Two Hundred Years of Grit AND Grind: A Mythological Geography in the Literary Landscape of Memphis, Tennessee

Meredith Heath Boulden

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For Dustin and our glory baby. You are my heart; I carry you in my heart.
Acknowledgements

With humility, I acknowledge that I am a settler on the traditional land and ancestral territory of the Chikashsha Iyaakni people. I extend respect to the Chikashsha Iyaaki people for their deep wisdom of the local geography and stewardship of the alluvial plains of the Mississippi Delta that were colonized in West Tennessee and North Mississippi. With gratitude, I continue to listen and learn how to be an ally as the Chikashsha Iyaaki people preserve and maintain their culture and safety.

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Abstract

“Two Hundred Years of Grit and Grind” explores literary texts that are set in Memphis and authored by native Memphians which offer scholars unique insight into the city of Memphis, Tennessee. While not intended as essentialized representations of an ‘authentic’ Memphis, the texts in this dissertation provide an insider’s view to Memphians’ perceptions of their local identity, one that Yi-Fu Tuan argues is but one of several much-needed perspectives into our understanding of a given place. As an entry point into a more comprehensive understanding of the South, Memphians’ ambivalence toward their status as residents of the Bluff City reflects Southern attitudes toward the region, but the historical and social conditions specific to Memphis have amplified this insecurity, which has in turn become endemic to the local and not merely the regional. Moreover, these texts contextualize local identity within the framework of various civil and faith-based religions – specifically the Religion of the Lost Cause, Catholicism, Judaism, and hoodoo – and how practitioners of these religions have both stigmatized and mythologized Memphis inside their belief systems and faith practices.

Starting with Peter Taylor’s A Summons to Memphis and Margaret Skinner’s Old Jim Canaan, I first establish how Memphis has participated in the prevailing civil religion of the South, that is, the Religion of the Lost Cause, and how it has functioned for both the white Protestant and Catholic populations. With Steve Stern’s The Pinch and Tova Mirvis’s The Ladies Auxiliary, I trace how Jewish immigrants have integrated – to varying degrees – into Memphis and how Jewish mythologies have come to serve the purpose of explaining local identity and phenomena. Lastly, by reading Arthur Flowers’s Another Good Loving Blues and Katori Hall’s Hoodoo Love in conjunction with each
other, I explain how, despite its marginalized status inside the Southern Bible Belt, hoodoo has operated, together with the black church, to connect black Memphians with the city at large. At each juncture, I have considered the ways that each sub-population of the city has alternately expressed its firm attachment to local identity, its absolute disregard for Memphis’s redeeming qualities, or some amalgamation of both sentiments.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>An Ambivalent Civic Pride</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Civil Religion, Christianity, and Catholicism in Conflict</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Memphis as Makom</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>“Vodou, hoodoo or whatever-you-do”</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>A Love Letter to Memphis</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Works Cited | 198
An Ambivalent Civic Pride

All heart. Grit and grind. It was in 2011 after a midseason game when Memphis Grizzlies forward Tony Allen famously responded to a reporter’s inquiry about his spectacular efforts during a game he was not originally scheduled to play (Cacciola). Though it began as a mere jab at his teammate Rudy Gay for having sat the game out over a mere toe injury, Allen’s quote “started a fire in Memphis” and became the mantra not only for the NBA team that represents the city, but also for the city itself (Mullinax). Jason Wexler, the president of business operations for the Grizzlies, has since noted that, in an unusual turn for a professional sports team, “the fan base [of the Grizzlies], the team and the city all share an identity” and that, moreover, the “city’s positive self-esteem and the franchise’s positive self-esteem are interwoven” (Evans). The interconnectedness between Allen’s off-the-cuff remark about a teammate and Memphis’s identity has likewise been corroborated by current Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland who is quoted as saying that “[Memphis has always had] to grit and grind to success” (Evans). Hometown film director Craig Brewer has shared similar sentiments, saying,

Before all this happened with the Grizzlies, Memphis was going through a little bit of an identity crisis. All these other cities were in the spotlight for being cool places to live. And then we were always on these lists for, you know, having a lot of crime and being really fat. I know the cliché thing is to say that it’s bigger than basketball, but it is. That Tony Allen line might be the best description of Memphis ever. (Cacciola)

In the years since Allen’s post-game interview, his words have come to embody the very essence of the city for which he played for seven seasons: much as the collective identity of the Grizzlies was “forged in the muck and mire” and “driven by doubters,” so, too, that of the city of Memphis and the individuals who call it home (Mullinax).
As a native Memphian, I intuitively recognize the authenticity of the connection between Allen’s description of himself and the city in which I was born and raised. History indicates that we have had to fight for every ounce of positive recognition we have ever been granted, and we have more often than not been on the receiving end of national criticism for a litany of reasons. Not only do we lean toward believing the worst about ourselves, we folks from Memphis also tend to believe a number of other narratives about our hometown, the least of which can at times be ambivalent, conflicting, or flat out untrue. We are Southerners, after all, and not unaccustomed to misleading ourselves about the past, our own identities, or the identity of the places in which we reside.

Without question, mythology has been fundamental to the South’s regional identity, which has in turn set a precedent for the ways in which localities handle their own narratives of place. Largely based on the negative perceptions of outsiders, the Southern imaginary is entirely dependent on our self-identification as “other,” a mentality that enjoys nearly universal acceptance within the region and has made a substantial impact on the city of Memphis (Gaston 29). After the American Civil War, for instance, Memphians participated, along with the rest of the South, in revisiting and rewriting regional histories so as to make the past – and its impact on the present – more palatable. As defeated Rebels, faced with substantial financial losses, a Northern Army occupation, and an overwhelming sense of shame, we found various means to idolize the Old South and the Lost Cause of the past and create the myth of the progressive New South (Gaston 225). Despite the South’s shame over its past sins, regional failures eventually begat a sense of pride in the South’s distinctiveness, culminating as the cliched chip on the region’s shoulders. The Southern myth, in whatever incarnation, remains an emotional
paradox: a concurrent sense of regional pride that at once stands as a coping mechanism for national condemnation and a crushing self-consciousness. As contradictory as these emotions may seem, Southern scholars from a variety of academic disciplines assert that they are crucial underpinnings to Southern mythology.

At the proverbial center of this rewritten past, Memphis has never been a stranger to these mythologies. In fact, local businessman Henry Turley once said that, in Memphis, there is the occasional opportunity to “fight [a] myth with a myth” (Katz). If anything, Memphis was born of a myth. From its earliest days of occupation by the Chickasaw Nation on the bluffs of the Mississippi, the land that would eventually become the modern-day city of Memphis was imbued with myth. According to their orally transmitted migration legend, the Chickasaw people arrived in West Tennessee at the behest of their gods who directed them through the medium of an oracle pole that was inserted in the ground each night; every morning, the people would travel in the direction the pole had tilted overnight. By adhering to this process, the Chickasaws first moved eastward across the Mississippi, at which point they settled near the banks of the Tennessee River (Gibson 10). After a time, the oracle pole tilted back westward, and the Chickasaws followed its guidance until they landed in the highlands of northern Mississippi (Gibson 11). According to records from the Great River Road Museum in Darrow, Louisiana, the name of the great river next to which the Chickasaw settled was “Misi-ziibi,” or the ‘Father of Waters,’ a name which would continue to be of significance to the region even after the Chickasaw Nation was displaced (“Mississippi River”). From then until the Chickasaw Cession of 1818 when the people relinquished
their rights to the territory they had inhabited for centuries, the bluff upon which Memphis now rests was part of Chickasaw hunting grounds (Harkins 30; Gibson 5).

