperback at the back catches my eye. I pause. Behind the pile of fiction—behind Maxine Hong Kingston, behind Sylvia Plath, behind *Bless Me, Ultima*, behind *Moby Dick*, behind Nabokov, behind *A Separate Peace*, behind Judy Bloom, behind a pile of Anne Rice’s witches and vampires and Anne Roquerfort’s *Beauty*, behind *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, behind Mark Twain, behind William Faulkner, behind Raymond Carver, behind *Hamlet* and all of the Complete Works, behind *The Secret Life of Bees*, behind *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, behind Huxley, behind *Zarathustra*, behind William Burroughs, behind Alice Walker, behind *The Secret Garden*, behind Margaret Atwood, behind Lewis Carroll, behind Toni Morrison, behind Eudora Welty, behind Lee Smith, behind Flannery O’Connor and her menagerie of misfits, behind all of the sustained fiction—is a book I barely recall buying. Instantly the embossed, drippy, kitschy, red letters on the cover scare out the memory. I scream out loud, “I cannot FUCKING believe I forgot about this book!”

Shifting into reverse, I immediately dump out the California-bound boxes and start rummaging through notebooks and legal pads until I find the notepad from my first trip to The Myrtles. There, inscribed in the margin, is a note about a book that Robbie, my favorite tour guide, told me to avoid because, “nothin’ in there is true!” I look back down at the paperback book: *The Myrtles Plantation: The True Story of America’s Most Haunted Home*. A Novel by

Frances Kermeen. I crack the cover and then slam it shut immediately. Something about opening this book seems naughty, forbidden . . . almost salacious. After all, I was told expressly not to read it. True? Not True? What is true is the fact that I haven't read it . . . yet. I can't imagine why I bought it, given Robbie's prohibition; perversity, I guess.

I desperately needed to understand as much as I could about what I would be taking on. Taking a deep breath, I asked, "What do you think causes ghosts?" . . .

It seemed that he was uncomfortable talking about it. . . . He looked down, shaking his head. "I just don't know." . . .

Couldn't ghosts just be spirits of people who died here, and just don't know they are dead? Or spirits who loved this place, and just don't want to leave?" This began a lengthy, esoteric debate about the origins of ghosts, until, reaching no conclusions, John L. went off to bed. (Kermeen 73)

When I read the section quoted above in Francis Kermeen's book about her experiences as proprietor of The Myrtles Plantation, in spite of myself, I laughed out loud. I laugh not because the section is particularly funny; on the contrary, this passage marks the beginning of a long hard story for Francis and her husband, John L., and everyone else—community members, friends, family—described in her book. On the verge of tears, I laugh because I identify intensely with both Francis and John L. In my attempts to better understand how ghosts are operating at The Myrtles, I have spent the better part of two years, trying desperately to understand how folks from a variety of different disciplines conceptualize ghosts and hauntings, and how they critically deploy those conceptualizations. The debates regarding ghosts, haunting, hauntology specters, and spirits are indeed lengthy, unquestionably esoteric, and, it seems to me, no hard and fast conclusions are in sight. Like John L., I often find myself wanting to crawl into bed, cover my head, and just get away from it all. However, as the owners and guests at The Myrtles continually remind me, crawling into bed and covering one's head in no way ensures one can escape either ghosts or the people trying—desperately at times—to conjure them.

Apparently there is a specter haunting performance studies (Powell and Shaffer), and I suspect there is more than one of them—there is always more than one of them—*Plus d'un*. There are loose ends, irresistible rabbit holes, and so many more stories to spin. I know there are. The stories are becoming more frayed, split and untidy by the second. Don't worry. I'm not apologizing. The loose ends are necessary. The garment must gape. The shadows must shadow. The ghosts must move. I am writing this ethnography from a particularly haunted landscape. I can't claim to know how everything turned out—or rather—turns out, nor do I want to. I don't want to impose that sort of finality or teleology on this study, these ongoing embodied performances, while ghosts still move, tour guides still breathe and tourists—sometimes—still scream.

