Accessing Blood-knowledge in Katherine Anne Porter’s

*The Old Order*

"I AM THE GRANDCHILD OF A LOST WAR, AND I HAVE BLOOD-KNOWLEDGE of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation." In her discussion of blood-knowledge Katherine Anne Porter refers to an inherited awareness of a family past. Porter acknowledges that her understanding both of the years prior to the Civil War and of the Reconstruction South stems not just from her own lived experience but from the fact that the “older people in my family used to tell such amusing little stories about” those times (“Portrait” 160). In this respect blood-knowledge passes from generation to generation through stories and recollections. While Porter claimed that despite being “a Southerner by tradition and inheritance” she neither belonged to “the guilt-ridden, white-pillar crowd” nor was she “Jewish enough, or Puritan enough, to feel that the sins of the father are visited on the third and fourth generations,” the guilt that she denies suffering herself can be found in her most autobiographical character, Miranda Gay (Thompson 4). In *Old Mortality* Porter writes that Miranda Gay, and her sister, Maria, “had lived not only their own years; but their memories, it seemed to them, began years before they were born, in the lives of the grown-ups around them” (174). Miranda and her sister inherit blood-knowledge, yet throughout Porter’s fiction such remembrances combine the factual and the mythical, as well as secrets and lies. As a result, blood-knowledge carries with it the lingering presence of the unspoken as well as the spoken.

For Porter’s fictional Gay family the tension between verbalized accounts of the past and the things too terrible to utter is particularly apparent throughout *The Old Order* and *Old Mortality*. These works follow Miranda Gay from her childhood in the post-Reconstruction South through to her eventual departure from the family’s Texas home. The family knowledge that Miranda inherits during her formative years is a sanguineous mix of fact and fiction, typed by secrecy. Such secretion leads Janis Stout to point to the “pervasive quality of reticence” that
permeates Porter’s work, a reserve Stout finds most noticeable in Miranda (113). Stout adroitly suggests that “it is largely in silence that [Porter] ponders the follies and the wonders of this world and attempts to puzzle out their hidden meanings” (125). Interestingly, while she acknowledges that it is “a corrupt society that deals in falsehood” that Miranda objects to as she tries to uncover that which has been secreted, Stout does not trace that corruption to the race issues that pervade The Old Order (143). Likewise, in his discussion of the workings of memory in Porter’s fiction, although he recognizes that through Miranda's eyes readers see “the truth that lurks beneath convention,” Edward Schwartz never links that truth to the racial aspects of the Miranda stories (70). Such aspects, or what Patricia Yaeger in her exploration of race in Porter’s work terms “racial melancholia,” are, I argue, deeply embedded in the blood-knowledge that passes from one Gay generation to the next (Dirt 18).

In these stories blood and bloodlines are riddled with complex permutations as the Gay family deals with the “responsibilities” of its “tangled world, half white, half-black, mingling steadily . . . the confusion growing ever deeper” (“The Journey” 337). In Old Mortality the family take pride in their lineage, in the perfection of Amy’s “white silk ankles” (186), while in “The Journey” the matriarch, Sophia Jane, continually worries about the children born “in the Negro quarters” waiting to see whether they “would turn black after the proper interval . . .”. Porter's ellipses intimate that many of the babies carry the white blood of the Gay men, an unspeakable yet not an invisible fact. Sophia Jane is a stalwart of silence since despite her knowledge of the black babies born with Gay blood, she maintains family stability by keeping “silent” and showing “no sign of uneasiness.” She even draws future generations of Gay women into this vigilance, sending “her eldest granddaughter” to check the skin color of the new babies (337). So when Stout asks why Miranda is so “reticent,” so “guarded,” readers are drawn to the omissions that revolve around the slave quarters. As I hope to show, silences shadow the Gays’ interactions with one another, suggesting that that which they seek to deny is never far from the surface. As Luise White suggests “Secrecy and lies conceal, they camouflage, but they certainly don’t hide everything” (15).