In 1541, Hernando de Soto, the famed Spanish conquistador, and his fellow explorers arrived on the eastern shore of the Mississippi River somewhere near present-day Memphis (Harkins 20). In an early indicator that Memphians are comfortable juggling competing cultural narratives that may or may not be factual representations of place (Katz), Harkins notes that Memphians have “long believed that larger-than-life Spaniards trod the paths of their locale in a heroic, futile search for El Dorado” and that this epic has become part of their local place identity (Harkins 20). As Harkins observes, this idea took hold even though de Soto’s “fabled expedition” made “little lasting impact” on the area; even so, in subsequent years, Memphis has commemorated his presumed influence on the city with “mural and marker, and in street, park, and bridge names” (20). Although de Soto’s legendary journey up the Mississippi may not have actually brought Memphis to the level of international fame that locals imagine, other white European settlers eventually saw potential on the banks of the Mississippi, and it was their foresight that eventually brought Memphis to the forefront of the national imagination.

When Andrew Jackson, John Overton, and James Winchester negotiated the transfer of the fourth Chickasaw bluff from the hands of the Chickasaw Nation to the United States in 1818, their decision to name their new settlement Memphis was highly influenced by Winchester’s interest in classical studies. According to John Harkins, Winchester’s suggestion to name “a fledgling frontier settlement after one of the great cities of antiquity” was “hardly unusual” (18). Memphis was, in fact, the second Tennessee town Winchester named after an ancient Egyptian city, but it was Memphis
alone that withstood the test of time and flourished on its own (Harkins 18). As the “one-
time premier city of the ancient world,” Memphis, Egypt, had survived as a provincial
capital through multiple Egyptian dynasties (Harkins 17). Moreover, Memphis was home
to a temple for the creator god Ptah, who preexisted the universe and brought creation
into being through his spoken word (“Ptah”). For modern Memphians, this association
with the ancient city has imbued their hometown with an “irresistible exotic mystery
while serving as a source of civic pride” (Harkins 17). In 1991, the city of Memphis
opened the doors to its very own pyramid, an imposing structure that has served multiple
purposes in its day, but yet reminds Memphians and its many visitors of the city’s roots
in the ancient world (Harkins 161).

As Southerners, we Memphians glean a certain sense of satisfaction in affirming
the exceptionalism of the region from which we hail, an ideology that is as hotly
contested by Southern scholars as it is fervently touted by Southerners. As a local place
within the larger regional space, Memphis also tends to emphasize its own place
exceptionalism. As Memphians, we like to believe that we are from Memphis. Not
Tennessee. Not West Memphis across the bridge in Arkansas. Most definitely not
Northern Mississippi. Just Memphis (Hall ix). Instead, with its uniquely situated
geography, Memphis has held its Southern identity in tandem with a multiplicity of other
narratives in order to create its own individual identity and mythologies. Situated atop the
Fourth Chickasaw Bluff of the Mississippi River, Memphis’s participation in the slave
trade, the cotton industry, and the American Civil War – all of which were influenced by
the city’s proximity to the Mississippi – lend credence to the Memphis’s status as a
distinctly Southern city. The complex relationships between the Old and New Souths, the
urban and the rural, and the global and the local that have long defined the South as a region have similarly found shelter within the confines of local culture in Memphis. Even so, although the city is definitively Southern, we are often reluctant to make that concession. Although Memphis rests along the western edges of early historical boundaries for both the American South and West, the city and its environs are known as the Mid-South, a label that we desperately wish would distance the metropolitan region from the Deep South (Rushing 5). Our earnest desires to the contrary, Memphis is “[c]ulturally…more associated with the Deep South and even more specifically with the Mississippi Delta than it is the Upland South” (“Memphis metropolitan”).

Not only do we prefer to distance ourselves from the state of Tennessee and the South at large, we would like to think that Memphis is different from anywhere else in the world. We have the best pulled-pork Bar-B-Que on the planet, and despite some historical context to the contrary, we lay claim to the titles of both the Home of the Blues and the Birthplace of Rock and Roll. At least some experts agree with our self-assessment: as the largest city in the Mississippi Delta, Memphis has been identified as “much more than a designated cultural, historical, and economic crossroads on a southern map of regional exceptionalism or a digitized point on a global network;” rather, it is tied together by “networks of social relations, collections of cultural symbols and historical memories, and invested with [its own] cultural meaning and value” (Rushing 26). Well-known journalist Hampton Sides, a native Memphian himself, has remarked that there is an ‘essential otherness’ to those who reside here, further amplifying the notion that Memphis – and her residents – are just a little ‘off-kilter’ (“Hampton Sides Quotes”).
Despite our hometown pride and our claims to fame, we Memphians also tend to walk around with a certain sense of shame regarding our hometown. For all that we tout our exceptionalism, we also recognize that some folks, including Hampton Sides, consider Memphis a ‘whack job of a city,’ which, if not exactly derisive, does not exactly leave one with a sense of civic pride (“Hampton Sides Quotes”). One Grizz commentator once noted that Memphis seems to be a place where “no one want[s] to come… much less stay” (Mullinax). Prolific Jewish American novelist Steve Stern, who is originally from Memphis, has observed that he grew up here believing that the city was “merely a good place for wishing you were somewhere else” (“In Search Of” 5). It does not matter that some see Memphis as a “city [that has] left a greater global impact on modern culture” than any other place (Rushing 25); no matter how you dice it, it seems that no one with a square head on their shoulders would come here willingly, and no one else with any amount of sense would remain.

One must surely wonder just how we arrived at this conclusion about our Memphis. In a broader context, some people might think it is merely because we are from the South. Memphis, however, has often suffered the fate of a negative reputation, though frequently for reasons endemic to the local rather than to regional attributes. Wanda Rushing has noticed this almost intrinsic insecurity in local residents; Memphians, she says, often wrestle with “past disruptions and identities, self-consciousness about them, and concerns about public image” (35). Moreover, native Memphians will tell you that, while the South may be a Christ-haunted region, Memphis clearly has its own reason to feel visited by vengeful spirits from the past, and our “memories [of] self-consciousness, pride, shame, and ambivalence…give meaning and narrative coherence to Memphis as a
distinctive Southern place and shape place identity. Ambivalence about the kind of city Memphis ought to be…as well as negative images from the past, seems to haunt [us]” (Rushing 6). Our name may mean “established and beautiful,” but it could easily be mistaken as misnomer on the part of our founders; after all, until “about 1840,” Memphis was a “primitive and pestilential little mudhole [just] trying to survive” (Harkins 26).

In the decades to follow, municipal mismanagement did little to improve our reputation. After a series of multiple debilitating Yellow Fever epidemics in the 1870s, Memphis achieved unenviable fame as “a sickly city and a filthy one” (Crosby 24). Burdened by corrupt politicians who refused to institute a public works system despite advice from public health experts, we were compelled to surrender our city charter in 1879 to become a taxing district of the state and did not recover it until 1893; it was decades longer before the city’s population and economy recovered from having been “‘brought to its knees by a mosquito’” (Rushing 15). For these reasons and more, Memphis’s negative reputation has historically been amplified in the national imagination, leaving little doubt about what outsiders to the city think of us.

