

# Southern Literature: A Blending of Oral, Visual & Musical Voices

*William Ferris*

*Abstract: The blending of oral traditions, visual arts, and music has influenced how Southern writers shape their region's narrative voice. In the South, writing and storytelling intersect. Mark Twain introduced readers to these storytellers in "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Twain blends both black and white voices within Huck's consciousness and awareness – in Huck's speech and thoughts – and in his dialogues with Jim. A narrative link exists between the South's visual artists and writers; Southern writers, after all, live in the most closely seen region in America. The spiritual, gospel, and rock and roll are musical genres that Southern writers love – although jazz, blues, and ballads might have the most influence on their work. Southern poets and scholars have produced anthologies, textbooks, and literary journals that focus on the region's narrative voice and its black and white literary traditions. Southern writers have created stories that touch the heart and populate American literature with voices of the American South. Future Southern writers will continue to embrace the region as a place where oral, visual, and musical traditions are interwoven with literature.*

WILLIAM FERRIS is the Joel Williamson Eminent Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he is also Senior Associate Director of the Center for the Study of the American South. He is a former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. His publications include *Give My Poor Heart Ease: Voices of the Mississippi Blues* (2009), *Mule Trader: Ray Lum's Tales of Horses, Mules, and Men* (1998), and *Local Color: A Sense of Place in Folk Art* (1992).

This essay reflects my perspective as a folklorist who for the past forty years has studied the American South and the intersection of the region's literature with oral traditions, visual arts, and music.<sup>1</sup> The blending of these worlds has had a significant impact on Southern writers and how they shape their region's narrative voice.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more than any other region in America, the South is a place where writing and storytelling intersect. Nail by nail, as carpenters of the imagination, Southern writers construct their region's narrative, and the *tale* and its telling are the grist for this literary mill.

Mark Twain introduced his readers to these storytellers in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the novel that forever defined the American narrative – a narrative with its heart in the tale. As Twain reminded his readers, "The art of telling a humorous story – understand, I mean by word of mouth, not print – was created in America, and has remained at Home."<sup>3</sup> When Huck declares he will "light out for

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the Territory ahead of the rest,” Twain himself makes a similar journey by employing such voices as “the Missouri negro dialect: the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary ‘Pike-County’ dialect; and four modified varieties of this last.”<sup>4</sup>

Most important, Twain blends both black and white voices within Huck’s consciousness and awareness – in Huck’s speech and thoughts – and in his dialogues with Jim. In *Was Huck Black?*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin argues that Huck’s voice was inspired by a black child, and “this child’s speech sparked in Twain a sense of the possibilities of a vernacular narrator.” She cites Ralph Ellison’s statement that the black man was “a co-creator of the language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence.” By going to the “territory,” Fishkin argues, Twain “helped open American literature to the multicultural polyphony that is its birthright and special strength.”<sup>5</sup>

These voices animate both Twain’s work and the American narrative by bringing an important aspect of Southern culture to literature<sup>6</sup>; for Twain, Southern whites learned to see “beyond the veil” and discovered the black experience through the black storyteller.<sup>7</sup> He recalled a slave named Uncle Dan’l, who told stories to “the white and black children grouped on the hearth,”<sup>8</sup> and with *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain captures a world in which black and white voices mix and interact.

In his introduction to a recent paperback edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, Robert O’Meally reflects on his attraction as a black man to Twain’s work and argues that the book is “full of the blues,” and that Huck is a “blues hero . . . a brilliant improviser in a world of trouble who optimistically faces a deadly project without a script.”<sup>9</sup> O’Meally concludes, “Huck knows how to solo; and like a true bluesman, he learns to *swing*.”<sup>10</sup> Huck and Jim,

in particular, reveal that Twain clearly understood that a true American narrative must recognize and embrace both black and white voices, and he cements their place in the American narrative by locating these voices on the Mississippi River, the iconic American waterway that itself becomes a central character in Twain’s narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the issue of race meant that Southern black and white writers could and did exist in parallel, as the lives of Eudora Welty and Richard Wright poignantly reveal. Their literary careers were hauntingly similar, but never intersected. Both lived simultaneously in Jackson, Mississippi, published books at the same time, and received the same national awards, but they never met or exchanged letters. Richard Brodhead suggests that their literary careers

are so symmetrically opposed as to make them seem like each other’s photographic negative: Wright, so emphatically the author as black man, Welty no less unmistakably the writer as (white) lady; his the authorship always of rage, hers of complex graces and controlled modulations of tone.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its enormity in the South, the dilemma of race has not been the only impetus for Southern writers who have developed love-hate relationships with their region. Perhaps they might identify with Stephen Daedalus’s sentiments in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike Daedalus, however, in addition to the net of race, Southern writers also fled the nets of politics and sexuality – by physically fleeing the region. Just as

William Faulkner's Quentin Compson finds himself far from his Mississippi home as a student at Harvard University, expatriate writers like Willie Morris, Richard Wright, Tennessee Williams, Alice Walker, and Thomas Wolfe have written about the South from afar. Southern black and homosexual and lesbian writers have made their homes as exiles in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Paris – free to express their complex feelings of alienation and nostalgia from outside their region. Expatriate Southern black writers, in particular, sometimes cling together, and even pine for home. While at the American Academy in Rome, Ralph Ellison wrote Albert Murray that he was homesick for Southern food:

