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“CAROLINE”: DEVIANCE IN SOUTHERN WOMEN’S POETRY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Sage Aspyn Short
May 2024

Accepted by:
Dr. Su Cho, Committee Chair
Professor Desiree Bailey
Dr. Clare Mullaney

ABSTRACT

Deviance in Southern women's poetry can be characterized by uncertainty, religious images, and through the telling of stories often unheard of, forgotten, or erased, like racial and gendered violence. Glenis Redmond's poetry in *The Listening Skin* and *What My Hand Say* both explore Southern womanhood alongside race, history, violence, illness, and legacy, among other themes and topics. In *Caroline: Poems* some deviances include religious metaphors alongside obsessive compulsive disorder, excessive cursing from a woman speaker, and historical graveyard musings. Critical texts about lyric theory and voice provide some background and historical significance to be used in this contemporary study and practice of what the voice of deviance looks like in Southern women's poetry.

For Abena

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been able to be done with such thought, care, and patience without the support of my entire thesis committee and dearest professors—Dr. Su Cho, Professor Desiree Bailey, and Dr. Clare Mullaney. The ideas for these poems started in Dr. Cho’s poetry workshop a year ago and finished in Professor Bailey’s epics poetry class. And Clare’s disability literature class changed my life. I am forever indebted to these women’s brilliance and teachings. And all the women before me and in my life.

The thank you category of my writing is endless. But here is an attempt at some of them: To every teacher I have ever had. Whether it was a poetry class or kindergarten. Teachers have saved me over and over. A special thank you to Amy at the Pendleton Bookshop for introducing me to Glenis Redmond’s books. To my partner of almost nine years, Brogan Will, who is also a teacher, and who just so happens to have been the love of my life and my best friend since tenth grade. To my family. My parents Amanda and Roger Short, my little brother Kade Short, and my babies Luka, Moona, and Fox, are the only family I could ever imagine having. To Channelle Russell, for helping me to be the best writer I can be since tenth grade. And for being one of my best friends since then, too. To two of my newest best friends, Marley Bickley and Abena Ofori, whom I came to know in Clemson and whose support I would not have been able to get through this program without. To all of my best friends. You know who you are. I’m grateful that there are too many of you to list. The acknowledgments place would literally go on forever. You are my chosen family.

I am a collage of y’all.

My heart, a bruised peach especially at Myrtle Beach.

Steeped in South Carolina's weighted history I keep reliving.

— Glenis Redmond, “How I Summer (Read Simmer)”, from *The Listening Skin*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	1
ABSTRACT.....	2
DEDICATION.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
EPIGRAPH.....	5
CAROLINE: POEMS.....	7
DEVIANCE IN SOUTHERN WOMEN’S POETRY	41
WORKS CITED	63
FURTHER READING	64

CAROLINE: POEMS

THE EARTH WOULD DIE NO MATTER WHO ARRIVED

On Caroline's
flat chest, leveled with the sea,
I lay down. And I

cannot hurt her. She
doesn't even feel my touch.
Is unbothered by

my embrace. Would take
care regardless. We spin and
cough up something hard.

PART ONE

ABERNATHY PARK

for Abena

This place could be so innocent. I hid, I waited.
I watched, saw you, saw you leave. I bring visitors
but mostly just myself. People still use this place for its purposes:
lunch, walking, socializing, birding, hand holding, swinging
on benches, etching, pointing at turtles, watching.
I wonder how many other notes are buried under these trees?
I know the carvings are done by almost everyone who comes
though I've never seen someone with a knife out here.
I don't think I ever finished your name. Gave up.
Sometimes I visit and don't feel you there at all and that's okay.
But could you visit more? Remember when we saw each other
here that first time? The shocked eyes of us both to see
neither of us knife-handed. I thought it would be my own
secret. In a way, it still is. Did I tell you
I'm trying not to rely on nostalgia too much
because it keeps me on a loop? I'm parked and waiting
to give you a ride home or something. I get out and wait
on a bench like I see other people do. Remember when we—
but you never come to remember with me. I can't focus
on carving your initials long enough, your apparition
shimmering at the edge of the woods where I wish I could will you so.

OCD AS DECISION FATIGUE

If saving the world
relied on what my answer was

about my favorite season,
I'd have to

interview myself in the mirror in whisper,
knot my stomach with worry, get the nervous shits,

consult ancient texts about this ill fate. I've been given
a year's supply of bubbles and blow them out

in two days. I think about this decision.
How it influences everyone else. Where are their bubbles?

I blew theirs out too? How rude! Back to: turn off
the lights. Or don't. I'm responsible for the killing

either way. How is that? How is it my parents
named me greatly and gave me all this

grace? Well, I do believe if all that story-telling was true,
that Jesus had OCD. He saved everyone. I guess

he also doomed them, if you look at it that way.
Just let me know what you think. I'm open

to anything at this point. Pop the bubble.
Blow it out like a birthday candle.

PACING MY BEDROOM AT NIGHT

I'm trying hard to tie my hands
and watch things be messy
without interference.
Without interrupting.
I will let the world go on
toppling. No clearing of the throat
necessary. I hope one day these tough knots
can be undone. So I can watch,
hands in my lap. So I can watch
and clap at all this work that's been done.
Like the good girl I am.
I-85 MEDITATION

I am putting oil in my car again
its bones are hurting from all this driving restless
& unforgiving the tread is wearing thin
& balding like where I'm picking
at my head & splitting my scalp hair

I'm braking too fast on the interstate
at the exit I need to take & sitting too quietly
in the loud music of the car whomping
on its wheels all the way home it's a race
near Darlington & I've never been Darlington

is just somewhere I travel through between there
& home & I just nod to it like a strange man
and keep on going like a cowboy
I imagine myself Western and brokenhearted
& deeply misunderstood I come back

up & wait for the sun to set in my rearview
mirror I pretend home is just a small pothole
I'm looking for in the blind spot
a buoyant tire slim in the road don't worry
you'll be home again soon

BEND

Something like a paper towel twitching
& almost dead in the road, imitating
a bent wing, made me swerve around it.

Days like these I have to remind myself
the Earth has never been
persuaded to be anything

but herself and I'm the one
who keeps bending
out of the way thinking I'm going to hurt her.

ON THE GROUND

I've had so many poems come to me
today about my left rib, its ache, my bloody
fingernails, and how many times I scrubbed
& bleached them with hand sanitizer
in the last hour. Shame appears
like an angel, puts his arm
around my shoulder & says coolly, *whatsup?*
Like he can't tell. Like he doesn't know.
Like he didn't put that idea there for me
to find and think, *oh, a memory, a false image!*
I shake him away, keep walking, head bent
toward a little shadowy bug on the ground.

PART TWO

NOT LIKE ANY OF THOSE OTHER SOUTHERN GOTHIC GIRLS

I don't bring any sharp farm tools to the table for forgiveness and I try to leave my rage on the pages of a journal. I'm more like a girl that should've died a long time ago who keeps coming back because the ghosts don't want me yet. Tell me I've got work to do and it's set out before me and not all the women in my family can die so young and from such poisons. No home where I'm from, just the people who hug me too tight in the suburbs, and water a little brown, but green now and again, for swimming. I don't mind whatever color or tide pulling. I don't mind a good challenge. All those fancy folk baptized,

drowned really. I'm in an Uber—as another type of fancy folk—but the conversation means more to me than any script. I tell everyone they can write books because the truth is the people who write books don't know how to write books and they're in these Ubers deciding how to put an Uber driver in a poem, to talk about Uber on a panel. Uber driver isn't in attendance. Benefit of the doubt: used to be an Uber driver, now a poet. See, my grandma may have been a poet if she lived long enough. I believe we inherit the storytelling but whose to tell a story when the women die? Granny, I selfishly wanna know what the fuck your parents names were

because no one ever told me and you're almost 90 and I'm sorry if that's rude. But I'm a poet and I'm your great grandbaby. And I'm entitled and bratty. And my Uber driver said *you don't sound southern at all* so I'm trying to learn who to be.

