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Donna Palmateer Pennee

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# “Something Invisible Finding a Form”: Feeling History in Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*

DONNA PALMATEER PENNEE

Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question:  
. . . How does it feel to be a problem?

— W.E.B. Du Bois (1)

MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S 1976 POETIC NOVEL recreates a brief period in the life of New Orleans cornet player Charles “Buddy” Bolden (1877-1931), a historical figure for whom little official documentation exists but who has been mythologized for a sound and style that innovated ragtime, spirituals, and blues into jazz (see Marquis). Given that Bolden was also an African American born a dozen years after the American Civil War (1861-65), surprisingly little of the rich scholarship on the novel has addressed his historical context beyond the references that Ondaatje himself acknowledges.<sup>1</sup> Only Joel Deshayé has provided a sustained reading of race in Bolden’s portrait, wherein he illustrates that, “As historical fiction, *Coming Through Slaughter* uses geography as the cipher for its cryptic racial subtext; the novel prompts readers to investigate how Bolden’s identity is affected by the segregated geography of New Orleans at the time of his band’s success” (474).<sup>2</sup> Using historical research and Michel de Certeau’s theory of tactics, Deshayé responds to critics of the novel who have found Ondaatje’s silence on race politically suspect: “He is not silent; his art, like Bolden’s, is tactical” (482).

Although I traverse some of the same historical ground as Deshayé, my horizon of reading looks past the artist’s (Ondaatje’s or Bolden’s) agency to the semiotic movement within and between novel and history to consider figurative language as a moving archive. In writing the novel, Ondaatje records its phenomenological origins: “Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, ‘Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade . . .’ before I knew

your nation your colour your age” (135). In reading the novel, the *after* of knowing Bolden’s nation, colour, and age comes into contact with the figurative archiving of the historical ground. The novel’s more intimate geography, in which somatic detail is integrated in repeated figurative patterns, evokes an afterlife of slavery. I experience the novel’s figurative density, its concentration on bodies and sensory perception to represent Bolden’s affective states, as openings onto understanding history phenomenologically. Its poetic intensities and non-linear narrative create an “*idiom of remembering*” (Scott vii).<sup>3</sup>

In both its linguistic and its non-linguistic senses, “idiom” signals my intentions in using Ondaatje’s phrase “something invisible finding a form” (125) to characterize “feeling history.” Idiom is “A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., used in a distinctive way . . . ; *spec.* a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from the meanings of the individual words”; “A specific form, manifestation, nature, or property of something”; and “A distinctive style or convention in music, art, architecture, writing, etc.; the characteristic mode of expression of a composer, artist, author, etc.” (“Idiom”). When historical research informs a close reading of the novel’s poetic intensities, jazz itself, and repeated objects and types of events and locations, become idiomatic of the sociality of capitalism into which African Americans were “freed” by the Civil War. The novel’s idiom manifests how jazz, prostitution, alcohol, drugs, and “vice” are metaphorical and metonymical indices of the rise of a new urban economy. “Remembering” this idiom, in a semiotic close reading contextualized in historical research, seems to be less about the novel’s troubling of the epistemological status of history and/as fiction than about becoming reoriented to reading for history’s ontological and phenomenological traces in the novel. Such a reading might contribute to coming to terms with an “epistemology of ignorance” (Sullivan and Tuana 1) in the insularity of Canada’s white cultural nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Actively developing historical literacy is necessary not only for engagement with minoritized Canadian literatures but also for critical reflection on a national pedagogy that, as Phaniel Antwi explains, “averts our analytical gaze from recognizing the work that practices of anti-black feeling [have] left behind” (141).

The phrase “feeling history” signals my encounters with phenomenological language in the novel and in texts about or contemporary with

Bolden's New Orleans, understood largely through feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed's analysis of *orientations* to, and the *circulation* of, objects in affective economies. As Ahmed explains,

Orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from "here." . . . The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the "here" of the body, and the "where" of its dwelling. Given this, orientations are about the intimacies of bodies and their dwelling places. . . . [O]rientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach. ("Phenomenology" 151)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, worked through Ahmed's critical race analytic, enables Ondaatje's phrase "[s]omething invisible finding a form" to signify beyond the novel's aesthetic self-referentiality. In its immediate context, the phrase is a poetic gloss on what happens when Bolden puts a match to Nora's gas ring (Ondaatje 125): just so, conducting research on Reconstruction-era New Orleans and slavery's afterlife makes palpable how "'feelings' become 'fetishes,' qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation" (Ahmed, *Cultural* 11).