I'm home sick . . . and I got no way to get any corn bread and these Romans think a chitling is something to stuff a sausage into. There is very little whisky I can afford, *no* sweet potatoes or yellow yams, a biscuit is unheard of . . . and their greens don't taste like greens.<sup>14</sup>

Southern writers chronicle a third-world experience within America – extremes of poverty and wealth, illiteracy and literary genius – and they find more in common with the rest of the world than with the American dream. They broaden our understandings of the celebrated Southern sense of place, which Eudora Welty describes as “one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction.”<sup>15</sup> The sense of place so important to Welty is a movable feast, as we learn when Cormac McCarthy shifts his literary terrain from East Tennessee to the Southwest border, Richard Ford from Mississippi to Montana and New Jersey, and Elizabeth Spencer from Mississippi to Italy.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the legacy of racial inequality in the South, shifting literary ground, and a wide variety of nets to flee, white and

black Southerners are intimately linked, often descended from common ancestors, inheriting and shaping contested memories of their region's history and culture. Three aspects of this history and culture have strongly influenced the South's literature and remain in continuous conversation with it: oral traditions, visual arts, and music.

Eudora Welty learned as a young child to listen for stories, a passion that foreshadowed her career as a writer:

Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening *for* them is something more acute than listening *to* them. I suppose it's an early form of participation in what goes on. Listening, children know stories are *there*. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole.<sup>17</sup>

Like the hunters in Faulkner's “The Bear,” Southern writers try to capture the wild, indomitable voice of their region. They listen, and the cage in which they contain the voice may be the novel, short story, poem, or play.

How to place that voice within a literary frame is a challenge Southern writers have faced for at least 175 years. Geographically, the South was considered to be America's western frontier in the early nineteenth century, the “Old Southwest.” Its “exotic” people and their speech were the focus of a group of white writers known as the Southwestern Humorists, whose regional sketches featured colorful horse traders, fighters, and gamblers. Their language, their trickery, and their violence – and an emphasis on the *oral* – influenced writers who included Twain and Faulkner.

Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, one of the Southwestern Humorists, published his *Georgia Scenes* in 1835. Born in Connecticut and educated at Yale University,

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Longstreet served as president of the University of Mississippi and is buried in Oxford, Mississippi.<sup>18</sup> *Georgia Scenes* is best known because it captured the Southern vernacular voice and humor that are so important in Southern literature. Longstreet's sketch "The Horse-Swap" develops colorful language and trickery, as two Georgians – Peter and Blossom – try to best each other in a horse trade. At the end of their trade, Peter tells Blossom that Kit – the horse he just traded for – is both blind and deaf:

"old Kit's both blind and deaf, I'll be dod drot if he eint." Peter then reassures Blossom that, "If you can only get Kit rid of them little failings, you'll find him all sorts of a horse."<sup>19</sup>

This exchange foreshadows a classic auction by Pat Stamper, the Texas trader in Faulkner's novel *The Hamlet*:

"Now, boys," the Texan said. "Who says that pony aint worth fifteen dollars? You couldn't buy that much dynamite for just fifteen dollars. There aint one of them cant do a mile in three minutes; turn them into a pasture and they will board themselves; work them like hell all day and every time you think about it, lay them over the head with a single-tree and after a couple of days every jackrabbit one of them will be so tame you will have to put them out of the house at night like a cat.... Come on, Eck," he said. "Start her off. How about ten dollars for that horse, Eck?"<sup>20</sup>

Faulkner had a personal connection to horse culture. As a young child, he owned a spotted pony, and his father ran a livery stable in Oxford.<sup>21</sup> Just as Faulkner taps the voice of a white horse trader in his fiction, Ralph Ellison turns to black folklore for his inspiration. Ellison argued that African American culture is best understood through its rich oral traditions.<sup>22</sup> He considered oral tradition the

foundation of the black narrative voice and explained that black folklore and its musical traditions are key to his writing:

Negro American folk tradition became precious as a result of an act of literary discovery. Taken as a whole, its spirituals along with its blues, jazz and folk tales, it has ... much to tell us of the faith, humor and adaptability to reality necessary to live in a world which has taken on much of the insecurity and blues-like absurdity known to those who brought it into being.<sup>23</sup>

Slave memoirs, autobiographies, ex-slave narratives, and oral history interviews reveal the horror of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow for blacks as well as the resistance, courage, and dignity of black people in the South. These narratives are richly illustrated with folktales and music, and they allow us to trace the history of African American folklore in the region.<sup>24</sup> This work was an important resource for twentieth-century black writers, who found both inspiration and succor in oral folk culture. In addition to Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Gaines, and Alice Walker each have used folklore in their work in distinctively different ways.