At the base of the Gays’ modified interaction, and the blood-knowledge it produces, lies the fear of miscegenation and the need to
gloss over the family's role as both slave owner and continued procurer of black labor. Porter's own denial of racial guilt may account for the fact that traces of such guilt in *The Old Order* have typically been overlooked by critics in favor of the gender politics involved in Miranda's maturation. However, as Gretlund confirms in his work on Porter's unpublished story "The Man in the Tree," the main character, often referred to as Maria, suffers from acute guilt in the wake of the hanging of the grandson of Nannie, the long-serving servant of Maria's family (9). Indeed, Porter refers to "the blood guilt" that many of the white townspeople feel after the lynching, a guilt that manifests itself in the "horrible sense of shame" that plagues Maria. The lynching may act as the trigger for Maria's feelings, yet she has always known "by intuition all that lies beneath this surface of friendly relations": for Maria, her servants and laborers "are a horrible burden on . . . her conscience." This burden is less overt in the *The Old Order*, where the much younger Miranda begins the process of piecing together a hidden family history: she is involved in filling in what Malcolm Bull terms "the void left by the hiddenness of truth" (9). The Gay family's narrative is one marred by gaps: omissions that pivot around the interconnectedness between miscegenation, black labor, and blood-knowledge.

While Porter goes some way to addressing these gaps in "The Man in the Tree," as Ciuba notes, she never finished the story "perhaps because she was not yet ready to face the full implications of the hanged man. The consummate craftswoman was still too much the daughter of the Old South, still too limited by some of the racial prejudices that make her fictional surrogate feel so guilty" (60). Porter's "racial prejudices" are not a matter of concern here; rather, the significance rests in the silences surrounding black labor and violence, silences that are most pronounced in *The Old Order*. In order to explore the silences and gaps that mar Miranda's youth, it is necessary to chart the processes by which the Gay

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1The unpublished story also contains the working titles: "The Southern Story" and "The Never-Ending Wrong."

2Fiction, uncompleted fragments—(Lynching Story), Series II, Box 4, Reel 69, Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Barbara Davis, President of the Katherine Anne Porter Foundation, for granting me permission to quote from this unpublished story.
clan deceive themselves, and the effects that such deception may wreak on its individual constituents.

Richard Gray notes that Porter belongs to the Southern “renaissance,” that group of authors writing between the two World Wars who were simultaneously involved in, and reacting against, the modernization of the region (3). As a new order supersedes the old, we see in Porter’s work a fear of change in the anxiety surrounding miscegenation. Metaphorically this concern centers on a desire to maintain order and stability through the preservation of a pure bloodline. For Sophia Jane, that new world, characterized by inextricable changes in black-white relations, modern agricultural practices, and growing women’s rights, results in “foreboding thoughts” that leave “a bitter taste in her throat” (“The Journey” 333). However, a cleansing concoction of family myths washes away the “bitter taste”; this peculiar mix reinventing the blood-knowledge that passes down through the generations. Mary Titus contends that Porter’s use of the phrase blood-knowledge resonates with “the chimes of the Agrarian nostalgia” (Ambivalent 183). For the Gays such romanticized versions of the past lead to layers of obscurity as myth supersedes reality.

Porter highlights the distorted nature of the family’s romantic outlook throughout Old Mortality. When Harry tells his daughters that there “were never any fat women in the family, thank God,” Miranda, even in her youth, begins to doubt the legitimacy of the these tales (174). She immediately thinks of Great-aunt Keziah whose husband “refused to allow her to ride his good horses after she achieved two hundred and twenty pounds” (174). While this stands as an example of their ability to re-imagine the bloodline, the Gays are equally defined by their reticence, as shown by Sophia Jane’s silences. Future generations of the Gays inherit, through the bloodline, this uneasy combination of myths and secrets.

