

“THIS FENCED-OFF NARROW SPACE”: AN ANALYSIS OF RACE AND PLACE IN

*MAUD MARTHA, ALL THEY WILL CALL YOU,*

*AND OWLS DON'T HAVE TO MEAN DEATH*

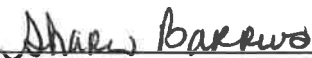
A Thesis

by

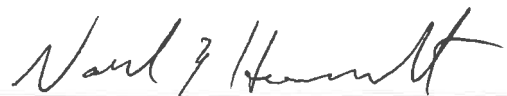
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Summer 2019

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A Thesis  
Presented  
to the Faculty of  
California State University, Chico

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English

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by

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## ABSTRACT

“THIS FENCED-OFF NARROW SPACE”: AN ANALYSIS OF RACE AND PLACE IN  
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Summer 2019

American contemporary and multicultural literature focuses on issues surrounding race. This project analyzes race through differing spaces, places, and environments in three works of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century American literature. Despite their differences in time and place, each novel deals with the restriction or removal of a marginalized group from a space or environment. Because an essential part of one's identity is rooted in their relationship to the various physical environments or spaces of which they are a part, this project asks questions surrounding identity, heritage, and the creation of self. It also looks at the movement of individuals between spaces, focusing on the different ways an individual's identity changes within urban and rural environments.



## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

*I look at the world*

*From awakening eyes in a black face –*

*And this is what I see:*

*This fenced-off narrow space*

*Assigned to me.*

Langston Hughes, “I look at the world”

An essential part of one’s identity is rooted in an individual’s relationship to the various physical environments or spaces of which they are a part. In the above poem titled “I look at the world,” Langston Hughes describes what it is like to be restricted or excluded from spaces based on the color of his skin. He addresses the fact that there isn’t just a denial of access to certain, almost always, white spaces, but a restriction placed on the spaces that people of color are allowed to operate or live within. This restriction is the physical “fencing-off” and “assigning” of urban spaces through racialized housing practices, such as the redlining of Chicago that began during the 1930s and lasted until the 1970s . This issue of forced location or restriction of people of color within specific environments and spaces is addressed throughout American literature. In his next stanza, Hughes describes the oppression people of color face in the urban environment;

*I look then at the silly walls*

*Through dark eyes in a dark face—*

*And this is what I know:*

*That all these walls oppression builds*

*Will have to go!*

Hughes argues that the oppression of color face is built within the physical structure of the urban environment: the space is literally constructed by oppression. He describes a recognition of both this constructed oppression and an understanding that it must go; that it must be confronted and destroyed. Similar to Hughes argument of assigned and constricted spaces, the major research of my project focuses on the experiences of several people of color within various urban and natural spaces from three novels spanning from the 1940s to the 1990s. This project looks at several works of American literature written by authors of color and aims to address the relationship between space and place, dignity, memory, and identity. In framing my project using Hughes' poem, I hope to illuminate the different ways in which these "assigned" and "fenced-off" spaces are dealt with in three diverse works of American literature. While the time and space within each novel differ, each work nevertheless addresses the marginalization and the resistance of people of color from total erasure within these differing environments. This project looks at their movements between spaces and environments despite the restrictions they face brought on by systematic racism and reflects on how this affects their identities. This project highlights several similarities between these three novels, despite their differences in time and place.

The first chapter examines African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks' only novel *Maud Martha*, particularly analyzing the role of dignity in the text's two physical spaces

– the natural environment of Maud Martha’s childhood home and the urban environment of her adulthood. Brooks contrasts dignity within these spaces through the use of both animal and plant metaphors, leading this chapter to two major inquiries – an analysis of Maud Martha’s relationship to dignity within both urban and natural spaces and an analysis of the representation of people of color through animal and plant metaphors. Maud Martha seems to associate the natural environment with more positive experiences, whereas in the various urban spaces she has more negative experiences. Maud Martha’s movement between these two spaces is reflective of a migration narrative. In her book, *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration Narrative*, Farah Jasmine Griffin describes the migration narrative in four moments:

“(1) an event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant’s attempt to negotiate that landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South” (Griffin 3).

Using Griffin’s third moment of the migration narrative – the negotiation of the urban space – I analyze Maud Martha’s occupation of her kitchenette, focusing on her encounters with various animals within that space. *Maud Martha* has other elements of a migration narrative. It begins with Maud Martha in the rural setting of her childhood home and follows her as moves into the tiny kitchenette space with her husband, Paul. This shift away from the original home space into a new, more urban setting is a major theme in all three of the novels in this project.

In thinking of the movement between spaces, my second chapter focuses on Tim Z. Hernandez's documentary novel, *All They Will Call You*, and looks at the metaphorical and physical use of land as it contributes to the creation/recreation of memory. This chapter looks at two major concepts – land and memory – focusing on how the relationship between these two contributes to the narratives/identities of several individuals. This chapter also highlights connections between land and memory and Hernandez's frequent use of formal features, such as the inclusion of scanned images of newspaper clippings and government documents. It analyzes the functions of these formal features in the overall creation of memory within the novel. Hernandez focuses primarily on the rural spaces between the valleys of Mexico and California, leading this project to explore the use of borders or “the line in the dirt” (Hernandez 61). In her multi-genre text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa explores the occupation of both metaphorical and physical connections, or borderlands as she terms it, that make up her own Chicana identity. In his text, Hernandez also explores the change or hybridization of identity between and on differing sides of borders – whether they be geographical or ethnic. Hernandez and Anzaldúa's texts both cross genre borders – playing with form while exploring and questioning the concept of identity. When looking at the memory of the individuals in Hernandez's text, the “line in the dirt” begins to blur between both the geographical spaces of his novel and the identities of the individuals who occupy those spaces. This chapter attempts to tease out the connection between memory/identity and the physical soil that exists on all sides of these borders.

The final chapter of this project analyzes the relationship between memory and the physical environment. Focusing on the historical trauma of Native American removal

and their subsequent reclaiming of space, Chip Livingston's two-spirit novel *Owls Don't Have to Mean Death* deals with memory, obligation to tradition, and the relationships of each of these to the physical soil/land. This chapter is also divided into two major sections – an analysis of the power of words and names and an analysis of the relationship between land and disease. The section on words and names focuses on the importance of these in informing characters of their identity, especially as it relates to their Native American heritage. The section on land and disease touches on the relationship between the physical spaces of the novel and the main character, Peter Strongbow's, grief and eventual acceptance of loss/death. When analyzing Peter's movement between spaces, I refer back to Griffin's definition of the migration narrative. While the migration narrative is a "dominant form of African-American cultural production from the twentieth century" (Griffin 3), Peter experiences two moments of the migration narrative – an event that propels an action northward and the negotiation of the urban space. Peter's movement within the migration narrative is inverted, with him moving northward at the close of the novel. Griffin claims that part of the third moment is the struggle between holding onto one's past; within the context of African American literature this is the negotiation of and often times complete severing of one's ties to their ancestors, to slavery, and to the south (Griffin 7). Maintaining a connection to his past is a major struggle for Peter as he navigates between the rural and urban spaces of the novel. Similar to Maud Martha's experience within the third moment of the migration narrative, I analyze Peter's experiences within this space through the use of land and animal metaphor.

An overarching theme of this project is an analysis of the lack of physical space for people of marginalized groups. All three of the novels within this project deal with “assigned spaces,” as Hughes calls them. In each section of this project I not only look at the natural environment and urban spaces separately, but also analyze the transitions that take place between the two. Utilizing both Griffin and Anzaldúa’s concepts on navigating between spaces of identify, I hope to illuminate similarities between all three works of American literature despite their differing time periods and physical spaces. As a project that focuses on only multicultural texts, I hope to draw similarities between cultural issues that occur across the board in American literature. The majority of the key terms for this project have already been mentioned; however, to reiterate the focus of this project is on memory, dignity, identity, and the relationship of these to both the natural environment/space and the urban space. The use of land/earth metaphors are prominent in each text, highlighting the importance of the natural environment in the construction of memory/identity. In tying back to Hughes’ poem, all three texts address and explore the spaces “assigned” to their characters with a major focus being the changing of each individual’s identity within and between these spaces.