As a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University, Hurston systematically collected and published African American oral traditions in *Mules and Men*.<sup>25</sup> She later used this lore in her fiction, and her evolution as a writer transformed her from ethnographer to author. Alice Walker, in turn, views herself as heir to the work of Hurston. Strong female characters, such as the blues singer Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, are inspired by worlds that Walker discovered in Hurston's work. Walker was drawn to Hurston because in her writing she created characters who reflected "racial health: a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings."<sup>26</sup>

For his *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Ernest Gaines recalled that he “heard the voices of not only all these ex-slave narratives I had read, but also what I knew of the voices of my Louisiana people.”<sup>27</sup> These Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives particularly inspired his description of Miss Jane’s life as a slave, her emancipation by Northern troops, and the rejection of her slave name, Tycie.<sup>28</sup> Throughout his writing, Gaines draws heavily on the vernacular voices of his Louisiana people.

An important narrative link exists between the South’s visual artists and writers; Southern writers, after all, live in the most closely *seen* region in our nation. Generations of photographers, painters, folklorists, and filmmakers from the South, the nation, and the world have documented the region, capturing its people and places through a full range of media. The Great Dismal Swamp, the Mississippi Delta, and the French Quarter are but a few of the many places that attracted visual artists, including naturalist John James Audubon in the nineteenth century and French filmmaker Jean Renoir in the twentieth. In fact, legions of artists have tried to capture the beauty and untamed spirit of the South, each as though he was the first to discover its worlds.

Southern photographer, sculptor, and painter William Christenberry has taught at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., since 1968. Over the years, from his home in Hale County, Alabama, Christenberry brought boxes of red clay on which he erected miniature sculptures modeled on the churches, homes, and country stores of his home county. Christenberry grew up in the same county where Walker Evans and James Agee had carried out their classic study *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the very county where Walker Evans photographed white sharecroppers.<sup>29</sup> Yet,

to Christenberry, his art owes more to *William Ferris*  
*another Walker*:

Southern writing, and southern literature, has had a greater influence on my work than the work of other visual artists. I don’t doubt or deny that other visual artists have played a big part in what I do. In more recent years Walker Percy, along with other people and their work, has had a profound influence on what I try to express in my work. I don’t know if it’s possible to do visually what they are doing with the written work, but I feel very strongly that it’s worth a challenge. That’s what it’s all about for me.<sup>30</sup>

Southern writers, however, have been influenced by photography and painting. While working for the WPA, Eudora Welty took more than a thousand photographs; Patti Carr Black suggests that “they give us a glimpse of some of the visual sources of her art.”<sup>31</sup> Welty recalled that she “just took the pictures because I wanted to. Just impulse.” She acknowledged that

nothing could have been written in the way of a story without such a background, without the knowledge and the experience that I got from these things.... It provided the raw material. And more than that, it suggested things in a valid way that could never have been made up without this reality. It was the reality that I used as a background and could draw on in various ways, even though indirectly.<sup>32</sup>

In Jackson, Mississippi, Welty was part of a circle of artists, writers, and photographers that included William Hollingsworth, a watercolor artist whose work captured scenes similar to those Welty photographed and wrote about in her fiction. In her introduction to *On William Hollingsworth, Jr.*, Welty expressed her admiration for the artist and his work:

With what knowledge, yes, but with what tenderness he painted. It was not a tender-

ness that stood in the way and blurred what his eye told him; rather it must have come of ever-increasing awareness. . . . [H]e always began with the close-at-hand; and the accuracy of his eye, turned on the home scene, is as marvelously reliable as that of another Mississippi William in another line of work. Again like Faulkner he never stops there. William Hollingsworth set off on the Old Canton Road, and the painting is where mind, spirit, and feeling carried him. There we're confronted with a territory we are not bound to recognize at all, but to which we give a response better than recognition, our own feeling about his vision of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Ernest Gaines shares Welty's love for photography, and the people and places he photographed at his home in Louisiana inform his writing. With his camera, Gaines captured images that connect him to people and places that have disappeared. While living in San Francisco, he explained:

I always take a camera when I go back to Louisiana. I take both black and white and color photographs. . . . I keep the photographs because most of these places are gone now. The stores are gone, the houses are gone. This river is all built up and this man is dead. They are just things of past, and I don't think that anything like that will ever be there again, ever again. This man can't come back, and you'll never see these places ever again. Never again, and surely not there.<sup>34</sup>

Welty's and Gaines's desire to capture, to preserve, to remember is shared by writers, photographers, and painters in the South. Faulkner also loved photography and used an old Zeiss camera that he had purchased in Europe. Jack Cofield, who developed Faulkner's negatives, recalled that they "usually turned out to be a hodgepodge of double exposures, over-timed or undertimed. . . . He finally gave

it up in disgust, even though cameras always did fascinate him."<sup>35</sup>

Faulkner had greater success in his fiction, where he uses photography to summon memories of the past. Literary critic David Madden suggests that in the novel *Sanctuary*, Faulkner describes photographs similar to those included in Cofield's *William Faulkner: The Cofield Collection*. In one passage, Horace Benbow looks at Miss Jenny's wall and focuses on

A faded tintype in an oval frame. A bearded face stared haughtily across the neck-cloth of the 50s, buttoned into a frock coat. . . . "What are you doing?" Miss Jenny said. "Looking at the Rogues' Gallery?"

[. . .]

Next was a conventional photograph dated fifteen years ago. The man was about sixty, going bald, the mouth shaded by a thick moustache.<sup>36</sup>

Gaines, Welty, and Faulkner each used photographs in their fiction and underscored the affinity of Southern writers for the visual in their lives and literature.