In addition to the Yellow Fever epidemics of the 1870s, other local public health crises have attracted the nation’s attention to Memphis. In 1975, for example, the women of Memphis labeled the city as “rape capital of the nation” due to the enormous backlog of rape kits and the police department’s inefficient response to domestic violence (Gilmore 95). The city’s sexual health is not limited to violence, however. As of 2015, the city was the most sexually diseased city in the state of Tennessee, with 11,000 cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis combined, an average of roughly 1% of the city’s population (“The most”). As of May 2021, the CDC had updated those numbers to reflect
an increase to more than 16,000 cases of those same STDs, an indication that the city’s sexual health is worse than before (Rodriguez and Barclay).

Other statistics demonstrate Memphians’ battle against the bulge. In a 2016 NBC News report, Memphis was listed as the “fattest city in America,” a fact previously cited by Craig Brewer as a contributing factor to locals’ negative self-perceptions about their place identity (“Memphis, Shreveport”). Scientifically speaking, we achieved this categorization due to the number of adults with high blood pressure, a high percentage of locals who eat less than one serving of fruits and vegetables a day, and the exorbitant rate of physically inactive adults (“Memphis, Shreveport). Anecdotally speaking, our struggle with obesity is varyingly attributed to our obsession with fried foods and our own BBQ or the high rate of criminal activity within the city limits and a resulting tendency to avoid exercising outside. The same researchers at the University of Memphis who first identified this trend have also clarified the intersection of poverty and obesity in Memphis, citing the inability of the city’s impoverished population to purchase healthy foods from within the food deserts that are common in lower income, high crime neighborhoods where corporate grocers generally do not invest their business capital (“The food desert”). With this lack of access to healthy and affordable groceries and just over a quarter of its population living under the poverty line, including an astonishing 44.7% of local children (Delavega), Memphis’s obesity rates can easily be linked to its status as the poorest metro area in the nation. What is worse is that poverty rates in Memphis are increasing, not declining.

Moreover, well-known journalist H. L. Mencken once described Memphis as “the most rural-minded city in the South,” and he did not intend his words as a compliment
Rather, his comment indicated that the South’s backwardness was that much more profound here than it was in other comparable cities in the region. In all honesty, Mencken’s observation is not really all that surprising, and the sentiment has not changed in the decades that have followed. Folks who are from here already know, and those who do wind up settling here, quickly discover that Memphis is the largest small town you’ll ever find. In 2009, former University of Memphis sociology professor Dr. Wanda Rushing provided further evidence that Mencken’s thoughts about Memphis were accurate when she commented that Memphis “has come to see itself as an amalgam of characteristically southern urban traits, where close proximity to rural culture bred innovative cultural expression and also fomented vicious racial tension, where the influences of the rural delta still mix uncomfortably with cosmopolitan ideals’” (Paradox 35). History likewise confirms Mencken’s suspicions and Rushing’s assertions. After the conclusion of the American Civil War, Memphis experienced an influx of movement of people from rural areas outside the city limits into the city proper, and with these additional residents came their long-standing attitudes toward patriarchal social structures and segregated racial interaction (Lewis 83). Where we had experienced a certain level of on-again, off-again peaceful tolerance along racial lines, the infusion of rural sentiments into the ideals of a theoretically democratic, modern, progressive town forever changed the course of our history and, as a result, a reputation that we have yet to erase.

In spite of our contradictory emotions about Memphis, we still believe in our own grit and grind exceptionalism. In 2013, we found validation for our local identity through yet another notorious moment in NBA history when Memphis Grizzlies player Zach Randolph succinctly encapsulated our sentiments during a post-game interview. After a
verbal on-court altercation with another player, Z-Bo emphasized his intention to play basketball and not whatever other games folks might be trying to play, saying, “There’s a lot of bluffin’ going on on the court… [but] I don’t bluff” (Freeman). The city subsequently rallied behind the clarion call of Z-Bo’s assertion. “We don’t bluff” became a game day mantra for the Grizzlies – an appropriate play on words for a city first settled along the Fourth Chickasaw Bluff of the Mississippi River, a veritable tagline for a city with two hundred years of wrestling with its rather gritty reputation and self-image. “We don’t bluff” is a fine addition to the “grit and grind” mentality that the Grizz and, by extension, the city of Memphis abide by. We may be hardscrabble ruffians who have had to claw and crawl our way to the top, but, by golly, what you see is what you get. Where Old South mythologies meet rough-around-the-edges, you find Memphis, and, in Memphis, we don’t bluff.

Except for when we do. For as much as we would like to distance ourselves from an association with the backwardness of the Old, Deep South, the fact remains that Memphians reside in the South, and her citizens more often than not embody, to varying degrees, characteristics of a Southern identity. In Kristin Lavelle’s 2015 *Whitewashing the South*, for instance, the author notes a trend among white Southerners and, specifically, residents of Greensboro, North Carolina that parallels life in Memphis. In the same way that the Religion of the Lost Cause aimed to rewrite the history of the Civil War, Lavelle identified a pattern of “selective detachment” among the white participants she interviewed about what they remembered of the 1960 Woolworths sit-in in Greensboro (88). Though historically regarded as the impetus for the larger sit-in movement across the South, many of the residents who had lived in Greensboro in 1960
that Lavelle interviewed were either unwilling or unable to identify specific details about the sit-in or were defensive about their or their family’s posture toward people of color. Others resisted the notion of Greensboro’s role in the Civil Rights Movement, hoping to dismiss the “actions that exposed Greensboro’s systemic racism [and enable] a perception of (white) Greensboro as a ‘good’ city” (Lavelle 108).

In so very many ways, Memphis is no different. In the 202 years since John Overton, James Winchester, and future president Andrew Jackson first purchased the land from the Chickasaw Nation that would eventually become Memphis, we have been lying to ourselves, if not to the rest of the world as well. Indeed, Rushing notes that “no city has gone to such extremes to rebuff its history and discount its legacy of rural traditions and ‘low-down’ culture” (Paradox 25). The Memphis Massacre of 1866, during which forty-six black Memphians were murdered and five black women were raped by a predominantly Irish mob of local firefighters and policemen (Ash 180), has, by and large, been ignored in local history until 2016 when a hotly contested marker was placed in the neighborhood where the violence originally erupted (Blank). Independently funded and erected by the NAACP of Memphis, the marker replaces the memorial originally proposed by the Tennessee Historical Commission that named the racial violence against black Memphians as a “Race Riot” (Blank). Also not recognized in the annals of local history is the fact that the massacre galvanized Radical Republicans in Congress to push for the passage of the 14th amendment (Ash 177). We have similarly spent nearly 150 years of our history blatantly ignoring the fact that it was the Curve Lynchings of three local black businessmen in 1892 that sparked Ida B. Wells’s national anti-lynching campaign. Instead of embracing her righteous anger toward the men who
murdered her friends and our very own fellow Memphians, we ran Miss Wells, who had been a schoolteacher and journalist in Memphis for years, out of town, throwing her news type into the Gayoso Bayou, burning her *Free Press* office to the ground, and threatening her life if she ever dared return to our fair city (Lauterbach 105).