## CHAPTER II

AN ANALYSIS OF DIGNITY AND SPACE THROUGH ANIMAL AND PLANT  
METAPHOR IN GWENDOLYN BROOKS' *MAUD MARTHA*

In her only novel, *Maud Martha*, Gwendolyn Brooks analyzes the role of dignity as it occurs in both the natural environment and urban spaces. Set in Chicago during the 1930s to just after WWII, Brooks explores the relationship between identity and place, focusing on the changing consciousness of its main character, Maud Martha. Throughout the text, Maud Martha draws on various elements from the physical environment to explore her experiences as an African American woman living in Jim Crow America. These elements are primarily animal and plant metaphors and occur within her kitchenette apartment. In her book, *Along the Streets of Bronzeville: Black Chicago's Literary Landscape*, Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach explores Brooks' role in the Chicago Black Renaissance, a creative movement that flourished on the South Side of Chicago during the 1930s and 1940s (Schlabach xi). When discussing *Maud Martha*, Schlabach focuses on the space of the kitchenette, calling it the "locus of urban segregation" for African American women (Schlabach 98). Using the term "special realities," Schlabach argues that the kitchenette is a key figure in the development of Maud Martha's racial identity (Schlabach 95). Drawing on Schlabach's scholarship, this chapter analyzes Maud Martha's exploration of her own identity as it occurs within this domestic space by focusing particularly on the use of animal and plant metaphors. This chapter will also look at the resilience Maud Martha maintains throughout the text as a major part of her

exploration of self. We see her resilience develop early on and remain throughout until the close of the novel where she asks herself, “What, *what* am I to do with all this life?” (Brooks 178).

Descriptions of her childhood home are rooted in the natural world; in their relation to plants such as her Aunt Eppie’s Michigan fern, the snowball bush, the lawn. For Maud Martha, home is marked by what is real versus not real, what is natural versus not natural. While living in her small apartment in the urban Chicago neighborhood, Maud Martha often reflects on the natural environment of her childhood home. She describes the snowball bush that grew “big above the dandelions” in the yard next to her porch (86). The snowballs that flowered from the bush were “healthy,” “beautiful,” “fat,” and “startling white in the sunlight” (87). As she grew older and the tree grew sicker, Maud Martha describes the snowballs as “smaller” and “more dispirited” until eventually there was a summer where it stopped blooming entirely (87). Maud Martha wonders what happened to the bush, knowing it is no longer there but having no memory of seeing it disappear. This representation of time passing is a microcosm of the entire text. The text moves through Maud Martha’s life chronologically, using seasons as markers of the passage of time. This movement through the seasons and into the urban space of the novel represents the first moment of the migration narrative that Farah Jasmine Griffin describes – an event that propels the action northward (Griffin 3). While she is in the rural space of her childhood home, she dreams of being in New York, describing it as “a symbol,” with the idea of it standing for what “she thought life ought to be. Jeweled. Polished. Smiling. Poised. Calmly rushing! Straight up and down, yet graceful enough”



(Brooks 50). Maud Martha is drawn to this idea of the urban space, choosing to leave her home space in search of “what she wanted to dream” (51).

In descriptions of her physical appearance, Maud Martha often locates herself in the natural world. The first description we see is her comparison of herself to dandelions, the “yellow jewels for every day” that she sees from the steps of her back porch (2). Wishing she was a lotus, or China asters, a Japanese Iris, or even meadow lilies like other women, Maud Martha instead sees herself in the “demure prettiness” and “everydayness” of the dandelion (2). Excluding the dandelion, the other flowers are all exotic or foreign, with even the meadow lilies growing outside the built environment where Maud Martha finds herself. But it is in the dandelion’s commonness in this environment where she finds comfort – comfort in the idea that something “so common” could still be considered a flower and subsequently be cherished (2). Claiming that to be cherished is the “dearest wish of her heart” (2), Maud Martha grapples with this throughout the text. When she isn’t looking at dandelions, she finds it “hard to believe that a thing of only ordinary allurements – if the allurements of any flower could be said to be ordinary – were as easy to love as a thing of heart-catching beauty” (2). The thing of heart-catching beauty is her sister, Helen – a more lightly complected, longer-lashed, and graceful version of Maud Martha. She has features that would be considered Europeanized in comparison to Maud Martha’s more Africanized ones. Maud Martha’s descriptions of Helen would categorize her as one of the more exotic flowers, such as a lotus or Japanese Iris. Yet, despite the awareness she feels of her “commonness,” Maud Martha does not feel sorry for herself. The previously mentioned description of the dandelions as “yellow jewels for every day” reveals a common theme throughout the text – that there is beauty in the everyday,

especially if that beauty comes from surviving day to day. Schlabach argues that Maud Martha's "power" lies in her ability to "accept the realities of life – no matter how unpleasant" (Schlabach 109). Maud Martha understands the struggle for survival and the ability to do so to be a thing of importance, recognizing in herself a strength that comes from her resilience.

We repeatedly see Maud Martha return to this idea of things needing to be beautiful in order to be worth cherishing, specifically as it relates to the color of her skin. In a chapter titled "low yellow," Maud Martha describes what she thinks to be Paul Phillips' opinion of her when they are first dating, stating that she is "really all right" and "will do;" she continues by saying that she is definitely not what Paul can call pretty if he "remains true to what his idea of pretty has always been" (52). Maud Martha describes the common standard of pretty as a "little cream-colored thing with curly hair" and "at the very lowest" this idea would be a "little curly-haired thing the color of cocoa with a lot of milk in it" (53). The use of the word "lowest" reveals that Maud Martha believes there to be a ranking or hierarchal system when it comes to beauty. We see this in her description of the flowers in the first chapter of the novel when she begins with a lotus, works her way to China asters and Japanese irises, and ends with meadow lilies; she subsequently settles on the idea that "yes, she would have liked meadow lilies" (1). Maud Martha understands standards of beauty even among African Americans to rest on a system of light skin privilege that favors curly hair and lighter complexions. She sees herself at the bottom of this system, below even the "lowest" standard of pretty (53). In a self-deprecating comment that indicates how she compares to other women, Maud Martha refers to herself as "the color of cocoa straight, if you can even be that 'kind' to

me” (53). Her use of the word “kind” in this moment indicates that she doesn’t believe herself to be the color of cocoa straight; instead, she probably has a darker complexion and as such she still falls below even the lowest standard for pretty. She later tells the reader that by “her own admission” her hair is “absolutely knappy,” indicating that she is even further from the standard for pretty (54). By describing her hair as “knappy,” Maud Martha is continuing to judge herself using language based on white standards of beauty.

However, we don’t hear any of this from Paul and the chapter title actually comes from Paul’s description of himself. Claiming to have “real Negro features,” Paul states “I’m light, or at least I can claim to be a sort of low-toned yellow [...] But even so I’m not handsome” (54). Maud Martha ends this section with the mention of “beautiful yellow girls, with natural hair” as part of Paul’s desired life. Later in the text when she is at a party with Paul, who is now her husband, Maud Martha describes the color of her skin as a wall: “it’s my color that makes him mad. What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall (87). When thinking of their relationship, Maud Martha claims it should be that simple, be easy to love each other. Maud Martha doesn’t believe the color of her skin to be who she truly is and we see this when she describes what is on the inside to be “what is really me” (87). She sees her dark complexion and hair as something that Paul constantly must confront and “jump over in order to meet and touch” what she has for him (87). Maud Martha argues that Paul has to jump way up high in order to see what makes her good and that “he gets awful tired of all that jumping” (88). In referring to her dark complexion as a wall, we cannot lose sight of the history of racialized housing practices in Chicago; implicit in Brooks’ metaphor is the practice of redlining – the systematic denial of various services to residents of specific,

often racially associated, neighborhoods or communities either directly or through the selective raising of prices (Gross). This metaphor of her skin color functioning as a wall is an instance where redlining translates into her home space because she believes that Paul faces certain limitations because he has settled for a wife with her skin complexion.

When dignity occurs in urban spaces in the novel it often carries a negative connotation. In descriptions of her childhood in urban spaces, Maud Martha describes the “unhandsome gray and decay of the double-apartment buildings” with “the little plots of dirt and scanty grass that held up their narrow brave banners: PLEASE KEEP OFF THE GRASS – NEWLY SEEDED” (5). The school building is “solid,” “candid,” and “serious” with “brownish-red brick” and “dirty cream stone trim” (4). She describes the sky as gray, with the sun “making little silver promises somewhere up there, hinting” (4). She observes that the June day is more like the last days of November, describing it as “more than rather bleak” but still having “these little promises, just under cover” (4). She wonders whether these promises would fulfill themselves, figuring it was “anybody’s guess” (4). Juxtaposing these images of dull, Maud Martha describes the children playing within this environment as “mixed in the wind” (5). Continuing, she describes “bits of pink, of blue, white, yellow, green, purple, brown, black carried by jerky little stems of brown or yellow or brown-black” (5). Maud Martha states there are lives within these buildings – “tiny lives” that the children blow by (5). She gives us a look into the lives of the children through their topics of conversation. Not concerned with the apartments “cramp, inhibition, choke,” the children instead speak “shrilly” of everyday things such as “ways to fix curls and pompadours, ‘nasty’ boys and ‘sharp’ boys, of Joe Louis, of ice cream, of bicycles, of baseball, of teachers, of examinations, of Duke Ellington, of Bette

Davis” (5). Maud Martha however speaks of the sweet potato pie she would have at home. As the school bell rings and the children are all hurrying to class, Maud Martha describes how “inevitably, the fat girl” is forced to be “nonchalant” and care very little about whether or not she is late (6). She would not run “because she would wobble, would lose her dignity” (6). Eventually though “every bit of the wind managed to blow itself in,” leaving the schoolyard bare (6).