The spiritual, gospel, and rock and roll are musical genres that Southern writers deeply love – although jazz, the blues, and ballads might have the most influence on their work. Eudora Welty speaks directly to this influence. Her short story "Powerhouse" was inspired by a Fats Waller concert she attended in Jackson during the 1940s. When she returned home after the concert, she

tried to turn the impromptu, frantic and abandoned playing together of a jazz pianist and his musicians into an exchange in words – something with its own rhythmic beat and crazy references, in the same on-rush of performance. It was an attempt, like any other from a storyteller, to turn one sort of experience into another in order to convey it.<sup>37</sup>

Welty brilliantly captures the musical call and response between Powerhouse and Valentine, his bass fiddler from Vicksburg, in her short story. As Powerhouse plays the piano,

He groans, and his fingers drag into the keys heavily, holding on to the notes, retrieving. It is a sad song.

“You know what happened to me?” says Powerhouse.

Valentine hums a response, dreaming at the bass.

“I got a telegram my wife is dead,” says Powerhouse with wandering fingers.

“Uh-huh?”

His mouth gathers and forms a barbarous O while his fingers walk up straight, unwillingly, three octaves.<sup>38</sup>

“Turning one sort of experience into another” is a familiar process for the writer, and blues poetry repeatedly transformed the region’s music into the written word. W. C. Handy first heard blues sung in Tutwiler, Mississippi, in 1903 and described how

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. His song, too, struck me instantly

Goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind.<sup>39</sup>

Blues poetry sprang onto the literary scene with the publication of W. C. Handy’s *Blues: An Anthology* in 1926. (Handy’s blues compositions were illus-

trated by Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias, and Abbe Niles, a white Wall Street lawyer, wrote the introduction.) In this historic volume, Handy claimed the blues as part of his “mother tongue,” and his lyrics shocked music scholars like H. E. Krehbiel, who considered blues a music “from the lips of harlots and the frequenters of low dives.”<sup>40</sup> Handy’s work inspired Langston Hughes to publish his own blues poetry in *Weary Blues*. Edmund Wilson praised Handy’s *Blues: An Anthology* as a model for a long overdue anthology of American folklore and literature. Wilson’s call was answered by Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and R.W.B. Lewis, who included Handy’s lyrics for “St. Louis Blues” in their 1973 edition of *American Literature*, along with lyrics by blues artists Robert Johnson, Leadbelly, Ma Rainey, and Blind Lemon Jefferson.<sup>41</sup>

Faulkner was moved by Handy’s blues performances when his band played for students in Oxford in 1913. The author’s biographer, Joseph Blotner, explains:

W. C. Handy would play alone, sitting at the piano and fingering the rich chords and steady rhythms that would bring him fame in compositions such as “Yellow Dog Blues,” “Aunt Hagar’s Blues,” and “Beale Street Blues.” [Faulkner] would watch, standing there, while the musicians played on until the early hours of the morning.<sup>42</sup>

Later as a student at the University of Mississippi, Faulkner even drew several cartoons in which he captured Handy’s band, and Jack Cofield recalled that Faulkner “not only was the best observer and listener I ever knew . . . but he was fully capable of sketching everything he saw as well as writing about it. His drawing of W. C. Handy, ‘The Blues Master of Memphis,’ typifies exactly the Roaring Twenties at Ole Miss.”<sup>43</sup> Lothar Hönnighausen suggests that it was through such stylized drawings that Faulkner “became able to

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express himself artistically for the first time.”<sup>44</sup> As a child, Faulkner both wrote and drew in school, and one of his classmates remembered how “he would do nothing but write and draw – drawings for his stories.”<sup>45</sup>

Tennessee Williams also appreciated the blues and used the music to talk about race and politics. He hoped that Elvis Presley would portray the white blues musician Val in his play *Orpheus Descending*. In his production notes, Williams describes Val as “a young man, about 30, who has a kind of wild beauty about him. . . . His remarkable garment is a snakeskin jacket, mottled white, black and gray. He carries a guitar which is covered with inscriptions.”<sup>46</sup> After seeing the guitar, Lady asks Val, “What’s all that writing on it?” “Autographs of musicians I’ve run into here and here,” he replies. “See this name? Leadbelly? . . . Greatest man ever lived on the twelve-string guitar! Played it so good he broke the stone heart of a Texas governor with it and won himself a pardon out of jail. . . . That name? That name is immortal. The name Bessie Smith is written in the stars! – Jim Crow killed her.”<sup>47</sup>

In Elia Kazan’s production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, black field hands Brightie and Small were played by bluesmen Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry. As Big Daddy stands on the balcony of his home, “A song, ‘Pick a Bale of Cotton,’ is heard.” To which his daughter Mae replies, “Oh, Big Daddy, the field hands are singing fo’ you!”<sup>48</sup>

In an interview with Studs Terkel, Williams acknowledged his love for blues and mentioned he had “written a few Blues lyrics, yes, which have been set to music by Paul Bowles” in *Blue Mountain Ballads*.<sup>49</sup> In his blues “Sugar in the Cane,” Williams wrote the lyrics

I’m red pepper in a shaker,  
Bread that’s waitin’ for the baker.

I’m sweet sugar in the cane,  
Never touched except by rain.  
If you touched me God save you,  
These summer days are hot and blue.

