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Out of Eden: Old South, Post-South and Ur-South in Sara Taylor's *The Shore*

Abstract: Sara Taylor's *The Shore* is ex-centric in many ways. As for the setting, it geographically and socially depicts a fringe of the already-peripheral Appalachian culture, shedding a new and interesting light on the Southern "sense of place" through the use of magical-realistic elements that actually connect characters and landscape. Geography, though, is but the palimpsest. The book's liminality is further reinforced by the fact that *The Shore*'s long and violent familiar history is chiefly narrated through the voices of six generations of women struggling not to be silenced by the all-embracing southern patriarchy. Considering both the psycho-geographical and socio-historical dimensions described by Taylor, this essay will show how *The Shore* stands as a counter-dynastic novel giving a voice to those who were excluded from the South's self-projected image-in-place. Also, through its comprehensive outlook on southern history, the novel chronicles the (frustrated) effort to overcome postmodern placelessness via an-other way of constructing southern identity.

Keywords: Sara Taylor; US South; Post-South; Southern Gothic; Pastoralism; Chronotope; Poor Whites; Postmodernism; Magical Realism; Patriarchy

"But everybody's bones are just holy branches
Cast from trees to cut patterns in the world
And in time we find some shelter,
spill our leaves and then sleep in the earth
And when we're there we'll belong
'cause the earth don't give a damn if you're lost"
—Radical Face, "Holy Branches"

The question of the survival of southern literature in the post-modern age is still one of the most debated topics among southern studies scholars. This is hardly surprising. The literary culture that found its splendor through a strong connection with a specific history and locale during the Renaissance was inevitably doomed to re-think and re-place itself when the relatively solid monolith of the modern and late-modern eras gave way to the hyperconnected, fluid paradigms of contemporary times. The question, of course, remains open. It is impossible to trace a single mode in which southern literature responded to the ontological and epistemological challenges that post-modernity forced on it. The task exceeds my ability, and it would require far more than a single essay to find an adequate answer.

What I will try in this article is to describe how a contemporary novel by a young author, Sara Taylor's *The Shore* (2015), responds to these challenges by addressing some classic forms and motifs of southern literature through a more than two-century-long family saga (1876-2143). Set on a group of islands off the coast of Virginia, *The Shore* is a magical-realistic account of the South's troubled history from a peripheral point of view, mostly conveyed through the eyes of two tightly intertwined families' six generations of women. The novel's main concerns – time, space and family – firmly

belong to the Renaissance tradition and, by following them from the Reconstruction to a post-apocalyptic future, Taylor shows their alteration in correspondence with an evolving culture. But, in doing so, *The Shore* also reaffirms these motifs' substantial permanence through the centuries, leading to some conceptual ambiguities. In the long-lasting debate between those who oppose an essentialist vision of the South and those who see a seamless connection between the Renaissance and postmodern southern writers, Taylor seems to take a middle road between these alignments.

Reading a contemporary southern writer only through their alleged descentance from the established canon can lead to the aporia according to which, as Matthew Guinn wrote, "a contemporary author from the region can be southern or postmodern but not both" (x). On the other hand, by seeking only the points of discontinuity between an author and the southern literary tradition, one could easily overlook how many southern writers of the new generation are actively engaging in a conversation with their artistic mothers and fathers in order to expand the literary canon without necessarily cutting clean from the past. I will not touch on this delicate matter, partly because I feel that an either/or approach would not do justice to its complexities, partly because I do not want to engage in a strictly theoretical exercise. In other words, rather than to see if *The Shore* fits either stance, I will discuss some elements from the novel in order to see how some traditional tenets of southern literature are conserved or transgressed. By putting Taylor's book at the center, it is possible to trace a sort of micro literary history; to see how a quintessentially southern form like the "genealogical" novel survived the cultural trauma of post-modernity by re-inventing itself and keeping at the same time an open dialogue with its illustrious predecessors. In order to do so, I will analyze the novel chiefly through the lenses of a geocentric, Bakhtinian reading, grounding (no pun intended) my considerations on the quality of spaces, the kind of societal order they accommodate, and the way characters interact with them.