CONFESSIONAL POEM IN WHICH NOTHING IS CONFESSED

Or should I say, liar. Well, the truth is,
I'd like to remain unpredictable
but these are my consistencies: picking
at my skin, always coming back to bluegrass
and jazz, with an urgency toward nothing
in particular. It isn't a sin. I'm just a girl
with an impatient hand. I didn't want
to be quiet. What I wanted
was for my loudness to be understood. A suffering
heroine of my own making, yes. Don't make fun
of my femininity, please, it's very delicate
and collectible—there are even limited-edition
stamps—thank you for your cooperation
in the handling of such priceless material.

OCD AS EMETEPHOBIA

the fear of throwing up

Did I tell you that I saw the narrator
of her poems walking around
drunk off her ass and puking up guts
from partying too hard? She said she couldn't wait
to be done so she could eat a big breakfast
sandwich and feel all better. She laughed
it all off over the toilet. Unbelievable,
that's my biggest fear. She started to play
folk music in the shower and used up
all the hot water. I can't stand her.
She came out, baptized and beaming.
I guess mostly from the laughter, the water,
the forgiveness she offered that we wouldn't—to move on with the day.

MONTHLIES

In this new edition of the January poem, our team put together a stunning collection from last year's archive in which our narrator demonstrated to the committee how bleak the new year is always looking. We have her on record saying that we need to move on to February, who, allegedly, had a brutal glare. But, she was unreliable after all and decided March is the real month for lovers, since that's when Spring makes her naked appearance. She had to tell submitters *the window closed* on the Equinox. This made her interested in Muses. She would Google nothing about them, so our research in this poem is flawed. To her, April was a glimpse of what was to come: May. She told us: *Ahhh. Release me from my contract pending immediately.* June, July, and August go by with no news. We sent out a PI. *We need the summer poems by September 1st!!! Plz answer!!!* Her text back: *the summer months crumpled up around me. they spit out salt water over all my wounds.* When we saw her next, the secretary noted that the narrator aged years because of the sun. Back on her feet for fall, the narrator relayed to HQ via payphone that September was looking promising and things were slowing down for the holidays. She followed up through email: *October through December is gonna be full of chocolate. Actually, the entire year is. Write that down! don't forget my bonus lol. Xoxo.* She said something in her notes app about November being incredibly depressing, which hurt his feelings and all the Scorpios decided to bomb her Instagram comments with fire emojis, not knowing that was an emoji of praise. A few days ago, and you didn't hear it from me, but apparently, it's rumored she switched companies as her main resolution for the New Year. Her severance package is close to nothing. Our new narrator, hired today, said, in an effort to do a job well done, that January is always full of this type of bullshit.

OCD AS

couples therapy

She always says shit like
your prose is too long you talk too much would you shut up
but she isn't super toxic otherwise. I wouldn't say we've ever
taken a break or experienced a break up. She brings me to therapy
with her & I don't make a sound the whole time. She puts words
in my mouth. I appear & she hugs me from the side. I do worry.

intrusion

About the knives in the kitchen—I never mess with them. She must worry more
though because she keeps thinking I locked them up. Blames me
for everything. I'm ranting now, sorry. Things I fuck up? Her
fruits & breads, dishes, locks, lights, messes, fingernails, scalp,
& of course, memory. In all my years of practice, I've found
the best way to unlock something is not with a key but with the image
of trigger finger, dead friend, road kill, mold, burning, repetition. Every time
she is proud, I throw candy in her face hard enough to bruise
& remind her that her concealer is expired. She licks caffeine from her cup
& I ensure it's always half empty. A failure, this one, & it is my job to protect her.

chef with contaminated countertop

I poisoned her
food & left the countertops a mess. If she was a chef,
she'd know better. I can't reassure her the countertops are safe
because I am the one who touched them & I don't feel bad
for it. I wanted attention. These fancy foods distract her.
If I throw up in front of her, all the food will go to waste
& she will take such good care of me & I will feel better.
On Sundays, she makes the house
so brand new. I fade away until the sun sets.
Sometimes I can creep back & she acts like she forgot me.
Like a one night stand. I lay next to her in bed,
the sheets hover over both our breasts & she's sickened,
stuck wide eyed, gaze toward the ceiling, thinking nothing
in particular except for all the mistakes I can remind her of. How much
she has hurt me by trying to get rid of me.

false prophet

When she is relieved, I have to tug at her shirt, remind her of my presence by sending her back somewhere she forgot about—day care, an early 2000s basement, Somewhere in West Virginia, a friend's room, that One Job with the Weird Coworker. She has a pattern and so do I. A little waltz.

lock

To enlist her confessions in an army of wounds for poking, to guilt her guilt into submission, into fearing the back of my hand. Balance? No one knows that god here. Funny you should ask, I saw him earlier, frolicking outside. She insists she's too scared to unlock the door after a night of playing with it. BREAKUP TEXT, NEVER SENT, NOTES APP

i wish ur initials were some pretty boys name
n that this was harder to write. rmr how I could
never figure out what was real n u had to tell me
the difference? the problem is u lie n i'll give you props
bc u had me convinced for a while. i remember how u didn't always speak
in full sentences. just ramblings on n on n when I'd wake up
u'd still b talking nonsense. it took me 2 long 2 notice
ur slyness. ur uncharming as fuck tho irl. rmr the knives
always locked up but yet magically out n about once my fruit
was 2 bad 2 cut up? u literally tried 2 get me 2 eat the weirdest ways
n inconvenience me all the time. ur condolences 2 all my problems
n losses were empty n u never failed 2 remind me of death @ every
inescapable turn. now i know this is how u wanted me.
i enabled u. rmr when we would watch true crime n u'd convince me
i liked to watch it because i'm a killer? well, cryptic as it may be,
when the readers find these receipts, they will know what u did 2 me,
who u r, n how u can't do it again to anyone else bc u will be d3@d
n no one likes to remember someone like you. call the cops if u want,
it will likely be 2 late by then n maybe u will already be over here
trying to kiss me bc u caught on to this shit.

APPETITE

I'm trying to be vegetarian because I have this fear
that meat is contaminated any time I try to cook it at home.

The pink guts of a once soft thing in my hands, my skillet,
my kitchen. The slaughterhouse slashes my brain

like a riddle. To eat or not to eat? If I eat every bite of something,
I'll get sick. So, I leave a piece behind for a tiny god. I try to leave it

but sometimes Brain says *that's too small and you'll get sick
from that too*. Tsk. The waitress says *I wish my appetite was that small*

or *I wish I could eat like that* because my eggs remain runny and untouched.
She can't hear my stomach churning with confusion so I am not mad

at her specifically but hot on the neck. I explain to mom *I'm just anxious*.
Say this every time. Everyone knows it's more than that

but they don't say much more. *It's just the egg ick* during vacation
when my dad fired up the Blackstone and I helped cook.