In lieu of coming to terms with our lengthy history of racial violence, we have chosen to venerate the memory of former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest, who, though not originally from Memphis, operated his slave trade market in Memphis prior to the Civil War. Forrest returned to Memphis after the war, and, in 1905, Forrest’s and his wife’s remains were disinterred from the historic Elmwood Cemetery where they had resided peacefully since their respective deaths in 1877 and 1893 and reburied in a park named for Forrest underneath a statue of the general and his war horse (Hardiman; “Mary Forrest”). The erection of a Confederate memorial like the one in honor of Forrest was common enough during the Jim Crow era. Such public displays of Confederate pride were theoretically non-violent but still overt means of rewriting an unpalatable regional history and reasserting the authority of majority white culture (Rushing 40-47). The need to enforce Southern exceptionalism remained a potent force even after the Confederacy surrendered, as though recognition of the region’s singular characteristics could somehow redeem it from the shame of having lost the war. In Memphis, the presence of Forrest and his contributions to the Confederacy loomed large, and the erection of a statue in his honor served seemed a suitable tribute to the city’s role, if marginal, in the Southern war efforts. His influence is perhaps best summarized in the sentiments of the young Lucius Priest, the protagonist of *The Reivers*:

> We were getting close to Main Street now – the tall buildings, the stores, the hotels: the Gaston (gone now) and the Peabody (they have moved it since) and the
Gayoso, to which us all McCaslings-Edmondses-Priests devoted our allegiance as to a family shrine because our remote uncle and cousin, Theophilus McCaslin, Cousin Ike’s father, had been a member of the party of horsemen which legend said (that is, legend to some people maybe. To us it was historical fact) General Forrest’s brother led a gallop into the lobby itself and almost captured a Yankee General. (Faulkner 96)

To hear the story now, one would be led to believe that it was Forrest himself who paraded through the Gayoso for the purposes of freeing Confederate prisoners and taking hostage the Union general occupying Memphis (Blank). Truth or legend, fact or fiction, the ghost of Forrest’s memory obviously haunts the city’s imagination, collective memory, and place identity in very real and tangible ways.

As James Mayo writes, however, the “[s]acred meaning [attributed to war memorials] is expected to represent truth” (73), and yet evidence shows that the Forrest statue hides glaring erasures of his other influences on the city of Memphis. Dr. Timothy Huebner of Rhodes College has examined the city’s memorialization of Forrest and has unearthed how Memphis has overtly ignored significant facets of Forrest’s lifestyle and livelihood. Huebner’s undergraduate history students at Rhodes have poured through records about Forrest’s slave trade business, first noting that Forrest’s slave auction house once stood directly next door to his home. To make matters worse, local records also indicate that he not only sold more than 1000 slaves annually during his busiest years in Memphis, he also broke federal laws against the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade when he brought seven African slaves from the Congo to Memphis in 1859 (Huebner).

Despite his many less-than-stellar character traits, Nathan Bedford Forrest – as both man and legend – came to embody how Memphis wanted to present itself at a time when the city was scrambling to hold on to any vestige of respectability and honor, and the assorted omissions of fact from the city’s presentation of his biography represent
some of the ways by which Memphis has variously sought to revise or repress its own past. Not only has the city boasted of Forrest’s eponymous park and immense statue, the Tennessee Historical Society planted a marker at the former general’s home on Adams that mentions his service to the Confederate army and the local community, but fails to mention his weighty contribution to the local slave trade market or his well-publicized participation in the KKK (Hueber). The historical omissions about Forrest’s role in the city’s racial dynamics demonstrate that, where Memphis has at times been eager to celebrate its Southern identity, it has done so at the expense of the truth.

If Forrest’s influence were not enough, Lord help us, Martin Luther King’s assassination has positively plagued us. As Stephen Schottenfeld’s Harlan claims in Bluff City Pawn, “‘[Memphis] ain’t never recovered from King’” (27). It is an established fact that Memphis has always struggled to gain the nation’s favor, but in the wake of the 1968 sanitation workers’ strike and the subsequent assassination of Dr. King at the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis, our prospects of earning positive recognition were slim. In the aftermath of Dr. King’s death, national media outlets perpetuated the city’s notoriety as a dismal, threatening place. As national attention shifted solely from holding James Earl Ray accountable for his actions to laying blame at the collective feet of all Memphians, Preston Battle, the judge who presided over Ray’s trial in 1969, felt compelled to dispel this notion: “Memphis,” he said, “has been wrongfully blamed for the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. Neither the victim nor defendant lived in Memphis. Their orbits merely intersected there’” (Rushing 52).

The media, the nation, and the city itself were reticent, however, to absolve Memphis of her role in Dr. King’s death, and the fallout was severe: his assassination
furthered the decline of downtown Memphis as residents and businesses pulled out of the area and moved east toward the city’s suburbs. We could not have imagined Dr. King’s death away, even if we had wanted to, namely because no one would let us. But never you mind: we got that under control when we converted the Lorraine Motel into the National Civil Rights Museum in 1991. It only took us twenty-three years and the culmination of lobbying and fundraising efforts by Walter Bailey, the owner of the erstwhile hotel, and other community activists who sought to preserve the site and honor King’s memory. We try not to focus on the fact that, in the decades subsequent to the museum’s opening, the district of downtown Memphis in which the motel was located has become a tourist destination and high-end arts district where property values have soared and former lower-income African American residents have been forced from their homes due to the rising costs of gentrification (Wang 611). Some folks recognize that this process flies in the face of Dr. King’s Poor People’s Campaign, but at least it has given us, at least to some degree, “a means…to come to terms with a difficult past” (Rushing 54). The only person who really wants to talk about all that anyhow is Jaqueline Smith, the final resident of the Lorraine who was forcibly removed from her home by the Memphis Police Department and has protested for nearly thirty years about the opening of the museum, but rumor is she has a few screws loose (Collins).

These are but a handful of the narratives specific to Memphis that have been whitewashed or otherwise altered over the course of the city’s history. Sociologist Sharon Zukin has described how communities such as Memphis participate in these processes by emphasizing or concealing various facets of cultural landscapes to create a ‘literature’ of place intended to serve the interests of local residents (162). By concealing less-desirable
components of place and highlighting the presumably more appealing aspects, Zukin maintains that communities from the size of rural municipalities to urban neighborhoods can distinguish themselves culturally, namely if they are able to capture their social capital through material culture or symbolic landscapes. One possible manifestation of this social capital is the medium of literature. As cultural geographer Timothy Creswell has noted, there are two basic requirements that precede our understanding of place identity: the meaning constructed by residents, media, politicians, and local culture and the materiality of the place, which arguably includes tangible cultural productions, including literary texts, that emerge as locals create emotional ties to their homeplace (46).

Literature is but one genre of cultural productions that can be used to understand a place. It is important, though, because “[t]he images of place [that] are evoked by the imagination of perceptive writers” impact our understanding of reality and “mediate how we know the places we inhabit” (Tuan 148; McPherson 11). According to Scott Romine, a sense of place, accurate or otherwise, can be perpetuated if people believe the narrative that surrounds it (21). The mythologies of place are likewise best sustained when repeated (Romine 23), and literature is certainly one mode of ensuring that the same story can be told over and again to a captive audience. My aim, however, is certainly not to suggest that there is an essentialized identity to Memphis, but to demonstrate how Memphis’s mythologies of place identity play out in the literature about the city. As Leonard Lutwack notes, there is no inherent value to any individual place, but the literature of place can serve figurative ends, creating associations between place and certain ideas or “moral geography[ies]” that people have imputed onto a specific place.
Based on the observations I make in this dissertation, the moral geography of Memphis is one of the ‘grit and grind’ mentality summarized above, along with the occasional strong dose of bluffing intended to validate locals’ hold onto a sense of civic pride and belonging to the city they call home.

