2002

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Suzanne W. Jones
University of Richmond, sjones@richmond.edu

Recommended Citation

Jones, Suzanne W. "I'll Take My Land: Cotemporary Southern Agrarians." In *South to a New Place*, edited by Suzanne Jones and Sharon Monteith, 121-46. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

[in memory of my brother]

I'll Take My Land: Contemporary Southern Agrarians

Suzanne W. Jones

How can we have something better if we do not imagine it? How can we imagine it if we do not hope for it? How can we hope for it if we do not attempt it?
—Wendell Berry, "Writer and Region"

For many earlier southern white writers, the southern rural landscape was the repository of nostalgia for lost ways of life, whether it was the plantation fantasy that Thomas Nelson Page pined for in his stories *In Ole Virginia* (1887) or the segregated agrarian ideal that many contributors yearned for in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). For modern southern white writers, beginning most prominently with William Faulkner, the rural landscape has conjured up unsettling guilt about a way of life that flourished on the backs of the black people who tilled that land. And not surprisingly, for many black writers the southern rural landscape has been the repository of troubled memories—"slavery's old backyard," as Eddy Harris terms it in *South of Haunted Dreams* (1993). African American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison started their lives and their plots in the rural South and then fled its racism. During the Harlem Renaissance, writers such as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston found the rural South to be a storehouse of African American culture, a culture that Hurston's anthropology professor Franz Boaz thought might be lost during the Great Migration of blacks from the South, a culture that she reclaimed. Many contemporary African American writers, no matter

their region of origin, have found that at some time in their writing lives they must go South in their fiction to understand their history, to confront old enemies, and to heal old wounds. For writers not native to the South, the turn South is often made in historical fictions recounting slavery or segregation—Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine.* In David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident,* Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day,* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, contemporary characters delve into their ancestors' southern rural past in order to understand their racial heritage.[1]

If the rapidly growing urban centers of the Sunbelt have somewhat overcome the stigma of a racist past and the gentrified picturesque coastal cities have mostly hidden evidence of de facto segregation from tourists,[2] the rural South still remains the repository of racism in the American imagination—a place where black churches smolder, paranoid militia men organize, white hate groups meet clandestinely, and Sons of Confederate Veterans congregate openly and fly their battle flag proudly. How to reclaim this landscape haunted by racism, how to rejuvenate the soil soaked with the blood, sweat, and tears of slavery and segregation, and how to make a space for white liberals and all African Americans to call themselves southerners and to return to the South has been the work of a number of contemporary novelists who grew up in the rural segregated South. As Nell Irvin Painter has pointed out, during the era of segregation, "*the South* meant white people, and *the Negro* meant black people. . . . *The South* did not embrace whites who supported the Union in the Civil War or those who later disliked or opposed segregation." For some today, these limited and limiting connotations of the word still hold. I think for example of the recently formed white reactionary political party that calls itself the Southern Party and the ultra-conservative magazine, *Southern Partisan.* Other southerners, both black and white,

1. After a trip to Africa, Eddy Harris, a black journalist from New York, discovered his cultural roots in the American South, during a motorcycle journey that he details in *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride Through Slavery's Old Back Yard* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

2. Fred Hobson, *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 352–54. In *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), Tony Horwitz found that the Civil War continues to be fought through historical re-enactments, especially in the rural South, though not all re-enactors participate for neo-Confederate reasons.

are beginning to loosen the neo-Confederate stranglehold on the word *South,* especially the rural South. In her analysis of the recent, more racially inclusive definition of "southern" culture, Thadious Davis argues that the return migration of African Americans to the rural South is not just "flight from the hardships of urban life" but also "a laying claim to a culture and a region that though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity." My focus is to examine how contemporary white writers Madison Smartt Bell and Ellen Douglas have intervened in such rhetoric and how they have represented the contemporary agrarian South.[3]

In *Tell About the South,* Fred Hobson argues that for contemporary liberal white writers, "the literature of self-exploration, even of confession and shame and guilt, had become . . . somewhat stylized, had become in part a habit, an aesthetic ritual. The talented, sensitive Southerner who left his home, or even remained, wrote his obligatory self-study, his love-hate drama, in part because his predecessors had." If the white southern memoirists whom Hobson analyzes wrote and rewrote the confessions of Quentin Compson because they both loved and hated southern culture and history, the white agrarian novelists that I highlight here, Ellen Douglas and Madison Smartt Bell, revise another of Faulkner's fictions, the narrative of Ike McCaslin, because they love southern places. Desiring social change, they write with an intensity and urgency that Hobson argues is missing from the works of most of his latter-day Quentin Compsons. And unlike their most notable agrarian predecessors, whom Wendell Berry suggests had "a tendency to love the land, not for its life, but for its historical associations,"[4] Bell and Douglas

3. Nell Irvin Painter, " 'The South' and 'the Negro': The Rhetoric of Race Relations and Real Life," in *The South for New Southerners,* ed. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 43; Thadious M. Davis, "Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region," *Southern Literary Journal* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 6. For further analysis of African Americans' return to the South, see also David L. Langford, "Going Back Home to the South," *Crisis,* 101, no. 3 (April 1994): 26, 35, 40; Carol Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); James C. Cobb, "Searching for Southernness: Community and Identity in the Contemporary South," in *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 125–49; and Wes Berry's essay in this collection.

4. Hobson, *Tell About the South,* 306 (he discusses works by Harry Ashmore, Hodding Carter, Larry King, Ralph McGill, Willie Morris, and Pat Watters); Wendell Berry, "The Regional Motive," in *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), 65–66.

desire both to conserve southern rural landscapes and to create new, more racially inclusive southern communities. Thus the question of what to do with the land itself—how to use it and who should own it—is of paramount importance in their fiction. But of equal concern are constructions of "southernness" because both writers are trying to dislodge the pejorative, racist connotation that the adjective *southern* carries for white people who live in the South, especially the rural South.

Madison Smartt Bell grew up literally in the laps of several contributors to *I'll Take My Stand*; Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate were his parents' friends. Bell's mother majored in English at Vanderbilt, while his father went to law school there. After college, they moved out of Nashville and bought a small farm in nearby Williamson County, where his mother ran a riding school and his father set up a law practice in the rural county seat of Franklin. There they lived the life of subsistence farmers that Andrew Lytle describes in "The Hind Tit": killing hogs, raising sheep, milking a cow, and canning fruits and vegetables from their large garden. Bell explains the effect on his psyche: "they gave me a childhood which was sufficiently atavistic that in some ways I entered the modern world as a stranger."[5]

As a young man, Bell dreamed of becoming an Agrarian novelist, like the writers he knew and admired. He read William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Flannery O'Connor in addition to Lytle and Tate and all of *I'll Take My Stand*. At Princeton, he wrote about Madison Jones and Harry Crews in his English classes. There, however, he also encountered Walker Percy's work, which led Bell to make a connection between Percy's apocalyptic vision and the Agrarians' concerns about industrialism. But fearful of "just turning out imitations of southern writings" that he admired, Bell set his early novels in New York City, where he lived after college. At the same time, he insists that he brought to that urban landscape and society "a southern literary approach and stylistic conventions and also some attitudes that I got from southern writers." Although

5. Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition,* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 201–45; Madison Smartt Bell, "An Essay Introducing His Work in Rather a Lunatic Fashion," *Chattahoochee Review* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 2. But Bell is quick to explain that his country upbringing was far from simply a rural experience: "The way I grew up was curiously double from the very beginning. I belonged to a pair of working farmers who were also accustomed to the rights and privileges of the best education available. This meant that I would get up in the morning, feed the horses, or milk the cow, and then be driven ten or fifteen miles to what I might as well admit was a rather posh private school in Nashville."

one may question whether his attitudes are exclusively "southern," Bell's sensitivity to nature, his feeling that something is awry, and his sense of alienation from modern life certainly combine the early lessons he learned from southern Agrarians with the views he later discovered in Percy's work.[6]

Not until his fifth novel, *Soldier's Joy* (1989), did Madison Smartt Bell set a novel in the South, and despite his predilection for the urban scene, he chose a rural setting, very much like the place where he grew up. His plot involves two Vietnam veterans—one white, Thomas Laidlaw, and the other black, Rodney Redmon—and the narration is alternately filtered through their perspectives as each tries to make a place for himself in the Tennessee hills where they grew up together. In *Soldier's Joy,* most of Bell's sympathetic characters have a strong connection to the land: Laidlaw, who returns to his family's farm; Redmon's father, Wat, who had been employed by Laidlaw's father; and Mr. Giles, a neighboring farmer who helps Laidlaw plant a garden. To use the terms of Walker Percy that Bell most identifies with, these characters feel "at ease" with themselves and "at home" in their environment when they are in the Tennessee hills.[7] Bell's least sympathetic characters—the unctuous, greedy real-estate developer Goodbuddy and the bitter, racist Vietnam veteran Earl Giles—are neither in tune with nature nor in harmony with those around them. They represent the evil forces, development and racism, that Laidlaw must do battle with when he returns home. Goodbuddy tries to buy him out, and Earl Giles tries to run him out.

Laidlaw's battle with Goodbuddy over the future of his property is little more than a skirmish. Because Laidlaw does not need the money, he quickly dismisses Goodbuddy's offer to buy all, or even some, of his land. Bell depicts the new houses that Goodbuddy sells as inharmonious with the rural landscape; Goodbuddy's realty office fits "as naturally into the surrounding countryside as if it had recently been dropped from a plane" (139). Like the Nashville Agrarians before him, Bell makes it clear that development is not necessarily progress, especially if people forget the connection between human life and the natural world. But Bell is more interested in people's emotional and psychological responses to places

6. Madison Smartt Bell, *Soldier's Joy* (1989; New York: Penguin, 1990) (quotations from this novel will be identified parenthetically in the text); Mary Louise Weaks, "An Interview with Madison Smartt Bell," *Southern Review* 30, no. 1 (January 1994): 3, 1.

7. Weaks, "An Interview," 11. See also Bell, "An Essay Introducing His Work," 4–5, 12.

than in the pastoral ideal that so preoccupied his predecessors. He establishes this concern in the first chapter when Laidlaw returns from Vietnam to California and buys a used Chevrolet pickup so that he can cruise the Pacific Coast Highway. Almost inexplicably, he is drawn to the East Coast:

> There were girls on the beaches, whiskey in the bars; you could have whatever you wanted if only you knew what it was. Laidlaw couldn't make up his mind to stop. Maybe, he thought, it just wasn't his kind of country. He tore the map out of the front of a phone book in a gas station booth just south of San Francisco, and set out east with that as his only guide. . . . Halfway across Virginia he stopped at a crossroads store, one of the old style with dust-covered cans ranked on the shelves, its only brisk trade in saltines and slices of rat cheese slicked onto sheets of wax paper at the counter. . . . The road was quite familiar now, every bend and curve of it known to him from summer after summer in the back seat of the car, chin propped on the front-seat cushion, peering around his father's boxy head to see the highway signs. . . . However, when he reached Virginia Beach it became a little strange, altered, more built up than he'd remembered. There were clumps of condo towers that had mushroomed since he'd been there, and he couldn't seem to find the house they used to stay in. . . . By dark he had gotten away from the high-rises and was passing in front of a row of bungalows, which then fell away entirely behind a rise of sand. (6–7)

With his back against a dune, the sea oats waving over his head, and the waves lapping the sand with their "*hush, hush, hush*" sounds, "Laidlaw was quietening within himself and a restlessness that had been in him began to drain away into the expanse of the cloudy water" (7). Laidlaw is calmed in this scene by nature itself, but also because this less-developed stretch of Virginia Beach is similar to the landscape he had vacationed in as a child. However, not until he is back on his family farm outside Nashville does Laidlaw feel that he is in the right place, and it is the rural place he loved as a boy that helps heal the psychic wounds he received as a soldier in Vietnam.

In setting his first southern novel in the rural Tennessee hills of his youth, Bell emulates his mentor Andrew Lytle. But Bell is not so much recalling a lost rural culture as he is a lost psychological relationship with the land. Richard Gray has argued that the "lost land" that Lytle and his cohorts recall in *I'll Take My Stand* was "lost in part, certainly, because of history but also for the simple reason that they had grown up and shades of the prison-house had started to gather around them." Michael

O'Brien has argued that many of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* were city dwellers with romantic yearnings for country life. Both arguments could be made about Bell, who has said that he began to feel like an "expatriate" in New York City. The feeling he experienced there of being in "a foreign country" is the one he gives Laidlaw at the beginning of *Soldier's Joy*. But Bell has articulated an additional dimension to the powerful draw of his rural place. He represents the relationship between Laidlaw and his homeplace as one built on sensory interactions, but he represents it as a complex reciprocal relationship. Psychologist Roger Barker calls such a relationship "psychological ecology"; he argues that places become "behavior settings" because "individuals and their inanimate surroundings together create systems of a high order that take on a life of their own." Winifred Gallagher interprets this relationship in these terms: "The basic principle that links our places and states is simple: a good or bad environment promotes good or bad memories, which inspire a good or bad mood, which inclines us toward good or bad behavior. We needn't even be consciously aware of a pleasant or unpleasant environmental stimulus for it to shape our states." One situation in the novel depends on a reader's understanding of this concept in order to make sense of Laidlaw's behavior. While the farm brings him the feelings of peace and security he experienced as a boy, the forest at night resembles the landscape where he experienced guerrilla warfare in Vietnam. The sight of a doe's crudely hacked-up carcass calls up "an acutely uncomfortable sensation which he seemed unable to control" (97). After Laidlaw finds this evidence of a deer poacher on his property, he stalks and knifes the man much as he would have an enemy soldier in Vietnam. By including such a scene, Bell suggests that the environmental particulars of a place can, in Gallagher's words, "work their way into the nervous system" and "incline us toward knee-jerk reactions." Bell weds Laidlaw's respect for animal life, a philosophy he learned when growing up in the country, with the ability to kill human beings that was required of soldiers by their experience in the Vietnam War, and he ties both to what Barker would call "psychological ecology."[8]

8. Richard Gray, *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 142; Michael O'Brien, "A Heterodox Note on the Southern Renaissance," in *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 157–78; Madison Smartt Bell, "A Stubborn Sense of Place," *Harper's* 273. (August 1986): 36; Winifred Gallagher, *The Power of Place* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 127–28, 132. Gallagher summarizes Barker's theories and those of other psychologists on pp. 127–38.