In Ondaatje's novel, the cornet player is represented as an embodied consciousness in the context of the origins of the "jazz age" in New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War.<sup>5</sup> In this era, structures of feeling emerged in "the problem of the color-line" (Du Bois vi), which vitiated emancipation and marked the public — and much-publicized — bodily freedoms constituent in the rise of jazz as a new form of entertainment, labour, and profit. Two generations away from slavery, Bolden's body and consciousness are still racialized, still searching for freedom, still resisting what the most significant African-American intellectual of his day, ventriloquizing white supremacists, called "the suicide of a race" (Du Bois 7). Perhaps because a white Canadian national pedagogy has succeeded too well in teaching that the line drawn at colour is a problem only in the United States, and perhaps because the novel reproduces a historical (i.e., distant) photograph of black musicians in an early jazz band, readers are oriented to read in particular ways. The prominent location of the photograph in the text, and the location of the story in New Orleans and/as jazz music and musicians, constitute Bolden and New Orleans as "objects"

that “circulate accumulative affective value” (Ahmed, *Cultural* 219). In this circulation, the racialized history of the emergence of jazz dwells *before* and thus informs recognition, largely through the history of three main modes of representation and reception of jazz (in performance and in jazz novels). Michael Titlestad explains these modes: “The literary embodiment of jazz has historically been embedded in primitivist discourses which reify desire in a racist mode” (1); “Situated as the elusive other of language, as an aesthetic process and object untainted by speech, music becomes something like a discursive space of wishing. Its ineffability . . . functions as a screen onto which yearnings are projected and, consequently, on which versions of human subjects and their contexts flicker” (2); and “The question of agency, given embodied competence, causes the jazz tradition to make a fetish of the proper noun, the named competence (Armstrong, Parker, Monk)” (6) — and Bolden. In other words, between the novel’s aesthetic virtuosity and jazz’s cultural repetition, a reading subject’s orientation to and “contact” with Bolden as object involve not only “the subject” but also “histories that come before the subject” (Ahmed, *Cultural* 6). With the historical photograph before them, and by thinking that they have had contact with jazz before, some Canadian readers might well erase the production and circulation of race and its relations in the novel.

Ondaatje acknowledges his historical sources in archival, print, and intersubjective (oral and aural) forms of research, including the Jazz Archives at Tulane, an unpublished history of, and files from, the East Louisiana State Hospital, and “the important landscapes of Holtz [sic] Cemetery, First Street, and Baton Rouge to Jackson” (n. pag.). Bolden’s geography is not only New Orleans but also its metonymic location in the deep American South and the history of the “race feud” that began when “Negro suffrage ended a civil war” (Du Bois 25).<sup>6</sup> Published in 1903, as Bolden’s fame was on the rise and just four years before his incarceration in a “pre-Civil-War asylum” (Ondaatje 133), W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* gives us not a map or chronology but a phenomenological perspective contemporary with Bolden’s time and place. After all that has been said on “the physical, economic, and political relations of the Negroes and whites in the South” (115), Du Bois argues,

there still remains a part essential to a proper description of the South which it is difficult to describe or fix in terms easily understood by strangers. It is, in fine, the atmosphere of the land, the

thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life. . . . [T]hese little things . . . are the most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole. (115)

That Ondaatje acknowledges “the important landscape” on a par with archives and other tangible documents suggests that his travels through the South, “from Baton Rouge to Jackson,” were equally, though intangibly, formative of his creative process.

New Orleans was once the largest slave market and port of international trade in the New World. Central to the Louisiana Purchase (1803) that enabled geopolitical, technological, and economic expansion of America as a new empire, New Orleans in Bolden’s lifetime was the birthplace of entertainment, leisure, and tourism as highly profitable industries that relied principally on descendants of slaves and free Creoles of colour for the music and the sex that made New Orleans an attractive destination for the “sporting” crowd. Both the music and the sex were forms of racialized, embodied labour consumed in Storyville, the region of New Orleans ordinances in 1897, and operative from 1898 to 1917, for the containment of “trade” in race in the city.

Bolden’s biography is situated precisely in the post-Civil War era in which New Orleans was “Americanized” and in which, as Emily Epstein Landau argues, “Storyville offered a stage for acting out cultural fantasies of white supremacy, patriarchal power, and a renewed version of American manhood for the twentieth century” (1). The brief arc of Bolden’s fame has its analogue in the brief arc of Storyville’s fame; though Storyville was hardly the only urban red-light district in America, “*it was in New Orleans.*” As Landau explains, the city was “notorious for promiscuous race mixing, interracial and illicit sex, and political corruption, as well as prostitution. . . . And yet, the ordinance that created Storyville was a reform measure, an attempt by an elite group of businessmen . . . attuned to the need to create clearly demarcated spaces for legitimate commerce” (2-3). The line drawn between legitimate and illegitimate commerce was also the colour line between white consumers and black people who played the music, provided the sex, and in some cases owned the brothels through the financial and legal “patronage” of wealthy white men.