When using literature to examine a place and its identity, understanding who has written the text matters. The authors’ relationships with that place likewise matter. Of utmost importance is how well they know the place about which they are writing. In his seminal work on the relationship between geographical space and places of meaning, for example, Yi-Fu Tuan argues that “[l]ong residence enables us to know a place intimately” (18). He acknowledges, however, that “its image may lack sharpness unless we can see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience,” that the “true quality of a place often escape[s] notice because the head [of the native resident] is packed with shopworn ideas” (Tuan 18). This reasoning suggests that long-term, repeated exposure to the same place may numb native residents to the particularities of their homeplaces and that putting some space between oneself and one’s home might lend a fresh perspective on the nature of place. On the flip side of that coin, visitors or tourists are “forced to see and think without the support of a whole world of known sights, sounds, and smells [of a place] that give weight to being” from there (Tuan 146).

Tuan’s somewhat circular argument seems to indicate that a tension exists between repetitive exposure to the intimacies of places and the requisite distance from them that is required for a balanced perspective of said place. With regard to Memphis specifically, however, literary critic Brian Carpenter offers a surprising solution to Tuan’s conundrum: Carpenter suggests that the “only true insiders in Memphis are outsiders…”
who [find] refuge in places other Memphians dare not go...[They] ‘occupy the real city of Memphis as none of the rest of us do” (482). With these lines of reasoning in mind, I settled on two-faceted litmus test that determined which texts I would use in this dissertation. My methods were simple. First, I made certain that all of the authors, save Peter Taylor, were born and raised in Memphis; though not originally from Memphis, Taylor, too, spent his formative years from middle school through university here (Culverhouse 38-40). Secondly, the texts themselves are, of course, set in Memphis, but each chapter explores a set of texts authored by members of a sub-community within the city – again, with Taylor as the solitary exception – that have historically not found as wide a literary audience as other, earlier narratives written by the traditional Southern, white, male author.

Much like other historical narratives about the South, texts about place identity and mythology that were set in Memphis first appeared at the behest of white men. Some of the earliest fictional texts set in Memphis – among them William Faulkner’s *The Reivers* (1962) and Shelby Foote’s *September, September* (1977) – were written by white men, and they were also primarily from the perspective of white male protagonists. What is troubling about this lack of diverse contributions to the literary landscape of Memphis is that those who wield the most social privilege can alter historical narrative to reflect events, people, and places how the powers-that-be wish for them to be viewed (Kreyling x-xi). For a place as diverse as Memphis, this trend is problematic in that it excludes a greater part of the city’s population. A majority black city (“QuickFacts”), Memphis is likewise home to significant Latino and Asian communities, as well as a bustling Jewish community that has remained relatively steady in number since its inception in the
nineteenth century. A discussion about the literary contributions of underrepresented communities, then, is not a matter of bringing attention to these voices solely for the sake of diversifying the canon, but rather a recognition that these groups of people are highly influential to conversations about identity and place, specifically in Memphis (Remillard 164).

In contrast to its early literary history, since roughly the beginning of the 1980s, the litany of texts set in Memphis – from novels to short stories to poems, plays, and a Broadway musical – offers a multiplicity of perspectives from which to glean an understanding of the city’s rich historical and cultural identity. The ways that these narratives may appear in conflict with one another in regards to their exploration of local identity is not troubling, however. According to Creswell, competing cultural renderings can readily coexist, particularly in regions such as the American South where competing mythologies have long cohabited in the regional psyche (57). Moreover, when minority voices have access to a platform, they often destabilize place identities and inaccurate notions with their contributions to the literary landscape (Stepcopoulos 7). Literature, and specifically narrative, thus provides creative agency for marginalized groups, enabling them to imagine and eventually actualize new ideas of community and identity and creating the opportunity for them to reject and destabilize the myths of the status quo (Stepcopoulos 6, 14). By shifting critical attention to local texts that are less widely recognized in the literary canon, my goal is to provide a more comprehensive overview of Memphis’s local identity through the lens of traditionally underrepresented voices.

Among the communities of Memphis represented in these texts are Irish Catholic immigrants, Eastern European and Orthodox Jews, and black hoodoo practitioners and
bluesmen. In what has been a startling revelation even for me, I found that each of these populations was doing more than negotiating their local identities as ethnic or racial outsiders to a culture defined by whiteness and Christianity. It is no secret that the American South has always been entangled with the various iterations of Protestantism, including the Religion of the Lost Cause, but for the purposes of this project, the ways that each of these respective religious communities have influenced the notion of local place identity in Memphis are as equally compelling. By weaving Southern mythologies and incorporating Memphis itself into their religious mythologies and practices, these followers of Catholicism, Judaism, and hoodoo have navigated the intricate process of becoming Memphians. Moreover, as they have further established their localized identities, each community has alternately assumed or negotiated – to varying degrees – the same ambiguous mentality that has historically defined other Memphians’ perspectives of themselves and their hometown.

As such, the intersection of underrepresented racial, socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious communities undergirds my analysis of these texts. Subsequent to my close reading of A Summons to Memphis in which I establish how the Religion of the Lost Cause has functioned as a civil religion in Memphis, I evaluate how each of these respective groups has struggled to define itself as a Memphis community whilst walking the tightrope alongside stereotypical notions of their identities; their cultural, religious, and ethnic/racial traditions; and the constraints that Old South mythology imposes on their social roles. As their identities have rolled into the collective notion of what it means to be considered a Memphian and a Southerner, my dissertation will unravel how
these communities have contributed to mythologies of place and local identity in Memphis.

In the first chapter, I begin with Peter Taylor’s *A Summons to Memphis* (1986). By exploring the tenets of the Religion of the Lost Cause and the Cult of Southern Womanhood, I establish how the Carver family’s initial disdain for Memphis eventually transitions into a reluctant, if unstated, acceptance of their identity as upper middle-class white Memphians. As actual outsiders to Memphis who, albeit unwillingly, become insiders when they move to West Tennessee from Nashville, the Carvers likewise fit the bill of Brian Carpenter’s suggestion that outsiders to Memphis truly make the best insiders. Displaced from their comfortable upper-class social status in Nashville through no real fault of their own, the Carvers spend decades resisting the idea that they have become Memphians. By using *A Summons to Memphis* as the backdrop for the entire dissertation, I am able to contextualize how the majority white culture in Memphis has historically ascribed to Lost Cause religion for the purposes of maintaining its place at the apex of local social hierarchies. I also detail how the Religion of the Lost Cause contributes to the near magnetic force that Memphis wields in compelling individuals, if subconsciously, to assume a local identity.

In this same chapter, I present Margaret Skinner’s *Old Jim Canaan*, a novel that traces multiple generations of the Irish Catholic Canaan family from their first days as immigrants and along each step of their progress toward assimilation into Memphis. With *Old Jim Canaan*, I show how the intersectionality of ethnicity, social class, and religion influence the Canaan’s ease of integration. With a retrospective view toward the history of Irish immigration and Catholicism in the American South, I situate the Canaan family
in their pursuit of forging a tentative space for themselves at the table of whiteness.

Moreover, although they live smack dab in the middle of what journalist Tracy Thompson calls a Protestant “‘Jesusland’” (Hudnut-Beumler 155), I demonstrate how the Canaans come by their social status at the expense of their moral compass, one that is defined by their Catholic belief system. As the narrative troubles the notions of integrity and social success within the context of Catholic values, it also discloses just how tightly the family clings to Memphis as a long-term safe haven for their Catholic faith.