When my roommate almost suggested we calorie deficit together
after I had just started eating three meals a day again

and I had to remind him I just got done starving myself.
When people with bulimia post they wish they would just starve

instead and when my biggest fear is throwing up. Call me
eating disorder outcast since I'm not fueled by the common

images. *Weight loss tips queen* failing an attempt
at validation. The skinnier-version-of-myself

is still trying to be honest, says, *Well I don't recommend it
but I lost my mind for a while and couldn't eat*.

If I don't eat every piece of my mom's sausage biscuits and gravy
then my stomach is torn up with guilt.

I didn't grow up traditional or harsh
but I did grow up knowing wrong from right. I used to squeeze

animals too tight because they were so cute. I knew too much

about sex at a young age for reasons I shouldn't have. A lot of things

no one really noticed even when I confessed it all
like vomit throw up puke. Now I am scared shitless all the time,

sick with the thought of hurting others. I think about the kitties
I held too tight. I feel bad for the turkey sausage

in my breakfast too. An image of a future hurt I may cause.
Image after image flashes true but when I think about apples

they aren't always red, sometimes they're in black and white.
If my OCD could speak, she'd probably

tell me how terrible I am and then hug me about it,
try to offer me food knowing I'll politely decline

because I don't eat when I'm anxious still to this day. The only one
who understands. My creator. Remember the defeat of her when

I caved to a cheeseburger so delicious that a fear moved through me
with it. I remember no memories surfacing, nothing to feel

guilty for. I remember I'm allowed to eat. I do not need to punish
and I remember—my stomach—unchanged. How food

convinces us of things, but mostly, actually, just how good it tastes.
How I would forego an indulgence, or even a normal thing,

to punish myself for something imagined that happened
in a body no longer here, and my tummy rumbling

now and then. The soft pink guts of me begging someone
to eat a meal with me before I remember something

else to be scared of. The appetite softer, yet still growling.

PART THREE

WINDY DAYS

Shit's spread across the graveyard. An unmarried
plastic red flower, floating immortal
on the wrong person's grave. Trash, really.

Publix babies breath bundle, still wrapped
in its plastic casket, flown to a corner it wasn't laid in.
Breathing slow in a nap next to a random death,

approaching its own, suffocating. I stomp around
the yard in beat up New Balance's and the grass bounces back
like it's used to this sort of thing.

Maybe it's got some youthful collagen. Maybe buccal fat
removal exists in grass communities? I can't forgive myself
for laughing about comedy's divine daily intrusions.

Three pennies, heads up, on the road back home.
I leave them and descend with nothing to show
for it. No toll to pay. Should scoop them for the gate

at the graveyard but I don't offer them peace anymore.
I just ask not to be followed home. Let the wind
carry everything somewhere else, unbothered.

The walk there and back also sees a man in a maintenance truck
too close to me so I cross the street to avoid him
and his possible kindness, or mine to him, in this life. I opt out.

Do we pick who we get to lay with
at the end? My neighbor in the ground? Can I buy
the plots next to me and ask someone to leave them empty forever?

I think about this as I avoid another person, wondering
if I'm an introverted, agoraphobic homebody in the afterlife
too, if it exists and all that.

Something to be said for grave walking
over the historic dead—Mr. John BLANK
of Revolution BLANK of War BLANK

Husband to BLANK son to BLANK—
on windy mid-days, as if the sun

and the chill has purified just the tops

of them, yet, what they must talk about
down there when I'm running around talking shit
about them and the wind

making my walk a little crooked,
stomping like a drunk on their doors:
Let me in and I'll kill you again and again.

THE TOLL COLLECTOR

FUCK! \$2.25 on the Southern Connector
and no cash. Didn't know the GPS took me
this way. I literally put in the backroad route.
I have to pay this shit twice. Let the lady
and then the other lady swipe my Apple Card.
I'm part of the problem,
holding up the line because I don't have
a few bucks or quarters. I swore tolls were cheaper.
Inflation's a bitch and so is my general vibe
but at least I ask the toll collector *how are you* with sincerity.

Sometimes I want to ask: Where do you park your car?
Does the noise bother you? What can you tell about people
who come through here without a Palmetto Pass?
How did you get this job? Do you like it?
You're hiring? Where would I park my car?

There's probably a town behind all this road somewhere
or maybe they commute but I don't get much more time to ask.
It's like meeting God. Please, Apple, approve my purchase
so this kind lady can let me through the gate and I can roll up
my window and turn my audiobook back on 2x speed.

So, over in that town I conjured where you must be from,
the sun rises and sets and it smells like something quieter
than our cars, right? The intimacy between strangers
may belong on the interstate, but I think we could be family
if I keep asking the right questions.

ANOTHER LIMINAL DREAM

I'm stuck in the elevator and feel relieved. I don't call anyone. DND is on. Sit down. Wish I had a blanket. Enjoy a quiet dream, placeless and forgotten, while someone presses the button all the way downstairs but says fuck it and climbs up a few flights, sweaty and disheveled while I soak in the elevator smell—carpety, rusty, industrial in the home-away-from-home office job sort of way—all to myself. Leave the nails poking out and the wood and metal too. Maybe Jesus will visit and carpentry my way out of here once I'm hungry or my boss says I've gotta take a personal day. Good. Leave me be. There's plenty of space to take up in here. If anyone else is looking to join the cause—taking a god damn minute—you know where to find me.

BILLBOARD, SC

I see the face of Jesus on the billboard
going down an I-Something road filled with billboards.

They're almost identical every time, the colors
yellow and red. The same message on the billboard:

JESUS FORGIVE MY SINS and JESUS SAVE MY SOUL
and an ad and an EXIT HERE toward a heaven of billboards.

A side of roadkill, candy wrappers, pointing fingers
at the glutton self, waiting on a fast food billboard

to follow my hunger like a compass or
like a sea turtle to the tide. To trash, cardboard, billboard.

FORGIVE MY SINS
repeat and rinse religious billboard

Over and over and over and over until my eyes hurt
and I swerve a little closer to the billboard

trying to kill me with a distraction worse than a phone.
Back on the road, smelling like a fresh kill, the billboard

says: JESUS / PET FRIENDLY EXIT AHEAD /
FORGIVE MY SINS and I wish I could buy my own billboard

but I don't know what to advertise and I'm going home
to my cats. SC COTTON MUSEUM billboard

BP EXIT AHEAD. No further detail needed.
What else happened here little billboard?

I show my mom the signs to signal I'm close by. She says
Sage, what time will you be home? When the billboards

turn into the shape of a a white suburb in this close distance.

THE WAYS I'M NOT SOUTHERN

I don't talk like that meaning pecan and pecawn both flow from my mouth like the tea I rarely drink. Soda and pop and Coke also mean oil and ol are twins. I don't give a fuck about James Dickey or any other uppity sounding Southern man's name. I live on the coast with the snowbirds and property tax evaders. I live in the suburbs of Yankee Stadium, my accent the same as a tourist playing hot potato with their own voice. I shot a gun for the first time as an adult and I haven't tried boiled peanuts or put peanuts in my Coke even though that sounds good as fuck. I swear like I reckon someone's fabulous grandma would. I'm from West Virginia so I can't be Southern anyway. But I'm not Appalachian because I'm from the thumb of the state. Where to put the unbelonging except down? But that heron over there is not watching me through the marsh grass and goes about his day pecking and flying here and there. This heat is not his primary concern and my body is just another. I can convince myself salt water is what I'm meant to breathe if I hold my breath long enough. The same way I can forget what happened in the water I keep drinking from. The same way the heron is migrating somewhere else and I'm beating a story to death that has no dialogue.