While Bell is interested in his characters' emotional and psychological responses to their environment, he is equally interested in their moral and ethical connection to the land. He told a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution* that after listening to a smooth-talking Ku Klux Klansman on a radio show and hearing of the arrest of a friend who participated in an anti-Klan demonstration, he was so angry that he began a novel set in the South not just to denounce the Klan but to reclaim the South as a place for whites who were not racist: "I especially wanted to deny their pretense of representing me or the great majority of other white Southerners—rural or urban, rich or poor—for whom they do not speak and never have." Bell thinks that our society's persistence in thinking of racism as confined to the South not only results in stereotyping the region but also in ignoring the national scope of racism, a truth confirmed for him by living most of his "adult life in urban slums outside the South."[9]

Thus Madison Smartt Bell set out to tell a more complex story of white southerners and race relations as well as of southern agrarianism. Both of his protagonists are emotionally scarred by the war, but Laidlaw's task of reentering southern society is easier than Redmon's because he is white and because his father owned property. Although fire has destroyed the farmhouse, Laidlaw's land, outbuildings, and a tenant house remain for him to use as he sees fit. In contrast, Redmon's family owned no property but lived in the tenant house on the Laidlaws' farm. As a result, Redmon cannot return to his "home" or make money from the land his father, Wat, farmed. In returning to the rural area of his childhood, Redmon can only become a wage laborer or a real-estate agent. He chooses the white-collar job, only to be betrayed by his white colleagues, including Goodbuddy. They implicate him in a fraudulent land scheme, for which only Redmon serves time in jail and after which he can find only blue-collar work.

Thus it is the inequitable pattern of land ownership based on the plantation past as much as contemporary race relations that puts Redmon in his place when he returns home to the South.[10] The economic difference in Laidlaw's and Redmon's relationship to the same piece of land makes

9. Don O'Briant, "Anger at Klan Fuels New Novel," *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 June 1989, B1.

10. Laidlaw suggests that significant landownership would help poor whites as well as blacks. He attributes some of their bitterness to an inability to fall back on subsistence farming should they need to, as well as to the consumerism promulgated on television (285).

friendship back in the States more difficult than their comradeship in Vietnam. Because Laidlaw's father owned this small farm, Laidlaw can fall back on subsistence farming if the music career he hopes for does not earn him a living. In contrast, Redmon feels "stuck," "in a corner" at his dead-end warehouse job (390). In a passionate exchange in Book IV, Redmon reminds Laidlaw that his father, Wat, lived and worked on this land before Laidlaw's father bought it: "You all didn't do anything but buy it. And then you put him off it in the end" (378). This view is similar to the one Ernest Gaines advances in *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), where he suggests that although his old men have not owned the Marshall plantation, they have had a more intimate relationship with the land than the Marshalls have, because they have tilled the soil. For the first time in his life, Laidlaw understands the full power and privilege of his whiteness. He immediately agrees with Redmon's point and generously, if impulsively, offers him half of the property, saying, "I'd do it for justice" (379). Laidlaw has already been thinking of the tenant house he now lives in as belonging to the Redmons. When Redmon first asks him where he is living, Laidlaw answers, "In you all's old house" (258). Laidlaw's guilt about the complexity of whites possessing southern land that has been farmed by blacks and is now threatened by developers takes him in a different direction from Faulkner's Ike McCaslin in "The Bear."

Determined never to repeat the sins of his grandfather, Ike tries to distance himself from his grandfather's treatment of slaves by renouncing his inherited land and by fulfilling his grandfather's will and paying off the mulatto offspring from his grandfather's union with a slave. But Ike never acknowledges his kinship to his mixed-race cousins or considers giving them any of the land, which he deeds to his white cousin McCaslin Edmonds.[11] Thus Ike foregoes any involvement in how his family's land is used, even as he bemoans the loss of southern woodland to logging companies. Unlike Ike, Laidlaw protects his farm from development and desperately wants an equal relationship with black people and a true friendship with Redmon. Laidlaw tries not to escape but to correct the sins of his southern fathers. However, the question of how he and Redmon will co-own the farm becomes a conflict that the two men never re-

11. In "Delta Autumn," Faulkner exposes the limitations of Ike's renunciation by having him repeat his grandfather's racism when confronted with the mulatto mistress and child of McCaslin's son Roth Edmonds. Furthermore, Roth's ignorance of his ancestor's shadow family has resulted in a version of his grandfather's sin of incest, because the mulatto woman, unbeknownst to him, is his own cousin.

solve. Laidlaw wants a joint ownership that would follow the agrarian philosophy of his father. Redmon pronounces such a deal in which Laidlaw calls the shots just as paternalistic as the one his father was engaged in with Laidlaw's father. But Bell is clearly on the side of Laidlaw as far as appropriate use of the land.[12] He depicts the half-built tract homes of the failed development scheme that landed Redmon in jail as a blight on the landscape. Bell even has Redmon, who admits he was "all for it at the time" (360), wish the land "back the way it was before" (154).

The novel includes an unexpected chapter from Wat Redmon's perspective, which Bell uses not only to emphasize Wat's kinship to the land but to suggest that the land is as much Redmon's birthright as Laidlaw's own. This dreamlike sequence is printed in italics and written in the beautifully lyrical style that Bell takes up throughout the novel when he is describing the landscape, but especially when he is representing the reciprocal relationship of a person in tune with nature's rhythms. In this respect, Bell is very much like the earlier generation of southern Agrarians, who wrote, as Bell said in an interview, about "the culture of small farms" and who were concerned "about the destruction of the natural rhythms of life in connection to the land."[13] Wat's animistic communion with the snake and the groundhog recall Ike McCaslin's first encounter with the buck in "The Old People" and later with Old Ben in "The Bear."

In *Soldier's Joy,* Bell harks back to his own southern agrarian roots, both emotionally and intellectually, but he goes beyond his Agrarian predecessors' preoccupation with the machine invading the southern garden by acknowledging the evil of the prejudice and discrimination that made that garden grow. At the same time that Bell would like to get back to agrarian relationships to the land, he knows they can never be the same as they were in his parents' day—a time when black labor was cheap and white men depended on and exploited black men like Wat. Because his earliest attempts to write about the rural South had been "dry and derivative," Bell says that he wrote about the urban North using "applications of the old vision to new subject matter."[14] But in *Soldier's Joy,* Bell, like Laidlaw in his relationship with Redmon, "wanted to make up something new" (310), and indeed he almost succeeds in creating a new vision with old agrarian subject matter. In the middle of the novel, when Redmon and Laidlaw spend their first companionable night together in Laid-

12. See Weaks, "An Interview," especially 5–10.
13. Ibid., 5, 18.
14. Bell, "A Stubborn Sense of Place," 37, 38.

law's cabin, which is the tenant house that Redmon grew up in, readers experience great expectations that the two men will succeed in creating "something new" on this land. As the sunlight streams down the next morning from "deep untrammeled blue sky," Bell writes that Redmon looks "at home there in the daylight" (304). This day that Laidlaw and Redmon spend together close to nature and to each other is Edenic.