Several of my colleagues, also taken by ghostly matters, have produced insightful robust scholarship and it is my sincere hope that this study will be received in dialogue with their work.¹⁶ However, and I want to be clear on this point, embracing that sort of unfurling, unfinalizeable, deconstructive, haunted slant to the way I do the doing of this ethnography—and to the way I critically engage the world as a performance studies practitioner more generally—does not paralyze me as a scholar. Quite the contrary. I think learning to live with ghosts has pushed my critical acumen to damn near its insufferable limit. Because in spending all this never-enough-time-with-ghosts, I have never encountered a haunting or a specter that ever promised NOT to freak me out and/or drive me a little bit mad. As well they should. I anticipate

¹⁶ See, for example, Joshua Gunn, “Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead”; Joshua Gunn, “Mourning Speech: Haunting and the Spectral Voices of 9-11”; Joshua Gunn, “On Recording Performance, or Speech, the Cry, and the Anxiety of the Fix”; “Ben Powell and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, “On the Haunting of Performance Studies”; Lesa Lockford, “An Ethnographic Ghost Story: Adapting *What's a Nice Commodity Like You Doing in a Spectacle Like This?*”; Sonja Kuflinec, “[Walking Through A] Ghost Town: Cultural Hauntologie in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Mostar: A Performance Review”; Matthew Wagner and Chris Danowski, “Hearing Ghosts and Speaking Spaces: A Conversation with Performance”; Diana Taylor, “Dancing with Diana: A Study in Hauntology”; Justin Thomas Trudeau, “Specters in the Rear-View: Haunting, Whiteness, and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*.”

creating future work that more specifically engages the theoretical and practical similarities and difference between my understanding of ghosts, hauntology and performance. That being said, I am well aware that it is time to exit the page of this stage and my audience, which is you dear reader, probably desire if not a conclusion at least a summation of some sort. But I don't want the conclusion of this document to veer too far away from the ghosts haunting The Myrtles, myself, perhaps you, and, hopefully, these very pages.

In a few days, I will pack all my belongings, save the boxes of books I have already shipped west, my cinnamon and sugar colored dog, Sappho, and all my spiral notebooks crammed full of seemingly random traces of cultural artifacts—phrases, idioms, sketches—and the sketchy sideways scrawlings of what appears to be a mad (bag?) woman into my aubergine Lexus and begin to drive. By then, my hair will be bright pink—again—an appropriate gesture, I think, for my going away party the night before at Houndogs. You can take the girl out of Spanish Town, but you can't take the. . . . You know the cliché.

This leg of my journey will take me 1,984 miles from my home in Spanish Town to another, equally quaint, gingerbread bungalow in the historic Tower District of Fresno, California, where my aunt and uncle have graciously . . . benevolently . . . invited me to come stay for a year to finish my dissertation. The road trip I will make is one that I haven't taken for at least 21 years. I made this trip three or four times between the ages of six and 12 with my grandmother and my grandfather, Glory and Dedo, both now deceased, in equally aubergine cars, though they were different makes and models.

On the morning of my departure, I will stand on the front porch of my Spanish Town house and apologize to Raquel Polanco, the new performance studies graduate student who will be taking over my lease because I haven't managed to get all the mulch spread before leaving. I

will point to the two bags sitting in a misshapen lump on the steps. She will say, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll take care of it,” and I will hand her my keys.