MOVING

The artificial sand
makes me pucker my ass
and accept my fate, which is being stuck
in the red clay and having my bathing suit
and feet temporarily dyed, dragging
the muddy floor of Lake Hartwell
which reminds me winter's coming
and I won't have to pretend to enjoy
the lake much longer. Winter will give me time
To learn about what lays at the true bottom.
So I won't have to bother with the beach
anyway until I go home. A whole other confrontation.
An unraveling of narrative. Take this winter
to lock yourself inside. Defrost. Test the water
another time.

GOING OUT CHECKLIST

1. Pick off my dirty blue nail polish
2. Think it's cute
3. Smear foundation
on my face and let it get in my teeth
4. Wash hands
5. Wipe off random ass eyeshadow

~~that seriously does not look good~~
Where is my Aquaphor

6. Settle in the lazy—legs hairy—tights packed
7. Revelation after touching between the thighs

8. *Dancing*
is an invention that only girls know

9. Make room in the car for gas, girls, and take out containers
10. Look around the dancefloor for safety

11. Check off what's been accomplished so far
12. Remember!!! Homework due tmrw grlll!!!

Forget about lucky numbers
~~Think about some other mistakes later, dancing is never one of them~~

ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Car thought: I was done being sad awhile ago and have been figuring out what to do with myself since beginning this non-attachment practice.
Thought on the way to school: Don't impulse buy a soccer ball just because you think it will heal your inner child to play when it's warmer out. Thought on the way home from the airport: Don't mind too much that TSA took your knife because that was really dumb of you.
Thought after checking the laundry to realize you washed all your Xanax in the pill box which was in your Levi's pocket: Don't stress. It isn't good for you or anyone. Thought while picking up friend: Pack all your dishware early, you only use one plate anyway. Thought on the way to Dick's Sporting Goods: Okay, get the soccer ball. Pink, for childhood.
Thoughts while driving past the cow field: Seems like it has restricted access, yet nothing is stopping me from pulling over to watch them run around. I know it's nothing more than that, but maybe they're saying bye. I only ever smiled at them on the way to wherever. Thought driving by the graveyard: The dead confederates I walk on might haunt me.
Thought while driving, sad: My fears. An intrusive image. Swerving into the other lane because I wasn't looking at the road. I can't say what I was looking at. Remembering a friend or someone's friend who died near here from an accident. A real accident.
Thought while driving home: rest stop ahead, to pee and grab a Reese's. Don't even know the other drivers names. Didn't really bother with finding out.
Thought while driving slow: Do I really want McDonald's?
Do we ignore the hurt of others when our people die?
And can we not admit that we don't know their names? And should we stop looking at the roadkill and down at our phones and our drinks and our stupid fucking hands,
and just follow the yellow lines home or somewhere close to it?

WEST VIRGINIA'S WISE OLD POETS

I don't remember much but that
my body was there
and existed sometime before
in the body of a grandma who's been dead for a while.

I muster a poem: blue hands in the river on Shenandoah
rock near grandpa's pawn shop, around the neck
of a family member, surrendered to the town, shivering
with history down to our truth bone.

And when I catch myself or an old transcendentalist man I admire
insinuate I know nothing and have nothing to write about
because I am in my mid-20s, I remember the story of
West Virginia's wise old poets—those women whose hips I land.

Lung cancer. Multiple organ failure. Small children.
Other stories, somewhere in the deep behind of us, both my grandma's
died in their 20's. They did not get to grow much beyond their stains.
I cannot justify the unbelievable conspiracy that
neither of them knew anything about their lives

just because they were young and beautiful with much left
to feel besides cough and side ache. A grandma
who never lived to be one, remembered for never existing? Unpoetic
as hell. Unbeautiful. Even if make believe, am I not allowed

to tell a story, Mr. Wise Guy? Even one where there is nothing to tell?
The nothing that I feel in me, passed down surely
at the moment of loss. My parents, young and without thought
of me for a long, long time, hands folded

between their mother's chests. And the world still teaching
them what to make of it. What to make of it?

I can't credit the feeling of West Virginia
in me, blue like the Shenandoah I don't pulse through,

unless from my much wiser, older,
and more well spoken grandmother's,

their absences somehow bigger than I have grown to be.
Blue river, carry them down the mountain to the sea

where I live and pretend to know things.

BUM FUCK WHATEVER

When I'm in the bum fuck
woods with my bum fuck

family, I don't shoot the gun.
I don't want to be bum fuck—

Don't want to be country—
like these people. I reject the bum fuck

everyone I come from. Their words
don't make sense to my bum fuck

brain anyway. Or maybe I don't shoot
the gun because I'm a scared little girl in bum fuck

nowhere. I'm messaging a boy on FaceBook
on a cubed computer in bum fuck

nowhere West Virginia when my pawpaw tells me
I'm not allowed to be interested in those bumfuck

sort of boys and something about killing us both.
My mawmaw, lets me know my mom's a bum fuck.

So here I am, getting in trouble in the mountains
by my grandparents who do not love me bum fuck

right. I'm up here defending myself and my mom
and the right to love any boy I want, bum fuck

or not. I am scared but defiant. I walk on the train
tracks to avoid their glares and going inside the bum fuck

trailer surrounded by clouds of gray smoke.
I cuss at them when I sulk inside like a bad bum fuck

white kid would. My phone gets taken away
by my complicit dad. A guttural scream of when will we go bum fuck

home? I know right from wrong even without details.
My mom slides my phone back to me, recognizing the bum fuck

situation and sacrifice I was in. To this day,
I never shut the fuck up about anything, bum fuck

or not and am always on my phone, talking to someone with
lots of love in my wise little fingers as they type *bum fuck* type *bum fuck* type.

MY DAUGHTER

would be named after one of my grandmother's
who I never met and have no stories about
so I can't attest to their character. Only my fantasies.
I imagine great-grandma's Pat Jane and Sharon Kay as perfect
because they would be angels to my daughter. Little mysteries
she wouldn't worry about because she'd have her own
grandma Mandy and mama Sage to hug on.
Little Kay Jane would like that our names both are short
and she would like to go by her middle name probably.
She would cry easily and pout often. She would test my patience
and I would be so gentle people would roll their eyes and say
this is what's wrong with this generation. If she existed, I fear
I'd be too mean and if she didn't like pink, maybe I'd hope
too much that she'd grow into it and she would know
that I hoped this and feel sad about it. Maybe she wouldn't like me
because I micromanage and she would not like me anyway
because at some point all daughters are this way toward their mom.
I don't want her to have to think *my mommy has mental problems*.
She is safer somewhere as only an idea, where her name can mean
anything she wants it to be. If alive, I do know I would ask
her to forgive me often and she would grow up knowing a lot
about plants because I use the Seek app and am learning more these days
just in case I have someone to tell things to someday.
Daughter, I'm sorry for assuming things. I'm sorry for not giving us a chance.
Your lungs will be clean and your organs will shine.
When you cough I will not fear a single thing. When you cough
I will giggle and whisper thanks to some invisible thing.

RUMINATE

The Director of the Chair of the Program of the Department
of the Whoever the Fuck
is in charge around here couldn't define
a single word about anything real in the body if they tried.

Here we are: The Last Supper,
averting our eyes from the catfish,
discussing the great American Gothic
or whatever the fuck we think it is.