I’m potatoes not yet mashed,  
I’m a check that ain’t been cashed.  
I’m a window with a blind,  
Can’t see what goes on behind.  
If you did, God save your soul!  
These winter nights are blue and cold!<sup>50</sup>

African American writers adapted Southern blues verses for a full range of literary forms. More than any other genre of folklore, blues captured the imagination of writers such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Sterling Brown, and Alice Walker, all of whom saw blues verses as a literary resource for their own works. For each, blues embodied fundamental truths about black experience in white America because the music plumbs the depths of despair and offers both listener and performer the strength to endure. In Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for instance, Trueblood sings blues to cleanse his soul after he commits incest with his daughter:

I sings me some blues that night ain’t never been sung before, and while I’m singin’ them blues I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself and ain’t nothin’ I can do but let whatever is gonner happen, happen.<sup>51</sup>

Sterling Brown learned blues from a musician named Big Boy, who “was broad shouldered with a scar down his cheek. He was much taller than I am and a hell of a ladies man. . . . He could play the hell out of a guitar with a bottle on his finger.”<sup>52</sup> Inspired by Handy and Langston Hughes, Brown captured the blues through the rhythm, language, and subject of his poem “Ma Rainey”:

When Ma Rainey  
Comes to town, Folks from anyplace



Miles aroun',  
 From Cape Girardeau, Poplar Bluff, Flocks  
 in to hear  
 Ma do her stuff;  
 Comes flivverin' in,  
 Or ridin' mules,  
 Or packed in trains,  
 Picknikin' fools.

[...]

That's what it's like,  
 Fo' miles on down,  
 To New Orleans delta  
 An' Mobile town,  
 When Ma hits  
 Anywheres aroun'.<sup>53</sup>

Richard Wright believed that “blues are as natural for the Black people as eating and sleeping, and they come as a rule out of their daily experience.”<sup>54</sup> The blues also provided opportunities for cleverness and for astute political commentary. Because of Wright's work with the Communist Party, in 1941 the FBI placed him on its Security Index, the list of individuals considered most dangerous to the nation's security.<sup>55</sup> Wright knew that he was under surveillance, and in his “FB Eye Blues,” he used humor to taunt the organization:

That old FB Eye  
 Tied a bell to my bed stall  
 Said old FB Eye  
 Tied a bell to my bed stall  
 Each time I love my baby, government  
 knows it all.  
 Woke up this morning  
 FB Eye under my bed  
 Said I woke up this morning  
 FB Eye under my bed  
 Told me all I dreamed last night, every word  
 I said.<sup>56</sup>

Wright saw a clear parallel between the language of his writing and the lyrics of the blues performer, and he felt his role as a writer was the literary equivalent of a blues singer, “who sings the blues and it

becomes a part of, an expression of, his whole predicament – his place in society.”<sup>57</sup> Faced with the predicament of being placed under surveillance by his own government, Wright turned to the blues to express his feelings.

While the lyrical blues inspired African American writers, the narrative ballad was an important influence on white writers in the South. Robert Penn Warren and Donald Davidson were part of the fugitive poets – also known as the agrarians – who published a small literary magazine, *The Fugitive*, from 1922 to 1925. They also contributed essays to a manifesto published in 1930, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. Warren and Davidson both used the ballad as inspiration for their poetry, and Warren composed two poems in the ballad form: “The Ballad of Billie Potts” and “Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace.” Davidson taught a class at Vanderbilt University in which he sometimes sang ballads that he learned as a child in Tennessee, and he also attended the Grand Ole Opry to hear country music ballads performed. In 1952, Davidson published a ballad opera, *Singin' Billy*, and his novel *The Big Ballad Jamboree* was published posthumously in 1996. The novel is filled with ballad verses such as these Mrs. Parsons sings:

Oh, when he told the grievous news, she fell  
 in dark despair.  
 She cried and wrung her lily-white hands,  
 she tore her golden hair.  
 She said, “If Johnny's drowned, thee's no  
 man I will take.  
 All on the Banks of Claudy I'll wander for  
 his sake.”  
 Oh, then he stepped up to her, no longer  
 could he stand.  
 He took the maid into his arms, saying,  
 “Darlin', I'm the man.  
 I've sailed back o'er the ocean to end your  
 grief and pain,

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And on the Banks of Claudy we'll never part again."<sup>58</sup>

While Davidson focused on the ballad in his writing, novelist Lee Smith draws on fiddle music she heard as a child in Grundy, Virginia. In fact, the titles for three of her novels are inspired by fiddle tunes: *The Devil's Dream*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *Black Mountain Breakdown*. In her novel *Oral History*, Smith transforms the traditional ballad "Darling Cory" into verses that Little Luther Wade sings for his Dory Cantrell:

Darlin' Dory stands by the cabin door  
Standing with her Bible in her hands  
Darlin' Dory stands by the cabin door  
A-pinin' for her city man.

You can throw that Bible down on the floor  
You can throw it out in the rain  
Prayin' for him all night long won't do no good  
For he ain't a-comin' back again.

Well he ain't a-comin' back to the meetin'-house

And he ain't a-comin' back to the school  
City feller gone with a head full of dreams  
Oh, why can't you see him for a fool?