Another mention of dignity occurs in the chapter “you’re being so good, so kind.” In this chapter, a boy named Charles calls on Maud and he isn’t just any “Willie or Richard or Sylvester” (17). Charlie is the “personalization of the entire Caucasian plan” and Maud Martha is “the whole ‘colored’ race” (18). Brooks meditates on the relationship between dignity and the physical environment, the family’s living space. Maud Martha describes “three or four straight chairs that had long ago given up the ghost of whatever shallow dignity they may have had in the beginning” now looking “completely disgusted with themselves” and with her family (16). She sniffs the air, concerning herself with the stereotype she often hears that “colored people’s houses had a certain heavy, unpleasant smell” (17). She dismisses this as “vicious and nonsense,” yet she raises every window anyways (17). She doesn’t assign a specific voice behind this stereotype but the reader understands it to be reflective of white society. Once again Maud Martha is feeling the constraints of the society she lives in – a racist, white supremacist one. She describes this simple act of Charles calling on her in her home space as “the theory of racial equality about to be put into practice” and she only hopes that she will “be equal to being equal” (17). When he arrives, she finds herself disgusted with the pleasure and relief it brings her. Questioning how it makes her feel, she realizes

she feels a “sort of gratitude” (18). She’s sickened by this realization, as if “Charles, in coming, gave her a gift” (18). She boils their relationship down to recipient and benefactor, ending the chapter saying internally, “It’s so good of you. You’re being so good” (18). It’s unclear as to who she is directly referring to – herself or Charles – but I’m not entirely convinced she believes what she is saying to be true. By voicing this, it seems as if she is trying to instead convince herself.

Brooks uses Maud Martha’s various interactions with animals to explore dignity through contrasting images. These moments are also representative of the second and third moment of the migration narrative – her initial confrontation with the urban landscape and her attempt to negotiate that landscape/resistance to the negative effects of urbanization (Griffin 3). One way that Maud Martha confronts the changes in her environment is through the choices she is presented with in her kitchenette. In Chapter Seventeen, Maud Martha finally snares the mouse that has been living inside her kitchenette for several weeks. In this moment Maud Martha can exercise power – she is allowed to make a choice – between preserving life or destroying it. On the sliding scale of vermin that potentially infests her living space, the mouse is the most innocuous. A month after moving in with Paul to their very first apartment, she spies a cockroach, something she could never kill because “she could not bear to touch one, with foot of stick or twisted paper” (63). Instead, “she had rather see a rat—well, she had rather see a mouse” (63). The way she interrupts her thought process here is telling; it indicates a hypothetical situation. We see no vermin in her childhood home; she only confronts this situation as a young adult unable to find suitable housing. Her confinement to a small, kitchenette apartment with neighbors who are predominantly people of color is an

explicit example of Brooks' representation of redlining in the novel. Maud Martha voices her disappointment at the size and condition of their apartment to Paul as soon as they move into the space. When confronted with her first mouse, she contemplates its life and humanizes it, rather than killing it. She begins by anthropomorphizing the mouse, giving it a human consciousness, wondering what it might be thinking. She provides it a hypothetical family, describing its children, Betty and Bobby. She even connects it to her own situation, projecting her own life story on its existence, indicative when she wonders if killing it would mean that "the family's seasonal house-cleaning, for lack of expert direction, would be left undone" and "it might be nursing personal regrets" (70).

However, it isn't until she catches the mouse and must decide about whether or not to kill it that she considers it to have a family and a purpose. As such, Brooks is commenting on the inability of white people to view people of color, specifically African Americans, as humans until after they have forced violence upon them. It isn't until white people are presented with a choice that they are forced to reflect on the power of their decisions. These perpetrators of violence aren't reflecting on the repercussions of their decisions because these acts aren't about the end result so much as they are about the power in the ability to have choice, to make a decision that holds power. Maud Martha isn't able to make choices of power in regard to her own life, but in making a choice about the mouse's life, she is able to reclaim some form of power/choice about her own life. The observation that the mouse's "bright black eyes contained no appeal—the little creature seemed to understand that there was no hope of mercy from the eternal enemy, no hope of reprieve or postponement—but a fine small dignity" is another example where animals represent a marginalized group, specifically African Americans (69-70). If we

substitute the word mouse for person of color or African American in this instance we are reminded of slavery, Jim Crow, and the discrimination/oppression that is still present. The statement about the eyes of the trapped mouse having “no appeal” is representative of the enslaved Africans who had no desire to ask their oppressors for mercy or sympathy because they had an understanding that there wasn’t any sense in it. It also applies more broadly to the experiences of African Americans at the hands of whites throughout American history. We see this again when Maud Martha describes the mouse as having this understanding that there is no hope for a change in its situation. The mouse retains a form of dignity, however, “a fine small dignity” (70). In the face of a hopeless situation, the mouse is seen as resilient. Brooks is arguing that despite being stripped of everything, the mouse maintains a form of dignity through its resilience for survival. Regardless of the size or form that this resilience takes, it contains enough power to allow the mouse, or Maud Martha, to maintain or keep a sense of who they are. This resilience is a further display of the beauty that can be found in the everyday; that in spite of everything, one can exist.

While this moment situates around violence, it also demonstrates the human capacity to work against violence, to resist it. When Maud Martha chooses to preserve the mouse’s life she describes being filled with a “wide air,” and also immediately becomes “conscious of a new cleanness in her” (70). While she is experiencing the power of choice in this moment, she relates how she feels afterwards to a “godlike loving-kindness” (71). She relates her choice of restraint to the act of creation, stating, “She had not destroyed. In the center of that simple restraint was—creation. She had created a piece of life” (71). This demonstration of restraint is reflective of Maud Martha’s approach to



her own life. By resisting/refusing to participate in violence against the mouse, Maud Martha is rejecting the system/society that she is a part of; a system that encourages/does nothing to prevent violence from taking place against people of color. Maud Martha is aware of this violence and throughout the text we see instances where she confronts ideas of racism, colorism, and sexism. While she does almost relish in this newfound power after her run-in with the mouse, she doesn't gain a sudden superiority complex. She instead recognizes in herself a goodness she hadn't previously seen. We see this when she exclaims, "Why, I'm good! I am good!" after describing the preservation of life as wonderful (71). Her experience with power isn't rooted in the ability to possess it, but in how using it kindly results in goodness, in the preservation of life. Her preservation of even the smallest dignity, a common or everydayness type of dignity, still results in life.

Maud Martha's interaction with the mouse is a stark contrast to that of her interaction with a chicken later in the text. Here her experience with dignity is more violent than before. While preparing a chicken for dinner in her kitchenette, Maud Martha makes a comparison between her ability to cut and clean a dead chicken and man's ability to do the same to another human. By beginning the passage with "People could do this!" Brooks immediately addresses the fact that humans are capable of committing these atrocities – such atrocities as killing and eating animals, killing other humans, and dehumanizing other individuals and using that as justification for treating them as less than human. But it isn't until she makes the transition from dismembering chickens to humans that we see the bigger picture. Before making this comparison, Maud Martha describes in detail the gruesome process of cleaning a chicken. Brooks' diction in this moment makes the process seem especially violent, indicative in the phrases "take

out the mess, with bare hands or a bread knife,” “shake the corpse by neck or by legs,” “intestines loosened and beginning to ooze out,” and “that headless death” (152). The use of words like “corpse” and “headless death” indicate the violent undertones of this seemingly normal task. The mention of a bread knife as a possible tool indicates a lack of proper procedure, resulting in the further destruction or mutilation of the meat. A bread knife is unable to make clean cuts through meat due to its serrated edge designed specifically for slicing through crusts. Her use of it to clean a chicken indicates that Maud Martha is either unaware of the difference in knives or due to financial circumstances, does not possess such a range in knives. We see the moment where the violence against the chicken transforms into the violence against man when Maud Martha exclaims, “but if the chicken were a man!—cold man with no head or feet” (152). She follows this moment with another vivid description of a body being destroyed, choosing words that could describe either a chicken or a human. In making this comparison, Brooks comments on the violent nature of humans, especially as it occurs in war. Brooks points out man’s ability to distance himself from another human as soon as they are divided into opposing sides. We see this when Maud Martha states, “The difference was in the knowing. What was unreal to you, you could deal with violently” (153). Maud Martha does this when cleaning the chicken – she is able to separate herself from it and violently rip it apart. The creation of this degree of separation – of disconnection, of one living thing from another – allows violence to take place. Similarly, war’s creation of “the unreal” or “the other” allows humans to commit violent acts against each other almost senselessly. This comparison occurs so naturally it almost normalizes the violence of war.