Since geography has a pivotal role in this study, placing the novel on the map of the US South is the first thing to do. The Shore is a group of small barrier islands "off the coast of Virginia and just south of Maryland, trailing out into the Atlantic Ocean like someone's dripped paint" (Taylor 6). This locale hosts a fringe of the nearby (and already peripheral) Appalachian culture, and its marginality is further reinforced early on in the novel: "people say that the government doesn't even remember we're here, that we get left off when they draw the maps" (7), one of the characters affirms. The otherness usually associated with Appalachia is then strengthened not only by the geographical element (after all, these islands are the last outpost of the South before the Atlantic Ocean) but also by the alleged governmental attitude towards the Shore and its inhabitants. If, as Michael D. Shapiro wrote in *Appalachia on Our Mind*, the Appalachian Mountains were considered a kind of "terra incognita" (5) for a long time, then the Shore is by all means a *terra obliterata*, a forgotten land. Erasure, considered in the general sense of a perhaps violent eradication (of a people and a culture), is indeed a major theme of the novel. The islands and their communities face a constant threat of extinction throughout the stories narrated, and much of Taylor's effort is spent in the description of these people's often desperate fight for survival and affirmation in a largely hostile environment. Moreover, since *The Shore* clearly takes sides with the

matriarchal, feminine element, the most important and tragic erasure it denounces is the one perpetrated by the South's patriarchal culture at the expense of women. I will return to this later on.

The novel's setting is then presented ambiguously. It possesses the characteristics of an almost virgin pastoral haven: its isolation is also a defense against the relentless advancement of modernity, the most frequent threat to the traditional Edenic-pastoral order. But the Shore can also be read as another representation of the classic garden-machine dichotomy. The contrast between the two, as described by Leo Marx's seminal study on the subject, is given great relevance in the novel's dynamics, as we see the islands and their inhabitants being swallowed by the ominous presence of industry in this otherwise untamed natural paradise. The potential of Taylor's idyll is marred by the proximity of three "chicken plants," a kind of spectral presence evoked only by their disgusting stench and by the soul-destroying debasement of the people that work there. The co-presence of a mythical-Edenic motif and the hellish (though indirect) depiction of industry that is typical of the South's agrarian tradition is perfectly clear in this description courtesy of Benny, a member of the large Slater-Day lineage narrating his share of the families' history in 1981:

I used to imagine I was King Arthur going to Avalon, and none of the city mess could follow me. It wasn't just the trip away in reverse ... It was all soft and green, and no one could tell me that the Shore wasn't the most beautiful place on the face of God's earth ... Then a few minutes later I smell it: not quite as bad as hogs, but it makes you want to never face a bowl of chicken soup again. The smell hangs with me for a few miles once I'm past the first chicken plant, and every bit of me knows I'm home. (Taylor 171-172, 173)

The plants' stench is a recurring element in the sections of the novel set in contemporary times, and it is usually paired up with bucolic descriptions of the environment, so as to maintain substantial ambiguity. But, judging from Benny's words, it is precisely the simultaneous presence of garden *and* machine that gives the Shore its sense of place (at least in the sections set in contemporary and near-contemporary times). As disgusting and debasing as they are, the plants are unequivocally part of the *genius loci* – Taylor's take on traditional pastoral nostalgia produces a spoiled environment rather than a prelapsarian Eden, a heterogeneous space in which the precarious balance between the conflicting elements of nature and technology is perpetually maintained in a kind of dynamic equilibrium.

Though framed in a condition of decline, the Shore's idyllic qualities are reaffirmed when we consider the novel's long timespan (from a pre-modern South to a post-apocalyptic one), but an entirely post-human perspective it is not applicable to the text due to its strong anthropocentrism. After all, in spite of the narratorial voice's continuous shifts between first, second and third-person, the facts presented in the novel are always filtered through a human conscience, with matters of family and blood firmly in the center. Yet, the suggestion to look beyond the narrow limits of the human lifespan in search of a bigger and better picture is not only implied in the novel's genealogical form, but also conveyed through the recurring symbol of oyster shells.