In Chapter 2, I account for the historical differences between different waves of European Jewish immigrants and their varied degrees of acceptance in local society; I also examine how characters in each of the two texts in this chapter adapt Jewish mythologies and Southern culture to forge a unique space for themselves in Memphis. I look first at Steve Stern’s *The Pinch* (2015), a tale about early Jewish immigrants to the city who lived in the North Memphis neighborhood for which the novel is named. In Stern’s novel, the lives of the two primary figures are further interwoven in yet another rendering of *The Pinch*: a historical account of the Pinch district written by one Muni Pinkser, one of Stern’s other principal characters. In Muni’s rendering of the Pinch, the life of his Uncle Pinchas, who arrived in Memphis during the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic, intersects with that of Lenny Sklarew, a sometime drug dealer and general delinquent squatting in the abandoned building on North Main Street that had once housed the Pinkser family and general store. Per Pinchas’s and Lenny’s observations, the local Jewish community exhibits a detached curiosity toward both their faith and their city. With the publication of Muni’s first edition of *The Pinch*, Lenny’s republication of the text in the late 1960s, and, presumably, Stern’s own account released in 2015, the
authors intend to capture the history of Judaism in Memphis and renew a sense of attachment to the city for contemporary readers for each of their respective texts. By identifying the mythologies that this particular set of Jewish Memphians create in order to establish a sense of belonging in Memphis, I am able to show how the Jewish tradition of using a written text, i.e., “the Book,” as a surrogate for a true homeland manifests in each iteration of \textit{The Pinch}.

After presenting this view of Memphis, I move to Tova Mirvis’s \textit{The Ladies Auxiliary} (1999). Unlike the characters from Stern’s text whose detachment from Memphis is reminiscent of the shame many Memphians continue to feel toward the city, Mirvis’s collective body of the Ladies Auxiliary are devoted to Memphis. Eager to protect the safe Orthodox neighborhood they and their foremothers devoted of all their mental and emotional energy to build, the women suffer from a concomitant urge to be less of a novelty when they are compelled to leave the \textit{eruv} in East Memphis where they live. Their desire to preserve their Jewish faith in its totality for future generations of their community is at odds, however, with their desperate need to claim an authentic local identity. By revealing the methods that these women employ in their attempts to wrangle two identities at odds with each other, I reveal how their mythologization of Memphis coupled with their fervent pride in their community overcorrects for the raging insecurity they feel regarding the cultural distance between them and the rest of the city. Moreover, by looking at the introduction of a recent convert and non-native Memphian in the midst of the Ladies’ Auxiliary, I show how the women’s at times self-imposed isolation has also thwarted their desire to hold onto the unique local identity their Orthodox community has contrived for itself.
Finally, in Chapter 3, I turn to Arthur Flowers’s *Another Good Loving Blues* (1993) and Katori Hall’s *Hoodoo Love* (2011), both of which are set on Beale Street during the 1920s. I begin by introducing Thadious Davis’s notion of a “southscape,” or a critical space in which black Southerners can explore both their racial and regional identities. I then consider how the syncretism of the black American church with the practice of hoodoo in these texts has given black Memphians the opportunity to explore these two facets of their identities at the same time; in addition, I contextualize class distinctions between the black Baptist church and charismatic traditions and how they respectively operate in either elevating or decreasing an individual’s social respectability. First, in *Another Good Loving Blues*, there is clear evidence of protagonist Melvira Dupree’s dependence on black Baptist theology, which in turn elevates her social status within the broader community. *Hoodoo Love’s* Candylady, however, most certainly borrows practices from the black charismatic tradition, which has not benefitted from the same level of respectability as the Baptist denomination and is generally associated with a lower socioeconomic bracket in the black community. In both narratives, the historical connections between hoodoo and the blues are also readily apparent, but in *Another Good Loving Blues*, I also look at how literacy and creating written records of both music and hoodoo factor into how the local black community as a whole claims its place in Memphis. For Melvira Dupree and her on-again off-again partner Luke Bodeen, it is the combination of her hoodoo practice and his musical prowess that summons the power of their black ancestors into the present, enabling both Melvira and Luke to use their individual skills to the benefit of their community and record their contributions for those who come behind them.
Hoodoo Love likewise differs from Another Good Loving Blues in that the mythologization of Memphis is less of an undercurrent and more of an overt proclamation in Hall’s text. The connection between the city’s reliance on the Mississippi River to Oshun, the hoodoo goddess of the river, specifically establishes Memphis as a pivotal component of hoodoo practice. Hoodoo Love also builds off of the themes in Another Good Loving Blues in the sense that, where the latter almost lovingly conveys the benefits of practicing hoodoo as a means of cultural preservation for the local black population, Hoodoo Love is rather vehement in its promotion of hoodoo as the preferred faith practice of the black community. Regardless of the degree to which each text represents hoodoo, both Another Good Loving Blues and Hoodoo Love make the argument that Memphis is vital to the practice of hoodoo and that the reciprocity between Memphis and hoodoo is how black Memphians can lay claim to a local identity. By synthesizing each of these details from Another Good Loving Blues and Hoodoo Love, I make the case that, unlike the other communities of Memphians represented in this dissertation, the local black population has managed to formulate a local identity that is not dictated by its marginalization from the rest of the community. Instead, by latching onto the might of their cultural roots and racial history, the black Memphians moving through these texts have developed a sense of pride in their local identities that is untroubled by the mingled sense of shame present in other communities in Memphis.

As Memphians continue to rely on the “grit and grind” mentality that has carried the city through the past two hundred years of local history, my intention with this dissertation is to uncover the diverse mechanisms that a multiplicity of voices hailing from Memphis have employed in their search to reconcile their reputation as locals with a
different, more desirable local identity. Using frameworks from Southern studies and
critical theory, my dissertation aims to situate Memphis in light of the tensions the city
has experienced as a result of its battle to assert its individual identity against the
seemingly monolithic South and the insecurities begotten from events and cultural mores
that have flourished in Memphis as a result of its unique location along the Mississippi
River. An examination of these texts that are set in Memphis and written from the
perspectives of Memphians themselves will reveal the ways in which communities that
exist at the same time as outsiders and insiders to the city have navigated the chaos of
their local identity, conceiving, in the meantime, original and sustainable identities
particular to their specific communities.
Civil Religion, Christianity, and Catholicism in Conflict

The American South is imbued with language that draws from the region’s historically Protestant, evangelical Christian roots, and many of the South’s mythologies attest to the prevalence of Protestant Christianity within the region. Alternately referred to as a “Redeemer Nation,” a “Southern Zion,” or “Eden,” the South’s self-identification with the tenets and mores of Protestantism is more than evident (Wilson 1, 10, 41).

Moreover, in many ways, the Religion of the Lost Cause, a civil religion¹ that emerged in response to the region’s collective memory of the Civil War, upholds an amalgamation of Protestant Christian doctrines and Old South social hierarchies. As a city tied to its history within the South and the Confederacy, Memphis has participated in the constructs of the Religion of the Lost Cause to varying degrees. As a microcosm of the South, the city’s practice of in Lost Cause rituals has at times enabled Memphis to ignore the less palatable particularities of local history. Even so, one finds that locals who insist upon the reimagined rendering of the city dictated by the Lost Cause and its role in the culture of the Old South and the Confederacy often find themselves at odds with their ability to forge a local identity that evokes a sense of civic pride and attachment to place.

As the prevailing civil religion of the South, the Religion of the Lost Cause developed in large part as a reaction to the festering wounds left behind by the Confederacy’s military loss to the Union army. Southerners’ concerns about the “moral anarchy” that was sure to reign “if traditional Southern values” died after the Civil War

¹ Remillard defines a civil religion as an interpretation of a people’s history based on their perceptions of their own “transcendent [moral] reality”; likewise, civil religion develops at the “nexus of religion and public life, where [local, regional, or national] social values, beliefs, and symbols assume a transcendent status” (1).
were amplified by the Northern Army’s victory that dashed their hopes of nationhood (Wilson 38); Southern religion and its resulting cultural iterations thus substituted for the former Confederacy’s desire for a national identity (Wilson 13). After the war, many Southerners sought to revisit and rewrite their regional histories so as to make the past – and its impact on the present – more palatable. The defeated Rebels, faced with substantial financial losses, a Northern Army occupation, and an overwhelming sense of shame, found various means to idolize the Lost Cause of the Confederacy (Gaston 225; Wilson 16).