Ondaatje’s novel begins with a vivid account of the geography of New Orleans that puts prostitution front and centre but also charts

something of the city's social and economic history before and after the Storyville ordinance came into effect and specifically in the context of the American Civil War. With the novel's first (post-epigraph) words, "His geography," we are invited to "Float by in a car today and see the corner shops" in the neighbourhood where Bolden lived. "This district, the homes and stores, are a mile or so from the streets made marble by jazz. There are no songs about Gravier Street or Phillips or First or The Mount Ararat Missionary Baptist Church his mother lived next to . . ." (2). The passing of an era is evoked: the street's "primary yellows and reds muted now," "the wooden houses almost falling down, the signs, the porches and the steps broken through where no one sits outside now" (2). What can no longer be seen or heard can nevertheless be told, as in this description of the "Negro" brothel district in uptown New Orleans before the creation of "the brothel district of Storyville":

[H]ere there is little recorded history, though tales of "The Swamp" and "Smoky Row," both notorious communities where about 100 black prostitutes from pre-puberty to their seventies would line the banquette to hustle, come down to us in fragments. Here the famous whore Bricktop Johnson carried a 15 inch knife and her lover John Miller had no left arm and wore a chain with an iron ball on the end to replace it — killed by Bricktop herself on December 7, 1861, because of his "bestial habits and atrocious manners." And here "one-legged Duffy" (born Mary Rich) was stabbed by her boyfriend and had her head beaten in with her own wooden leg. "And gamblers carr[ied] cocaine to a game." (2-3)

These opening paragraphs move seamlessly between oral history and this geography, though recorded history is also traceable. For example, history is "recorded" in sheet music and for phonograph and replayed in famous songs such as "Basin Street Blues," unnamed but metonymically evoked by orientation to "higher up Basin Street" (2). The geography is described in oral "tales" of prostitution but also in the architectural record metonymized by "the streets made marble by jazz": the most famous brothel in America in Bolden's time, Lulu White's Mahogany Hall, was built of marble (Rose 80). And though the status of tales that "come down to us in fragments" can certainly trigger epistemological uncertainty, the semiotic productivity *within* the fragments represents history as *also* embodied. Here we have fragments of two tales, both

of which feature fragmented bodies, victims of violence at least twice over: both as amputees and as lives cut short by murder. Interestingly, the year dropped into these fragments is 1861, the year that the Civil War began and brought with it a new proximity for white Americans to violations of the body (violations with which black Americans had long been familiar) but also intimate photographic records of that violence. The Civil War created a generation of amputees, prosthetic bodies, wounds that would not heal, and pain that created addictions to the opium and morphine so freely used on the battlefield, traces of which appear in the novel (67, 115).

In these early pages, repeated attention is drawn to Coca-Cola signs, which characterize Bolden's geography in ways that further materialize the legacy of the Civil War. Coca-Cola first appears in a description of economic decline in the 1970s when Ondaatje travelled to New Orleans in search of Bolden. This decline is measurable in relation to the slave-owning wealth of New Orleans before the Civil War, its significant decline during Reconstruction, and the rise of new wealth, still based upon exploiting black bodies, in the late 1890s and early 1900s: "The signs of the owners obliterated by brand names. Tassin's Food Store which he [Bolden] lived opposite for a time surrounded by DRINK COCA COLA IN BOTTLES, BARG'S, . . . TOM MOORE, YELLOWSTONE, JAX, COCA COLA, COCA COLA" (2). This geography traces the historical rise of patents, including patent medicines and industrialized models of production, such as bottling, a new technology in Bolden's lifetime. The obliteration of small, independently owned businesses by corporate brand names is familiar to readers today, but perhaps less familiar is the rise of brand culture in general out of the Civil War, for which Coca-Cola is a ubiquitous metonym. A Civil War veteran invented Coca-Cola when searching for an alternative painkiller to morphine, to which (like many veterans of the war) he had become addicted (Gardiner 22). Needing money for his addiction, he sold two-thirds of his ownership in the invention to two businessmen, whose own debts enabled one Asa Candler (the son of plantation owners) to acquire both the management and the ownership of Coca-Cola. In *God's Capitalist: Asa Candler of Coca-Cola*, Kathryn Kemp tells the story of how Candler would make himself, his sons, and the city of Atlanta, Georgia, very rich by manufacturing Coca-Cola and investing the profits in real estate and banking. As Kemp notes, merging the plantation



model of a family-run business with the rising power of Protestantism in the United States, and aware of “a new kind of business, made possible by the rise of mass manufacturing and transportation technology in the late nineteenth century” (47), Candler also “understood that brand recognition, although intangible, constituted a valuable asset”: his advertising budget was “a million dollars” by 1911 (49). As a church and family man, and a tee-totalling community leader, Candler also ensured that Coca-Cola did not contain coca or cocaine, and he worked assiduously to bar associations of the product with “coke,” “dope,” or addiction (44, 50). If we think about structures of exploitation and containment in a circuit of white profits, property, and propriety (the line between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” commerce), then it makes sense that, while Candler invested (five hundred dollars) in Coca-Cola after it cured his headache (41), the metonymical links between cocaine and the racialized world of vice subsequently needed to be severed and denied. His later attempts to “assure Coca-Cola’s respectable reputation” (50) succeeded so thoroughly that the beverage’s origins are largely unknown today.