Taylor frequently writes that these fossil remains form huge banks on the

Shore and sometimes also function as roads – the first chapter alone, “Target Practice,” contains five mentions of this geographical peculiarity (4, 13, 20, 21), including the evocative “oyster-shell road” (4). Fossils, a typical feature of the nearby Appalachian region due to its marine-sedimentary origin, function in *The Shore* like they do in “Trilobites,” a short story by West Virginian writer Breece D’J Pancake. In this story an estranged young man seeks a deeper connection with and understanding of his surroundings by hunting the Appalachian hills for fossils. “It took over a million years to make that smooth little hill, and I’ve looked all over it for trilobites,” writes Pancake, also adding: “I think how it has always been there and always will be, at least for as long as it matters” (21). Functioning both as a concrete and metaphorical link to the land, fossils may in a way reinforce the feeling of permanence rhetorically connected to the traditional southern pastoral mode and the sense of place it creates: they are literally part of the ground on which Pancake and Taylor’s lonely and alienated characters stand (and take their stand). But since *The Shore*’s space is often characterized by elements of heterogeneity and polysemy, the oyster shells can also and paradoxically be a metaphor for the opposite: the inevitable erasure of history. By forcing a focus on deep time (that is: geologic time) rather than on human life alone, they are a *memento mori*, destroying the illusion of timelessness associated with the pastoral ideal. As a matter of fact, and in spite of Taylor’s meticulousness in creating a complex family tree, the only enduring character of the novel is the archipelago itself.¹

But, in spite of the subterranean dark side and meaning of the Shore, the islands are initially presented as an almost metaphysical paradise. “The Shore is flat as a fried egg; on a clear day from our upside porch it feels like you can see into tomorrow” (Taylor 6), says Chloe, first narrator of the novel and one of the few characters given more than a single chapter in the book – a description that hints at the dreamy atmosphere evoked by the place (that comes to resemble some kind of dreamscape in which the characters’ interiorities meet and mix with the locale), and that also represents another subtle expression of the desire for permanence that characterizes every southern pastoral reverie. The little girl goes on to say: “We take the force out of the hurricanes, grow so much food that a lot of it rots on the vine because there’s too much to pick or eat” (Taylor 6). Though Chloe’s story abruptly shows its hidden, darkest side, the Shore is by all means a self-sufficient, abundant simulacrum of the garden of Eden. Isolation from the chaotic mainland and the strong connection to the island that the inhabitants feel elicit a comparison with Bakhtin’s Idyllic chronotope, the one in which, as the Russian theoretician posits, we find

an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory ... Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers live, and where one’s children and grandchildren will live ... The unity of the life of generations (in general, the life of men) is in most instances primarily defined by the *unity of place*, by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable. (225)

¹ As a curious (and perhaps frivolous) confirmation of the symbolic power held by the shells in the book, it is probably interesting to note that the first edition cover of *The Shore* depicts an assortment of sea shells barely hiding a bloody human tooth.

Even if the lives depicted in *The Shore* are more often than not only pseudo-idyllic, with grim and unsettling subtexts hiding right underneath the surface of things, the “fastening-down” mentioned by Bakhtin is nonetheless a strong motif. Also, the islanders’ intimate bond with their place is the element from which the magical-realistic elements of the book derives. As we come to discover, some members of the Slater-Lumsden branch of the family are able to bend nature to their will, functioning as keepers and defenders of the Shore. They are able to heal the ground, control the rains and stop potentially dangerous storms coming from the ocean. This is indeed an original take on the quintessentially pastoral “middle ground” as described by Leo Marx. Introduced by another typical motif of the mode – the “echo” (a metaphor for reciprocity between human and non-human) – the middle ground is defined by Marx as the “place” where the pastoral ideal is located, a space “somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendental relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (Marx 23). This interpretation reveals a metaphysical side of the connection between man and place that, in the case of Taylor’s novel, becomes a supernatural link that allows some of her characters (of course, the ones whose roots are firmly and deeply planted in the islands’ ground) to partake in the non-human. These people, directly descending from the witch-matriarch Medora Slater, symbolize the ultimate and utopian pastoral dream of a perfect continuity between people and nature; they are hybrid beings existing somewhere between the raw forces of the planet and civilization, a literal incarnation of Marx’s “middle ground.” But, just like the symbolic presence of the oyster shells, the magical-realistic vein of *The Shore* functions as a twofold rhetorical strategy, both strengthening and threatening the pastoral permanence that it suggests. As Rawdon Wilson writes in his essay titled “The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism,” one of the most interesting features of the genre is the way in which it brings together different kinds of literary spaces: the “actual” space of reality, the surrealist space of the unconscious and the mythic space of folklore (the latter being represented, in the case of Taylor’s novel, by the evoked pastoral realm). “Magical realism focuses the problem of fictional space. It does this by suggesting a model of how different geometries, inscribing boundaries that fold and refold like quicksilver, can superimpose themselves upon one another” (Wilson 210). As in Gabriel García Márquez, the author from whom Wilson’s analysis originates, this practice is inherently political because it aims at inscribing (or “superimposing,” as Wilson writes) the ex-centric onto an ideological center – which is precisely what *The Shore*, through its portrayal of a peripheral community and matriarchal society, does in relation to the monolith of southern male-dominated culture. But, as this ideological space gradually recedes under the pressure of the alienating forces of progress and patriarchal oppression, Taylor also clearly reveals its fragility, implicitly denouncing the possibility of a southern maternal Arcady as a figment of the imagination, or worse, a delusion. The novel’s strong southern gothic (and affectedly misogynistic) undertow clearly reinforce the suspicion that such Edenic equilibrium will not hold – and hold it will not.