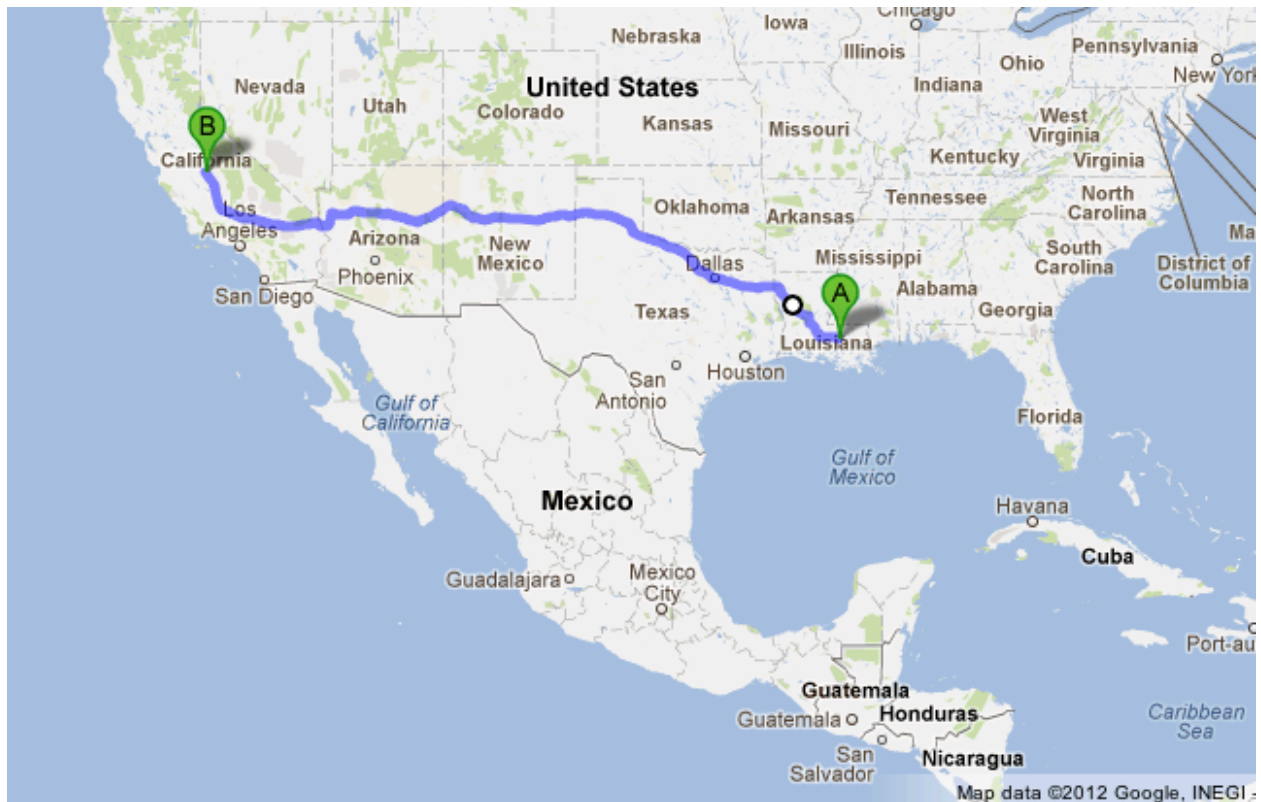


Figure 4. 2032 Miles toward an Increasingly Haunted Future-To-Come

Mr. Ricky, David Brown, Terri McKinney, Melissa Easton, John LeBret, Brandon Nichols, and several other friends from the department who live in the neighborhood, will stop by the house that morning to say goodbye. We will exchange hugs, words of encouragement, best wishes, and a measure of playful snark designed to temper excessive sentimentality—the laughter through tears that accompanies such departures. It will be September, the heat will have broken, and I will realize I don’t have to use my seat towel when I get into my car. From the passenger side, I will put Sapph into the narrow slot in the back seat designed as her bed. She will not be amused, suspecting this is another trip to the veterinarian. Eventually she will realize the trip is long—beyond veterinarian range—and will settle down to sleep, but not yet. By the

time I make it around to the driver's side, she will have broken through the shoebox barrier I designed to keep her in the back seat. As I wave goodbye one last time, opening the driver's side door, I will extend my right arm into the car to keep her from bolting, and climb in, closing the door behind me.