References to brand names in Bolden’s geography metonymically record the history of commercial developments in the 1890s as well as some of their older historical connections. For example, Tom Moore is a brand name of cigars made with Havana tobacco leaves; the product invokes the history of slavery in the Caribbean and the post-revolutionary diaspora of free Creoles of colour in New Orleans. By that association, the brand name is also contiguous with the loss of free coloured Creoles’ exceptionalism when the influx of emancipated plantation African Americans raised the ante on the problem of the colour line in New Orleans. Bolden was nine years old when the 1886 *Plessy v. Ferguson* verdict entrenched as both “natural” and legal the hierarchy of whites over blacks such that generations of free, educated, property-owning, and highly cultured Creoles of colour became identified with slaves only recently freed.<sup>7</sup> For classically trained Creoles, the altered sociality of New Orleans after the Civil War, and especially after 1886, is audible in the words of Creole violinist Paul Dominguez, though he conflates a whole conjuncture with a single performer: “See, us Downtown people . . . we didn’t think so much of this rough Uptown jazz until we couldn’t make a living otherwise. . . . If I wanted to make a living, I had to be rowdy like the other group. I had to jazz it or rag it

or any other damn thing. . . . Bolden cause all that” (qtd. in Rose 107). Tom Moore cigars are similarly associated with the sporting life and new money and with another form of addictive consumption potent enough in America to produce the temperance and prohibition movements. “His geography” houses two prominent white men in vice: “Anderson” sends Bolden “money for the family . . . and two bottles of whiskey a day,” while “Dago Tony” sends him “Raleigh Rye and wine” (3). Again such details function metonymically: “Dago Tony” signals Mediterranean histories in the slave trade, and Tom Anderson published the “Blue Books,” the guides to “the sporting district,” in which ads for newly patented drugs, cigars, alcohol, and brothels sat side by side, page after page, with references to musical entertainments (see Rose 125-46).

The novel’s opening paragraphs, then, are saturated with historical references to a cultural and human geography in which bodies are for auction and consumption (“\$800 in 1860” for “a teenage virgin” [3]; Landau 45-76), and in which businessmen, such as “Dr Miles (who later went into the Alka Seltzer business),” bought advertising in the annual Blue Book that “list[ed] alphabetically the white and then the black girls . . . and then the octoroons” (3). This is a geography in which chattel slavery is in effect renewed, and economic stratification by race further entrenched, *after* the Civil War. The novel’s opening pages also document the extent of economic change with the migration of former slaves into New Orleans following the Civil War: in 1861, when “[h]istory was slow” in The Swamp and Smoky Row, “about 100 black prostitutes . . . would line the banquette to hustle” (2-3); however, “in the brothel district of Storyville,” created when the effects of post-emancipation migration quickened history and “illegitimate” traffic, “Money poured in, slid around. By the end of the Nineteenth Century, 2000 prostitutes were working regularly. There were at least 70 professional gamblers. 30 piano players took in several thousand each in weekly tips. Prostitution and its offshoots received a quarter of a million dollars of the public’s money a week” (3).<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

In New Orleans [the Negro] soon observes that the only places his people can express themselves loudly and without restraint or caution are at Protestant churches, dances, parades and games of sport. . . .

I learned early . . . that if I wanted to go places with a minimum of education, the way involved the learning of a musical instrument. . . . I saw that the lowest jobs were done by Negroes and they never were promoted. So my mind was set on one thing: learn to play something.

— Danny Barker (qtd. in Shipton vii)

I pore over these historical details in the novel's representation of Bolden's geography because they so clearly put side by side, and up front, prostitution, gambling, drugs and alcohol, violence, music and musicians, and race relations in the production and consumption of sex and music along the colour line. The proximity and condensation of these items in the novel's early pages orient us to metaphorical resemblances and metonymical associations that also saturate the textuality of the novel. I turn now from the ambient presence of New Orleans in the novel to the semiotic movement among some key locations and references in the novel, specifically the barbershop, brothels, cabin at Lake Pontchartrain, and pre-Civil War asylum. Together they suggest that Bolden was perhaps a prostitute less to fame or celebrity than to the sporting and hustling economy in which he was yet another body circumscribed by racialization, an economy of competition felt individually in a new market sociality. Bolden feels this history in the novel in an explicitly embodied consciousness that seeks the freedom promised in the outcome of the Civil War, not least of all the freedom that, for former slaves, was also a *new* necessity to enter into a capitalist democracy in the making, in which everyone was "free" to make his or her way, to make money, to be on the make, to make or break. Music and pimping ("hustling") were the principal means by which African-American men could supplement incomes from their day jobs, escape being returned to field and stevedore labour, and earn better money.<sup>9</sup> That Bolden's sense of his value comes from music and sex is reflected in how his sense of competition and his desire are represented in terms of music and sex. Scenes in which Bolden seems to be most conscious of himself in this competitive world are scenes in which Coca-Cola also appears. Coca-Cola anchors the metaphorical and metonymical connections among these more intimately imagined locations and events.