As we progress through it, touching more and more on the contemporary, *The Shore* presents us with increasingly violent and desperate situations: physical and psychological abuse, rape, domestic violence, small-time criminality and homicide become a cruel leitmotiv for these characters. With few exceptions, the novel’s many

family nuclei are all dysfunctional in a greater or lesser degree. Plagued by drug abuse, depression and (above all) brutal masculinity, they sometimes resemble a bleak, overtly stereotypical (but not at all ironic) representation of the worst “white-trash” culture. Although the psycho-geographical premises seem to direct everything in this novel towards uniqueness and exception, these islands sometimes resemble more a synecdoche of the South as a whole than a hyperbole of the region’s agrarian identity. Or rather, in the real-and-imagined space of *The Shore*, we find an enhanced counterpart of both the South’s pastoral self-image and its darker social and anthropological aspects. The hybrid nature of this place extends far over the limits of the traditional symbolic struggle between nature and technology – it is as much a dreamscape as it is a nightmariscape, a geography of fear and violence where natural splendor and opulence are heightened, but so are the darkest corners of human possibilities.

Writing from the periphery (actually the edge) of southeastern culture allows Taylor to maintain a detached, if still schizophrenic, outlook on the region. The deep ambiguities recorded by the writer are clearly inscribed in the families’ history right from the beginning. In the fourth (but chronologically first, being set in 1876) chapter, tellingly titled “Out of Eden,” the onset of *The Shore*’s complex family history begins with the story of Medora Slater, the novel’s mythical matriarch. Medora, the bi-racial daughter of a highly-stereotypical southern planter (rich, racist, violent and alcoholic) plans her escape from the gothic decadence of his father’s mansion in Franklin County, Kentucky – a vanishing symbol of the decaying remains of the Old South. She teams up with an equally stereotypical carpetbagger from Boston, with whom she fakes a marriage proposal. But Medora does not just want to break free from her father’s oppressive authority; she seeks revenge. Just before leaving for the Shore with her faux-husband, she poisons one of the many bourbon bottles in Slater’s cellar, setting up a perfect murder. The ritual killing of the father as a symbolic repudiation of the imposed order of the traditional South will reappear again in the family lineage, but this violent act of emancipation also seems to carry a stigma, a kind of damnation. On the one hand, Medora’s parable is in a way a faithful re-enactment of the southern agrarian utopia: through landownership she finally crowns her dreams of freedom and independence; but, again, the pastoral realm she creates is destined to crumble. As the tension between the pretend spouses rises, she falls victim to male violence for the second time: after a particularly heated argument, her con-man husband throws her into the fireplace and Medora, in flames and screaming, disappears in the swamp that surrounds her home.