As a civil religion, the South’s Lost Cause ideology was “not a formal religion, but [it was certainly] a functional one” – one intended to maintain the “social order” of the antebellum South (Wilson 14, 102). In the simplest of terms, the Religion of the Lost Cause can easily be described as the intersection of Protestant Christianity, the preservation of a collective Confederate memory, patriarchal social standards, and white supremacy. However, of most interest to this dissertation are the ways that Lost Cause ideologies have historically circumscribed the participation of women and non-Protestant Christians in post-war Southern society; the methods by which authors from Memphis have used their stories to variously uphold, challenge, or trouble these cultural trappings; and the ways that these same codes of conduct have affected Memphians’ sense of local identity and attachment to place.

Memphis has always struggled, along with the rest of the South, to straddle the fine line between a sense of regional pride and shame over the South’s perceived sins. Peter Taylor, for example, a non-native Memphian who wrote extensively about his adopted hometown, examines how Memphis and its surrounding communities constitute
“a region aware of its tenuous hold on that southern identity, and ambivalent about clinging to it” (D. Robinson 757), which further confirms the overwhelming body of research that speaks to Southerners’ long-standing uncertainty toward claiming or rejecting their regional identities. For the purposes of this chapter, an investigation of the ways that white cultural texts have responded to this predicament will demonstrate how certain subsections of the white population of Memphis have wielded the broader community’s cognitive dissonance related to its regional and local identities to forge their own mythologies, attachments to place, and prominence within the city of Memphis itself.

Peter Taylor’s *A Summons to Memphis* is a prime example of a novel by a white male author whose characters deftly maneuver their way through the cultural trappings of the South. While Protestant Christianity does not explicitly manifest in Taylor’s characters or his depiction of Memphis, the principles of Lost Cause religion – and its regulation of Southern womanhood in particular – retain their grip on the “bourgeois morality” of the Carver family (Casey). *A Summons to Memphis* is a tale of many things: Old South sensibilities, intergenerational family drama, and the coming of age of a young man in the ambiguous era between the World Wars I and II. It is also a novel rife with contradictions about one family’s perceptions of themselves, the place to which they have moved, and the intersection of their identities with Memphis itself. Much has been written about Taylor’s preoccupation with upper- and upper middle-class Southern families like the Carvers; that is, after all, as critics and many readers are already aware, Taylor’s niche (Towers). West Tennessee born and bred, Taylor’s life heavily parallels that of his protagonist Phillip Carver in *A Summons to Memphis*, and the author’s
introspective look at his own upbringing and social status becomes clear through the protagonist Phillip Carver’s narration (Culverhouse 38-9). Even so, although occasional mentions of Memphis itself appear in criticism of *A Summons to Memphis*, they seem to nestle the city more so within the broader context of the South than to examine the city itself for any particularities. Moreover, even though critic David Robinson takes a long look at Taylor’s use of place in his work, particularly the comparisons in *A Summons to Memphis* between Memphis and others places like Nashville and Manhattan, he fails to look at the intersection of place and identity within the confines of the local, particularly in the ways that residents of Memphis struggle with their identity as Memphians and not solely as Southerners.

Any understanding of how local identity functions in *A Summons to Memphis* and, truly, within the city of Memphis itself, does require an awareness of the longstanding contentious relationship between Memphis and Nashville that Robinson describes, but not for the sole purposes of comparing the two cities. One lingering point of pride for Memphians has been that, despite Nashville’s status as the state capital, Memphis had always been the larger of the two cities in terms of population (McKenzie). After nearly two centuries of laying claim to the title, however, in 2016 Memphis surrendered its standing as the most densely populated city in Tennessee (McKenzie). A cursory Google search furnishes a litany of articles demonstrating the ongoing rivalry between the two cities, but Taylor’s novel elaborates on the longevity of its origins.

Loosely based on autobiographical facts from Taylor’s own origins and upbringing, the characters in *A Summons to Memphis* make a marked distinction between Memphis and Nashville, beginning in the 1930s when the Carver family first moves to
Memphis. Broadly speaking, the most significant means that the Carvers have of comparing the two cities is the terminology they use in reference to each of them respectively. Despite the city’s best efforts to distance itself from association with the Deep South, the Carvers regard Memphis and its environs as the counterpart to their Upper South origins in Nashville. Although the Carvers firmly declare that Memphis and Nashville are distinct, the “tone with which these differences are dwelt upon remains ambiguous” throughout the novel (Towers). Specifically, Phillip Carver presents his own rather contradictory notions about the place that each city holds within the context of Southern history. For instance, Phillip asserts that Nashville represents the past and Memphis ways are indicative of the present. He also argues, however, that Memphians are most concerned with the “dull, practical problems of domestic life,” which is similar, if not identical, to the issues with which his own mother and her social peers are preoccupied in Nashville (Taylor 53). Moreover, for all his positive reflections about Nashville, Phillip reluctantly admits that, roughly four decades after his family’s departure, their hometown has a “vulgar, ugly, plastic look” (Taylor 23). Even so, he cycles back to the idea that, in Nashville, the “past is still real” (Taylor 24). For the Carvers, and for Phillip especially, whatever progress Memphis may represent pales in comparison to the staid relics of Nashville’s manners and social hierarchies.

The entire family appears to despise Memphis for its own inherent qualities as well as its differences from Nashville, and, per Phillip’s reckoning, native Memphians likewise tend to take on the mantle of a ‘less than’ identity. Over the course of less than a single page of text, for instance, Phillip refers to Memphis as a “plain” city with “nothing remarkable” about it, with “no eccentricity or excellence” above or below the status quo
that would distinguish it from anywhere else (Taylor 72). According to Phillip, in the “small, old world of Memphis,” native-born residents have a penchant merely for “simple truth[s]” that have little room for more robust, nuanced understandings of social or familial dynamics (Taylor 55). Memphians themselves, Phillip notices, tend to see his own family, and in particular his father, as a reflection of a “sophisticated…world beyond the river town of Memphis,” an indication that Memphis is neither refined or civilized (Taylor 75).

The Carvers’ fixation on Nashville can be tied back to the “spell” Phillip insists the city invokes on its inhabitants and demands “of all men…who happen to pass that way” (Taylor 23). Phillip observations – largely based on intuition – suggest that there is something supernatural, almost ethereal, about Nashville, and he readily declares that “one can feel now and again that he had just glimpsed some pedestrian on the sidewalk who was not quite real somehow” (Taylor 23). The apparition signifies Phillip’s aforementioned reference to the connection that Nashville has with the past, a conclusion fortified by his mother’s explanation that it was the spirits of deceased Native peoples who had fought the early European settlers for their land that “made everybody [in Nashville] so queer” (Taylor 24). That Nashville might be haunted by the ghosts of its past sins echoes the sentiments residents of Memphis have expressed about their own hometown, and Minta Carver’s assertion that Memphis “didn’t have any such spirits” entirely negates the city’s settlement on the Chickasaw Bluffs, so named for the Chickasaw Nation who lived along the Mississippi long before Hernando de Soto explored its banks (Taylor 24; Harkins 17).
Though the Carver family would never deign to grant Memphis the same deference they felt was due to Nashville, Peter Taylor himself once commented about the almost gravitational influence that Memphis, too, has on its native-born daughters and sons. In one interview, Taylor discloses that he felt a “great sympathy with a lot of [his] friends in Memphis” because he knew “they would love to get away and live a different life” (Paine 391). For these individuals, however, Taylor declares that “Memphis is the center of the world” and that “[t]hey can’t leave it” (Paine 391). To leave Memphis would be a too great a risk, according to Taylor, because of its relative isolation from the rest of the world. To move from a place where, per Phillip Carver’s observations, everyone tends to know everyone else, not to mention their personal business (Taylor 109), would render folks as “nobody” ran than the “somebody” they are at home (Paine 391).