Coca-Cola appears in the novel not only in the extratextual references to Bolden's geography but also in at least two important scenes that bring together competition, prostitution, bodily violence, enslave-

ment, and containment (or unfreedom), all in relation to a focus on bodies. Figure and reference, metaphor and metonym, come together in a kind of switching point between extra- and intratextual relations such that the location of Coca-Cola in these two scenes points us toward a third, equally important one. These scenes are the fight between Bolden and the pimp Tom Pickett in the barbershop (68-72),<sup>10</sup> the circulation of the cut bottom of a Coca-Cola bottle among inmates in the East Louisiana State Hospital (150), and the “parad[e] alone” among the mattress whores (116-18). When Bolden cuts up Pickett and is himself injured in the fight, which begins in the barbershop but ends in the street, Nora throws “empty coke bottles between” them (72). When Bolden is incarcerated in the East Louisiana Hospital, a fellow inmate who knows who he is and wants to give him liberty (141) escapes and returns with “the bottom circle from a bottle of Coca-Cola . . . ground . . . into a sharp disc” (144). Before examining these scenes more closely, I return to the barbershop at the novel’s beginning, the location of Bolden’s day job but also a scene of explicit details woven into the later asylum and mattress whore scenes.

The evocation of Bolden’s geography through historical details about the work of prostitutes in The Swamp, Smoky Row, and the sporting district of Storyville culminates with “N. Joseph’s Shaving Parlor, the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked” (4).<sup>11</sup> Here, “After school, the kids come and watch the men being shaved. Applaud and whistle when each cut is finished. Place bets on whose face might be under the soap” (5): they apprentice early to black masculinity in a sociality in which money, alcohol, and women (metonymically) circulate. Note how the location and Bolden are characterized:

One large room with brothel wallpaper left over from Lulu White’s Mahogany Hall. Two sinks with barber chairs in front of them, and along the wall . . . armchairs where customers or more often just visitors sat talking and drinking. Pausing and tense when the alcohol ran out and drinking from the wooden coke racks until the next runner from Anderson or Dago Tony arrived, the new bottle travelling round the room including . . . the working Bolden, the bottle sucked empty after a couple of journeys, Bolden opening his throat muscles and taking it in so he was sometimes drunk by noon and would cut hair more flamboyantly. . . . Humming loud he would crouch over his sweating victim and cut and cut. . . . He

. . . offered raw steaming scandal that brought up erections in the midst of their fear. (6)

Bolden's solicitation of erections recalls what we have read just a few pages earlier: tales of the sex trade in the city's history and in Storyville itself, including "Olivia the Oyster Dancer" with her raw oyster or "try your luck with French Emma's '60 Second Plan'" at "335 Customhouse (later named Iberville), the street he went crazy on" (3-4). "Customhouse" was the original address of Josie Alton, later Josie Arlington, of *the* Arlington on Basin Street (Rose 48), and just before Bolden blows his blood/ejaculates through his cornet, in the culmination of a scene of sexual and/as musical ecstasy with an unknown woman (131-32), his music is embodied and performed by her at the "Liberty-Iberville connect" (130).

The contiguities among the day job, music, gambling, sex and sex trade, and final years of Bolden's life are particularly condensed in the scene of the fight between Bolden and Pickett (68-72) but also *remembered* (almost a hundred pages later) in the scene in the asylum. An inmate, Bertram Lord, acquires the ground bottom of a Coke bottle after failing to "get the scissors off" Bolden when his haircutting shift ends in the East Louisiana State Hospital (143). "Lord, who knew of Bolden's reputation, was always trying to persuade him to escape. The noise of Lord so constant it was like wallpaper and Bolden could blot himself against it" (143). Lord succeeds in smuggling the cut glass into the asylum "hidden under the instep of his left foot" (144):

When protests began over guard rapes, bad plumbing, labour, lack of heat, the patients organized a strike. This did nothing. They then cut their tendons. . . . Lord walked down the hall and slid the coke bottom under each door to the patients. They took the sharpened glass, cut their tendon, and passed it back. Bolden who saw the foreign weapon enter his room . . . peered at it, touched it with his foot and pushed it back slowly to Lord. (150)

With these metonymic links to labour unrest, the barbershop, the fight with Pickett, Bolden's fear of the barbershop's ceiling fan, and "his ultimate nightmare of having his hands cut off at the wrists. . . . Suicide of the hands. So many varieties of murder" (44), Bolden chooses to stay in this pre-Civil War asylum and the silence there. He touches

but pushes back the promise of “liberty” of an economy metonymized in Coca-Cola.