On my way here, I saw a billboard that reminded me
of us. It said SINS HAVE CONSEQUENCES
and I couldn't agree more. Lovely evening. Thanks
for everything. The food and conversation was delicious.

I'll be sure to check in soon, especially if I have any questions
but I hope you know that there's no need to think
about this in the future. What about the hurt? You didn't
even bother to touch it. Do you know what it is? Do you remember?

EPILOGUE: CAROLINE

after Glenis Redmond

wants to buy a gravestone cleaning kit online,
prefers long dresses—but not because of modesty, just because her ass is big enough to
catch the attention of unwanted fellas. anyway she prefers her masculine looks—

is boyish enough.

is pretty useless with cars but will give you a ride to the gas station for smokes and won't
pry about the colors marking your bent frown.

will slide you something to eat but will make sure you leave her by nine.

has been known to revert, convert, and subvert.

is one of the only atheists in town who believes in god in some other way—
doesn't cry when kissing the cross splinters her skin.

will hangout in the pew—besides sundays—just to keep the cross company: hugs its
burnt spots and she doesn't know what they're from and won't ask. averts her gaze
easily.

hasn't any idea about herself. ebbs and flows. is never constant.

started lying last year and hasn't been able to stop.

likes pop music, is likely to go missing, feeds into americana with her burger and
beer, blue jeans and leather jacket, smudged red lip against a cigarette when it
suits her best.

insists on beachside punches. had colic as a baby. won't stop smoking.

last seen on sunday morning, windows down, air conditioning on, doing
doughnuts
in the megachurch parking lot.

still has a lot to learn about how things look before she can begin saving anything else,
really.

DEVIANCE IN SOUTHERN WOMEN'S POETRY

INTRODUCTION

As a Southerner, I often imagine ways to outrun that identity, then find myself coming back to confront it and embrace it. I had a professor tell me my *weirdest stuff* was my *best stuff*. I decided for my thesis at Clemson University, I would confront more of that “weird.” By this I mean Southern womanhood—how that identity is shaped, changed, and manipulated through gothic, horrific, and speculative religious landscapes and how every Southern woman poet has to navigate that differently. That professor was Jess Richardson. At Coastal Carolina University, she taught me how to use spectacles in my poetry and fiction. Motif’s a Southern woman like me is shy about sometimes. The poems are reminiscent of haunting baptisms in the ocean, billboard signs on the backroads about heaven and hell, and the genuine struggle between purity and shame, while also shining a light on the beauties that accompany these horrors. The deviations against past and present racial and gendered violence through the freedom of exploring archival poetry.

Critical works for poets often involve texts like Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town*, Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, Louise Glück’s *American Originality*, Mary Ruefle’s *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, and Mary Oliver’s *A Poetry Handbook*—all of which I have studied and leaned into to gain a vocabulary and a grounding within poetry. However, to gain more footing, I had to find more specificity for a deviant Southern woman’s lyricism.

In an attempt to understand voice, lyric, and narrative, I explored two main texts: *The Art of Voice* by Kay Cosgrove and Tony Hoagland as well as *The Lyric Theory*

Reader: A Critical Anthology, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins. Two of the main texts I consulted in my research were the articles “Gender, Creativity, and the Woman Poet” by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar as well as “Introduction to American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language” by Juliana Spahr. I began with an interest in these texts to explore how they would discuss womanhood in different contexts regarding poetry and the poet’s voice. I often think of the confessional poets like Sylvia Plath who are reduced simply as sad women’s poets and not as more nuanced individuals with separate, more complex voices in and out of poetry, as well as with their own political complications and implications, like the fact Plath was anti-Semitic. Working through these ideas was present in my navigation through Southern women’s voices in poetry, the complex histories and nuances, and finding room to work through these ideas in already-made texts. I struggled through some of these writings with their limitations on intersectionality. For example, some of the gendered writing mainly discussed white women and their struggles without identifying the intersectional complications encountered by other marginalized women’s identities.

My work tackles intersections such as gender, mental illness, and the “borderlands” of my regional identity, an idea I have picked up from various authors. The poetry I used to write and sometimes still do often explores the landscapes of the Pee Dee and Low Country of South Carolina, where I grew up. There are often references to bodies of water and other natural landscapes through which I embody identity and ground my work. I use a mixture of religious symbolism, modern cultural references, and callbacks to poets like Mary Oliver who, to many, embody the spirit of nature. While I

try to focus primarily on recent and contemporary texts from the 20th and 21st centuries, there are usually remnants of voices from the further past, Southern and non-Southern alike. I typically always reference my roots in Appalachia, as I consider that a big influence on my Southern identity or the “borders” of it. Something since the creation of this thesis idea that’s been nagging at me is the comparisons between the Upstate in Clemson as opposed to growing up in the Pee Dee of Myrtle Beach and the surrounding Low Country. Three South Carolina books that inspired this project were, even at a glimpse, *Fire in the Cradle* by David Aiken, *Tales of the South Carolina Low Country* by Nancy Rhyne, and *Before Freedom When I Just Can Remember* by Belinda Hurmence. However, the main texts that lent me new insight into South Carolina were the poetry manuscripts *What My Hand Say* and *The Listening Skin* by Glenis Redmond.

Using Glenis Redmond’s *What My Hand Say* and *The Listening Skin* as the first two poetry collections I read in preparation for writing about Southern womanhood. Self-described as a bi-Carolinian, Redmond’s poetry takes the past and present racial violence and abuses of the South and creates new stories from the archive of stories or, as someone like M. NourbeSe Philip might describe as she did for her collection *Zong!*, unstories or stories that cannot be told (Philip 190). For my thesis, I encountered Southern women’s voices diversely but Redmond’s aligned most closely with me in the way that I want to dig into South Carolina. Redmond’s genius has influenced my attempt at navigating historical and modern Southern women’s deviance through a spirited remembrance of the past while delicately balancing the intimacy of the present in poetry. This deviance can look like many embodiments such as giving voice to the dead, retelling

stories with inventive metaphors, or creating new narratives about the self and the impacts from the past on the self, like generational trauma, ancestry, and legacy. This may be considered deviant because of the reminiscent old ideals of what women's poetry should or ought to look like—romantic, flowery, submissive. But many Southern women write to subvert that. They make us gaze into a new perspective, or a perspective long passed from woman to woman but documented only now through a poet's metaphor.

Many of Redmond's poems influence my own, through archival history, speech, vernacular, and what is left unsaid for the poet to place. I discuss my own grandma's deaths in "WEST VIRGINIA'S WISE OLD POETS." I debate the difference in pronunciation of pecan in poems like "THE WAYS I'M NOT SOUTHERN." I insinuate the noncommunicative gestures of women in "GOING OUT CHECKLIST." Interestingly, I often suppressed my accent as a child, something I interrogate in my poems like "THE WAYS I'M NOT SOUTHERN" about being raised with Yankees, who influenced my speech. This sense of unbelonging as a West Virginian in South Carolina, never identifying with either much until recently in life, was pivotal in the way I spoke, acted, and treated other Southerners. My Uber driver at AWP in Kansas City told me I did not sound Southern, which I discussed in "THE WAYS I'M NOT SOUTHERN." What I did not include is that she also told me the phrase "six eggs in one hand and half a dozen in the other" which I had never heard. She also told me her dad was from Aiken, South Carolina. I have been thinking about her and speaking to strangers more. Strangers appear in my poems, either as subjects or as the implied reader. Redmond's found poem about Confederate flags inspired my graveyard wanderings, where I walked around

weekly in Clemson, South Carolina, while writing this thesis, creating “WINDY DAYS.” “Proof of Purchase ” inspired my ghazal. Other works that often influence my work are in *The Bitter Southerner*. The featured stories like “Big Freedia: Queen of Joy, Empress of Peace”, “Jason Isbell is Walking Tall”, “The Evolution of Tyler Childers”, “Waffle House Vistas”, and poems like “Trees in Mississippi” by Aimee Nezhukumatathil, among others.