But the genre Bell has chosen for *Soldier's Joy* is psychological realism, not pastoral idealism. The Klan targets Laidlaw as soon as he initiates a friendship with Redmon, and the Klan tracks the activities of Brother Jacob, who, in the style of an evangelical preacher, advocates interracial friendships in open meetings throughout the South. At this point in the novel, Bell marries the Agrarians' wishful thinking to Walker Percy's apocalyptic vision, and the result is a violent ending, which I have discussed elsewhere.[15] Here I am most interested in the agrarian ending Bell teased readers with, but did not choose. In discussing the idealistic approach that New Age cults take to the possibility of global destruction in "An Essay Introducing His Work," Bell could have been discussing his difficulty in writing *Soldier's Joy*: "The problem for New Age prophets and believers is to weave a plausible relationship between this optimism and the real, actual threat of the fairly imminent end to human life on earth." The violent ending of *Soldier's Joy* hints at another, happier outcome. Hit with submachine-gun fire in the chest during a shootout with the Ku Klux Klan, Laidlaw is certain he is going to die, but Redmon refuses to give in to his pessimism. He wills him to live with a tempting reminder of the offer Laidlaw has made to share the land: "Hey, we still got a house to build. Are you taking back all you said?" (465). This remark comes as a bit of a surprise to readers because the two men have never resolved their differences about joint land-ownership. Indeed, the last time the subject comes up, it does not seem as if Redmon is interested in Laidlaw's gift unless Laidlaw will give him full rights to half of the property (391), and Laidlaw is reluctant to do so because as long as he retains some control of the land, he can control how it will be used. Most important, he does not want Redmon to sell farmland and woodland to Goodbuddy "to put a mess of those little square houses on" (391). For a few brief moments, Bell tantalizes his readers with the possibility of a

15. See Suzanne W. Jones, "Refighting Old Wars: Race Relations and Masculine Conventions in Fiction by Larry Brown and Madison Smartt Bell," in *The Present State of Mind: Southern Identity in the 1990s*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 107–20.

happy ending, southern agrarian style—but racially integrated as befits the contemporary South. In many ways, Bell's narrative technique—with its lyrical descriptions of the land, its dialogic working-through of racial misunderstandings between Laidlaw and Redmon, its two main characters providing readers with both black and white perspectives, and its psychological realism in the first four books—does not seem to add up to the sensational shootout with the Klan in Book V, although Bell certainly prepares his readers for his use of violence.[16]

Perhaps Bell saw interracial agrarianism as an "escapist fantasy" equal to the "New Age menu of magical solutions" he disparages. Perhaps this ending is Bell's realistic analysis of the older southern Agrarians' romantic longings to turn back the clock. Whatever the cause, Bell makes Laidlaw more interested in music than in farming, which is unrelenting in its demands, and gives his protagonist Andrew Lytle's belief that one cannot be a good artist and a good farmer at the same time. The more involved Laidlaw becomes with his music, the more he neglects his land. Yet the possibility of a happier ending to this novel cannot be dismissed so easily, for Bell has argued that "what maybe all my characters have always been after in all my books, is a visionary solution to the fatal problem which our collective consciousness is virtually unable to acknowledge." Bell glimpses a new vision of the rural South, which involves an animistic approach to life, if not an agrarian one.[17] But he cannot quite solve the old problem of how both blacks and whites can possess the same land or cultivate a harmonious relationship with nature unless they are farmers, nor can he imagine how such an interracial friendship is sustainable in a place where hate still lurks.

Ellen Douglas tackles the same problems as Madison Smartt Bell but works out different fictional solutions in *The Rock Cried Out*, which is set in rural Mississippi.[18] Like Bell, Douglas grew up in the South, but

16. Bell, "An Essay Introducing His Work," 8; Jones, "Refighting Old Wars."

17. Bell, "An Essay Introducing His Work," 8, 13. Bell's comments on this visionary solution are on p. 13.

18. See John Griffin Jones, "Interview with Ellen Douglas," *Mississippi Writers Talking, Volume II* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 47–73. In writing *The Rock Cried Out* (1979; rprt., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), Douglas has said that she was struggling with how best to present "the sensibility of young people of her children's generation," which is Madison Smartt Bell's generation: "When I decided to do that, I then had to decide where to put them, and it occurred to me that the setting in rural south Mississippi would be extraordinarily fruitful in terms of producing the kinds of circumstances that I could use in making that exploration, particularly because that part of the country was violently involved in the civil rights movement. I also knew the isolated, rural world I wanted to use; I was at home there. I knew the kind of people I would use,

unlike him she has lived there all of her life, except for a very brief interlude in New York City. The rural area outside of her fictional Homochitto roughly corresponds to her own family farm near Natchez, property that she and her siblings own jointly, just as the McLaurin siblings own Chickasaw in *The Rock Cried Out*. Like Bell, Douglas seeks to intervene in the stereotypical definitions of the South and to revise old stories, but her novel is more self-consciously autoethnographic.[19] Her implied readers are both native southerners and outsiders to the South. To address this dual audience, she chooses a first-person narrator in his late twenties, a liberal white insider who has lived outside the South. In 1978, Alan McLaurin writes about his experiences in 1971, when he left college in Boston to move home to rural Mississippi for an extended vacation, only to decide to stay. His account is punctuated with comments addressed to naïve outsiders: "Winter in Homochitto County might sound to a man from Boston as if it would be pleasant; but south Mississippi is not Florida" (9). When his college girlfriend from Ohio visits him, Alan has many opportunities to comment on the stereotypical stories that outsiders tell about the South and to expose the generic lens through which they see all southerners. At the same time, the retrospective narrative technique allows Douglas to address insiders—by underlining how much Alan needed to learn about himself, his family, and his community, and by emphasizing how ill-suited Faulkner's approach is for the story that Alan, and she, must tell.

Douglas has said that on first reading Faulkner's fiction, she felt "the joyous sensation of *coming home.*" Not only was Faulkner writing about a place and people she knew, but he was obsessed with moral issues that caught her attention: "the temptation to violence, the nature of heroism, the indissoluble marriage of love and hate between white and black, the pernicious nature of respectability, the obligations of the individual to society—and everything laid out in that rolling, hypnotic, irresistible language." Later, as an adult, her response to his fiction changed: "I began to feel, not drawn to, but repelled by the hypnotically repetitive, overblown, latinate language. . . . And the sentimentality, the romanticism of

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both the young white people and the black families" (68). Quotations from *The Rock Cried Out* will be cited parenthetically in the text.

19. Here I am using Mary Louise Pratt's definition in "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1991), 33–40: "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (35).

my adolescence was being tempered, radically altered by the beginnings of maturity. I read with impatience and irritation as well as with pleasure and awe *Go Down, Moses* and *The Hamlet*."[20]

In *The Rock Cried Out*, Douglas gives Alan her own criticisms of Faulkner, and she rewrites Ike McCaslin's story—in both form and content. As if demonstrating her desire to free the southern landscape itself from the powerful epithets attached to the region, she foregoes Faulkner's elaborately figurative descriptions of place—"verbal constructs," as Richard Gray calls them, which emphasize that place is "a product of human creativity." By the time Ike inherits his father's land, he can see it only in terms of the injustice that occurred there, a fact so powerful that it overwhelms his ability to see the land in any other way. Part IV of "The Bear" begins with Ike telling his cousin McCaslin Edmonds of his decision to relinquish his tainted inheritance: "then he was twenty-one. He could say it, himself and his cousin juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been his heritage, the land which Old Carothers McCaslin his grandfather had bought with white man's money from the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it and in their sweat scratched the surface of it." While Douglas, like Faulkner, is quick to let readers know of the history that has been played out on the Mississippi landscape, she describes southwestern Mississippi's specific geological formations in an attempt to allow the landscape to reassert itself—not to suggest that one's sense of the landscape is ever unmediated but to unburden it of Faulkner's mythic figuration: "We had been whirling along the winding two-lane black-topped road deep between sheer loess bluffs, traveling as fast as the car would take the curves; and now we were climbing toward Chickasaw Ridge, narrow backbone of the hills, where straggling bands of Chickasaw Indians had made their camps before they crossed the river on the way westward, after the Treaty of Pontotoc Creek robbed them of their lands" (7).