Two other scenes also resonate with references to consumption, ownership, and competition in the postbellum economy and with Bolden’s attempt to escape from the subjectivity and human relations shaped in this context. Figurative relations and somatic details are repeated across these scenes and draw attention to the conjuncture of intra- and extratextual paradigms. The first of these scenes is focalized by Webb as he remembers how he and Bolden lived together for two years after getting their first jobs: “Being financially independent for the first time they spend all their money on girls, and sometimes on women” (30). At the time, Webb “was the public figure, Bolden the side-kick” (30); practising his horn, Bolden was to Webb

the muted howl in the other room. Till coming into Webb’s room with beer and sweating Bolden would collapse in an armchair and say “Tell me about magnets, Webb.” And Webb who had ten of them hanging on strings from the ceiling would explain the precision of the forces in the air and hold a giant magnet in his hands towards them so they would go frantic and twist magically with their own power and twitch and thrust up and swivel as if being thrashed jerking until sometimes the power that Webb held from across the room would break one of the strings and Webb would put his magnet at his foot and drag the smaller piece invisibly towards him. (30-31)

Resembling power in relationships, the magnets’ effects are also difficult not to associate with lynching, a particularly racialized image of the exercise of power.<sup>12</sup> This image, contiguous with Webb’s nostalgia for the time when Webb “was the public figure,” Bolden “the muted howl in the other room,” suggests the extent of postbellum anxiety about self-perception and competition not only across the colour line but also among black men.<sup>13</sup> Webb’s experience of the loss of power in Bolden’s emergence as a public figure is confirmed by the end of this scene:

A month after Bolden had moved Webb went to the city and, unseen, tracked Buddy for several days. Till the Saturday when he watched his nervous friend walk jauntily out of the crowd into the path of a parade and begin to play. So hard and so beautifully that Webb didn’t even have to wait for the reactions of the people,

he simply turned and walked till he no longer heard the music or the roar he imagined crowding round to suck that joy. Its power. (30-31)

Webb tracks Bolden again for escaping from New Orleans and brings him back to the cabin at Lake Pontchartrain. Here metonyms for slavery are much more explicit, recorded in a journal bearing traces of Bolden's body ("Alcohol sweat on these pages" [101]):

Found an old hunting jacket. I sleep against its cloth, full of hunter sweat, aroma of cartridges. . . . Scratch of suicide at the side of my brain.

Our friendship had nothing accidental did it. Even at the start you set out to breed me into something better. Which you did. . . . I sped away . . . and now you produce a leash, . . . pull me home. Like those breeders of bull terriers in the Storyville pits who can prove anything of their creatures. . . . [They] can slice the dog's body in half knowing the jaws will still not let go. . . . All you've done is cut me in half, pointing me here. (86)

The resemblances and contiguities here establish a continuity from antebellum slaves reduced to animal status, escaped slaves hunted by hounds under the Fugitive Slave Act, to emancipated slaves reduced to objects of sporting entertainment in Storyville.

Further references to animals used in sporting entertainment cluster around Webb and Bolden, Bolden and other musicians, and Bolden and the barbershop. When Webb tracks Bolden to Shell Beach, "Webb was releasing the rabbit he had to run after. . . . [T]here would always be the worthless taste of worthless rabbit when he finished" (81). Webb discloses Bolden's location to a fellow band player, who then brings alcohol, music, and a woman to Webb's cabin to tempt Bolden back into circulation:

With a girl fan he came in his car and played some music he's working on, while she was silent and touching in the corner. I could have done without his music, I could have done with her body. . . . I wanted to start a fight. . . . I wanted the horn in her skirt. I wanted her to sit with her skirt on my cock like a bandage. My old friend's girl. What have you brought me back to Webb? (100)