The complex notion of blood-knowledge in the Miranda stories may be read in light of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s psychoanalytic account of the “transgenerational phantom.” The phantom occurs as unspeakable family secrets are passed down through the generations; each new generation keeps alive the hidden facts of a family’s history. Nicholas Rand, in his editor’s note to Abraham and Torok’s study, claims that the “concept of the phantom brings the idea and importance of family history, in particular the secret history of families, to the
forefront of psychoanalysis” (168). Importantly, Rand goes on to argue that Abraham and Torok’s phantom may be read both historically and socially. He suggests that

Abraham and Torok’s work enables us to understand how the falsification, ignorance, or disregard of the past—whether institutionalized by a totalitarian state . . . or practiced by parents and grandparents—is the breeding ground of the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of individuals, families, the community, and possible even entire nations. (168-69)

Arguably, beneath the prevailing Gay legends that Miranda inherits lie “shameful secrets” whose absence from the family’s stories creates gaps within the familial narrative. Abraham and Torok claim that “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” and for the Gays black labor and miscegenation go some way toward forming the gaps that act as haunting presences in these stories (171).

Certainly, Miranda and her siblings feel guilty when they hear stories about slavery from Uncle Jimbilly in “The Witness.” The children have only a vague understanding of slavery yet when they hear Uncle Jimbilly’s stories they nevertheless experience “faint tingleings of embarrassment” (341). While DeMouy claims that Uncle Jimbilly’s tales of enslavement are merely metaphoric since “What he actually bears witness to, by his own person, is not physical abuse of slaves by their owners but the physical deterioration and certain death to which all humans are slaves” (129), the impact of his stories on Miranda indicate that she has knowledge, albeit encoded, of her family’s involvement in slavery. In this respect Porter’s blood-knowledge and Abraham and Torok’s phantom are deeply intertwined since the symptoms of the phantom’s return do not, according to Rand, “spring from the individual’s own life experiences but from someone else’s psychic conflicts, traumas, or secrets” (166). The reader of The Old Order, then, “must listen for the voices of one generation in the unconscious of another” (Rand 166). That Miranda certainly desires to hear more indicates both that she is attuned to the gaps in her knowledge and that she seeks to fill in those missing spaces. As Yaeger suggests with regard to Miranda, “in Porter’s landscape [there] is the burning sense that all around us, and all around the child there is an excess or remainder” (Dirt
20). Such uncontainable excess may return as a transgenerational phantom, a phantom that points to the gaps in this family’s history.

In a bid to cover over those gaps the Gays place Miranda’s dead Aunt Amy on a pedestal, elevating her to a place where her whiteness can be viewed but not contaminated. Significantly, Old Mortality opens with reference to the photograph of Amy, who, even in death, remains the object of the family’s gaze. Indeed, Henninger draws attention to the fact that “Aunt Amy’s photograph disturbs her young nieces ... because the smile seems at once to exist in the dead past and the alive present” (3). Even after death the Gay family remains hugely invested in the idea of Amy as the ideal Southern belle: for them she embodies “the old order,” a time when lines between black and white were, at least on the surface, clearly delineated. Richard Godden suggests that as “the color line was criss-crossed in the quarters, so the pedestals soared at the plantation house” (1004). Godden’s illuminating account of black labor in Poe’s “The Raven” provides a useful gloss for considering Amy and what she represents for the Gays.

For Godden the “cult of Southern womanhood raised the standard of the unbreachable hymen precisely because miscegenation breached the color line throughout the prewar South” (1005). Although Porter’s Amy belongs to a post–Civil War era, the emphasis on antiquity in the titles Old Mortality and The Old Order naturally imply a backward glance to a lost plantation system where the purity of the white Southern lady floated “free from the violence for which she was the cover story” (McPherson 3). The Gays’ sepia-colored image of Amy serves to validate their whiteness and to deny both the fact of miscegenation and the black labor upon which the family depends. As Godden argues “Southern labor is a site of physical exchange in which ... the black is traumatically lodged within the generic body of the white owning class—he lodges there as a revenant, a man who is both dead and alive and whose presence must be denied” (1006). The Amy myth, then, is an attempt to displace the black body.

Titus, in her work on Porter’s recreation of her own ancestral past, claims that Porter’s autobiographical texts share the sentiments of the Agrarian manifestos, particularly “John Crowe Ransom’s description of the Southern gentry in the lead essay of I’ll Take My Stand: ‘...Their true inheritance is not labor but leisure’” (Ambivalent 187). The blood-knowledge that flows through The Old Order is therefore corrupted as
the Gay family seeks to draw out any trace of labor that contaminates their guilt-free leisure.