Rather than describe a generalized setting with vegetation ubiquitous to southern literature (crepe myrtle, magnolias, wisteria), Douglas places the reader in a very specific southern place near Natchez (her Homo-

20. Ellen Douglas, "Faulkner in Time," in *"A Cosmos of My Own": Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 289, 290, 295–96.

chitto) and takes care to identify flora and fauna native to that locale. Take for example this passage, where she describes the sensory experience of Alan's winter homecoming: "the pervasive smell, not of boiling syrup and automobile exhaust fumes, but of cedar and pine; of smilax and jasmine twisting dark green up into the bare dogwood and walnut and cherry trees; of oaks under shawls of gray moss that turn out when you look closely to be throbbing with pale green life; of the winter silence, above all, broken only by the voices of birds that stay with us all year: the towhee, the crow, the mourning goatsucker" (10). With such specific localization, Douglas employs description as many of the earliest novelists did, to distinguish an individual place from the mythic landscapes used in epic forms. In so doing, she resists her readers' inclinations to mentally conjure a generic southern place without registering the words that make it a very specific geographic locale. When discussing the importance of "place" in her fiction, Douglas underlines this distinction by saying, "*place*, in the sense of the specific, is absolutely essential. . . . I don't think *regionalism* is important."[21]

The way Douglas depicts Alan's visceral feelings about his homeplace is interesting. Rather than attribute human feelings to nature, Alan expresses his intense emotions in terms of the natural world. For example, when he hears of his Aunt Lelia's affair with the McLaurins' black tenant Sam Daniels, "it was as if the house and everybody and everything in it shifted along a fault" (124). As Alan learns these new facts about his family and speculates about how they have shaped and will shape him, he says, "I feel mostly wonder at how our lives move, by twists and turns, as a creek moves, rippling in its bed, doubling around and shaping itself against the contours of rock and silt and fallen log, eating out a bank and appearing one day, after a rainstorm, flowing down a ravine that yesterday was half a mile from its course" (124). Douglas seems to suggest that nature can provide analogies that help people know themselves.

Douglas's mode of describing Alan's feelings underlines the fact that he has been more sensitive to the beauty of the natural world than to the feelings of other human beings, a situation that causes problems in his relationship with his girlfriend, Miriam. But this technique also reminds

21. Gray, *Writing the South,* 177; William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (1942; rprt., New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 243; D. S. Bland, "Endangering the Readers' Neck: Background Description in the Novel," in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: Free Press, 1967), 316, 326; Jerry Speir, "Of Novels and the Novelist: An Interview with Ellen Douglas," *University of Mississippi Studies in English* 5 (1984–87): 236.

readers that although our experience of the natural world is mediated by our cultural perceptions, nature is not passive in the relationship. In *The Rock Cried Out*, the forces of nature take an active role in the working-out of the plot, reminding readers of nature's power and of the need for careful management of land and natural resources, but also that place is not just myth but also reality. These are matters that Alan has been oblivious of while he soothes his soul in the bosom of nature and rebuilds one of the tenant houses for his rural retreat. Alan barely pays attention when his Uncle Lester remarks that the dam is dangerously positioned above the farmhouse and that too much rain could cause a disaster. Alan thinks of his Uncle Lester, who works at J. C. Penney's, as incapable of appreciating nature's beauty and the farm's rejuvenating powers. What he finds out is that in judging Lester's practical point of view as beneath his own aesthetic and spiritual one, Alan has misjudged his own relationship to the land.

Near the end of the novel, Douglas includes just the sort of rainstorm Lester predicted. Sam and Lelia are the first to discover that Chickasaw and the community below are threatened by the weakening earthen dam that holds back the lake's now-overflowing waters. Preoccupied as usual with personal matters, Alan has just learned that his childhood friend Dallas Boykin is indirectly responsible for his adored cousin Phoebe's death, and Alan has followed Dallas to the lake to kill him in retribution, even though he knows Phoebe's death was an accident. In the midst of their fight, it is Dallas, not Alan, who helps avert disaster at the dam. Alan is too preoccupied with his own anger and grief to think about the welfare of the community. Dallas's confession makes the familiar ground of family history shift metaphorically beneath Alan's feet, but in this scene the "shift" (287) is literal as well,[22] thereby giving the storm both symbolic and thematic power. For as with most natural disasters, the storm causes a disparate group of contentious people to work together because they have an abiding love of the land and a passionate desire to save Chickasaw farm. The storm moves Alan beyond his self-centered approach to life. Thinking he has killed Dallas, he repents this action, and he risks his own life to save Dallas's body from being swept away. In saving the body, he saves Dallas's life and outgrows both his solipsism and his idealism. A conscientious objector in the Vietnam War, Alan has thought himself incapable of killing a fellow human. That night he learns the lesson Faulkner's Ike never learned, that no one is "pure" (295).

22. Lelia too feels that the earth "quaked underfoot" in the storm (286).

But this novel is not simply a sentimental story about how love of a place can bring people of different races and classes together. While Douglas is incredibly sensitive to the power of place, she also knows the power of fiction to shape perceptions of place and region,[23] and she uses Alan's college girlfriend Miriam to demonstrate this power. Although Miriam has never been in the Deep South until she visits Alan, she has seen plenty of moss-draped live oaks in the movies. However, she has difficulty processing the winter landscape with its unexpected "bare tangled vines" and "limp and frost-blackened" wood ferns: "What is this, anyhow, Alan? Could be the set for a bad movie. Faulkner? Tennessee Williams?" (91). Because movie images have etched long hot southern summers in her brain, Miriam cannot see what Alan sees—the stark beauty of the Mississippi countryside in winter. Because of her limited knowledge of the place, she misses the awesome sight of a soaring red-tailed hawk. Douglas shows the difficulty of dislodging outsiders' preconceptions, of adding unfamiliar images to the familiar ones. Even as Miriam imagines making a film of her own—shooting the southern winter vegetation, "stark, not leafy," getting "a shot of the house from the gate," and panning around "to the rusty tractor parts and falling-down sheds and back to the front porch"—she is unable to hold on to the sights she sees right in front of her. She concludes her imagined winter filming by unconsciously reverting to an image of the South fixed in eternal summer: Alan's aunt lazing "in a hammock with a box of chocolates" (92).