The girl "fan" resonates with the fan in the barbershop: "Above me revolving slowly is the tin-bladed fan, turning like a giant knife all

day above my head. So you can never relax and stretch up” (42-43). A bent back in the barbershop scene recalls the back-breaking work in the plantation fields, while wanting “to start a fight” in this cabin scene recalls the barbershop fight with Pickett over ownership of Nora. It also recalls another form of competition between cocks, metonymically linked with the barbershop when Bolden advises clients to “take the money and put it on the roosters” (37). After the fight with Pickett, “Bunk Johnson, seventeen years old, took his [Bolden’s] place” with “some of Bolden’s players”; Dude Botley reports that, after Bolden sees Bunk in his place at Lincoln Park, “He steps out of the park like a rooster, ignoring everybody and everything” (77). By such means, the novel’s intratextuality condenses and displaces extratextual references to the sporting district into Bolden’s behaviour, thoughts, emotions, and body as musician, hustler, consumed (castrated), and (bandaged) consumer of others. Bolden the once-successful musician fears that, in the market sociality of the sporting life in New Orleans, he is not only slave to the barbershop, with its “brothel wallpaper left over from Lulu White’s Mahogany Hall” (its mirrored walls metonymically linked to Josie Arlington’s brothel with its “Hall of Mirrors” [Rose 80] and to competition with Pickett), but also subject to the hardening of his humanity to others<sup>14</sup> and the consumption of his body through his playing. Bolden dreams of cutting throats in the barbershop in a redirected house slave’s fantasy:

They trust me with the cold razor at the vein under their ears.  
 Dreams of the neck. Gushing onto the floor and my white apron.  
 The men stumbling with no more sight to the door and feeling  
 even through their pain the waves of heat as they go through the  
 door and into the real climate of Liberty and First, leaving this ice,  
 wallpaper and sweet smell and gracious conversation, mirrors, my  
 slavery here. (43)

The barbershop acts as metonym for perpetuated fantasies of the antebellum South (Landau 8-10; Rose 81): his “slavery here.” And “the real climate” of “Liberty” only confirms his continued slavery in a new economy, his violated body, and his violation of others as a competitor and consumer himself.

The novel’s most abject meditation on the dehumanizing consequences of blackness in the postbellum economy of New Orleans occurs just before Bolden’s last performance, in a scene that metonymically



remembers the already-read asylum scene. There he refuses to cut his ankle with the ground bottom of a Coca-Cola bottle delivered by an inmate who “had a limp” (144). Here the scene involves the limping, “gypsy feet” prostitutes who, when used up, are also cast out of Storyville, their bodies diseased and emptied in the sporting district, then broken further by “pimps . . . out hunting them with sticks” (116) to stop them from lowering the prices elsewhere. Here we find a particular compression of metaphors and metonyms in Bolden’s consciousness, leading up to his last performance. After two years of silence, having been found and returned to New Orleans like a fugitive slave, Bolden walks in the evening to an isolated area near the water where prostitution is likely to have begun with traders, merchants, and sailors who arrived by ship in this basin of the Mississippi River (Rose 5-8):

Along the water. The mist has flopped over onto the embankment like a sailing ship. . . . [T]he mattress whores . . . walk up and down . . . to show they haven’t got broken ankles. The ones that have stand still and try to hide it. . . . Women riddled with the pox, remnants of the good life good time ever loving Storyville who, when they are finished there, steal their mattress and with a sling hang it on their backs[,] . . . taking anything so long as the quarter is in their hands. . . . The women who are called gypsy feet. . . . All that masturbation of practice each morning and refusing to play and these gypsy feet wanting to play you. . . . My brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back. . . . Their bodies murdered and my brain suicided. (116-17)

Figurative relations of contiguity between Bolden and prostitutes become relations of similarity here; he himself has become marginalized in the music industry of the city, surpassed by the different style of Robichaux and other literate musicians.

\* \* \*

Bolden felt the “Scratch of suicide at the side of [his] brain” when he was tracked down by Webb, but his return to New Orleans leads to his “brain suicided.” His later incarceration provides the means for suicide (the barber scissors, the sharp bottom of a Coca-Cola bottle), but he does not use them. His imprisonment seems to offer escape from the market sociality of postbellum New Orleans, a sociality figured in terms

of slavery, but the journey to the asylum is a journey back in time, to a time when history was even slower than in the Negro brothel district where the novel's unofficial history begins: the patient/prisoner travels by train, then by horse-drawn wagon (158), to a pre-Civil War institution. Is this a return to the violent paternalism of antebellum masters? Or does it provide asylum from renewed forms of slavery between the Civil War and the Second World War, when the "crime" of unemployed blacks was called "vagrancy" and the men thus captured were "leased" to industrialists? (see Blackmon). And can we say that the novel anticipates, in a kind of proleptic haunting, the disproportionate number of racialized inmates in prisons in the twenty-first century? (see Adams).

Although the novel alone might not answer these questions, it can nevertheless raise them for critical reflection. For readers willing to bring to the poetic intensities of the novel knowledge of the historical conjuncture in which Bolden lived, *Coming Through Slaughter* offers a portrait not only of an artist but also of legacies of the American Civil War.<sup>15</sup> Ondaatje might have freed the artist Bolden from an official history that did not recognize him, but his novel also cites through its phenomenological, somatic, and figurative portrait a larger history of the afterlife of slavery.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Selected examples of the extensive criticism include Barbour, de Smyter, Titlestad, Van Wart (on form, imagery, and poetics); Heble, Kamboureli (on historiography, metafiction, and epistemology); Marinkova, Siemerling (*Discoveries*), Spinks (on haptic aesthetics as ethics, heterological discourses of self/other, and micromodalities of politics and ethics, respectively).