This passage is also a commentary on the violence that occurs every day in America, violence that is a byproduct of racial discrimination. The chicken is an analogous to man, specifically African Americans. This is best represented when Maud Martha says, “the chicken was a sort of person, a respectable individual, with its own kind of dignity” (153). Here Brooks meditates on how African Americans were not considered to be whole people or on the same level of existence as white Americans. Maud Martha examines how an African American could almost be seen as a person, with their own identity and dignity, but the phrase “sort of” is used to remind the reader (or maybe Maud Martha reminding herself?) that they haven’t been allowed to fully obtain either. There’s even a separation created in the way dignity is described. By saying “own kind” of dignity, it is suggesting that people of color don’t possess the same or even a similar kind of dignity to white people, but instead their own, entirely separate kind. We see another instance where Brooks touches on race in America when Maud Martha states, “If chickens were ever to be safe, people would have to live with them, and know them, see them loving their children, finishing the evening meal, arranging jealousy” (153). In this moment Martha lists universal aspects of the human experience, and breaking down the separation or “othering” created by racial prejudices. If people of color are ever to be safe, white people will have to normalize them, identify with them, maintain a human connection with them. There would have to be a removal of biases that are based solely on the idea of difference – a recognition of dignity.

The title of this chapter, “brotherly love,” is also ironic in that it’s supposed to mean a shared love between human beings. By having this as the title for a chapter that analyzes the way humans destroy one another, Brooks critiques the religious concept of

loving others the same as loving one's own kin. This idea of brotherly love circles back to the concept of a universal human experience. If life is viewed as a collective experience, where the life of each individual is valued the same, it should be easy to love and respect others in the way one would their own family. This moment raises the question of who exactly is one's brother? What constitutes brotherly love and how far is this extended?

Maud Martha's exploration of self focuses on her experiences with surviving within differing physical environment. In his critical essay "The Aliveness of Things: Nature in Maud Martha," Larry R. Andrews describes Maud Martha's relationship to nature as a "life force" that acts as "a source of personal power" for her throughout her life (71). He argues that Maud Martha's characterization of herself as ordinary is a method of survival, claiming she draws strength "from the very aliveness of those mundane details" that she lists (75). We see this in the return to the image of the dandelion at the close of the novel. In the final chapter, "back from the wars!" Maud Martha describes the return of soldiers from overseas, specifically her brother Harry. She describes the loss of human life, of the destructive and mutilation of human bodies even at their survival. It is spring again and Maud Martha is pregnant with her second child. This juxtaposition of life verse death leads Maud Martha to pose the question, "what, *what* am I to do with all of this life?" (178). She reflects on the fact that at a moment such as this, one could "feel that death was a part of life: that life was good and death would be good too" (178). She describes the reality that America still faces on its home soil as stories of "the latest Georgia and Mississippi lynchings" are reported in the "Negro press" (179). The image of the dandelion blooming in-between, up through, or even as a

production of the corpses is a marker of spring's return, of a transitional moment in Maud Martha's life. It leads her to think that "it was doubtful whether the ridiculousness of man would ever completely succeed in destroying the world" (179). Despite the lack of substantive, systematic change in Maud Martha's material circumstances – she still suffers from light-skin privileges, Chicago is still deeply segregated, white Americans still perpetuate racially motivated murders and the like – she recaptures a sense of wholesomeness. She experiences a sense of completeness – arguably because she has placed herself out in nature. She describes taking her daughter out-of-doors where she doesn't need "information, or solace, or a guidebook, or a sermon – not in this sun! – not in this blue air!" (178). Placing herself and her daughter once again in the natural environment, Maud Martha draws strength from her surroundings. She argues that "in the meantime, while people did live they would be grand, would be glorious and brave, would have nimble hearts that would beat and beat" (179). We've seen this relationship between the creation or preservation of life against the destruction of it before. In previous discussions of Maud Martha's relationship to both nature and animals, especially that of the mouse and its tiny dignity, there appears to be a cycle of life and death. Just as the snowball bush from her childhood eventually disappeared and her choice to allow the mouse to live, Maud Martha's life is marked by this cycle of life persevering over death, which Andrews describes as the "persistence of [Maud Martha's] life force amid instability and destruction" (69). At the close of the text, with "the weather bidding her bon voyage" Maud Martha is left with a feeling of elation, at the start of a new life cycle (Brooks 180). While it is easy to read Maud Martha's descriptions of herself and view them as pessimistic or reflective of low self-worth, her

acceptance and overall perseverance against the major challenges she faces in the text reveal her to be so much more. Brooks novel takes the everyday and finds the beauty in it – a beauty that is rooted in survival, resistance, and perseverance. Maud Martha's experiences/interactions with the various animals and environments in the text allow her to work through ideas around her own identity, especially as it is shaped by this resilience.

## CHAPTER III

SOILED HISTORIES: TIM Z. HERNANDEZ'S DOCUMENTING OF MEMORY  
AND IDENTITY IN *ALL THEY WILL CALL YOU*

In his 2017 documentary novel *All They Will Call You*, Chicano poet Tim Z. Hernandez describes the earth, soil, and land as consumers of bodies and harbors for the pieces and fragments of the deceased. His work is the culmination of a painstaking five-year effort to uncover the identities of twenty-eight Mexican nationals who died and were forgotten in a plane crash over the Los Gatos Canyon in Central California in 1948. Through his descriptions of the physical spaces in the novel, Hernandez weaves together familial stories and formal features to create a topography of memory. These formal features serve as reminders of the geography of the various physical spaces of the text – primarily the rural communities of both Mexico and California. This relationship between memory and the physical environment operates in two ways. The first is that the earth consumes and physically covers up or conceals both the bodies and memories of the individuals Hernandez attempts to resurrect through research and narrative. This relationship is what primarily contributes to Hernandez's reconstruction of the past through his use of storytelling. Through these stories, Hernandez details the different ways in which the physical geography and social make-up of the Central Valley of California slowly consumes and holds onto multiple generations of individuals. This results in the second relationship – the earth keeping everything as a way of retaining or possessing a sort of memory, developing its own consciousness and refusing to forget.

Hernandez's text crosses geographical borders, moving between rural spaces of both Mexico and the United States. Due to the migratory existence of the twenty-eight Mexican nationals, Hernandez's movement across and between these borders helps conjure up memories of these individuals. As mentioned previously in this project's introduction, Gloria Anzaldúa explores the "borderlands" of her own identity, a space where both metaphorical and physical connections exist. Anzaldúa defines borderlands as the third space between cultures and social systems, "the space in which antithetical elements mix, neither to obliterate each other nor to be subsumed by a larger whole, but rather to combine in unique and unexpected ways" (Anzaldúa 6). Similar to Anzaldúa, Hernandez explores the change or hybridization of identity that occurs between borders of geography, ethnicity, and gender in his multi-genre text (Anzaldúa 3). If we look at what Hernandez is doing, he is combining these two spaces where the memories of the individuals exist. He's doing this hybridization work between the United States and Mexico. In the United States, the memory of these individuals exists – or more accurately does not – in newspapers, official records, and in the memories of individuals who witnessed/reported on the crash. However, in Mexico their actual memory is alive with their loved ones – something Hernandez discovers through personal interactions with these family members. Now it is in both spaces where we look to the soil for the keeping of their memory. Through his work of identifying victims of the crash, Hernandez reveals intimate details of the various physical spaces they occupied. These primarily rural spaces highlight the close ties these individuals have to their communities; relationships that are established and strengthened through a reliance on the land for survival. Their identity is tied to the soil – regardless of which side of "the line in the dirt" it falls on –



existing within this borderland. The border imposed on this area in a rather arbitrary way in 1848-1849 as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo meant bisecting a country, which Hernandez highlights as having ramifications for us even now. It creates not only a division of people, but of resources as well. Throughout the text, individuals explain the need for water in order to survive. Their choice in crossing the border for work isn't actually a choice, but a matter of survival as Hernandez shows through the story of Guadalupe Ramirez Lara who was forced to leave his family in hopes of making enough money to build a well for his entire community back in Mexico. As Hernandez reveals through the various stories told by surviving family members, these individuals cross the border in order to provide for others. The text also crosses a variety of borders: national ones (between the US and Mexico) as well as boundaries of genre, landing somewhere between fiction and history. In his Author's Note, Hernandez addresses his intentions with creating a documentary novel, stating, "its loyalty is not to people of fact but rather to people of memory" (xiv). As he reveals the various official government documents and newspaper clippings to have recorded an incorrect history, Hernandez proves that "officialness too has its inconsistencies" (xiv). This is where storytelling and memory play an essential role in the recreation of these individuals' identities.