At times, Miriam knows that she is using clichés. For example, she playfully parodies a southern-belle accent and air when she admits to Alan, "I learned just about evahthin' I know at the movies" (92). But when interacting with the new people she meets, Miriam relies on clichés of "southernness" and stereotypes of southerners. She liberally peppers her speech with "y'all," unaware that the colloquialism is not used to refer to one person. She relates to southern women by talking about cooking and crocheting, never imagining, as Alan points out, that "most of the ones I know, like men, talk about sex and money and politics and movies and television and books and vice and crime and drugs and the vagaries of human nature and tragedies of human fate" (106). Through Miriam, Douglas critiques the very "obsession with idiom and idiosyncrasy" that historian James Cobb argues "threatens to turn the South of popular perception into caricature."[24]

23. Ellen Douglas, "Provincialism in Literature," *New Republic* 173 (5 and 12 July 1975): 23–25.

24. Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture,* 142.

Perhaps most significantly, Miriam predictably simplifies the earlier unhappy outcome of Sam and Lelia's interracial love affair by reducing the causes to race alone, missing the very human emotions of jealousy and lust and revenge and love of place. Douglas uses Miriam's reductive language to construct a parodic representation of the outsider's perception of southerners' behavior. As Alan's Aunt Lelia histrionically lists what she had been willing to relinquish for her black lover, Sam—"friends, family, my country"—and bemoans Sam's refusal to leave Chickasaw with her, Miriam interrupts with "Weren't you, no matter what happened, an enemy? I mean, *white*? Wouldn't that enter into it?" (140). As readers get to know Sam, we see that the motivations for his refusal to leave are neither as simple as Miriam thinks (white racism) nor as simple as Lelia thinks (insatiable male sexual desire) nor as simple as Alan thinks (love of Chickasaw farm). Rather, the Sam that Douglas slowly reveals is a complex man, motivated by many strong feelings. Paradoxically, he is emotionally tied to the rural landscape of a region that has discriminated against him; ironically, he is a tenant farmer on the very land that his white lover's family owns.

It would be easy to dismiss Sam's emotional ties to the land as the product of his lack of training to do anything else but farm. However, Douglas uses another African American character with more options as a reminder that the temperament and personality traits that draw people to rural areas cross racial, class, and gender lines.[25] Calhoun Levitt, a man of mixed race, was educated in the North but chose to return South to his family's farm. Douglas makes certain she does not recreate that old dichotomy coupling South with rural and North with urban. A white union organizer tells Levitt that he too is burned out on cities, but they are southern cities—Nashville, Miami, and New Orleans.[26] Repeatedly,

25. See Winifred Gallagher's summary of recent scientific research into human temperament in chapter 6, "Different People, Different Worlds" of *The Power of Place*. These scientists regard "behavior as the product of an individual's effort to match his physiological and psychological makeup with settings that can help him maintain an optimum level of arousal" (161).

26. Here I differ from John L. Grigsby in "The Agrarians and Ellen Douglas's *The Rock Cried Out* and *Can't Quit You, Baby*: Extending the Tradition While Expanding the Canon," *Southern Quarterly* 34, no. (Fall 1995): 41–48, who sees Douglas as employing the conventional opposition between "industrial-urbanized North and Agrarian-rural South" (42). Although he points out some of her differences from the Agrarians, his purpose is to show the "centrality" of their concerns in her work (41). As a result, I think he sometimes over-reads the connections.

Douglas's characters, like Madison Smartt Bell's, declare their emotional responses to places. Alan says, "I had begun to feel a pull—like gravity, maybe, whatever it is that makes one sure . . . that one's own part of [the world] is a necessary spiritual terrain, as much one's own as a cast in the eye—that drew me southward again" (57).

Thus Alan sees Miriam not only as an outsider to the South but as a person who is detached from place. He contrasts her "uprooted life," moving from one college town to another, with his own attachment to Chickasaw farm, which "holds his past and considerable of the past of his parents and grandparents, and even his great-grandparents, the landscape of his nightmares and of all those dreams so sweet" (127). He conceives of the difference in their relationship to place as a dichotomy between place as ideology and politics, and place as land and people. For example, to Miriam the South is the Klan, George Wallace, the Citizens' Council, *Brown v. Board of Education;* to him, the South is Chickasaw, his relatives, and the black tenants Sam and Noah with whom he hunts and fishes. Like Ike McCaslin, Alan uses the land for his pleasure and spiritual rejuvenation; like Ike McCaslin, Alan has as mentor a mixed-race man of the earth named Sam, who owns a mongrel dog and who has tutored Alan in his reverent relationship with the land.

Also like Ike McCaslin, Alan is naïve. Although he is not unaware of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, he remembers the sixties as a time of bad news on television, a period during his adolescence when he was obsessed with his beautiful cousin Phoebe. As an adult, he harbors no guilt about prejudice against blacks because he is protected by the cloak of his parents' liberalism—although in the sixties it made him an outsider in his community. But while *The Rock Cried Out* begins as a novel of education about the South for outsiders and people detached from the land, like Miriam, it ends as a novel of education for insiders like Alan, who thinks he knows his family and Chickasaw farm like the back of his hand. The novel opens with broad hints of what Douglas sees is Alan's problem in thinking about place—the idea that he can divorce geographical location from "moral climate."[27] Fleeing Boston, factory work, and his girlfriend Miriam to romance nature and create poetry in solitude at Chickasaw, he runs smack into the disconcerting effects of southern race relations when black college students and their graduate instructor pick him up as he is hitchhiking the last leg home. A young black woman in a passing car throws a Coke bottle that shatters against

27. Speir, "Of Novels and the Novelist," 236.

the sign near him. When the driver comes back to give Alan a ride, he assures him that what looked like a racial incident was a coincidence, but just as Alan gets out of the car, the young woman says she meant to hit him. Alan's response to this ambiguous encounter, "This was not what I had meant my arrival to be like, not at all" (7), shows the extent to which in Boston he has made Chickasaw into a pastoral ideal, just as another generation of southern Agrarians did before him. Much like Bell's Thomas Laidlaw, Alan looks to nature for redemptive recovery and to rural solitude for creative inspiration. What Douglas gives him is "the empty-bed blues" (181), bad lyric poetry about welding a bush hog, and some surprising encounters with his neighbors. Alan's attempt to interpret the rural landscape fails him as surely as Miriam's because both perceive the place through interpretive lenses that precede their present experience there and neither knows all of the local stories, or even the whole truth of familiar stories.

Before Alan can write successfully about his homeplace, Douglas shows that he must open himself up to the repressed stories that reside there. Like Ike McCaslin, Alan learns of interracial sexual relations within his family, but with an important twist. His Aunt Lelia's secret is the South's most repressed story and most tabooed relationship—one of mutual desire and illicit sex between a white woman and a black man. As a device to unearth other repressed southern stories, Douglas has Alan and his childhood friend Lee Boykin, a hippie photographer, team up to write about the South—human-interest stories about old times for the popular magazine *Southern Life* and stories about the Civil Rights movement and the pulpwood cutters' union for the more progressive *New York Times* and *The Speckled Bird*.[28] Alan, Lee, and Miriam collect oral history from Sam's father, Noah Daniels, and Calhoun Levitt.