<sup>2</sup> Three other scholars consider race but in relation to other foci. Sally Bachner analyzes "the tension between historiographic reform and horror for historicity that animates the text" (203) to illustrate the flawed execution of postmodern attempts to recoup minority subjects from official history. Leslie Mundwiler argues that Ondaatje's aesthetically ideal-

ized portrait is generically and ethically suspect (Chapter 5), but Michael Titlestad, via Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Julia Kristeva, sees in the aesthetics of Bolden's final performance an "embodied-subject formation . . . which challenge[s] hegemonic, and significantly detrimental, myths" (4).

<sup>3</sup> My method necessitates frequent and sometimes long quotations from the novel and secondary sources to illustrate this idiom at work.

<sup>4</sup> See Siemerling (*Black Atlantic*) and Siemerling and Casteel (*Canada*), which bring significant bodies of scholarship to work against both "consciously produced" and "unconsciously generated and supported" ignorance about race in Canadian literary history (Sullivan and Tuana 1-2), largely through analyses of works by racially minoritized Canadian writers. See also Coleman, who illustrates the early development of a national pedagogy of ignorance in repeated tropes of popular and canonical white writers. Here I consider Ondaatje's majoritized novel for history and effects that do not stop at the US-Canada border.

<sup>5</sup> "[M]usic became the first and perhaps most profound way" in which ex-slave African Americans "would be able to rise above their deplorable conditions." During Reconstruction, "there was wider access to musical instruments, particularly brass instruments that had been primarily used by military bands during the Civil War. [These instruments] found their way into the hands of ex-slaves through antique stores, pawn shops, general stores, and simply being left behind on war-ravaged plantations and fields" (Barnhart 11-12).

<sup>6</sup> Widely circulated, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* cite enslaved and free African Americans' fear of being "sold South": that is, in slave auctions in New Orleans. "Huck Finn" is cited in Ondaatje's novel when Bolden is en route to the pre-Civil War asylum (158).

<sup>7</sup> For more on *Plesky v. Ferguson*, see Landau ("Introduction" and Chapter 2).

<sup>8</sup> The accuracy of the novel's portrait is confirmed by recent historical scholarship (e.g., Landau), though Ondaatje's source for most of the details and quotations in the novel's first two pages is likely Al Rose's *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District* (1974). His book itself recirculates oral legends of the sporting life from earlier collections of interviews with musicians, among them actual or near contemporaries of Bolden. Ondaatje paratextually recognizes these sources in the novel. That he has a section for "Credits" and another for "Acknowledgements" speaks to encounters with history that inform without necessarily being documentable.

<sup>9</sup> Oral histories of musicians in New Orleans return frequently to matters of money making and how the creation and dissolution of Storyville generated different economic opportunities for racialized musicians and other workers (see, for example, Shapiro and Hentoff 7, 8, 11, 12, 16, 18, 20, 22, 26, 32, 33, 41, 49, and elsewhere).

<sup>10</sup> Bolden cuts Pickett with a razor, Pickett cuts Bolden with the hook on the razor strop after throwing shards of a broken "\$45" mirror at him (Ondaatje 71). At a time when jazz bands were proliferating and competing for paying gigs, they advertised by playing in the streets in open wagons: street battles between bands were known as "cutting contests" (see Shapiro and Hentoff 24, 25). Although Bolden and Pickett spar over sexual ownership of Nora, masculinity was at stake in economic competition as well.

<sup>11</sup> Bolden did not in fact work there, but he might have frequented the barbershop for booking band members and gigs (Marquis 6-7). The historical inaccuracy makes no difference to the novel's semiosis: that Bolden is imagined as a barber is what matters to the figural economy of the novel, in which his "slavery" in the barbershop is associated with his music and pimping.

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Adams's history of the southern plantation in popular culture is particularly informative about lynchings in the context of nostalgia for antebellum life (see, especially,

Chapter 4). William H. Chafe and co-authors note that lynchings “were epidemic in the South between 1890 and 1910” (27).

<sup>13</sup> In 1868, the governor of Louisiana created a metropolitan police force for New Orleans to replace the all-white, independent police force (Nystrom 75-76).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Bolden uses the “noise” of Lord as “a bark around himself” (143) as both a hardened exterior and the sound of his own dog.

<sup>15</sup> On various components and consequences of postbellum racism, see, for example, Adams; Blackmon; Chafe et al.; and Holt.

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