When discussing the role of memory and Hernandez's juxtaposition between the spaces of California and Mexico in *All They Will Call You*, one must look at the formal features at work. The text is multimodal, drawing on photographs, scanned images of newspaper clippings and official government documents, as well as song lyrics and other visual aids such as a diagram of the Douglas DC-3 skyplane, the plane that bore the passengers and ultimately crashed. Each of these features helps shape the

memory/retelling of the events that occurred before, during, and after the plane crash in January of 1948. One of the first of these formal features we notice is the inclusion of a short newspaper clipping from the Associated Press, dated January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1948 that appears on the adjacent title page for the first section of the documentary novel. The short entry, less than 115 words, refers to the thirty-two victims of the plane crash as “28 Mexican Deportees, Crew, and Guard.” Referring to twenty-eight of the victims in such an impersonal and vague way sets the tone for Hernandez’s novel, which is only completed after a long search through memory and storytelling for their true identity. Hernandez uses these formal features as a way of reconstructing their memory. At the beginning of each section where he tells the story of a different passenger on the plane, Hernandez includes a photograph of the individual he describes. All are in black and white, most have superficial blemishes such as watermarks, tears, or creases, and each depicts a person whose story and memory Hernandez is intent on preserving. The use of these photographs alongside a narrative about their life not only gives them a name but also a face. Included at the conclusion of the novel is the identification list from the January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1948 Holy Cross Cemetery catalogue that lists the twenty-eight passengers as a “Mexican National” with a number ranging from one through twenty-eight. Right before this image, Hernandez lists in full form the actual names of all twenty-eight passengers, with the correct spellings of each. By juxtaposing these two lists at the close of the novel, Hernandez finally clarifies once and for all the true identities and memory of these individuals. While Hernandez primarily uses the formal features to assist in the recreation of memories, he also uses them to bridge the gap between the two main physical spaces in the text – the valleys of Mexico and California.

Hernandez also uses lines from Woody Guthrie's poem "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee)" to frame and organize three of his four sections of the novel. Written by Guthrie in 1948 after he heard about the crash over the radio, "Deportee" was later set to music by Martin Hoffman in 1957, and if it wasn't for hearing the song about a decade ago, Hernandez himself would not have begun researching the individuals behind the crash. For his first section, "The Witnessing," which describes the plane crash through the eyes of those who saw it firsthand, Hernandez uses the line "the sky plane caught fire over Los Gatos Canyon..." When framing his second section, "The Stories," Hernandez uses the lyric "who are these friends scattered like dry leaves?" Hernandez locates and interviews the scattered relatives of seven victims from the crash in order to piece together their narratives in this section. For his third section, "They're Flying 'em Back," Hernandez uses the lyrics "Goodbye to my Juan, Goodbye Rosalita / Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria..." where he forms a narrative around the final moments of the passengers. In his fourth and final section titled "The Power of A Song (One More Name)," where he discusses the story behind Guthrie's writing of "Deportee" and Hoffman's creation of the music for it, Hernandez departs from the pattern he establishes wherein he uses quotations from "Deportee" and instead uses an excerpt from a song written by Hoffman titled "Driftwood." The words are as follows, "your gravestones now / rowuponrowuponrow / remind us / of all you gave us... / and what of us?" These lyrics appear just eight pages after Hernandez reproduces a symbolic representation of the Fresno cemetery plaque that denotes the mass grave of the "28 Mexican Citizens;" we turn the page and may miss the small block of text, located at the very bottom of an otherwise blank space, surrounded by so much whiteness. This plaque was the only

marker of the eternal resting place for these individuals, and as Hernandez mentions, only created in order to let potential plot buyers know that that portion of the cemetery was already occupied (181). The block of text/plaque occupying such little space on the page reflects two things. The first represents the limited space given to these specific victims in the original documentation and memory of the crash. And the second represents the physical space these individuals occupied in the cemetery, condensed and surrounded by white space. Deploying Hoffman's lyrics so close to the plaque poses a question that Hernandez attempts to answer throughout his text – what do these gravestones, and more specifically the overall treatment of these individuals, remind us about ourselves? Posing the question “what of us?” requires the reader to reflect on the way individuals from marginalized or underrepresented groups are treated, not just by the government but by everyday people. Hernandez begins the text with the retelling of the crash by those who witnessed it first-hand, the everyday occupants of the Los Gatos Canyon, and pairs it with the reconstruction of the event through reports from various government bodies.

It is in the aforementioned third section where Hernandez blends together several of his most interesting multimodal formal features. Occurring immediately after the reimaging of the passengers' final moments before and during the crash, Hernandez includes a solid black page. This page marks the transition to the next chapter, titled “Dry Leaves,” where the family and friends of the victims describe the first time they heard about the crash. The blacked-out page represents this abrupt transition, leaving the reader feeling the full weight of each individual's loss. In a reference to Guthrie's lyric about scattered leaves, Hernandez dedicates two-and-a-half pages to the names of these individuals upon which each name dots the page in varying shades of black ink,

embodying the falling of leaves. Of the eleven names that appear on the page, we see Luis Miranda Cuevas, Guadalupe Ramirez Lara, Ramon Paredes Gonzalez, Jose Sanchez Valdivia, and both Bobbie and Frank Atkinson – all of whom Hernandez creates narratives for earlier on in the text. While we see the full name for several of the individuals, the first or last name are all that appear for the majority, such as Frank and Chaffin. Even when their full name appears, it is scattered out of order, falling, it seems, at random, much like the way pieces of their bodies tumbled away from the airplane's midair explosion. Portions of the names appear in darker ink differing between the first, middle, or last. Once again seeming at random, there is no uniformity in what part of the name appears in darker ink between each individual.

Directly following the pages of falling names, Hernandez enters into a brief scientific breakdown of where memories are located in the brain. He states, "there's a small part of the brain where memory is stored called the hippocampus" where "in moments of intense trauma, this specific node of brain goes into shock. Any number of memories haphazardly flash, as quick as a camera bulb" (163). This moment acts as a thread, connecting the blend of formal features to the use and importance of memory. Hernandez uses two opposing forms of memory to reconstruct a narrative around the lives of the twenty-eight Mexican nationals in his text. The first is that there is no memory of them; their names are never accurately recorded in any official government document, newspaper, or on a tombstone. And the second is in the memory of those who knew them. It is in this second version of memory where we see Hernandez's use of storytelling, where he uses the actual words of family and friends to create a narrative around the lives of these individuals.

Memory plays an important role in the text, as he offers an intimate look into the migratory existence of these individuals. Early in the narrative, we read descriptions of the land as keeping or holding onto things – the bodies of people and animals, death, a history of pain. In the chapter titled “Los Gatos Canyon,” Hernandez quotes a local resident describing the history of the canyon saying, “the plane crash ain’t the only thing. This whole area’s got a history with death” (20). This leads into a brief retelling of the violent past that literally has stained the canyon with the blood of people of color, especially the destruction of native populations in the region. When an Oklahoma family attempting to settle in this area finds buried bones and native jewelry, she refers to this as a “burial ground or something” (21). Her casual, flippant dismissal of what could be anything from a sacred burial ground to a mass grave—embedded in the “or something”—is representative of the ways people of color have been, and still are, marginalized in the United States. There is a pattern of forced relocation for people of color, such as the physical removal and forced relocation of Native American populations from their land. The recording of history then further pushes these individuals into the margins, reconstructing narratives that leave their voices out completely. In this moment Hernandez also emphasizes the importance of a space, specifically the physical soil or makeup of a place, by its ability to remember things that no one else seems to, an idea that is further illustrated with the final line of the passage stating, “The land keeps everything. And it remembers too” (20).