Among this linguistic variation are further intersections. Growing up around Gullah-Geechee influence, I was interested the book *Before Freedom When I Just Can Remember*, collected by Belinda Hurmence during a trip to Charleston. Wandering the marketplace where people used to be sold, where the bricks you walk on were laid by the enslaved, women sell sweetgrass weavings. Further inside, there is a historical book section, where I discovered this book, assuming it must have been written and collected by a Southern Black woman. Upon reading and researching more, I found the book outdated in its practices. The author reveals she redacted or changed information for more readability and legibility (Hurmence xiv). Writers like Alice Notley and M. NourbeSe Philip have recently influenced me to think after reading that introduction, readability for who? I skimmed the book until I found the one interview she plucked from Conway (Hurmence 73-76), which is close by where I call home.

Conway inspires some of my work. It is beautiful there. It is also gentrified. It also has an extremely violently racist history. And even recently, Conway was entrenched in nationwide news when, a few years ago, a man was found to be enslaved at a local restaurant (WPDE Staff). In the same article, the press release from the lawsuit described

the events of enslavement and torture enacted on the victim. I went to school with someone closely related to him and my talking about it at school caused problems and a hush-hush situation because I got one detail of the enslaver wrong. The girl came to our creative writing class with a poem about how she was proud of her name, which belonged also to the enslaver.

A poet I would be remiss to mention as a great source of inspiration for my work navigating identity, community, and the balance of beauty and horror would be the current U. S. Poet Laureate, Ada Limón, whom I had the pleasure of meeting a few years ago when *The Hurting Kind* was released. In her titular poem for *The Hurting Kind*, she writes a stanza that reads: “Back in Texas, the flowers I’ve left on / the counter have wilted and knocked over the glass— / I stay alone there so the flowers are more than flowers” (Limón). When this poem transitions into part two, she writes “In the myth of La Llorona, she drowns her children / to destroy her cheating husband. But maybe she was just tired” (Limón). All of these lines encapsulate a kind of translation between the natural world and what we make of it, and that is something I want to employ across my work. The complexities and the long poems are broken into bits, and the stories inside each word move with the landscapes, the images, and the reflections on nature, identity, and place. The poem goes on, and I doubt I picked the best parts. There are so many parts to each of her poems, and others' poems, that I could pick apart to justify what I want to communicate, too. How each poem feels like a home for traveling poets to rest in until we find our own words.

Of course, there are many other Southern woman poets (and other writers and scholars) who inspire me and my work. I will briefly mention the names of many of them here who have not been named yet as huge influences—Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, Joy Harjo, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Natasha Trethewey, among many others. Many of the background texts need more time to settle, more time to read, and more time to analyze than I have available here, but are nonetheless important in the ruminating.

PART ONE: CRITICAL TEXTS

In *The Art of Voice*, Hoagland explores voice by practicing writing within specific categories, like imitation and borrowing the voices of others. With a specific vocabulary and straightforward approach, Hoagland provides brief yet detailed descriptions of narrative tools, such as lyric, to identify, reflect, and practice in the process and progress of drafting new work and revisiting old work. Alongside his advice on craft, he employs exercises that help administer a practical approach to writing about the topics discussed in the book. He brings specificity to the broad by enlisting the task of exercising creative muscles. At the end of every chapter, Hoagland allows the reader into a more hands-on activity that summarizes the critical work alongside the reader's new creative invention. For this paper, the chapters discussed are THE TRIBAL BOND OF VERNACULAR, WHOSE VOICE IS IT?, IMPORTED VOICES, VOICES BORROWED FROM THE ENVIRONMENT, and "SAY IT, SAY IT". Narrative tools like enjambment and mimicking allow a doorway of opportunity for the poet (Hoagland 48). In WHOSE VOICE IS IT?, Hoagland acknowledges that writers' voices are "made from others" (Hoagland 52). Lyric is informed by vernacular in this way, especially social. Linguistics and orality are in poetry. VOICES BORROWED FROM THE ENVIRONMENT detail the specificity of things like ceremonial forms of speech (prayers, ads, recipes, etc). In the IMPORTED VOICES chapter, he discusses how the poem can be an ecosystem with imported speech as a species (Hoagland 71). This chapter goes into detail about how the best poets mimic some sort of other speech, which encapsulates all the ideas previously and after this chapter about embodying voices from others, the environment, and

authorities. Voice can be the heartbeat of a lyric poem. What sets one lyric poem apart from another? Whose voice it is.

Secondly, in the critical piece “Gender, Creativity, and the Woman Poet” Gilbert and Gubar write that “to attempt the pen has historically been a subversive act” (Gilbert and Gubar 522). They express that the “lyric poet must be aware of herself from the inside as a subject, a speaker” (Gilbert and Gubar 527). The argument that women cannot be serious poets is sexist, an *ad feminam* (Gilbert and Gubar 523). They discuss the idea of the poem as public property (Gilbert and Gubar 524) when they write “...the art of woman poet must in some sense arise from ‘romantic’ feelings...either in response to a real romance or as compensation for a missing one” (Gilbert and Gubar 525). Historically, they add that “...when poetry by women *has* been praised it has usually been praised for being ‘feminine,’ just as it has been blamed for being deficient in ‘femininity’” (Gilbert and Gubar 525). They mention how “there is evidently something about lyric poetry by women that invites meditations on female fulfillment or, alternatively, on female insanity” and that the idea of *Judith Shakespeare* by Virginia Woolf touches on this “madness,” especially considering the differences in the treatment and support of women novelists and poets since poetry required a more formal education (Gilbert and Gubar 525-526).

The woman and poet are in contradiction. Women who want to write poetry are “mad” women. The mad woman is at odds with herself and poetry. The historical intensity of patriarchal religious authority and poetry has the authors ask “But if in western culture women cannot be priests, then how—since poets are priests—can they be

poets?” (Gilbert 526). The strong, assertive I provides power (Gilbert and Gubar 527). Hysteria and its linguistics are no surprise to a reader who encounters words like madness and insanity when discussing women writers and their mental illnesses, whether real or projected onto them for their craft. Are women deemed crazy because they write? Perhaps at the time, the novel seemed to explore themes of women’s lives as caretakers or wives whereas poetry dealt with an interiority and a struggle against the confines placed upon women, even within the constraints of writing—“For the woman poet, in other words, the contradictions between her vocation and her gender might well become insupportable. Impelling her to deny one or the other (as in the case of ‘Judith Shakespeare’) driving her to suicide” (Gilbert and Gubar 527). Thus, the woman poet must be deviant in some way—in the past, usually through the expression of her gender in these “nonconventional” ways, like lyric and interiority.

Juliana Spahr writes in “Introduction to American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language” that “Some argue that the lyric’s intimate and interior space of retreat is its sin” (Spahr 557). She says “This desire to articulate those moments where meaning is slipping away is lyrics great tradition” (Spahr 557). And what to make of tradition when the priests are the poets? She also says “Lyric has often had a troubled history of relation with women” because of the reclamation of the male tradition, like with Sappho (Spahr 558). She expresses how women and lyric move away from declarative identities (Spahr 558). The authors write about innovation as

a word that is hard to define as lyric, but for the most part here it means the use of agrammatical modernist techniques such as fragmentation, parataxis, run-ons,

interruptions, and disjunction, and at the same time the avoidance of linear narrative development, of meditative confessionalism, and of singular voice (Spahr 558).