The pattern drawn by this character’s parable is both centrifugal and centripetal with respect to the traditional pastoral order. As a woman (and daughter of a Shawnee Native), her participation in the perfectly-engineered plantation life is only apparent. Everything in Medora is ex-centric, unable to conform to the rigid structures of the Old South: the narrator says she is “tortured into the form of a Southern lady much in the way a French gardener would shape a box hedge” (Taylor 64). It has been noted how “Arcadia at its most glorious is an entrapment” (MacKethan 6), and in Medora’s case, this sense of entrapment that from a traditional point of view is to be associated with the conservative romanticization of the past, becomes a concrete prison rather than just a retrospective psychological attitude. Running away from the gothic enclosure of her

father's home is but a step towards the re-creation of that same order, and as a result Medora finds herself an outsider once again. Too late she understands that, no matter what she does or how far she runs, she will always be fettered by the all-encompassing southern patriarchy.

It should then not come as a surprise that Medora will find her true freedom only in the recesses of the swamp where she hides after the fire incident. The Shore, although a peripheral and isolated location, is not enough for this character's metaphorical resurrection; to really escape, she needs to totally withdraw from civilization. Even if a swamp is a poor substitute for a new Eden, this apparently unwholesome place functions in the novel as a redemptive locale, preparing Medora for her finally triumphant comeback. Since the first woman of *The Shore* has all the characteristics of a quasi-mythic matriarch, her story replicates in a way the legendary path of the first Virginian settlers. In what is still today an exhaustive and concise analysis of the myth of the southern pastoral, *The Dispossessed Garden*, Lewis P. Simpson pairs up this mode with the motif of the errand, discriminating between New England's "errand of the covenant" and Virginia's "prelapsarian" errand. The second one, lacking the strict puritan ethic of the former, is defined by Simpson as "an errand into an open, prelapsarian, self-yielding paradise where [the settlers] would be made regenerate by entering into a redemptive relationship with a new and abounding earth" (15). Even if Taylor did not consciously build this mythic palimpsest for Medora (though I am sure she did), she stands in the book as a founding mother, an American Eve whose actions give birth to a new, different generation. Taylor writes how Medora would later remember the moment of her final liberation "as a turning point, another rebirth in a life full of rebirths" (Taylor 165), confirming that this character has escaped the fallen world and has been made whole again. Her quest for the Garden is finally over when she dethrones her abusive husband by castrating him (something she had already done before to her father's beloved stallion) and so depriving him of the possibility to have "pure-blooded children" (Taylor 90) – a physical and symbolical gesture of sterilization directed towards the male-dominated, whitewashed social order of the Old South. The Shore then ideally becomes another promised land, a haven for a different society made for those who had found the South's "self-yielding" paradise to be just another entrapment.

I have tried to present Medora's part of the story and its symbolical implications in detail because her parable is like a mold for the other character's lives. In greater or lesser degree, her descendants will be destined (or doomed) to follow her path of fall and (sometimes) ascension again and again. The narrative structure of the book as a whole tends to circularity, conforming to Bakhtin's description of the idyllic chronotope time frame. Thanks to the focus being on a particular, well-defined space, temporal boundaries tend to be erased – a feeling that is further reinforced by the non-linear fashion through which the events are presented by the author. But, as the stories approach the present day, and as is to be expected, things get more intricate. Modern southern novels have a notoriously complicated relationship with time (and hence psychic and ideological structures), and *The Shore* is not an exception. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the scrambling and rearranging of linear narration, far from being just a virtuoso exercise,

is a rhetorical hint at the author's metaphysics (66). The French philosopher poignantly defined Faulkner's metaphysics of time as a "vitesse glacée" (Sartre 67), a frozen speed at the heart of things, a notion that can also be used for Taylor's novel, although with some differences. On the one hand, the perpetual feeling of the "here-and-now" (the perception of an everlasting present caused by the weakening of time) creates something of a sense of déjà vu, a repetition of an already-established pattern – the never-ending circularity of the idyll that revolves but does not evolve. On the other hand, the backbone of the story as laid down by the first member of the family is not just passively re-enacted throughout the book. The mythic palimpsest is subjected to a set of variations just like in the musical meaning of the term: the original material is clearly recognizable, but changes are made as the score is played. Because of this, Taylor's speed is not congealed as is the case, according to Sartre, in Faulkner, but is, rather, a viscous fluid that seeps through the cracks of time.