Dory let me dry those tears away  
Dory come back in and shut the door  
A month or two don't add up to a life  
A slip or two don't make you a whore.

Dory come back to your own true love  
A month or two don't add up to life  
Dory let me dry them tears away  
Dory let me make you my wife.<sup>59</sup>

Smith's ballad "Darling Dory" anchors her novel with lyrics that urge Dory to heed Little Luther Wade's call and become his wife. Ballads and blues illustrate the strong influence of the South's music on its literature.

While Southern writers defined the narrative voice through the novel, short

story, poetry, and drama, the region's literary critics also exerted a strong influence on both the South and the nation. Southern literary anthologies evolved from early black and white collections to a blending of these voices in a multimedia format that includes both a book and a CD.

In the 1930s and 1940s, teams of Southern poets and scholars produced important anthologies, textbooks, and literary journals that focused on the region's narrative voice and its black and white literary traditions. Poet Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks coauthored *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943). For more than four decades, these texts introduced the study of literature—including Southern writers—to students in classrooms throughout America. Described as "the most important literature textbook of the twentieth century," *Understanding Poetry* was adopted by more than 250 colleges and universities around the nation.<sup>60</sup> In 1935, Brooks and Warren founded *The Southern Review* at Louisiana State University and published emerging white Southern writers like Eudora Welty, Randall Jarrell, and Peter Taylor.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to Brooks and Warren's work, which focused on white writers, Sterling Brown, with literary scholars Ulysses Lee and Arthur P. Davis, edited *The Negro Caravan* (1941), a landmark anthology of black literature. In the preface, the editors declare that their volume presents "a more accurate and revealing story of the Negro writer than has ever been told before."<sup>62</sup> They argue that the anthology is unique because it includes a "section of folk literature, ampler than in any similar anthology; the neglected antislavery pamphleteering and journalism; the little-known fugitive slave narratives; [and] the earliest novels (never before anthologized)."<sup>63</sup>

More recently, poet Michael Harper and literary scholar Robert Stepto edited *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, which first appeared as two volumes of *The Massachusetts Review* in 1977 and later as a book in 1979. Both publications are dedicated to Sterling Brown, and in his foreword to the book, historian John Hope Franklin notes that the work is a sequel to *The Negro Caravan*:

The present volume may well be regarded as a yardstick by which to measure the evolution of Afro-American literature and culture, and as a commentary on what has happened in these areas since the appearance of *The New Negro* in 1925.... One sees it in the dedication to Sterling Brown, dean of Afro-American letters, whose early works constitute an important link between the Negro Renaissance and the present.<sup>64</sup>

*Callaloo*, the nation's leading African American literary journal, was founded by Charles Rowell in 1976 and is published at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where its white counterpart, *The Southern Review*, is also published.

Voices of black and white Southern writers converge in *The Literature of the American South*, a Norton anthology edited by William Andrews, Minrose Gwin, Trudier Harris, and Fred Hobson. In his preface to the volume, Andrews declares his belief that because the volume is "fully cognizant of its constituent diversity of voices, cultures, and expressive traditions," it will help influence "the reconstruction of American literary history and its literary canons.... We see southern literature as constituted by a diverse constituency of writers and traditions in dialogue (and sometimes in active dispute) with each other."<sup>65</sup>

The anthology includes a CD of sound recordings. The selection of blues, ballads, spirituals, preaching, and storytelling on

the CD underscores the influence of oral tradition on Southern writers and also allows the reader to study folk literature as part of the region's literary tradition. Andrews stresses that the editors included the CD to show the dialogue "between writing and oral artistry" that has existed throughout the history of Southern literature.<sup>66</sup> The CD is especially important given the ongoing dialogue that Southern writers have with visual, oral, and musical traditions.

This recent anthology of black and white literature, with voices featured in both written and recorded formats, offers an exciting new window on the Southern narrative. The volume echoes Twain's belief that no narrative can be complete unless all its voices are included side by side. While the black and white synergy is a driving force in shaping the Southern narrative, it is not the only influence. Increasingly, the rich tapestry of Native American, Asian, and Latin/Hispanic voices will influence the Southern narrative voice and will broaden our understanding of it.

For more than two centuries, Southern writers have created stories that touch the heart. Their stories populate American literature with voices of the American South. Future Southern writers will continue to embrace the region as a place where oral, visual, and musical traditions are inextricably interwoven with literature.