At the heart of this blood washing lies Sophia Jane. As Ciuba notes, Sophia Jane “overmasters blackness at every opportunity” (62-63) so it is little wonder that she presides over a family whose “hearts and imaginations were captivated by their past, a past in which worldly considerations had played a very minor role” (Old Mortality 175). Sophia Jane not only “overmasters blackness”: she also works to render it invisible.

Certainly, it is Sophia Jane who celebrates her own closeness with Nannie, who leads the family in its attempt to gloss over the family’s dependence upon black labor. When she arrives at the farmhouse every summer she first sets the black quarter in order by sending a worker for “such lime for white-wash, so many gallons of kerosene oil, and so much carbolic acid and insect powder.” Only after “every hut was whitewashed” could she tend to setting her own house in order (“The Source” 323). Because she is absent from the farm most of the year, the living conditions of the black workers do not trouble her, but she can secure her presence at the farm only when she has successfully whitened that quarter. In a world where the purity of bloodlines is essential to maintaining a version of the Old South, Sophia Jane’s cleaning instructions emerge from her need both to render the black field laborers invisible and to hide any trace of miscegenation under a coat of whiteness. Of course, whitewashing the cabins leaves beneath each fresh coat the traces of the old, thereby hiding but not eradicating what the Gays perceive as threatening blackness.

Miranda begins to look for what lies beneath the surface of family myths. When she and her sister look at the photograph of Amy without the distorting nostalgia that plagues the adults around them, they see

a faded kind of merriment in the background. . . . The clothes were not even romantic looking, but merely most terribly out of fashion, and the whole affair was associated, in the minds of the little girls, with dead things. . . . The woman in the frame had been Aunt Amy, but she was only a ghost in a frame, and a sad, pretty story from old times. (Old Mortality 173)

As an interrogative child Miranda, despite hoping that she might grow up to be as beautiful as her dead Aunt, nevertheless questions the validity of family stories. Significantly, “The Grave” finds Miranda
looking for treasure in empty graves, an exhumation process that highlights her role as the family archaeologist searching for those things buried beneath family myths.

"The Grave" recounts a day in 1903 when nine-year-old Miranda and her older brother Paul go on a hunting expedition on old Gay family land. By 1903 the Gay family has lost much of its wealth, in part due to the death of Sophia Jane. By the time of the grandmother's death the family cemetery on their Texas land had contained "about twenty graves" (362). In death, however, Sophia Jane relinquishes her family's hold on the land as part of it "was to be sold for the benefit of certain children, and the cemetery happened to lie in the part set aside for sale. It was necessary to take up the bodies and bury them again in the family plot in the big new public cemetery, where the Grandmother had been buried" (362). The removal of the graves from the family plot to a public cemetery signifies a key change in the Gay family's attachment to the land: Miranda and Paul now feel like trespassers on the "black, rich soft land." The children, in an echo of Potter's own childhood, become "landless," a situation that Darlene Unrue, in her recent biography of Porter, claims was "a classification Katherine Anne always associated with a lower social rung" (29). Porter underscores the dramatic change in the Gays' fortunes as she interlaces their landless position with a reversal in race relations as Miranda worries that "Maybe one of the niggers'll see us and tell somebody" (363). In a moment when Miranda and Paul are acutely aware of land and ownership, their recognition of their own changed fortunes coincides, in this moment at least, with a reversal as the fear of a policing black gaze curtails their time on the land.

The complex race issues that arise out of the children's visit to the family graves resonates out of a soil that contains, as Yaeger explains,

extraordinary numbers of women, men, and children [who] fall into the landscape and disappear. It is as if the foundation or basis for this world is made out of repudiated, throwaway bodies that mire the earth: a landscape built over and upon the melancholic detritus, the disposable bodies denied by white culture. (Dirt 15)

Indeed, while the cemetery had housed the white family, the land itself contains traces of the black labor that allowed the Gays a life of "wealth and leisure" (365). In "The Fig Tree," while Great-Aunt Eliza tells Miranda that the weeping she believes comes from the ground is actually
the sound of tree frogs, Miranda’s young consciousness may be more attuned to the melancholic sounds that emanate from the ground than to the adults who choose to ignore the sources of their privileged existence (361-62).