The “value in lyrics that retreat from individualism and idiosyncrasy to pointing to heady and unexpected yet intimate pluralisms” (Spahr 564) is necessary for the innovation she describes. She details an author and relays that

Mullen points to how she finds lyric as a place for intimate, self-aware investigation of her own relationship to race, class, and gender, to dominant and subordinate cultures, to her role as spokesperson for “minority experience.” Yet at the same time she points to how the form of the work can change the construction of a segregated social space (Spahr 565).

She insists that lyric persists among new genres and that women are always innovating as lyric persists among new genres and media (Spahr 565). She mentions that “...the social and cultural keep introducing and developing an aesthetic frame whether the poets admit it or not” (Spahr 558) even when those aesthetics or motivations are different, whether politically and aesthetically (Spahr 559). Either way, lyric moves away from the declarative identity and tends to internally look at emotion (Spahr 559) but she also mentions the ideas of artifice, artifact, and interiority. She says “This desire to articulate those moments where meaning is slipping away is lyrics great tradition” (Spahr 557).

The poets described as “ancestresses” (Gilbert and Gubar 523) are white women. The authors discuss how “Despite a proliferation of literary ancestresses, however, Elizabeth Barrett Browning commented mournfully in 1845 that “England has had many

learned women...and yet where are the poetesses?...I look everywhere for grandmothers, and see none” (Gilbert and Gubar 523). Among the other “ancestresses” mentioned were also Anne Finch, Margaret Cavendish, Christina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Louise Bogan, and Sylvia Plath (Gilbert and Dubar 523). What does an “ancestress” look like for non-white Southern women or other Southern women not represented by the list of “ancestresses”?

Authors like Glenis Redmond explore the ideas of gender and race in the South. While sometimes partaking in what may be considered traditional narrative or lyric poetry (and what a loose definition tradition and lyric can have) poets like Glenis Redmond use the poem to reconcile with the past using archives and reimaginings of histories untold. Here, we go on to remember ancestresses seldom mentioned before.

PART TWO: POEM TEXTS

Glenis Redmond, the current Poet Laureate of Greenville, South Carolina, opens her poem “Bale” from *What My Hand Say* with “When you gotta go. You leave. Take fear and every gift God gave you. / Shove it in half the space of a man. Tuck yourself whole self / amongst those same white blooms that you picked / underneath South Carolina sun...” (Redmond 9). Often in Redmond’s poems, the reader encounters South Carolina and the people within it across time and space.

Redmond often uses epigraphs from archival sources, with information about the people in the poem. In “Bale” the epigraph is from John Andrew Jackson, an enslaved man, and reads “They asked me who I belong to....I say I belong to South Carolina. They had no business askin me. I was trying to belong to myself” (Redmond 9). Then, perhaps, a liberation of sorts as the poem ends with the phrase “...to become the master of your own world” (Redmond 9). Breathing “cotton dust” and images like “Swamp water” locate us in the poem (Redmond 9). Place is important to Redmond. Place is everything. Place is somewhere we find enslavement as well as liberation.

Womanhood then, is reflected in the poem “On the Way to Grandma’s Funeral” where the reader is confronted with memory and cultural daily life. The opening line “You set a South Carolina record for footprints” (Redmond 12) transports the reader onto Carolinian soil again and this time with memory intact. More specifically, she locates us in Waterloo, where her grandma is buried (Redmond 12). Often a reader may confuse the speaker with the poet, but many of these poems are Redmond herself, or maybe a version of Redmond as she appears on the page with the other people. In the same poem,

Remond's use of vernacular is another tool she uses to ground the reader, like the reader there with her, when she writes, "You'd be proud of how we turned our heads, / away from hate fixed our minds on sweet thangs" (Redmond 13). Using language, especially language often forgotten, forcibly or subconsciously, vernacular rises from bed again in Southern women's poems. So many variations on how Southern women talk, and Redmond represents some here. Linguistic variation is important in many Southern women writers' works as it is in their personal lives.

Many Southern poets embody religious Christianity in ways that are more like a reckoning with it than anything else. The influence of Christianity on Southern culture is deeply rooted in racism, erasure, and the preservation of the West and whiteness. Poems spanning topics like mental illness, generational trauma, and other legacies, often use religious imagery. Poets encounter the influence of Christianity in their poems differently, maybe depending on what denomination, if the writer is religious, if they had any traumatic experiences as a child with religion, or if they are, at the time of writing, at peace with it all. Redmond's titular poem "What My Hand Say" is dedicated to her great-grandpa, Will Rogers, who lived in the 1800s (Redmond 18). The reader is once again put into the past and the reconciliation with it. The relationship Rogers has with work is like religion, as Redmond writes "I work this ground / like it was my religion and my hands / never stop praying" (Redmond 18). Redmond's ability to fluctuate between the legacy of the past and the present while sometimes embodying the past like the reader is there is embodied in Redmond's "Crystal Clear" where the speaker asserts "I always fall below the Mason Dixon line, / I always come up short, empty or high on somebody's

story / about my story, plots that don't hold ground" (Redmond 25). The South, its landscape, and the longing are all present here through statement and image: "Some blame my mother's milk, where the tooth learns longing" (Redmond 25). Ashley Jones' poem "Mary Don't You Weep, Or, Mary Turner Resurrected" says "maybe mary and her baby flew up from death / in sweaty georgia—her shallow grave shaken loose. finally free, / resurrected—it turns out, all along hell was earth" (Jones 4). This is a striking example of the religious symbol of Jesus's mother, Mary, alongside Mary Turner, who was killed along with her unborn child after pressing charges for the wrongful lynching of her husband (Jones 4). There is so much power in these stories, with images like "mary's emblazoned womb. her baby, a fire" (Jones 4) in the reader's face that they cannot look away from.

The myth is an interesting twist in "Cymbee: An Afro Carolinian Mermaid Tale" where yet again we encounter language and culture, as always. How "We know clean water is big medicine" (Redmond 69). Specifically, the language recalls "The West says, Mermaid, but she's more" (Redmond 72). She ends the poem by connecting the cultures to each other, "We the blackest blue beauty. Carolina bred. / Ancient lights. Stolen, but belong to Africa" (Redmond 75). As she used the Cymbee (and other variations of this spelling) she recalls the generational legacies she's inherited and the stories she is now telling. When myth, history, and story are combined, possibilities for narrative and lyric are opened up. When Western Christianity is challenged by Southern women poets, the poem creates a dialogue for what has been taken, changed, manipulated, erased, etc.

What My Hand Say sisters *The Listening Skin* in its desire to discuss life in the South as a Black person, specifically in some poems, what it is like to be a Black woman. Redmond has poem after poem which each impacts the vision of South Carolina. In “South Carolina’s Love: It’s Complicated” Redmond’s second stanza reminds the reader of the complex relationship many people, especially Black folk, who may feel: “My Palmetto State sells both homegrown peaches / and hate roadside. Every time I try to fit / my mouth around a Carolina Allegiance, / I cannot own the stance outright” (Redmond 38). The devastating poem “Chair” delicately and tenderly describes the murder of fourteen-year-old George Junius Stinney, Jr. (Redmond 53). Redmond reminds and reveals to the reader how this little boy “sit[s] in a too-big chair”, “with the world guilty stamped on [his] too-small head by an all white jury” (Redmond 53). In this short, stichic poem, Redmond reveals what the boy was killed for—showing “two white girls / where to find Maypops” (Redmond 53). Redmond is there in the poem, as a witness, “Cause all I see is a little boy’s eyes in search for somebody / —anybody who can hold you in these last minutes, / but you are held only by your own sweat” (Redmond 53). Redmond does not make a spectacle of this boy's death but reminds the reader of the individual, personal, and political history of violently racist South Carolina.