This somewhat unpredictable movement of the mythic elements in the novel can be explained thanks to the different *milieu* in which the two authors live and write. If, as Sartre said, Faulkner's metaphysics is mainly concerned with time (and we can agree on this to a certain extent), Taylor's can perhaps be better described as a metaphysics of people-in-place, or a transcendental investigation of that hazy and ubiquitous southern letters' tenet that is the sense of place. By choosing to place her novel right on the margin, Taylor is undoubtedly following the southern tradition of the regional novel (and the permanence of some classic pastoral-gothic motives suggests some kind of continuity between *The Shore* and southern modernism). But *The Shore* cannot just be considered a sterile exercise in mannerism. A great deal of the novel's focus is on contemporary and near-contemporary times (more than half of the chapters cover the 1980s-2010s timespan), a demonstration that Taylor, as Walker Percy wrote, is interested in "a very concrete man who is located in a very concrete place and time" (*Signposts* 190) – or, better, a very concrete woman in a very concrete place and time. As Martyn Bone has demonstrated in his brilliant essay, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*, the agrarian (or pseudo-agrarian) place and time of southern modernism was progressively left behind by novelists like Percy in order to embrace a different relationship with space and identity: one in which the fluidity and constant ontological uncertainties of the postmodern condition have a significant impact on the way people live and understand their socio-spatial connections.² Discussing the possible role of southern culture (and the literature it produces) in this postmodern world, Charles Reagan Wilson writes:

Postmodern regionalism, to state my argument, involves the reinterpretation of traditional American regions, based on understanding the operation of knowledge and power at the local level. It is based in the appreciation of local places, of how individuality is constructed, often using materials close at hand. In the process of this reinterpretation, regional identities are not rejected but reconfigured. (154)

2 Bone takes an historical-geographical materialistic approach in his essay, justifying the movement towards a post-southern sense of place through the displacement of traditional agricultural property. This economic process, although never openly addressed, is indeed a subterranean presence in the contemporary sections of Taylor's novel, in which the protagonists mostly belong to working-class or poor white sociocultural backgrounds.

This process of reconfiguration, through which old patterns are bent and rewritten to accommodate a new way of looking at a society-in-place, can again be described with the help of Walker Percy, whose *The Moviegoer* stands as a fundamental work in understanding the shift from a traditional to a post-southern sense of place. Binx Bolling, “man without qualities” and the novel’s protagonist, classifies the events of his almost-uneventful life through the categories of “repetition” and “rotation.” A repetition, he says, is “the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed” (Percy, *Moviegoer* 79), while a rotation is defined as “the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new” (144). These existential categories are particularly exciting for Bolling when they happen in conjunction, when, in other words, a rotatory movement brings with it some kind of repetition – sameness embedded in divergence. An example from Taylor’s novel is Chole’s re-enactment of her great-great-great grandmother’s attack on patriarchy (she kills and castrates a young man who sexually assaulted her little sister). It is a courageous, although brutal, act of liberation just like Medora’s was. But this time everything redeeming is absent from the scene; there is no rejuvenating wilderness to hide in, nor a mythic, redemptive violence in action. The circularity that tended to accommodate every aspect of life to the safe rhythm of the idyll is frequently broken into a spiral that swallows the lives of these characters. In accordance with Bone’s thesis, being in the post-southern (dis)order³ does not necessarily imply an exhaustion of the old myths and themes, but it often implies the inability to live up to these narrations, and be consequently riddled with loss and confusion.

This explains in a way the different trajectories that the stories draw on the existential map of the Shore in the contemporary chapters. Taylor’s characters are torn between the desire to re-enact the Edenic order established by the myth and the impossibility of doing so in a rapidly changing world that drifts away from the crystallized palimpsests of the South’s “dream of Arcady,” as MacKethan labels it. This creates a cognitive dissonance between the sense of place strongly conveyed by the novel and the postmodern placelessness that, according to Martyn Bone, characterizes southern literature from the 1960s on, further problematized by the novel’s eminently feminine point of view. This is surely one of the main reasons for the progressive deterioration of the pastoral ideal in the book: writing from the periphery, on a shifting “ground” created by the merging of a mythic-psychological landscape and the actual societal relations enacted in it, Taylor dramatizes women’s more or less complete inability to actively partake in contemporary southern identity by playing any role but that of the sacrificial victim. Women, who already had a purely symbolic role in a society characterized, as W. J. Cash wrote, by a strong but empty sense of “gineolatry” (86) – something that we can find, although largely adulterated, in Medora’s story