Yaeger’s reading of the racial dynamic of these stories offers a useful way into the complex attachment to the Southern soil in the Miranda tales. Yaeger rightfully notes that

The landscape of The Old Order is filled with real and hypothetical bodies—with buried children, buried chickens, and the bodies of tortured slaves. In the secret world of the child, these voices come to life again. Their weeping marks not only the child’s individual loss but her culture’s predations. (Dirt 19)

Certainly, the graveyard returns readers to “The Witness” and Uncle Jimbilly’s horrific stories about slavery that he tells whilst whistling small tombstones for the graves of dead animals and birds. The guilt and embarrassment that his stories evoke in Miranda and her siblings reveals their perhaps unconscious awareness of their own family’s position as slaveholders (“The Witness” 341). Miranda’s guilt during the storytelling is similar to Maria’s realization in “The Man in Tree” that “she was the repository of a never-ending wrong.” As Robert Brinkmeyer summarizes, Uncle Jimbilly “delivers a telling rebuke to the family’s glorified past, nudging the children out of their innocence” (161). Miranda’s keen attention to Uncle Jimbilly’s tales opens her up to the unspoken remnants of her family’s past. Yaeger suggests that “Something is calling out from Miranda’s past that escapes the control of its concepts, that continues to weep. The child becomes the agonized vehicle for this lost reminder” (Dirt 20). As Yaeger argues, Miranda senses her family’s complicity in slavery, yet whilst the “tortured” history of black-white relations in the South demands that we pay attention to the black bodies beneath the soil, we equally need to pay attention to the white bodies that were once contained in the Texas earth. In “The Grave” the children’s discovery of the empty plots reveals a level of regret at the loss of a family past, a past bound up in a plantation code.

The fact that the family has lost part of the land and that family bodies are now located in a public rather than a private space underpins the effects of modernization in the region. For Yaeger,

The grandmother’s gravesite refigures female fecundity; her body enters the text as a locus amoenus, a pleasant place. . . . This gravesite is sexually charged; it becomes
a site of openness, exploration, nonaggression, and sensuality, and yet, for the children, this is a landscape peculiarly without gender or name. ("Poetics" 272)

However, Miranda knows that she plays in her grandfather’s grave and although the grave in which Paul plays remains unnamed, his discovery of a decorated ring certainly marks that particular site female. Rather than being genderless, the landscape proffers both masculine and feminine gifts, gifts connect the siblings with their family history.

The empty graves act as open wounds or, to employ Abraham and Torok’s term, gaps. The children find themselves drawn to these empty spaces but on initial inspection they are rather disappointed with the “commonplaces of the spectacle” (362–63). These seemingly empty holes, then, act in a similar way to Abraham and Torok’s notion of gaps. On one hand, the graves seem like little more than void spaces in the soil, but at the same time they contain traces of the past. These graves effectively offer Miranda an alternative way back into her blood-knowledge.

That the Gay dead are no longer concealed within family land places greater significance on the children’s finds. Miranda discovers, in what was her grandfather’s plot, “a silver dove no larger than a hazel nut, with spread wings and a neat fanshaped tail. The breast had a deep round hole in it” (363). My earlier allusions to miscegenation and black labor as gaps in the family narrative may be applied to the silver dove’s gaping breast. The object from the past returns Miranda to her heritage, a heritage marred by omissions.