Both *What My Hand Say* and *The Listening Skin* are divided into sections, which inspired my own. *What My Hand Say* feels closely tied to land with sections “Pick”, “Plow”, “Push”, and “Pull.” In *The Listening Skin*, the sections are appropriately labeled “Flinch”, “Fester”, “Flashback”, and “Flight.” The poem “Afro Carolinian” opens *The Listening Skin* by reading “With Carolina on my lips, I sing a quilt, / a crooked stitch that

weaves its way around / my pie-shaped state that conjures food— / too sweet like amber iced tea or cake, red-velvet rich. / Too sweet, like the words I was raised on, words that say, / *If you don't have nothin nice to say, [...] lace it with sugah*" (Redmond 3). This immediately drops us into the language and landscape of the South. The spelling of sugar as sugah invites the reader into a dialect or an accent, a particular way of speech for some folks, and thus makes it intimate, like sitting on a porch with an older Southern woman. Sugar is loaded in Southern poems as it can relate to iced tea or in some cases to the crop itself and the legacies of enslavement. The "sweet"ness is familiar because of drink, family, and history—three things Southern women poets seem to continue to discuss.

Health is an interesting topic when discussing legacy, which is something Redmond considers delicately in *The Listening Skin* where she discusses generational health alongside other generational circumstances like the legacies of enslavement directly impacting health. She writes in "Medical History" that her Uncle Pete "drug his tired flesh from factory floor / to the colored-only side of the doctor's office" (Redmond 20). She considers the legacy further in "Mechanics of Muscle" where the opening stanza reads "In a clinch, I wonder if these wounds / carryover from a previous life: / rope around neck, body hung / hoisted and tree-strung" (Redmond 24). The body here is a legacy. The body is reaping the wounds still. The inheritance is one of pain.

She continues to remind the reader what she is working with, against, and for. In "Hang Man (Woman)" Redmond writes "We were not meant / to be written in but hung" (55). "An Exercise in Restraint, a Letter to Ann Cunningham" is an epistolary exploration of the generational healing and the dismantling of institutions that still benefit from

enslavement (Redmond 76-77). Redmond is writing stories the South looks away from. She also writes poems which personify the state. "Say Carolina" is a poem where the voice changes, has a thicker accent, takes on a persona of Carolina, describes "her sweet potato thick waist", "her cobblestone roads laced with Spanish moss", how "cotton's supposed to let you breathe", how "she the bomb / all muskets & cannons she lifts her skirt" and how "Carolina will blow your mind / with the twisted & strange fruit" (Redmond 59). She ends this poem with the ambiguous, "she likes how it hangs" (Redmond 59). Eyes glance back to the beginning of the poem, reading: "Nothin finer than a tea-drunk gurl / raised on peaches, sugah, honey chile..." (Redmond 58). The sugar of her language in this poem brings us back to "Afro Carolinian" in a cyclical sense that the reader can recall feeling the sweet iced tea drink previously. It is almost as if the reader comes back to the drink, with some of the tea a little watered down.

CONCLUSION

After consulting both critical works about poetry and critical poetry works and carving through my poems, I have found that lyrical voice is a flexible one. Lyric may be self-intimate but also requires a socially reflective critical lens. I found myself beginning to create “funny” poems among the ones with no humor or wit at all and thinking: do women need to be serious poets all the time to be taken seriously? Is there room for silly women’s poetry? Is there room for silliness to be serious and vice versa? What molds are certain Southern women poets supposed to fit in? I think the question remains standing but poets like the ones mentioned here knock at it. They balance delicately the strange complexities of life and legacy, sociohistorical archives and personal experience, and the techniques of poetry to endure alongside with. They reveal how much there is to mourn and yet how much there also is to celebrate.

Known as it is, Southerners constantly hide and justify things of the past and present, whether blanketed under religion, beautiful landscapes, and blatant continued legacies being upheld and rebranded. Having to seek out Black-owned businesses in the South among the College of Charleston trust-fund coffee shop owners shows how much hell the bar is in still and how much work is left to be done. These authors are doing just that—blending narrative with the lyric, combining stories across stories.

Nikky Finney, another Carolinian, born in Conway and author of many fabulous books, also uses archival work in her poems. In *Head Off & Split*, poems such as “Dancing with Strom” employ epigraphs to set up the stakes of the poem. Finney writes in a stanza close to the end of the poem “History does not keep books on the / handiwork

of slaves. But the enslaved / who built this Big House, long before / I arrived for this big wedding, knew / the power of a porch” (Finney 68). South Carolina is explicitly mentioned several times in the poem as it details histories alongside statements and images like “I refuse to leave the porch” (63) and “Long before AC African people did the / math: how to cool down the hot air of / South Carolina?” (Finney 65) and “I don’t want to dance with him” (Finney 66).

Redmond’s books are the biggest impact of this thesis and require more in-depth exploration. Other sources of inspiration for Southern womanhood and poetry include Evelyn Berry, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Joy Priest, Patricia Smith, and other poets and writers alike. In the future, a bigger project with a different scope could tackle these issues even more specifically. Many of the background source material has barely scratched the surface, and most of my writing is experience-based. I want to continue to read other people's stories, narratives, and fiction to understand their experiences better too. I think this idea is something many of the Southern women poets gather around here. We cannot talk about the South without discussing gendered racial violence, and this project barely scratches the surface on this topic, but poets like Glenis Redmond are doing the hard creative and critical work to bring stories untold to life through intimate retellings, sensitive historical and archival work, and meaning-making through narrative and lyrical emotions.

The intimacy in my poems, much like the declared intimacy of what women were supposed to be writing about in the past, appears in a lot of narratives with OCD, such as “BREAK UP TEXT, NEVER SENT, NOTES APP” and “OCD AS” in the couples

therapy section. The “I” is something I am still figuring it out in poetry and it is something many of the poets and writers above are confronting too. The “I” fluctuates between self, idealized self, other, a unified “we”, a voiceless entity, etc. As I continue to discover my voice, these poets and writers have lent me a gaze into the possibilities of Southern women’s poetry. Many of my poems take on the voice like “EPILOGUE: CAROLINE”—only one idea of a Southern woman across a myriad of others. An exploration of what lyric and narrative can do when they come together to tell stories in forgotten or new ways.

In the future, “EPILOGUE: CAROLINE” and the *CAROLINE: POEMS* project will be an epic-length poetry manuscript challenging the persona of South Carolina, inspired by the one and only Glenis Redmond. South Carolina is my home, is likely both of our homes through different eyes, is some variation of that word for many people in this state. In her ghazal “Home Security” Ashley Jones reflects on home, a real home, one we can empathize with. She uses religious images: “the big house / I imagine as heaven. Maybe, then, my angel-parents wave me home / from their golden porch” (Jones 13). Mostly, the real I wants to chat with these women and hear their stories. Maybe on a porch with some tea, surrounded by loved ones, if they would like.

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