3 As Fredric Jameson writes in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: “In that simpler phenomenological or regional sense, place in the United States no longer exists, or, more precisely, it exists at a much feebler level, surcharged by ... [an] increasingly abstract ... power network” (405). If the true value of place (and the sense of identity it gives) is to be rediscovered again and again in relation to the larger, “increasingly abstract” postmodern power network, the process of “reconfiguration” mentioned by Charles Reagan Wilson can be considered as a constant oscillation between order and disorder, depending on the individual’s provisional understanding of the aforementioned relations.

– fare no better (actually, they fare much, much worse) when that society is aloof, unhinged, paralyzed between the weight of history and the contemporary *unheimlich* induced by the corrosion of the sense of place. A famous southern authoress once wrote: “Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too” (Welty 54). In *The Shore*, the atomized, clueless and frustrated society that evolved from the almost-perfect idyll of the mythic forefathers gives vent to its rage, it is women who pay the highest price for it.

The violent paralysis in which post-southern culture seems to be trapped in this novel finds some correspondence in the works of other contemporary southern writers. Mary Miller's *Always Happy Hour* frames a less gruesome but equally bleak picture of women's lives in the South, and C. E. Morgan's *The Sport of Kings* shows a similar “scapegoat logic” in dealing with the effects of a displaced society on southern women – I could add Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* to the list, but in this novel the mythic background buoys up the protagonist and her animal counterpart China, although the depiction of femininity is heavily tinged with gruesome undertones. A comparison worth making is with Cormac McCarthy, not only because McCarthy, like Taylor, is clearly devoted to the kind of postmodern regionalism described by Charles Reagan Wilson, but mainly because his latest novel, *The Road*, shares *The Shore*'s vision in that it places southern society in a post-apocalyptic setting. To my knowledge, this is one of the few southern novels to do so, together perhaps with Omar El Akkad's *American War*, Frank Owen's *South*, and Holly Goddard Jones's *The Salt Line*. Moving from a post-southern to a post-apocalyptic setting implies a speculation about southern society's destiny, and also an investigation into its inner workings. As McCarthy wrote in *The Road*, “Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made” (274).

McCarthy's novel possesses a perhaps more straightforward symbolism when we associate it with traditional southern pastoral motifs. The dying nature portrayed in *The Road* can be immediately linked to an overturning of Lewis P. Simpson's “redemptive” power associated with the Virginian errand. The Garden has become a ghastly wasteland populated by “bloodcults” and survivors, a Hobbesian state of nature where people “make beasts of themselves,” to half-quote Samuel Johnson's famous aphorism. But in this ultimate errand into the hyperbolic wilderness-wasteland of the world's end, McCarthy shows a possible redemption (the boy as the last remnant of purity in an otherwise totally corrupted world), and, unlike many of his works, *The Road* actually contains a message of hope for the future. By “carrying the fire,” that is, keeping the memories of the old days alive, the father and son become post-apocalyptic pioneers bound to ignite a new light in the darkness of the present (a frequent trope in McCarthy). Arguably, the author suggests that the only way out of the radical placelessness of the post-southern condition, of which the barren landscape of the novel is but a geo-allegorical representation, is by actually going back to the prelapsarian pastoral myths. An act that fulfills Allen Tate's final proposition in “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” in which the poet urged Southerners to go back to their traditions “to re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life”⁴ (175). As Chris Walsh rightly says in “The Post-southern Sense of Place in *The*

4 Michael Kreyling uses Tate's statement (in which the poet himself seems dubious about his

Road,” in this novel the post-South is redeemed in the end through the evocation of a pristine, mythic South. According to Walsh, the post-apocalyptic (and thus entirely anti-pastoral in its appearance) locale of *The Road* is re-inscribed into the “most cherished geocentric American myth of the frontier” (54) through the father’s “old stories of courage and justice” (McCarthy 41) and, more generally, through the protagonists’ quest for a “new physical, imaginative and spatial beginning” (Walsh 54). By substituting the western frontier with the deep South McCarthy not only re-enacts the journey of the people who set forth to reach the “Garden of the World,” but also rejuvenates the southern pastoral myth by re-connecting it to its most primitive form: the quasi-Edenic, redemptive frontier state of the pre-plantation South. Following a suggestion found in Scott Romine’s “Where is Southern Literature?” (7), I would like to define this deep archetypal structure as an “Ur-South”: the most primeval and untainted (and therefore intrinsically regenerative) form of the southern pastoral myth.