Miranda has already inherited a subtle understanding of her family’s past and present status through her blood-knowledge. Despite her awareness of her father’s weakened economic status, she also has blood-knowledge of the family’s affluent past. Although Harry’s fortune has diminished Miranda still has “vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and leisure” (365). Porter evokes the force of this past at the close of the story where a grown Miranda, having long left home behind, remembers the day that Paul stood “twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands” (368). In order to elucidate the complexity of the closing image I will, here, discuss the events that follow the children’s graveyard excursion.
Having unwittingly hunted for relics of an old plantation order they now direct themselves towards their original prey, rabbits and doves. After Paul kills a rabbit Miranda watches her brother pull back the animal’s skin, seeing how

The flayed flesh emerged dark scarlet, sleek, firm; Miranda with thumb and finger felt the long fine muscles with the silvery flat strips binding them to the joints. Brother lifted the oddly bloated belly. "It was going to have young ones." (366)

Significantly, Porter, in describing the children’s find, switches to formal address as she refers to Paul as “Brother.” Prior to his awareness of the “oddly bloated belly” Porter refers to Paul either by his forename or in the possessive, “her brother.” While such terms of endearment were not uncommon during this period in the South, the appearance of “Brother” at this point in the story intensifies the sibling relationship.

Porter further reinforces the sibling, blood connection as she refers to Paul as “The brother.” On realizing that the rabbit carries “young ones” Paul

Very carefully . . . slit the thin flesh from the center ribs to the flanks, and a scarlet bag appeared. He slit again and pulled the bag open, and there lay a bundle of tiny rabbits, each wrapped in a thin scarlet veil. The brother pulled these off and there they were, dark gray, their sleek wet down lying in minute even ripples. (366)

That the switch to formal address occurs as “the brother” reveals both the rabbit’s pregnancy and the “bundle of tiny rabbits” heightens Paul’s role in the scene. Paul’s ripping of the “scarlet bag” and his pulling off of the “scarlet veil[s]” echoes the tearing of the hymen. In effect, Paul, in pulling apart the bloody veils, opens his sister up to reproductive knowledge.

At the literal level, then, the rabbit moment opens Miranda’s mind to procreation. Indeed, Mary Ann Wimsatt has termed “The Grave” a “female initiation story” (88) while William L. Nance regards it as a story that “achieves a universality of truth” since this “brief moment in the life of the young heroine is one which she shares in some way with every girl” (104). Certainly, in many readings of the story, the womb and the reproductive knowledge to which Miranda are exposed are typically cast in terms of patriarchal discourse. Even Yaeger, despite her own claim that “A poetics of birth will require a theory of the changing values and sociohistorical meanings of women’s biological contribution (or refusal
to contribute, or inability to contribute, or forced contribution) to the production of children" ("Poetics" 269) does not situate the story's interest in reproduction within the collection's wider interest in slavery. For readers of "The Journey," Sophia Jane's careful watch over the color of the babies born in the "Negro quarters" lies behind any reference to reproduction in the "The Grave."

Furthermore, Porter intensifies the link between black bodies and the rabbit incident as she details Miranda's reaction to the bloody scene. With the metaphoric hymen ripped, thereby displacing the purity that the family clung onto through the figure of Amy, the repressed returns to the surface. Watching Paul skin the animal Miranda recalls that "Uncle Jimbilly knew how to prepare the skins so that [she] always had fur coats for her dolls," fur coats that tie to her knowledge of the "family legend of past wealth and leisure" (366). Beneath that existence, however, lie the hands of Uncle Jimbilly, hands that "were closed and stiff from gripping objects tightly, while he worked at them, and they could not open altogether even if a child took the thick black fingers and tried to turn them back" ("The Witness" 340). Porter's inclusion of Uncle Jimbilly's name during this scene means that black labor is never far from the reader's, and arguably Miranda's, mind. When Miranda sees blood running over the dead rabbits she trembles "without knowing why" (366). On the surface, her dawning understanding ties to her first realization of reproduction, yet the nature of blood in these stories points to something that lies beyond the immediate experience of this generation of Gays. As Godden suggests

The figure of the revenant slave, structurally central to a premodern regime of accumulation and to the unconsciousness of an owning class, never forms, but makes itself felt at the lower levels of the narrator's consciousness and consequently at the outer semantic reaches of his language. (1007)

Miranda's blood-knowledge flows with the spoken and the unspoken and at any moment the hidden surfaces to create within her an uneasy sensation, a feeling that blood is more complicated than family stories suggest.