In this section, we’re given multiple descriptions where the soil is able to remember or hold onto the past after undergoing some kind of physical change. The history of a place is characterized by the “impressions” from the various individuals who

“put down roots” (21). We see this explicit association of land with memory mirrored in other areas of the text. When talking about the geological history of California, we see descriptions of the land as being “alive” (21); likewise, we read that “the whole Diablo Range quakes in an attempt to absolve itself from its cursed history. But the records wedge themselves deeper into the sediment, and in the rings of the black oaks trees” (21). The records Hernandez refers to are a chronicles of violence against people of color remembered in the soil and tree rings. Similar to the standard recording of this violence – which either doesn’t occur at all in official documents or if it does, reflects only the perspectives of those perpetrating the violence – this form of record keeping is obscured from view and visible to no one. This is one example of Hernandez paralleling the memories of a violent past alongside the physical makeup of California; even geography participates in the continued violence.

The role of memory plays out in the soil’s ability to serve as a reminder for individuals of who they are and of where they have originated. In Chapter Ten titled “El Norte,” Hernandez reimagines the stories of several individuals from Mexico who worked as “braceros” in the United States. The Bracero Program, named for the Spanish word for arm, allowed laborers from Mexico to temporarily enter the United States to work in the fields, harvesting a range of agricultural crops. The program lasted for over nineteen years, beginning in 1942 and going until 1964. Hernandez illustrates the struggle of these individuals who were forced to migrate back and forth across the border of “the mistress of el Norte” and the place they call home (59). Throughout the text Hernandez refers to this border as “the line in the dirt,” something that has been easily drawn but whose existence is impossible to forget; the implication here is that the national border is

an arbitrary, casual demarcation of space, and yet the sociopolitical consequences of that arbitrary decision, of the line in the dirt, are far-reaching. One passenger from the flight, Guadalupe Ramirez Lara, found himself struggling to cross this line multiple times. In this section Hernandez imagines Guadalupe in conversation with his grandfather Don Refugio about their ties to their home soil in el Valle de Santiago of Mexico. Don Refugio claims, “if one needed a reminder that we were born from warriors, great fighters, all you had to do was put your hands in the dirt, right here in Charco, and you would find evidence” (62). Here we see that not only does the land hold onto the physical things hidden beneath its surface, but it also holds the personal histories of the people who inhabit or exist on top of it. We see this with the people of Charco who define their identity in regard to their close relationship with the land. Hernandez describes this relationship through their agrarian lifestyle, one that has a difficult but proud history. This relationship is best described in Guadalupe’s words of home: “Charco holds pieces of me” (65).

Faced with no other option, Guadalupe, like many others Hernandez describes, enters into the migratory existence of the braceros hoping it’ll be temporary. When in el Norte, these individuals use memory as a way of survival. Hernandez describes this dependency on memory as follows: “The ability to recall a loved one’s voice, or even the warm smell of bread, can mean the difference between alienation and a welcome reminder that we are still human” (73). Memory plays an important role in the humanizing of the individuals Hernandez describes. The land’s ability to hold onto their memory, either physically or metaphorically, is an important component towards shaping their identity. When discussing the “conjuring of memories” in this section (41),



Hernandez highlights the role of the physical environment in the creation/recollection of memory. When describing the memory as it takes place within the physical home space, Hernandez states that “to remember is to live again” (41). This means that by situating the memory of these individuals within the home, which for these individuals is the soil of the country they grew up in, they are given life; they live on. What is interesting is the similarities Hernandez draws between the two physical spaces of Mexico and the United States. Both his descriptions of the physical makeup of these spaces as well as the memories and narratives he creates within them are similar. By drawing parallels between the two spaces, Hernandez is attempting to blur the line that’s been drawn in the dirt. By referring to the border as something that can be drawn or created so easily, Hernandez facilitates a discussion about the significance of defining spaces.

Tim Z. Hernandez uses multiple forms of memory in his creation of the narratives surrounding the lives of the victims from the 1948 plane crash – the physical documents they were either included in or more likely left out of, the memories of the individuals closest to them, and the physical memories of the land they were closest to. He documents the lives and memories of these individuals through their connection to the physical space, focusing primarily on their relationship to the land and soil of their home. He uses the physical dirt of both California and Mexico to conjure up the memories and identities of these individuals in the minds of both those who knew them most and those who didn’t, such as us as his readers. Also, in the creation of the memories of these individuals, his use of a wide range of formal feature helps *All They Will Call You* live up to its description as a “documentary novel” as Hernandez reconstructs the lives of thirty-two individuals through his own use of storytelling and memory.

## CHAPTER IV

HERITAGE, NATURE, AND NAMES IN CHIP LIVINGSTON'S *OWLS DON'T HAVE TO MEAN DEATH*

Chip Livingston's first novel *Owls Don't Have to Mean Death* (2017) follows Peter Strongbow as he navigates growing up as a two-spirit Native American youth in Florida. The novel brings up the question of mortality, focusing on Peter's role in his evolving relationships with those closest to him, especially in learning to cope with the loss of two of the most important people in his life – his grandfather, Pucha, and his partner, Cache. Each passing differs in circumstance: Pucha's death reaffirms Peter's strong ties to his indigenous ancestors, while Cache's AIDS diagnosis and death calls into question Peter's own safety. Peter struggles to balance the responsibility of upholding his tribe's memory and tradition while living in a changing, modern world; this is best exemplified in the way he is torn between his sexuality, which he is able to pursue more freely in cities, especially in Atlanta, and the role he has in his tribe, which is strongly associated with rural Florida. However, we see Peter's connection to his heritage and its traditions strengthen as he comes to terms with the inevitability of loss – whether that loss be a historic or current struggle.

Taking place in both rural and urban spaces of Florida and Georgia, the novel touches on historic tensions between native tribes and southern settlers. In order to understand the dynamics of the various physical spaces of the novel, these tensions must be explained. As highlighted later in this chapter, the southern spaces mentioned in this

novel – such as Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida – were all occupied by various Native American nations before their forced removal through the Trail of Tears. These nations included “the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole, among other nations” and were referred to as the “five civilized tribes” (Pauls). The novel establishes early on that Peter and his family are members of the Creek nation (as is the novelist Livingston, who has a mixed background), with loose ties to the Seminole nation as well. The forced removal of native populations was motivated by land use and resource extraction. One example being the increase in white settlers both within and outside state territories desiring agriculturally rich land, and, in North Carolina and Georgia, the removal of indigenous people to open up more land for gold extraction (Pauls). Livingston touches on this history in brief, passing moments throughout the novel. A major theme within this chapter – and throughout my thesis as a whole – focuses on the treatment of land, its use and who is allowed to occupy certain spaces. As we’ll see later in this chapter, whoever owns the land is often the only one allowed to dictate who and how individuals are remembered within these spaces.

In my analysis of the novel in this chapter, I am imposing a chronological order that is different than the temporal organization of Livingston’s novel, which moves back and forth in from the present day to the past. Beginning with a trip to the sea, Peter and a very sick Cache encounter an owl that has been hit alongside the highway. After collecting the mangled body, Peter brings the bird back to his grandmother, Granny Weave, where he buries it among several rose bushes with a tobacco offering. In direct reference to the title of this work, Peter reflects on the significance of owls for his people. Beginning at the age of nine, Peter knew owls meant death (6). In an early conversation

with Pucha, it's revealed to him that owls are messengers, not always carrying death with them (7). However, their association with death persists throughout the text as Peter witnesses Cache's deterioration. As Cache's health takes a final turn, Peter returns to the idea of the owl, claiming, "the owl buried in the flower bed hadn't thrown death off" (175). At the close of the novel, the final image of the owl comes full circle when Peter sees a horned owl as a messenger on his walk to "remember his relations" and decides to listen to what it has to tell him (212). The main narrative leading inexorably to Cache's death is interspersed with events concerning different members of Peter's extended family and tribe, too, such as the initial relationship between his mother and father, the early death of his cousin Coon, his cousin Caroline's pregnancy and eventual birth of a son named after Cache, and more. These interwoven flashbacks to the past help establish Peter's connection to his family, his heritage, and the land/natural environment. These moments also establish connections between certain patterns in characters' behavior. One prominent/notable example is Pucha's love for storytelling. In moments from both Peter and Coon's childhood, we see Pucha telling his grandchildren stories of their heritage/tradition, establishing their connection to their shared past across generations, from precontact to the days of removal to more recent events.

Several times throughout the text, characters claim that words carry power or have the power to influence the world around them. We see this when Peter's grandmother, Granny Weave, teaches him how to make dreamcatchers. When Peter is thirteen he breaks his leg, and spends the summer learning to weave dreamcatchers from Granny Weave. After several days of finding willow branches and soaking them in water in order to soften and bend them, Granny Weave and Peter start the process of weaving.