I will pull out and make my way to the stop sign at Lakeland and 6th, turning left past the Bailey's house, past the apartment complex with the green jalousie shuttered gallery. I will pass Melissa Easton's burgeoning basil plants and pause at the stop sign at Spanish Town Road to take a last long look at the beads hanging from the trees. At this time of the year the foliage is still dark and heavy so I will only catch a glimpse of a glint here and there. Turning left onto Spanish Town Road, I will wave at the people sitting in the chairs outside Capitol Grocery. I will pause for a brief breath as I pass Bungalow Street and, once again, at the wood plank house with the Cobalt blue trim at the corner of 8th Street. I will make the light at 9th street and turn left onto the I-110 shunt, which will take me to I-10 and launch me across the Mississippi River bridge. I will take I-10 west to Lafayette, where I will catch I-49 north to Shreveport. There I will take I-20 west to Dallas. I will stay for a few days. My brother, David, will get married. He and his wife, Heather, will take care of my dog for the year I am gone. I will head west, eventually taking historic Route 66 toward California. Along the way, I will read a book about The Myrtles that I was instructed to remember to forget. Although I made this same trip with Glory and Dedo three or four times before I was a teenager, I will not remember my memories until I meet them again, unexpectedly, on this trip—the indoor/outdoor pool at the Marriott in Flagstaff, counting windmills with Dedo, Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn along for the ride, the Painted Desert where we bought Glory's turquoise bracelet.

I will arrive at my aunt's house in Fresno, it will smell exactly like I remember—sandalwood, patchouli, piñon. My books will arrive the next day and I will hole up in her basement, reading, re-reading, reading, re-reading voraciously. The two texts I will come back to again and again are Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* and Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*.

Gordon argues that analyzing hauntings might, “lead to a more complex understanding of the generative structures and moving parts of historically imbedded social formations in a way that avoids the twin pitfalls of subjectivism and positivism.” She further claims that the result “will not be a more tidy world, but one that might be less damaging” (19). Avery Gordon published *Ghostly Matters* in 1997, when I was 19 years old, barely out of high school, decked out in twelve-eye Doc Martins, baby doll dresses, rocking a pink streak in my hair, and still authentically mourning the loss of Kurt Cobain. At the time, I was completely unaware of the performative turn—or as Mary Frances HopKins has called it, the “performance turn—and toss”—let alone the spectral turn in continental philosophy ushered in by Derrida a few years earlier (“Performance Turn—and Toss”). In a basement in Fresno, reading and rereading Gordon and the beautiful way she articulates ghostly matters, I will learn a way of engaging with the ghosts that are haunting me by finding *my* shape in *her* hand. I will discover there is a way to investigate and to interact with Chloe, not just as a dead or missing person, but as a “social figure,” who leads to “a dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8).

I will be increasingly persuaded that I need to look for her (Chloe's) shape in his (Clark Woodruff's) hand (Gordon 1-28). I will make trips back to Louisiana and visit the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum where I will meet Helen Williams, who is incredibly knowledgeable about the histories of St. Francisville. I will wish, fervently, that I had met her earlier. She is feisty, opinionated, helpful, and gracious. The information she will make available

to me within the course of an hour will change the trajectory of my project radically. I will spend a year and a half attempting to process the emergent beginning that took root in the course of that one speciously simple hour. Everything will change—as everything is wont to do. What I think about the history of The Myrtles, St. Francisville, West Feliciana Parish, Baton Rouge, Spanish Town, the Civil War, The Whisky Rebellion, The West Florida Rebellion, the antebellum south, spiritualism, elocution, my own disciplinary inheritance, as well as the multitude of specters animating the whole heaving web, will change. In one split second, something . . . something anachronistic . . . something which defies all sense of logic will shift. The relationship between specter and spirit will reveal itself in a spectacularly mundane display of difference. Haunting will become the operating logic of the future to come. The world will become infinitely smaller and larger at the exact same moment.