Indeed, on discovering the dead rabbits inside the womb, Miranda and Paul undergo a series of conflicting emotions. As Paul pulls away the veil that covers the unborn rabbits, Miranda exclaims "Oh, I want to see" (366). Porter italicizes the "see," effectively underlining the
importance of Miranda's desire to look. Miranda is the vehicle through which Porter opens up the complex layers of meaning in the Gay world, the child being the only one who wants to know more about slavery. Paul would rather not hear Uncle Jimbilly's stories but Miranda "wanted to know the worst" ("The Witness" 342). Unlike her grandmother, who was able to "keep silent" about the racial mixing on her farm, Miranda constantly seeks to look beyond family myths.

However, even at the moment that "her former ignorance" surrounding gestation disappears and she begins to learn "what she had to know," Paul turns the moment into a secret. He buries "the young rabbits . . . in their mother's body . . . and hides her away," a process of secretion not unfamiliar to those with Gay blood (367). Paul stresses that Miranda must remain silent about the incident, asking her to tell no one about their find. Yet, as White notes, "secrets and lies are not forms of withholding information but forms by which information is valorized" (11). By demanding that Miranda keep their discovery secret, Paul effectively signals the importance of what they have just seen. As White goes on to suggest, we "might not see the truth distorted by a lie or the truth hidden by a secret, but we see the ideas and imaginings by which people disclose what should not be made public, and how they should carry out concealing one narrative with another" (11). The idea of one narrative's concealing another is central to Porter's Miranda stories and offers a useful way to view the Gays whose dominant narratives about Amy can barely conceal the black bodies whose labor lies beneath her whiteness.

Read in light of the social and economic context of the story, a context in which the family has already had to sell part of their land, keeping Miranda innocent keeps her safe from the threat of exogamy. The family, though, are unsuccessful in their bid to keep Miranda innocent. Miranda, following in the impetuous footsteps of Amy, makes an early marriage that severs her connection to the home place. By the close of "The Grave" readers find a grown Miranda in a "strange city of a strange country" (367). Miranda's crossing over borders into strange lands places her at the heart of an exogamous move beyond the confines of family and region.

As Miranda walks through these alien streets "without warning, plain and clear in its true colors as if she looked through a frame upon a scene that had not stirred nor changed since the moment it happened, the
episode of that far-off day leaped from its burial place before her mind’s eye” (367). The foreign streets bring forth the rabbit memory, a memory that involves the family land and a moment when her sibling introduced her to the knowledge that would eventually lead to her exogamous departure. However, Miranda works back through that memory to the moment that she and Paul made their discoveries in the family graves. In doing so, Miranda returns to a time before she awakens into reproductive knowledge, a time that nevertheless contains traces of the Gays’ complex family history.

To understand the way she views home at this point in the story it is necessary to consider the way that the memory returns to her as she walks through this strange city:

An Indian vendor had held up before her a tray of dyed sugar sweets, in the shapes of all kinds of small creatures: birds, baby chicks, baby rabbits, lambs, baby pigs. They were in gay colors and smelled of vanilla, maybe. . . . It was a very hot day and the smell in the market, with its piles of raw flesh and wilting flowers, was like the mingled sweetness and corruption she had smelled that other day in the empty cemetery at home: the day she had remembered always until now vaguely as the day she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves. Instantly upon this thought the dreadful image faded, and she saw clearly her brother, whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands. (367-68)

Here, images intersperse with one another, conflating past and present, thereby permitting “the juxtaposition of different spaces in a single picture” (de Certeau 84). All of the sweet baby animals and birds naturally return Miranda and the reader to Uncle Jimbilly, the one person whose account of slavery was not sugarcoated. A three-fold layering is involved here as interconnecting chains link the small sugary animals to Uncle Jimbilly, the whittler of tombstones for small animals, whose sepulchral pastime further evokes the family cemetery in “The Grave.” The earth in and around those empty graves had “a pleasantly sweet, corrupt smell” the same smell that returns to Miranda in the market street (363). Ultimately, the mixture of sweetness and corruption points to the use and abuse of black bodies on Gay land.