Before beginning this process, Granny Weave instructs Peter to pick the person for whom he intends to make the dreamcatcher. She tells him to call that person to his mind and think about what he wishes for them, but most importantly she tells him to pray for them as he weaves. As Granny Weave explains every step of the weaving process, she reminds Peter to pray. She tells him to, “Pray specifically. And be careful what you wish for. Prayers are words. Words are power. Even unspoken ones” (89). Peter listens to his grandmother and considers the power of his words while he prays. He continually prays throughout the novel, speaking his words aloud and into existence. In this way, words also represent tradition and are often used alongside tobacco in ceremonies demonstrating respect. When Peter attempts to talk with God, also referred to as the Creator, he describes the process of choosing his words carefully while releasing tobacco from his hands. As the one who taught Peter how to pray, Granny Weave also taught him the importance of tobacco when showing respect to his elders, the spirits of the earth, and other important traditions. As he enters early adulthood, Peter is reminded of the power of his words. It is clear that Peter believes words have the ability to change things. He even influences Cache in this way, which we see during their breakup. When Cache is missing Peter and thinking of him, he remembers Peter telling him the power of words. Claiming he didn’t believe him back then, Cache confesses that he does now and whispers “I love you” into the night air (60). He then repeats words without saying them out loud, singing them to the dreamcatcher Peter made him. In this moment, Peter is doing the same thing, praying that Cache is thinking of him, wherever he is, whether he is awake or asleep (57). Their eventual reunion speaks to their belief and reliance on these words of prayer.

Similar to the power borne by words, the names of cities, counties, rivers, plants, and especially people are acknowledged as carrying meaning. Livingston introduces new characters, most of whom are part of a large extended family, by explaining the stories of their names. These stories reflect personality traits, history and heritage, and even draw on different religious and cultural traditions. Granny Weave, for instance, gets her name from her ability to “weave or sew anything she saw in life or her imagination” (82). When working on a new weaving, she sits and talks with whomever it is for, listening to their stories and “manifesting their words and dreams” (83). Peter describes Granny Weave’s fingers as “a bow over strings” that make “simple prayers” as they string stories (83). Her name represents her gift for reading people and being able to then express what she sees in her work. Peter’s adopted cousin, Pond, tells a fictional story of how he received his name, tying it to the biblical story of Moses found floating in the Nile after he was abandoned by his own mother, but his cousin Caroline claims Pond got his name because of the color of his eyes – a deep green, the color of “pond scum” (71). In a cruel letter to Pond, Caroline also tells Pond that he received his name after his adoptive father rescued him from his alcoholic mother who was trying to pawn him for alcohol money. She makes a play on his name Pond, saying his real name is Pawned (73). The truth is that Pond is unsure of how he got his name or what it means, never having asked his adopted parents because “he knew the name came from sadness and with shame” (67). This uncertainty of his identity is what leads Pond to go in search of his own people and his past. Earlier in the text, Peter reflects on a conversation he had with his Pucha where he claims a person’s name was once based on their connection to a physical place. Pucha states, “in the old days, a man was known by the place he lived, for the place that claimed

him” (78). As Peter navigates various struggles, primarily his grief from first losing Pucha and then Cache, his connection to the physical, rural space is tested and ultimately strengthened.

The naming ceremony is another instance where we see the importance of names represented. An important tradition for Peter, the naming ceremony occurs when a boy has reached the age of becoming a man. It marks a major transition in the lives of Native American men. Leading up to his ceremony, Peter focuses on all the names around him, from street signs to technology brands. He claims, “everything has a name” (22). After worrying about what name he might receive, Peter learns that Micanopy, a “chief of chiefs” and highly respected elder, has chosen his name meaning that there is little chance of him receiving a dishonorable name (26). During the naming ceremony, the individual receives a piece of paper with their name written on it three times. The first is written in Muskogee, the second is a phonetic spelling of the Muskogee in order for them to be able to pronounce it, and the third is the English translation. The importance of their name represents their responsibility to their tribe and to upholding their traditions. As Peter is to receive his name, Mico, the son of Micanopy and the chief of the Warmouth Springs Village, who is also leading the ceremony, describes the tradition of two-spirit people. Describing them as once being “known to hold powerful medicine,” Mico doesn’t bother to explain that two-spirit is the “pan-tribal term for gay and lesbian” for everyone already knows (46). Mico goes on to say that Micanopy had a vision of Peter and blessed him with a powerful name – Hokkolv Yahv, meaning Two Wolves. As a two-spirit, Peter acts as a liminal character between both male and female positions within the novel. Before the naming ceremony, the Mico gifts Peter with a medicine bag to wear around

his neck. This necklace is symbolic of Peter's two major roles within the novel – one being the keeper of medicine for his tribe, a historic position that he must journey to understand, and the other as the major caretaker for Cache as his health continually deteriorates. The necklace is a constant presence during Peter's occupation of each role and gives him strength during his final transition between the two at the close of the novel. This final transition being marked by Cache's death and Peter's beginning of the walk of the Trail of Tears in order to understand his relations.

Establishing the importance of both the natural and urban environment, Livingston distinguishes the role each space has for different characters. It focuses on the transition between these spaces and the change in a character's relationship to that space. Throughout the text we see characters walk out into nature, physically removing themselves from the urban space, when in need of guidance or answers or when dealing with conflicts such as the ending or beginning of life. In an early memory of his grandpa, Pucha, Peter refers to this tradition as "walking the land" (5). He states it is "something he still did, something his family had always done" (5). He goes on to explain that he walks the land when a relative returns, after dinner, or when he needs to think things over (5). One space within nature that Peter frequents is the burial mounds outside his home town. The first mention of them occurs when describing the lack of action on the government's part to protect them and ensure the graves are left intact. Describing the mounds as being on "state land," Peter tells of the Warmouth Creek nation fighting and failing to gain control over the mounds. Here Livingston is briefly highlighting the historic struggle over land use between Native Americans and the state government. Peter has an understanding of the sacred nature of this place as well as the continued



mistreatment of it by others. The burial mounds are physical representations of a buried past – a past Peter can only understand by entering rural spaces. We see characters physically placing themselves in the natural environment in order to receive clarity and in order to heal. After his naming ceremony and while on his way back to Atlanta and Cache, Peter stops at a rest station during a sudden rain storm. Passing the restrooms, he walks towards the woods, referring to them as “another shelter” (77). He finds himself praying, asking God or Master of Breath if going to see Cache is the right decision. He unrolls a cigarette and spreads the tobacco in a ceremonious pattern – “first to the east, then north, then west and south” (78). This brief detour into nature, off the path he is on to the urban space is a common occurrence for Peter in the text.

Livingston provides several images of the ailing earth alongside ailing characters. Directly following the moment at the highway rest stop, we see the first mention of AIDS, as Peter recalls seeing a poster at the clinic that said, “*The earth has acquired an immune dysfunction. We are all living with AIDS*” (78). Peter asks the spirits to ultimately help him in his understanding of Cache’s disease, in his acceptance of what this means for both of them. What this ends up meaning for Peter is that he must continue to make a choice between two spaces – the urban and rural. Due to his illness, Cache must remain in the urban space for treatment. Throughout the novel, Peter must choose between his family/heritage in the rural space and Cache in the urban space, a dynamic at play when Pucha passes away and Peter returns home in order to be there for his family and assist in the various preparations and ceremonies. During this time, Cache feels himself getting worse but refuses to tell Peter in fear that he’ll choose to stay with Cache, keeping him from his family. When Cache doesn’t attend Pucha’s funeral, Peter believes it to be

because Cache has a fear of death when in reality he feels his own sickness near, describing his “body, mind, and spirit” as telling him to stay home (157). Even as Cache receives news of his diagnosis worsening, he refuses to tell Peter and drag him away from the rural space and back into the urban. It’s clear in this moment that Cache has an understanding of Peter’s need to be in the rural space, alongside his family. A significant moment in the text occurs when Peter and Cache finally decide to take Cache home – home meaning Hoyet, to Peter’s family in the rural environment. This removal from the urban space marks a major transition in the novel in Peter and Cache’s relationship and in Cache’s diagnosis/health. It’s also marks the moment Peter chooses to finally rely on the things that give him strength; his family, his ancestors, his heritage, and his relationship to the natural world.