The transformation will begin quite innocently. I will tell her that I am looking for information on The Myrtles and initially she will roll her eyes. I will qualify the initial request; I will say that I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at LSU, and am researching tourism in Louisiana and The Myrtles as part of my dissertation project. Adjusting to the fact that I am not *just some tourist* on the trail of a ghostgasm, she will become more amenable to my request. I will tell her I am looking for more information of Judge Clarke Woodruff, specifically any information pertaining to him in his role as a Judge. What types of cases did he preside over? Who appointed him to the bench? What type of law did he practice prior to becoming a Judge? She will tell me that she doesn't have much in the way of *actual* history of the home what with all the hoopla surrounding the “ghosty touristy” stuff, insinuating that all of the “ghosty touristy stuff gets in the way of *actual* history. I will keep my objections to her claim to myself as she makes copies of the information she does have in a thin, manila file

folder with “The Myrtles” scrawled in a spidery handwriting on the tab; it will prove to be mostly old pamphlets and copies of magazine articles. We will briefly discuss Francis Kermeen, and she will assure me that “we do NOT sell *that woman’s* book here.”

She will invite me to sit at the stout, wooden research table while she combs through the stacks of books lining the back wall of the museum. In short order she will bring me a coffee-colored brown reference book that includes the following entry:

Woodrooff, Clark. Educator, politician. Born, South Farms, Litchfield County, Conn., August 23, 1791. Established academy near St. Francisville, La., 1811. Incorporated St. Francisville Library Co., 1816. Married Matilda Bradford, daughter of David Bradford with whom he studied law, November 19, 1817. Admitted to Louisiana bar, 1817. Incorporator, St. Francisville Baptist Church, 1823; member, first board of trustees, College of Louisiana, Jackson, 1825; incorporator, Presbyterian Church, St. Francisville, 1828; served in Louisiana legislature, 1827-1828; appointed judge Eighth Judicial District by Gov. Henry Johnson (q.v.) and served 1828-1836; practiced law in New Orleans, 1840-1846; appointed first auditor of public accounts by Gov. Isaac Johnson (q.v.), 1846-1849. Retired, 1850; died at home near New Orleans, 1851. E.K.D. Source: Elrie Robinson, *Early Feliciana Politics* (1936). (Woodrooff, Clark)

In addition to the information about his judgeship and stint in public office, the fact that he was also an educator, a teacher, intrigues me. What did he teach? In tracking down the various clues provided in this short encyclopedia entry, I will come across an article entitled, “The Political Career of Isaac Johnson” (Robinson). In addition to learning that Governor Johnson was from the Felicianas, elected in 1943, a fierce proponent of slavery and states rights who voted to extend the Missouri Compromise line to accommodate more slave holding territories, I will also learn that he was educated at an academy established by Clark Woodruff in St. Francisville in 1811. What academy?

When I return to LSU, I will make a beeline for Hill Memorial Library. I will sit at another stout, wooden desk and wait with baited breath for the librarian to bring me a letter housed in their permanent collection. The two delicate sepia-toned pages are wearing their 177

years well, although the parchment is cracked and brittle around the edges. The letter is addressed to The Honorable Morris Woodruff of Litchfield Connecticut (“To Morris Woodruff”). The letter is penned in the hand of Judge Clark Woodruff, and is addressed to his brother. His handwriting is elegant and slants to the right; in some parts it is hard to distinguish the words, much less parse them. The majority of the letter is about financial matters—business—and states that a one hundred dollar check is enclosed. He briefly laments the politics of the time and discusses his last campaign for office. He thanks his brother for the attention he has paid to Octavia, his one surviving daughter, when she last visited Connecticut. He goes on to express condolences and deep grief over the loss of her brother’s young granddaughter. He states that he still grieves daily the two children he lost. I see *her* shape in *his* hand.

I will spend more time rummaging through the Special Collections, squinting at a projector for hours on end, pouring over microfiche. I will run across a notice submitted by Clark Woodruff in *Time-Piece*, the West Feliciana newspaper published by James Bradford, advertising enrollment for the Feliciana Academy, an institution giving instruction in “English, grammar, elocution. . . .” My tired eyes will stop short, I will lurch back violently in my chair as if dodging a book lobbed at my head. Elocution? Elocution! It says . . . elocution. I will see *my* shape in *his* hand. I will understand what Derrida means when he says, “This being-with-specters is also a politics of memory, inheritance, and generations” (xix).