Noah's stories reveal a narrative that southern liberals sometimes repress, the fact that they or their families may be implicated in the racism that produced inequitable land distribution in the South. One definition of *agrarian* is "a person who favors equitable distribution of land,"[29] which is not a definition associated with the Nashville Agrarians. Nor is it a concept that Ike McCaslin thinks of when he gives his family land to

28. The title *Southern Life* is surely either Lee's failure to remember the title of *Southern Living* or Douglas's veiled reference to that lifestyle magazine, and *The Speckled Bird* is probably a reference to the *Great Speckled Bird*, an Atlanta underground newspaper of the 1960s and 1970s.

29. *American Heritage Dictionary.*

McCaslin Edmonds instead of distributing it equally among all his relatives, both black and white. From Noah, Alan learns that his great-uncle Dennison never gave Noah the oil well he promised him as payment for Noah's advice about where to drill on Chickasaw farm. Alan also learns that this betrayal was one in a string that stretched back to Alan's great-grandfather, who never deeded Noah's father the promised sixty acres of Chickasaw land that he had allowed him to build a house on and farm rent-free. This breach of trust is reminiscent of the black freedmen's expectations during southern Reconstruction that they would receive forty acres and a mule.[30] Thus Alan learns that his family, which he takes such pride in thinking has a close relationship to the Daniels family, has violated their trust repeatedly. Later, insult is added to injury when Alan's Uncle Lester discloses that Lelia contracted with the U.S. Navy to set up the satellite-tracking station on a portion of the family farm as revenge for Sam having jilted her. Alan had always placed the blame for this high-tech use of the land on his boring, bourgeois Uncle Lester. Leasing land to the government has been financially beneficial to the McLaurins but devastating to the Danielses, who had used that acreage to graze their cattle. Given this history between the black and white families of Chickasaw, it is no wonder that, for the Daniels family, trusting the McLaurins is no easy matter. Noah sets Alan straight when Alan upbraids him for not telling the whole truth earlier and for trying to making him feel guilty now: " 'You're still thinking only about yourself, ain't you, son?' Noah said. 'Stop and consider. When you come down here this winter, what I actually *know* about you—now you're a man? If you expect somebody to talk to you, you got to tell them who you is. Teach 'em to trust you. All you ever done with me was throw me a bone every now and then—show me off to your girl friend' " (298).

The oral history that Alan, Lee, and Miriam collect from Calhoun Levitt contains similar suppressed truths about race relations and land ownership in the South. Both Calhoun's grandparents and his parents were interracial couples who could not live together openly; his grandparents' story is one of publicly segregated housing and a privately integrated home. His white grandfather willed Calhoun's mother three hundred acres of land, which Calhoun now farms. He provides an inter-

30. This proposal was made by Congressman Thaddeus Stevens. He wanted to seize land owned by slaveholders and redistribute it to former slaves, but Congress never acted on his belief that the vote was not enough to uplift southern blacks. After he died in 1868, the idea was no longer discussed.

esting contrast both to Douglas's Noah and Sam Daniels and to Bell's Rodney Redmon. The fact that Calhoun owns land gives him more choices than Noah, Sam, or Redmon; landownership allowed Calhoun to leave the cold northern city he hated and to make ends meet during the Depression. But the bulk of Calhoun's story concerns another buried southern tale about a liberal southern white union organizer who learned his socialism and his racial tolerance at Vanderbilt Divinity School. With this story, Douglas excavates the small but not insignificant southern liberal movement in the 1930s.[31] This story puts Lee in the same position that Noah's story puts Alan, because it leads to the revelation that Lee's father was a Klan member who took Lee to meetings, a memory Lee has repressed. Unlike Alan, Lee reacts to the incriminating facts about his father's racism by pronouncing Calhoun's "truth about Homochitto County" (198) a "lie" (229) and then abandoning the oral history project and fleeing to New Orleans. Lee's inability to admit to participating in his society's evils leads to his failure to do the work necessary to correct them.

Alan's assessment of their oral history project is that "none of these stories lent themselves to the needs of *The New York Times*—or *The Speckled Bird.* I doubt they would have borne out anybody's theories—economic, political, moral—or mythological" (145). But their very failure to meet outsiders' expectations about Mississippi is precisely Douglas's point for including these stories in her novel. If audience expectations determine publication, how will the repressed southern stories get told? Who will publish them? How to get a truthful story and how to hear it accurately are issues embedded in the way Douglas sets up these chapters on storytellers and listeners. Lee attempts to elicit answers from the storytellers by asking leading questions, but both Noah and Calhoun resist the pattern that Lee tries to impose on their narratives. As Calhoun says, "The problem is, my answers may not be the answers to your questions. . . . But that's their problem, I said to myself. Maybe they can think up some questions to fit my answers" (198). Unlike Lee, Alan opens himself up to the possibility that Noah's and Calhoun's stories are true. In seeking further verification from many sources, Alan's understanding of both family and local history changes. Douglas suggests that these new

31. One example is Herman C. Nixon, a leader in the Southern Conference on Human Welfare, whose writings emphasized class conflict and pointed to how southern landowners and businessmen exploited both poor whites and poor blacks. See Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

stories make his sense of place more complex because the history of southern people and their relationship to the land is more integrated than southerners themselves know, particularly white southerners. The suppressed stories reveal the false dichotomy between Miriam's notion of place as ideology and politics, and Alan's of place as land and people. Interestingly, they drive Alan to give up pastoral poetry and journalism in favor of modernist fiction, a better literary vehicle for bringing all these stories into the open and all the perspectives into dialogue.

Like Ike McCaslin, Alan eventually takes up a simple trade to support his writing, but it is welding, not carpentry work; Alan does not fancy himself a Christ figure the way Ike does. In "The Bear," Ike's wife begs him to keep his land; in *The Rock Cried Out,* Alan's girlfriend Miriam begs him to do the opposite—to give up his tainted land and go to New Orleans with her and Lee. Unlike Ike, Alan does not put his ideals above his humanity. He promises to leave the farm if Miriam wants to be with him and if she will end a sexual relationship she has begun with Lee, but he will not promise to renounce his portion of his beloved land for Miriam, although he does promise to give Noah and Sam the oil wells that are their due. In vowing to hold on to his share of the family farm—even though Chickasaw is planted in trees and derricks, not cultivated in traditional crops—Alan is vowing to preserve the rural landscape in a way that Ike did not when he relinquished his property to McCaslin Edmonds. Like Bell's Laidlaw, Alan learns from the sins and mistakes of his fathers; in "Delta Autumn," Ike repeats their sins because he tries to escape the moral responsibility of the past. For Bell and Douglas, unlike Faulkner, the southern landowner's crime is not so much possession of the land as it is inequitable possession. At the end of *The Rock Cried Out*, Alan criticizes Faulkner as romantic: "It is only in certain kinds of stories that you can pull off the kind of sacrifice Faulkner used in *The Bear* when he had Ike McCaslin give away his tainted inheritance and become a humble carpenter" (295). Another of Alan's closing remarks reveals how naïve Douglas thinks some of the southern Agrarians were in creating such a sharp dichotomy between agriculture and industrialism: "So I've joined the human race in its despoliation of the earth. Because, although the pulpwood trucks I work on belong mostly to poor men, ultimately, like them, I'm working for the International Paper Company and the Georgia Pacific. Or, if I'm in the oil fields, for Exxon and Cities Service" (295). In talking about this passage in an interview, Douglas said, "Until you can do without gas and paper, you can't present yourself to yourself as a person who is so pure that he is not involved in these

things."[32] Maybe a good writer cannot be a good subsistence farmer, as Bell's Laidlaw determined once and for all, but Douglas shows that a writer can be a good tree farmer, which, with a little part-time welding on the side, makes "it possible to spend considerable time writing" (294) and enjoying rural life. Unlike Madison Smartt Bell, Douglas not only allows Alan to stay on the land but to live something of an integrated communal life with Noah and Sam, albeit in separate houses on the farm.