One particular type of sweetness that Miranda knew as a child came from the fig trees on her grandmother’s land. In “The Fig Tree” Miranda thinks of how the figs “at home were black and sugary,” preferable to the
“white ones” at the family’s summer home (355). Miranda draws a connection between the dark figs of home and Nannie’s face that “was wrinkled and black and it looked like a fig upside down” (358). Indeed, Miranda’s preference for the “dark and shady . . . fig grove” with its saccharine harvest conjures up the black breast of Nannie who suckled Sophia Jane’s eldest children before Sophia Jane decided to breastfeed her own babies (354). Although Harry was not fed by Nannie, his awareness of motherly figures reveals the intertwined nature of black and white in the South. While Harry did not have a wet nurse, Porter’s own father, Harrison, the basis for Harry, was breastfed by the family’s own Nannie, Mammy Jane (Unrue 21). Harry, we are told, was one “of that latest generation of sons who acknowledged, however reluctantly, however bitterly, their mystical never to be forgiven debt to the womb that bore them, and the breast that suckled them” (“The Last Leaf” 351). The final comma in this sentence separates womb from breast highlighting the potential role of two women in the nurturing process, one white and one black. Titus writes that in Porter’s notes “the fig tree is associated with fertility, mother and grandmother, or simply the family, faithfully reproducing the same blood through the generations” (“Mingled” 121). However, miscegenation troubles that bloodline, and as white child suckles on black breast the ingestion of fluid suggests that what flows through these white bodies is a complex mix of races. The sweetness that Miranda aligns with corruption in the graveyard and in the marketplace ties to her developing awareness of her family’s dependency on black labor.

Furthermore, it is the overwhelming artificiality of the “dyed sugar sweets” that force Miranda to recall the bloody reality of the dead rabbit and its young, “each wrapped in a thin scarlet veil.” The abrupt transition in the story from the day’s events to Miranda’s presence in a strange city bypasses “twenty years.” Readers of Porter’s other Miranda tales know that a twenty-year jump covers a time frame in which Miranda has eloped, married, and divorced. When Miranda stands in the market street of a strange country, suddenly recalling the image of the dead rabbits from “its burial place,” her memory returns her to the place she has left. The pregnant rabbit and all the attendant images of that particular day return to haunt Miranda due to the connection between those events and her own developing awareness of exogamous possibilities.
Miranda’s negative experiences of exogamy, though, account for her dismissal of the dead rabbit for a memory that takes her back to a seemingly more innocent past, one in which she still retains an attachment to her family. Miranda regards the memory of Paul as reassuring in the face of change. When Miranda looks back from her vantage point at the close of “The Grave” she herself, perhaps unwittingly, becomes involved in the time-honored Gay tradition of nurturing romanticized views of the past, effectively replacing the “dreadful vision” of the dead rabbit with the “childhood face” of her brother.

Yet that closing image contains residues of the siblings’ secret and Miranda’s developing awareness of her family’s complex past. Even the land that seems to offer escape smells corrupt. That corruption underpins Porter’s Miranda stories; no memory remains uncorrupted, remains free of what Porter refers to as the “peaks and edges . . . of family anecdotes” (“Portrait” 165). Despite Miranda’s ability to detect the secrets and lies that taint the Gay family’s blood-knowledge, she too finds comfort in supplanting terrible memories with pleasant images. Thinking of Paul holding the dove does not, however, create an image free of complexity. The dove, with its gaping breast, points to all those things omitted from the prevailing Gay myths.

Regardless of their attempts to remain silent, or to cloud the truth with romanticized versions of the past, the Gays cannot escape the fact that “blood is blood” and that blood carries with it the unspeakable as well as the spoken (Faulkner 243). Throughout The Old Order the reticence concerning miscegenation and black labor begins to falter as Miranda looks beyond the surface of things. As she does so, she sees the warped hands of Uncle Jimbilly, just as she may have perceived the hidden babies of the slave-quarters in the bloody womb of the rabbit. As the “old order” disintegrates in these stories, the “persons who defy the boundaries that taboo once regulated” (Bull 291) can no longer be contained by the Amy legend.

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