In the moment I discover that Clark Woodruff taught elocution, I will have several choices. I can be freaked out and terrified by this ghost with whom I share a common ancestry, and run screaming from the house, headlong in the wrong direction. But I will remind myself in all this never-enough-time-with-ghosts I’ve been spending with ghosts, I have never encountered a haunting or a specter that ever promised NOT to freak me out and/or drive me a little bit mad.

Alternately, I can simply be inhospitable and ignore this inconvenient revenant, but that would be rude. When folks—living or dead, invited or not—show up to visit, you visit. That’s just good manners. Or, I can give in. I can practice what I preach. I can choose to participate in a haunting, chose to “maintain now the specter,” choose to listen at the thresholds and never take the conjuring that every haunting entails lightly. I chose—or at least I hope I chose—the latter. When the ghost of Clark Woodruff—a teacher, a politician, a judge, an elocutionist, a slave owner—decided to show up for a visit, invited or not, I had to learn to live with him, too, to listen to him and to try to speak with him.

This experience will force me to rethink elocution, and the unstoried teaching of literature in the age of performance studies, and the spiritualism implicit in speaking into the air. In short, this experience will force me to rethink my own disciplinary history—a history I have inherited—in ways that are at times dangerous or, at least, feel that way (Conquergood “Rethinking Elocution”; Edwards “Unstoried”; Peters *Speaking into The Air*). This is a good thing.

You see, here is the thing about spending time with ghosts—the *it* this entire study has been about the business of tracing out—crazy shit starts to happen. Uncanny coincidences start popping up all the time. Anachronism is the logic of haunting, and haunting is geared toward justice. I was and still am haunted. If I am being honest—and I am trying my best to be honest here—somewhere in the back side of my brain was a nasty little belief that if I could just gather the right archival evidence, I could prosecute Clark Woodruff as the white, privileged, racist, slave-owning, murderer that I wanted him to be and, in doing so, I could avenge Chloe’s death. As my Uncle Mame would say, “Hon. Admitting you’re an asshole is the first step.” God, I miss him terribly. But that is another story.

I cannot avenge Chloe's death or absolve myself—or anyone for that matter—from the inextricable connection between rape, murder, slavery and the traumas those actions continue to inflict, primarily because they are all still happening, all the time. While these atrocities are certainly less overt than they were in Woodruff's day, they are no less devastating. One of the covers blown off by the winds of Katrina is the massive network of human trafficking in southern Louisiana. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Baton Rouge ranks in the top ten cities in the country for human trafficking. Haunting is also about justice, and ghosts issue spectral injunctions to the living people they are haunting. As Derrida so very eloquently states, "This trauma is endlessly denied by the very movement through which one tries to cushion it, to assimilate it, to interiorize it, and incorporate it. In this mourning work in process, in this interminable task, the ghost remains that which gives one the most to think about—and to do. Let us insist and spell things out: to do and to make come about, as well as to let come about" (98). Although I have come this far, there is so much left to do, so much more left to let come about.

While in California, I will lock myself in my aunt's basement. I will immerse myself in Derrida and Artaud and Deluze. I will miss The Myrtles terribly and will fill that void by searching for new videos on YouTube, following travel blogs, and watching and re-watching The Myrtles episode of *Ghost Hunters*. I will take several weekend trips back to Baton Rouge, faithfully reserving the last scheduled leg of the weekend itinerary for an imperative trip to The Myrtles. I will take the most romantic trip one can possibly imagine to San Francisco, and will briefly fall in love again. On my trip out, I will drive through San Jose, California. I will remember that I forgot that I planned to check out San Jose during my sojourn in the state. That was where Frances Kermeen lived and restored Victorian houses before she purchased her first

piece of antebellum property—The Myrtles. The weekend will be epic and I will briefly convince myself that I have fallen in love again. I will be wrong.