Unlike Faulkner, Douglas moves her characters beyond the South's ignoble past to what she terms "its misunderstood past." As a result, for her characters she creates the possibility that the future can grow out of the past, rather than be overshadowed by it.[33] However, readers do not know whether Alan will ever give Sam and Noah the promised oil wells or talk with his relatives about deeding them the sixty acres they worked so hard to cultivate and preserve. Thus Ellen Douglas, like Madison Smartt Bell, fails to resolve the troubling issue of making restitution for inequitable land distribution in the South. However, both writers acknowledge this problem, which was caused by slavery and continued by racism, and which the United States government did not begin to face until very recently. In 1999, the Department of Agriculture settled a class-action lawsuit brought by black farmers, many of whom were southerners, who were denied government loans and disaster assistance simply because of their race.[34] Given the racially different relationship to

32. Speir, "Of Novels and the Novelist," 247. In "The Enduring Soil," Hamilton C. Horton Jr. argues that the location of factories in the rural South, which have provided much-needed jobs for rural people, has actually "*saved* the family farm" since income from most family farms alone is insufficient. Fifteen Southerners, *Why the South Will Survive* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981) 61–62. Writing almost twenty years later in "Agriculture in the Post–World War II South" (in *The Rural South Since World War II*, ed. E. Douglas Hunt [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998]), Donald Winters agrees that nonagricultural employment has preserved agrarian life for some part-time farmers, but he points out that "farming as a business has, for the most part, undermined farming as a way of life" (26). In 1981, Horton optimistically predicted that "the South may well be the first major region of this world to be industrialized and yet preserve the human dimension" (62). For an analysis of this prediction, see David R. Goldfield, "Urbanization in a Rural Culture: Suburban Cities and Country Cosmopolites," in *The South for New Southerners,* ed. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); and David R. Goldfield, *Promised Land: The South Since 1945* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1987).

33. In "Faulkner in Time," Douglas reiterates Jean-Paul Sartre's point that in Faulkner's metaphysic, "the future does not exist" (298).

34. In Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988; New York: Penguin Books, 1989), Tweet, a poor black woman, loses her small family farm because of white greed and white manipulation of the legal and banking systems. For analysis of how the lives of southern

landownership in the South, it is not surprising that while contemporary white agrarians such as Bell and Douglas are preoccupied with the beauty of southern places, even as they criticize the white privilege that predominates, many southern black agrarians such as Ernest Gaines, Randall Kenan, and Dori Sanders focus primarily on the power that comes from landownership and the problems that still arise based on a legacy of mistrust across the color line.

In *A Gathering of Old Men,* because Ernest Gaines's old men do not own the land they once farmed, they lose a way of life. In contrast, in Randall Kenan's "The Foundations of the Earth," because Miss Maggie does own her own land, she not only has financial independence but the freedom to rebel against the prejudice, homophobia, and religiosity of her black neighbors, even her minister. But continued wariness about trusting white people is a subject of primary importance in agrarian fiction by contemporary African American writers. In Kenan's "Run, Mourner, Run," a black landowner, who is an undeclared homosexual, is blackmailed by a greedy white landowner into selling his land so that he can remain in the closet, thereby protecting his reputation in his conservative rural community. In Dori Sanders's *Clover,* a black peach farmer predicates his dealings with whites on the belief that "a white man never gets enough land or money," a racial generalization that causes unfortunate misunderstandings and that Sanders attempts to undermine. In *Her Own Place,* Sanders represents the past inequities from which such present generalizations arise: Mae Lee Barnes has the money to buy land, but until she finally identifies the one white landowner in her county willing to sell to a black person, she despairs of ever fulfilling her desire to farm, for none of her black neighbors own property.[35]

In *The Rock Cried Out,* Douglas finesses her failure to resolve the ongoing McLaurin/Daniels landownership saga by having Alan resist the storyteller's urge "to tie up loose ends" (303). But if Douglas has no solu-

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rural blacks continue to be shaped by the "legacy" of "slavery, sharecropping, segregation, marginal employment opportunities, and limited educational choices," see Louis E. Swanson et al., "African Americans in Southern Rural Regions: The Importance of Legacy," in the special issue, "Blacks in Rural America," of *Review of Black Political Economy* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 109–24. See also Daniel T. Lichter, "Race, Employment Hardship, and Inequality in the American Nonmetropolitan South," *American Sociological Review* 54 (June 1989): 436–46.

35. Stories by Randall Kenan in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1992); Dori Sanders, *Clover* (1990; New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991), 137; Dori Sanders, *Her Own Place* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1993).

tion to the thorny problem of inequitable land distribution in the South, the conclusion of her novel both shows why liberal southerners can and must go home again and suggests how they should write about the South. Alan reveals that his strategy in writing the novel, which we have just read, has been to tell all: "adding a sentence here, a paragraph there, trying to put in everything, to ask and answer as many questions" as he can (302). Although Alan resists the moralist's urge "to make his point," the ending that he writes—simply stating that he cannot tie up loose ends because "the shape [of his story] is still changing" (303)—reverberates beyond his narrative to become a comment on contemporary southern fiction. Jan Gretlund has proclaimed Madison Jones's characters the "last southern agrarians," and although the fate of Bell's Laidlaw seems to bear him out, Douglas's McLaurins and Danielses suggest that this southern species has not died out yet. However, their stories are changing along with their new relationships to the land and to each other. The enemies of the contemporary southern agrarians are no longer specialization and mechanization but racism and self-deception. Both *Soldier's* Joy and *The Rock Cried Out* enact Wendell Berry's warning that any attempt "to redefine Southernness without resort to geography" in a regional attempt to escape American homogenization is problematic. Berry suggests that such "a regionalism of the mind" creates "a map without a territory, which is to say a map impossible to correct, a map subject to become fantastical and silly like that Southern chivalry-of-the-mind that Mark Twain so properly condemned." Madison Smartt Bell and Ellen Douglas suggest that such "a regionalism of the mind" homogenizes the South and its people.[36]

36. Jan Nordby Gretlund, *Frames of Southern Mind: Reflections on the Stoic, Bi-Racial and Existential South* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 47, 48; Wendell Berry, "Writer and Region," *Hudson Review* 40, no. 1 (spring 1987): 25. The phrase "to redefine Southernness without resort to geography" is quoted by Berry from the *New York Times Book Review* article by Marc K. Stengel, "Modernism on the Mississippi: *The Southern Review* 1935–1985" (24 November 1985, 3). In this article, Stengel reports that during a symposium to honor the *Southern Review*, the participants agreed that definitions of regionalism had been too limiting and that since the material South was disappearing, they should "redefine Southernness without resort to geography." Berry's immediate response is a reminder that the natural world is not subject "to limitless homogenization" (25).