We see this reliance on nature for healing again at the end of the text, three months after Cache passes away, when Granny Weave forces Peter to walk to the creek. After witnessing her grandson stagnate in grief, Granny Weave tells Peter he needs a walk and proceeds to lead him to the creek where she plunges into the cold current. Having no other choice, Peter reluctantly joins her in the water. During their second walk to the creek, Granny Weave tells Peter a story of letting go and then proceeds to take another dip in the water. The water in this moment is cold and forward moving. Upon their third walk to the creek, Peter finally confronts his grandmother on her intentions, where they both cry and have a silent exchange of understanding. This time it’s Peter who initiates the climb down into the water, where Granny Weave sits and allows the water to “have its time with him” (196). This repetitive ceremony of submerging themselves in the creek is described as “bathing” by Granny Weave, “not swimming. It

was a remedy Granny prescribed for their grief, both having lost the one most loved” (195). Granny Weave claims that the cold water “shocks you, wakes you up,” and “makes you feel better” (197). On the fourth day to the creek, Peter confides in Granny Weave that he is unsure of what to do now that Cache is gone. He is seeking answers, but can’t seem to find or hear any. With this uncertainty, he once again turns to both nature and his ancestors for answers. Turning to the burial mounds, Peter lays out tobacco before asking for guidance, but it isn’t until the third day when he finally receives an answer – that Oklahoma is a good direction, that he must follow in the footsteps of his ancestors (203). We see him attempt to understand this past throughout the novel by walking the land.

For Peter, walking the land allows him to process his grief after the loss of both Pucha and Cache. In this space, he finds comfort in seeking answers from his ancestors whereas in urban spaces, we see him struggle with his loyalty to heritage and tradition. Within nature, he is able to find clarity and understand what is expected of him. His decision or calling to walk the Trail of Tears with Pond is a reflection of this. The Trail of Tears holds historic pain for Peter and his family, something Livingston touches on briefly in the novel. These removals were carried out on foot, requiring individuals to walk thousands of miles to a space called “Indian Territory” – what is known as present-day Oklahoma. Peter’s choice to walk this trail represents a reclaiming of his past. This is where Griffin’s third moment of the migration narrative comes into play. Peter experiences two moments of the migration narrative – an event that propels an action northward and the negotiation of the urban space. We see him negotiate the urban space during his movement between it and the rural spaces of the novel. The event that propels

him northward, to Oklahoma, is his connection to his ancestry. Griffin claims a major part of the migration narrative is the struggle to hold onto one's ancestor/history once leaving the home space (Griffin 8). We see this with Peter as he's torn between being with Cache in the urban space of Georgia and with his family in the rural space of Florida. Throughout the novel, Peter struggles with an underlying understanding that he needs to honor his people's traditions. He reveals in conversations with both Caroline and the Mico that he must return "home" to Oklahoma in order to better understand where he comes from. It makes sense that Pond, a character whose entire existence is a struggle to discover who he truly is, would be Peter's companion on this historic/tragic walking of the land.

Their walking of the Trail of Tears is a collective experience. At the start of their journey, Pond and Peter discuss why they're walking and who they're walking with and for. Pond compares himself to Spanish moss, claiming that he "sort of gets by, taking nutrients from the air, without any real roots" (210). He then reveals that he's walking to "try and find the connections," to which Peter tells him that they aren't walking alone, even when they look around and don't see anyone (210). Peter tells him of the wolves walking with them, a call back to his name Hokkolv Yahv or Two Wolves. Peter tells Pond that he sees Cache and is walking towards him. Pond responds, telling Peter that he's walking for his parents and for his real mom and dad. They each list off various family members, including ones they haven't met. When Pond says baby Cashley, Peter adds "for all the babies. And the ancestors. For my Pucha" (211). Remembering and honoring their ancestors is a major motivation for their journey. We see this when Pond claims he's walking for "the five civilized tribes" and for "the tribes that didn't get

recognized as either civilized or non-civilized,” claiming, “they still got moved. They still took the long walk” (211). Peter responds saying, “So we’re walking for all those people who were moved,” and “the ones who stayed” (211). This reflection on his past leaves Peter feeling both “burdened and proud to be alive” (211). In this moment, we also see the image of the owl return. After claiming that they’re “walking to remember our relations,” Peter sees a great horned owl fly over their heads and settle in a red oak tree, facing the path they would follow (212). As Peter turns his ear to listen, he remembers Pucha telling him the owl was a messenger. Throughout the novel Peter believes the owl to be a messenger of death but as he begins this journey, he’s intently listening for a different message.

This re-walking of the Trail of Tears is not the first journey or path that Peter finds himself on. Roads and highways play a significant role in the text for Peter. We see him breaking down and struggling to stay on them, sidetracking off them, using them to move both closer and further away from those he loves, and turning to them in hopes of finding answers. As previously mentioned in this essay, Peter uses the highway to transition between the rural and urban spaces; between his family and Cache. Roads and highways represent choice and transition for Peter. It’s worth noting that the novel begins and ends with Peter on a highway; both times he is a passenger of sorts. At the opening of the novel, Peter is a passenger as Cache drives them down the coast for a weekend getaway. This brief trip is one of the final memories they create together before Cache’s health begins to rapidly deteriorate. It’s an opportunity for Peter to reach a final understanding of what’s happening to Cache and what’s about to happen. At the close of the novel, Peter is one of many passengers, surrounded by his ancestors as he walks to

discover who he is through where he is from. This highway represents a move towards tradition and his heritage. While these two highways/journeys move in opposite physical directions, they both lead Peter closer to acceptance and understanding. His differing experiences on these two highways speak to his ability to transition between and exist in both the rural and urban spaces of the novel.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

While the writing of this project technically began in two separate American literature graduate seminars, the true spirit of it originated in a survey course during my undergraduate education. It was within this course titled, “American Literature: Major Works of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” where I read twelve books written by twelve white authors and one short story written by one person of color – surprisingly, a woman of color. The lack of representation on this course’s reading list is what led me to pursue graduate school in the first place – I wanted to read literature that included and represented the American experience. This meant reading texts by and about people of color, of both genders, and of all sexual orientations. This project includes three works of American literature that when placed alongside the traditional canon – which is still predominately representative of white voices and experiences – would be considered vastly different. While I have drawn connections between the experiences within each text, each represents a unique meditation on space and place within American literature as it pertains to different populations of people of color. This project points out the importance of paying attention to the experiences of people of color within traditionally white spaces, both historically and in the present. It looks at the removal, refusal to grant, and forced occupation of certain physical and metaphorical spaces within multicultural literature.

When it came to thinking about the larger conversation that this project is attempting to participate in, I struggled. Primarily this is because two of my texts are relatively new, with not a lot of scholarship written on them. I initially thought I was

participating in an eco-critical conversation about American literature but then I quickly realized that the scholarship wasn't addressing the issues of race and environment and place in the ways that my close passage analysis was attempting to do within this project. Because eco-critical work addresses concerns around global environmental crises and ways literature can point to solutions, I needed a theoretical framework that looked at nature, space, place, and environment while also addressing racism. It was in this moment that I recognized I was actually at the beginning of entering into a conversation on contemporary/multicultural literature, on American literature, and on what these look like, drawing on the traditions of each. For example, in regard to Hernandez, I thought about genre which led to questions about form: what is a documentary novel? How does Hernandez play with this? How can something be fiction and true? As stated previously, a major thread throughout all of my novels is the removal and refusal of people of color or other marginalized groups from certain spaces. My project also looks at the movement between spaces and how that affects or informs certain things about one's identity. This is where the migration narrative comes in. Using Farah Jasmine Griffin's definition and breakdown of this tradition, I analyze the movement of individuals within two of the novels. I look at their experiences within these changing spaces and how that informs or creates new elements of their identities. Ultimately, I realized I was participating in a larger conversation about disrupting conventions of American literature, attempting to push at questions such as; what does multicultural literature look like? What does American literature look like? And why should we read these texts?

In recognizing that this project is both a process and a milestone, there are several things I would do differently – starting with finding a theoretical approach first. I believe



starting with the research instead of the specific analysis I had already done might have helped the drafting process of this project. Keeping this in mind and in moving forward with this project, I would like to further explore the use of the migration narrative in each text, maybe focusing on *Owls Don't Have to Mean Death*. My experience with reading multicultural literature has led me to realize that the majority of these texts involve some form of migration or movement into unfamiliar space. I would like to take this tradition and apply it to the migration experiences of other marginalized groups, such as Native Americans. In a different version of this project I would have liked to apply Griffin's third moment of the migration narrative to Hernandez's text, focusing solely on one's confrontation with their new space. While Hernandez's text does not have a confrontation of the urban space, individuals do confront changes in rural settings between Mexico and California. I would like to use this form of Griffin's definition to work through the migratory experiences of the individuals within Hernandez's text. I would also like to parse out the role of memory in the creation of one's identity. Each text uses reflection to reveal certain things about one's identity; it would be interesting to focus an entire portion of this project on how each author does this. I would also like to dive deeper into the role of the urban space/built environment in the development of one's identity. While the importance of the natural environment is explored in each chapter, a broader meditation on the role of the urban environment is still necessary. In each text, there is a transition into this urban space, away from the rural/natural environment. It would be worth further exploring how this transition into the urban space defines one's identity, especially within the context of being American or existing in "American" spaces.

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