On my way back home to Fresno from San Francisco, I will drive through San Jose again. I will see several giant billboards advertising The Winchester Mystery House—another place of mystery and intrigue. Indeed, I will impulsively exit the highway and make the next tour. I will become fascinated and begin to make the 200-mile drive between Fresno and San Jose regularly. The ghosts will intensify their haunting. I will spend months and months tracking down old documents and pouring over papers in family collections and discover that Sarah Winchester and Clark Woodruff, The Myrtles and The Winchester House, are related. I will discover not only that The Myrtles Plantation and The Winchester House are related in terms of their alternating positions on most of those lists—the ones that come out around Halloween—naming America’s most haunted home, but they also are connected by a common ancestor—it’s like blood with people, though perhaps slightly different houses. To find the connection, one has to trace Sarah Pardee Winchester’s matrilineal line back to 1646, but there he is—Matthew Woodruff 1646-1691. I will spare you the begats and make a long story short. Sarah Pardee Winchester is a distant cousin of Clark Woodruff. There is so much more to do here. There is so much left to do here.

I will find out via Facebook that an old lover who I met in the aftermath of Katrina, an engineering student at LSU, died in Iraq. His name was Nathan Carse. Although I will learn what happened to Nathan, I will never know what happened to “He” of the oil-colored eyes. On hearing of Nathan’s death I will wish that the war had stopped—if only for one day. We will have been at war for over a decade. There is much left to do here.

I will become obsessed with Artaud. I will be way more than a quart low on Serotonin, and I will get sick again. I will not be able to write. I will begin the slow gangrenous rot from the inside out—again. There will be more doctors and shrinks, more diagnoses and more meds. I will miss Miss Gene. I will choose not to check out early—again. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida claims that it is impossible for the dead to bury the dead. “Only mortals, only the living who are not living gods can bury the dead. Only mortals can watch over them, and can watch period. Ghosts can do so as well, they are everywhere where there is watching; the dead *cannot do so*. It is impossible” (174-175).

I will give the last of three eulogies that I have given over the course of studying The Myrtles: Dedo, my grandfather, Glory, my grandmother, and my Uncle Mame. When you study Communication, they don’t tell you that you will become the default orator at family funerals. Following the funeral of Robert Stephen Vaughn—my beloved Uncle Mame—I will spend two weeks in Lubbock attending to his earthly belongings and helping my father execute his will. When cleaning out the house, I will discover the not-so-secret family secret that my Uncle Mame was, indeed, gay, and that he had worked for numerous AIDS outreach and hospice organizations in Dallas at the height of the epidemic. I will wish he could have met Stephen, the specter from Capitol Grocery. I will think he might have been able to help in ways that I could not. I will experience grace and benevolence that will be difficult to parse.

I will be heartbroken for a while. I will be desperately, desperately homesick primarily because I don’t know where home is anymore and I’m not sure if I really understood what home was from the get go. I will go back to Texas. I will help my mother tend her garden. It won’t be easy, but it will be good.

I will play a supportive role in helping my best friend adapt one of our favorite novels, *The Bell Jar*. I will perform in her production. We will make performance together—again. I will squint through the light of a general wash into the hazy blue-green shadows of a backlit audience. In the front row, I will see the silver haired professor who recognized gifts I did not know I possessed and recruited me to the field. I will hear the delicious, infectious laughter of the irreverent woman who introduced me to the Psycho Chicken and taught me to play with performance. I will make out the yellow hair, bright cornflower-blue eyes, and broad mischievous smile of the like-sized sprite that encouraged me to believe in myself when I was ready to throw in the towel. I will hear the gruffly genuine professorial guffaw of the scarecrow-like figure that introduced me to the wonders of tourism, and the playfully serious interjections of his viciously whimsical partner in crime who, though she is like a marionette without strings in everyday motion, watches performances intent(s)ely and sees in ways that will never cease to amaze me. I will hear the rising giggle and see a whisp of the Patty Hearst blonde pony-tail of the mentor who showed me how vision, the bending of light, is an embodied event. I will see the back lit spikey pixie cut of a slender giant who has grown quite fond of the lush grey gardens she has tended to over the years. Guiding myself by them, as if by a magical thread, I will step into a room on August 31, 2012—the date of an actual blue moon—and choose to begin again—as always, *in medias res*.

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VITA

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