Something similar (and yet altogether different) happens in Taylor’s novel too. The last chapter, “Tears of the Gods,” set in 2143, describes the last remnants of the islands’ society after a sexually-transmitted disease has caused an epidemiological holocaust. Just like McCarthy’s, Taylor’s post-apocalypse portrays a future in which civilization has been brought down to a new frontier state populated by survivors and ravagers. Tidal waves have destroyed the islands’ frail connection to the mainland, and people live in a reborn primitive society in which the weather-controlling descendants of Medora Slater function as shamans and rhapsodists, keeping the memory of the old times alive. The story told is quite straightforward: Sim (short for Simian), a “halfman,” a word that publicly identifies him as a misshapen young man (and thus, because of the new social structure, a sort of pariah), conquers the girl of his dreams after gaining the respect he never had through the rediscovery of moonshine (the “tear of the gods”). It is a rather humorous way to come full circle with the forgotten traditions of the past South, but, judging from the result, a highly successful one.

Everything in this last section is unusually light-hearted for a novel so dark and violent, leaving us to wonder why Taylor chose this conclusion for a book that takes great pain in depicting the geography of systemic male violence on women through the centuries. If *The Road*’s ending is perfectly congruous with McCarthy’s primitivism and generally conservative position, it is surprising to see a young woman conclude such a hard novel with an amorous idyll. Even more puzzling is the fact that, despite this almost unbelievably happy ending (the final sentence of the novel reads: “our hearts feel so full they’re like to burst”), the tribal world depicted by Taylor is strictly and absolutely patriarchal. “A daughter will be cooing over you an’ baking’n’brewing over you till you die, whether or no she’s got a man t’home” (Taylor 284) says Simian, who later literally has to kidnap his future wife from her protective father. Cash’s gineolatry is in action again; in this world, women cannot be anything but daughters, brides and mothers. Still, there is not a hint of overt polemic from the author. *The Shore* finally finds its order and balance only when every ensuing transformation of southern society is wiped off and things are brought back to a simpler, stable, traditional organization. One could say that the author’s condemnation

advice) to build his argument that southern literature is an artifact “invented” by the Agrarians. Whatever one’s position on this matter, McCarthy undoubtedly chooses to take Tate’s advice.

of toxic masculinity and southern patriarchy as a whole does not get in the way of a genuine affection for her southern heritage, but that would be a hasty and superficial consideration in my opinion. As a matter of fact, since the novel ends with one of its few male narrators, and in spite of the light, almost humorous tone of this chapter, I am afraid that Taylor is only depicting the comeback of southern patriarchy after all the past struggle enacted by her female characters. If, as McCarthy wrote in *The Road*, the world's undoing is the key to understanding its hidden machinery, *The Shore's* bitter message is that it is virtually impossible for women to escape the omnipresent clutch of southern patriarchy, and that, although we are far from the psychological and physical abuses depicted in the previous chapters, the history of violence (subtle or not) of the southern patriarchal order is destined to repeat itself. Making a provocative reference to William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* through the character of Maureen, Taylor writes: "The past always exists ... I think I'm really f*cked this time" (180). This is exactly the kind of blistering sarcasm that is probably to be found at the bottom of the happy-go-lucky closing chapter. Read in this light, the cheery atmosphere of the closing section is more of a disturbing silence than quiet pastoral bliss. Missing from this picture are the strong, antagonistic women that populate the rest of the novel. In spite of their hegemonic presence as protagonists and narrators, these women are in the end nothing but revenants, phantasmal presences that, like the shells on the Shore, exist only to testify to their erasure from southern society.

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