William  
Ferris

- <sup>1</sup> Parts of this article are drawn from *The Southern Voice: Writers, Artists and Composers* by William Ferris. © 2013 by William Ferris. Forthcoming in 2013 from the University of North Carolina Press ([www.uncpress.unc.edu](http://www.uncpress.unc.edu)). Used by permission of the publisher. I am indebted to my wife, Marcie Cohen Ferris, my daughter, Virginia Ferris, and my colleagues Aysel Erginer and Dave Shaw for their invaluable comments and suggestions on this workpiece.
- <sup>2</sup> My understanding of these worlds has been influenced by Robert Farris Thompson, whose work taught me how music, dance, and art often intersect in African and African American cultures. Thompson suggests that we can “see” syncopated musical rhythms reflected in the patterns of folk quilts and in the collages of Romare Bearden. Katherine Coryton White and Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Robert Farris Thompson, “African Influence on the Art of the United States,” in *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, ed. William Ferris (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 27–66.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, *How to Tell a Story and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4. While Twain was not born in the South, he is considered a major influence on the region’s literary tradition. In his preface to *The Literature of the American South*, William L. Andrews describes Twain as “one of southern literature’s defining artists. Some of his greatest books – *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894) – have southern settings, deal with people and institutions readily identifiable with the South, and are told in a style and language that carry a distinctively southern inflection. Hence, for most southerners, Mark Twain belongs to Dixie”; *The Literature of the American South*, ed. William L. Andrews (general editor), Minrose C. Gwin, Trudier Harris, and Fred Hobson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), xvi.
- <sup>4</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with an introduction by Robert O’Meally (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4–5.
- <sup>6</sup> Ralph Ellison uses Huck’s phrase as the title of his book *Going to the Territory*, and in a *New Yorker* interview he argues that Huck is speaking about Ellison’s home in Oklahoma:
- “There is a blues lyric that goes” – And he sang:  
I’m going to the nation,  
Going to the territory.  
Going to the nation, baby,  
Going to the territory.
- “You never heard that? Well, did you ever read ‘Huckleberry Finn’? What does Huck say at the end of the book? He says he’s had enough of civilization, that ‘I got to light out for the territory.’ Well, it is Oklahoma he is talking about. . . . [A]fter Reconstruction had been betrayed, people – black and white – came to the territory.”
- Jervis Anderson, “Going to the Territory,” *The New Yorker*, November 22, 1976, 66–67.
- <sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 405.
- <sup>8</sup> Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?*, 7.
- <sup>9</sup> O’Meally, “Introduction,” *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, xxx, xxxiii.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.
- <sup>11</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin suggests that these voices “have shaped our sense of what is distinctively ‘American’ about American literature”; Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?*, 9.
- <sup>12</sup> Richard H. Brodhead, “Two Writers’ Beginnings: Eudora Welty in the Neighborhood of Richard Wright,” *The Yale Review* 84 (2) (1996): 2.
- <sup>13</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Dover Publications, 2011), 148.

- <sup>14</sup> Albert Murray and John F. Callahan, eds., *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* William Ferris and Albert Murray (New York: Vintage, 2000), 118.
- <sup>15</sup> Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," in *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays & Reviews* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 116.
- <sup>16</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God* (New York: Vintage, 1993) and *All the Pretty Horses* (New York: Vintage, 1993); Richard Ford, *A Piece of My Heart* (New York: Vintage, 1985), *Rock Springs* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), and *The Lay of the Land* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Elizabeth Spencer, *The Voice at the Back Door* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994) and *The Light in the Piazza and Other Italian Tales* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).
- <sup>17</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (New York: Warner Books, 1984), 16.
- <sup>18</sup> An excellent overview of these writers is Kenneth S. Lynn, ed., *The Comic Tradition in America: An Anthology* (London: Gollancz, 1958). See also Anne E. Rowe, "Regionalism and Local Color," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, vol. 9, *Literature*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 137–140.
- <sup>19</sup> A. B. Longstreet, "The Horse-Swap," in *Georgia Scenes: Characters, incidents, &c. in the First Half Century of the Republic* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1970), 21.
- <sup>20</sup> William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 319.
- <sup>21</sup> Jack Cofield, *William Faulkner: The Cofield Collection* (Oxford, Miss.: Yoknapatawpha Press, 1978), 23, 40–41.
- <sup>22</sup> Ralph Ellison, "What America Would be Like Without Blacks," in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 109.
- <sup>23</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 58–59.
- <sup>24</sup> A complete set of published slave narratives can be found on the University of North Carolina's website under North American Slave Narratives, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/texts.html>; the project collects books and articles that document the individual and collective story of African Americans struggling for freedom and human rights in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. This collection includes all existing autobiographical narratives of fugitive and former slaves that were published as broadsides, pamphlets, or books in English up to 1920. Also included are many of the biographies of fugitive and former slaves and some significant fictionalized slave narratives published in English before 1920.
- <sup>25</sup> While doing her field research for *Mules and Men*, Hurston wrote Franz Boas, her anthropology professor at Columbia University: "May I say that all primitive music originated about the Drum, and that singing was an attenuation of the drum-beat"; Carla Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 138.
- <sup>26</sup> Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and A Partisan View," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 85.
- <sup>27</sup> William Ferris, "Meeting Ernest Gaines," *Humanities* magazine, July/August 1998, 103.
- <sup>28</sup> Oral tradition is especially important in Southern theater. Inspired by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland, Frederick Koch founded the Carolina Playmakers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1918. Adapting Southern folktales for the stage, Koch was known as the father of American folk drama. Koch's successor, Paul Green, wrote *The Lost Colony*, the oldest outdoor drama in the United States. Green also worked with Zora Neale Hurston on a stage adaptation of her story "John De Conqueror." Hurston shared Green's love for folk speech and was enthusiastic about their collaboration. After she visited Green in Chapel Hill in 1940, she wrote him:
- My mind is hitting on sixteen cylinders on the play now.... I can continually feed you with grist for the framework.... So I believe that we can hit the ball for a long run.... I see no rea-

son why the firm of Green and Hurston should not take charge of the Negro playwriting business in America.

Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 450–451.

That same year, Green helped Richard Wright adapt his novel *Native Son* for the stage. Working together in Chapel Hill,

sometimes the two men worked feverishly with Green lighting one cigarette after another in the excitement of the moment and Wright buried in his armchair shored up against the wall, concentrating on the words that poured out of his mouth. At other times they conversed more calmly during the languid summer afternoons.

Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: Morrow, 1973), 208.

- <sup>29</sup> In his photographs, Evans later said that he had found “old America again, which goes so far back that some of the people still speak with something reminiscent of the Elizabethan Age. And their faces are like that, too. That sharecropper’s wife is a classic portrait of a real, old pioneering, American woman of English stock, and pure, too”; William Ferris, “A Visit with Walker Evans,” in *Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans* (Memphis, Tenn.: Center for Southern Folklore, 1977), 43.
- <sup>30</sup> William Ferris, “‘Those Little Color Snapshots’: William Christenberry,” *Southern Cultures* 17 (2) (Summer 2011): 64–65.
- <sup>31</sup> Patti Carr Black, “Introduction” to *Eudora* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 1.
- <sup>32</sup> William Ferris, “A Visit with Eudora Welty,” in *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy Whitman Preshaw (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 156.
- <sup>33</sup> Eudora Welty, *On William Hollingsworth, Jr.* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 4–6. See also *Eudora Welty: Photographs* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989); Pearl Amelia McHaney, *Eudora Welty as Photographer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); and Rene Paul Barilleaux, ed., *Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the Thirties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).
- <sup>34</sup> Ferris, “Meeting Ernest Gaines,” 103.
- <sup>35</sup> J. R. Cofield, “Many Faces, Many Moods,” in *William Faulkner of Oxford*, ed. James W. Webb and A. Wigfall Green (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 110.
- <sup>36</sup> William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (New York: Random House, 1931), 41–44.
- <sup>37</sup> Eudora Welty, William E. Massey Lecture III, 6, Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, cited in Suzanne Marrs, *One Writer’s Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 25.
- <sup>38</sup> Eudora Welty, “Powerhouse,” in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979), 205.
- <sup>39</sup> W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 74.
- <sup>40</sup> William Ferris, “Introduction,” to W. C. Handy, *Blues: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo, 1990), 1.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>42</sup> Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1974), 155, 175.
- <sup>43</sup> Cofield, *William Faulkner*, 65.
- <sup>44</sup> Lothar Hönninghausen, *William Faulkner: The Art of Stylization in His Early Graphic and Literary Work* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.
- <sup>45</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner*, 154–155.
- <sup>46</sup> Kenneth Holditch and Richard Freeman Leavitt, *Tennessee Williams and the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 31.

- 47 Tennessee Williams, *Four Plays* (New York: Signet Classics, 1976), 50–51.
- 48 Richard F. Leavitt, ed., *The World of Tennessee Williams* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), 107. Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, vol. 3 (New York: New Directions, 1991), 127.
- 49 "Studs Terkel Talks with Tennessee Williams," in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 93. The blues Williams wrote are published in Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles, *Blue Mountain Ballads: Voice and Piano* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1986).
- 50 Tennessee Williams, *Blue Mountain Ballads* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1979), 12–14.
- 51 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 65–66.
- 52 William Ferris, unpublished interview with Sterling Brown, Washington, D.C., 1979.
- 53 Sterling A. Brown, "Ma Rainey," in *Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany*, ed. Benjamin Botkin (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1930), 276–277.
- 54 Richard Wright, "Note Sur les Blues," *La Revue du Jazz*, April 1949, 113.
- 55 Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 295.
- 56 Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre, eds., *Richard Wright Reader* (New York: Da Capo, 1997), 249–250.
- 57 Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, eds., *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 240.
- 58 Donald Davidson, *The Big Ballad Jamboree* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 70.
- 59 Lee Smith, *Oral History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 174–175. Interestingly, singer and songwriter Dolly Parton read *Oral History* and was inspired to compose her own ballad, "Mountain Angel," about Smith's character Dory Cantrell. The ballad appears on Parton's 2001 album, *Little Sparrow*.
- 60 Garrick Davis, "The Well-Wrought Textbook: A Look Back at Brooks and Warren's College Classic, *Understanding Poetry*," *Humanities* magazine, July/August 2011, 23.
- 61 Warren and Brooks maintained lifelong friendships with Ellison, Welty, and C. Vann Woodward; their work significantly shaped our understanding of both Southern and American letters in the twentieth century. Welty recalled an evening with Warren in her Jackson home and how he loved storytelling:
- [T]here were a lot of us sitting around talking. And he laughed so hard, and he stayed so late. And when he left he said, "I had a perfectly wonderful time – not a serious word was spoken all evening." (*laughs*) I thought he had something there. Oh, we had told so many tales! He had Kentucky ones, and I had some from West Virginia and Mississippi.
- Ferris, "A Visit with Eudora Welty," 165.
- 62 Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, eds., *The Negro Caravan* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1941), v.
- 63 *Ibid.*, vi.
- 64 John Hope Franklin, "Foreword" to Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, eds., *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), x–xi.
- 65 Andrews, *The Literature of the American South*, xx–xxi.
- 66 *Ibid.*, xxii.