Phillip does not seem to carry these same fears with him. Rather, the “hold on him that life in Memphis” maintains is entirely based on his father’s patriarchal authority and Phillips’s filial responsibility to carry on the family’s legacy Lindsay 172). Instead, he struggles to escape his “Memphis fate” that would entail attending law school and remaining in Tennessee as his father’s law partner (D. Robinson 759). It is only with his sisters’ financial and logistical assistance that Phillip manages to leave Memphis for Manhattan where he finds that the “most valuable characteristic [about Manhattan] is that it is not Memphis” (D. Robinson 756). Even whilst noting that his life in New York is “very different indeed” from that of his family’s existence in Memphis, Phillip’s ongoing defense of his choice to leave his family of origin and pursue his life goals belies his confident assertion that he is well-adjusted and content with his life in the North (Taylor
Though a middle-aged man distanced by space and time from both Memphis and his family, Phillip clearly still feels a desperate need to justify his decision to leave it all behind.

Herein lies Phillip’s self-contradictory reasoning. For as much as he contends that Memphis is a better representative of the present than the past, Phillip’s efforts to extricate himself from the city’s grip indicates its unrelenting ties to the past and Southern family hierarchies. As the son of George Carver, a man who once defied his own father to leave his native rural West Tennessee origins and attend college in Nashville, Phillip has theoretically inherited a tradition of individuality and the notion of a self-made man (Taylor 176). Early on, however, he finds himself at odds with his father and, unlike Mr. Carver, unable to step out from under the umbrella of his parental influence. Given Phillip’s predicament, it seems that Mr. Carver’s return to his origins in West Tennessee have thus resulted in cementing his role in the tradition of the Old South as the sole authority over his family.

Transplants to Memphis, the Carver family has moved to the southwest corner of Tennessee at the behest of their family patriarch. A respected attorney in Nashville and its environs, Mr. Carver enjoys a robust law practice until a ruinous business deal with his former partner Lewis Shackelford sends the family running for cover in Memphis. Though Mr. Carver’s feelings toward his betrayal of trust and the imminent move to Memphis are never clearly articulated because he refuses to discuss either topic, Mrs. Carver gathers her four children about her one day prior to their move and admonishes them to hide any of their disappointment or grief about leaving Nashville from their father’s view (Taylor 19). For a man who had left West Tennessee behind against the
strong disapproval of his own father, Nashville was “the height of [Mr. Carver’s] aspirations” (Taylor 166). Abandoning it for Memphis, then, symbolized a return to region where “nothing remarkable” was expected of him (Taylor 72).

Despite his elder daughter’s romantic attachments to one Wyatt Brawley, the son of two prominent Nashville families, Mr. Carver is insistent that their family transfer to Memphis as a unit (Taylor 21). Unable to control the fallout of his social demise in Nashville, Mr. Carver tightens the reins of the “strange emotional control [he exacts] over his children [and wife]” (Lindsay 172), a power, Phillip notices, that is “beyond all traditional parental power that fathers of [even] earlier generations possessed” (Taylor 39). Phillip muses that perhaps his father could not withstand any further changes to his immediate circumstances after the cataclysmic upending of their family’s status among the upper echelon of Nashvillian society, but George’s attitude toward the preservation of his family unit is also demonstrative of the firm Lost Cause religion belief in the family as the building block of society (Casey). Mr. Carver’s fears about the dissolution of his family make sense, then, particularly in light of his status as a well-to-do Southern white man in the 1930s.

Upon their arrival in Memphis, Minta Carver, George’s wife, explains to Phillip and his siblings that Memphis did not “have any soul or any real history. Memphis was a place that had simply been laid out and sold off like any other town” (Taylor 24). Minta’s comment diminishes any claim of exceptionalism on the city’s part. Moreover, for a city that prides itself on the very premise that its ‘soul’ defined an entire era of American popular music (J. White), her opinion is quite the insult. Although Minta insists that the city’s lack of a soul does not inform her opinion of it, “it was a prejudice [her husband]
could never quite overcome” (Taylor 24). In the end, though, George Carver “manage[s] to take on the coloration of his environment” in Memphis, particularly in his adaptation to local modes of attire. Mr. Carver’s transition into a Memphis man is so successful that Phillip argues “[a]ny knowledgeable person in Memphis… could tell at a glance who Father’s black tailor had been and what Father’s station in Memphis life was” (Taylor 139, 120).

Phillip’s observation of the precise origins of his father’s clothing – or, rather, the exceptionalism of Memphis’s distinct fashion style – troubles his mother’s former claims that Memphis had no soul or history to speak of. The tug and pull of this argument continue throughout Taylor’s text, as each of the Carvers individually and collectively move toward the conflicting goals of distinguishing themselves from the backwardness they perceive about Memphis’s ways and simultaneously meting out a place of belonging within local social circles. They struggle to maintain their Nashvillian dignity in a city they admit is “almost imperceptibl[y] differen[t]” from their hometown (Taylor 20); despite this admission, they are convinced that “there is a difference between these two provincial cities even nowadays,” and this belief colors the entirety of the Carvers’ social life in Memphis (Taylor 23).

For all his apparent displeasure over the necessity of relocating, Mr. Carver is the sole member of his family who is excluded from the “disaster” that accompanied their move (Taylor 16). In addition to altering his outward appearance for the sake of fitting into Memphis, Mr. Carver also cedes further pieces of Nashville’s culture to other specifics of Memphis’s identity. In particular, the Carver family believes that their husband and father has stooped to local expectations regarding achievement and success.
Phillip alleges that Memphians are accustomed to a rather common-place existence, one that is not marked by any form of exceptionalism – a very different attitude from Nashville, where everyone either exceeds societal expectations or fails altogether (Taylor 72). On the other hand, according to Phillip’s perceptions of the city, Memphians strive to be neither the best nor the worst exemplars of Southern society.

For example, when Phillip performs well in his college courses, his mother lauds his accomplishments without restraint. His father, however, merely concedes that Phillip “is bookish” (Taylor 91). Bitter that his son refuses to commit to legal studies, Mr. Carver no longer takes any interest in his Phillip’s intellectual pursuits and resents his academic excellence. Rather than attribute his father’s disinterest to a rift in their relationship, Phillip credits Mr. Carver’s nonchalance as yet another extent to which he had taken on a local identity. Phillip regards his father’s placid acquiescence to these mediocre standards as an added insult to the injury of their family’s move to Memphis, and he stubbornly redoubles the pursuit of his own personal interests. Though he remains in Memphis at his father’s behest to attend the erstwhile Southwestern College, Phillip continues his clandestine trips to secondhand bookstores and estate sales in his pursuit of first edition classics, much to George Carver’s chagrin, who preferred that his son not “exhibit special knowledge on any subject” whatsoever (Taylor 92).

Mr. Carver’s willingness to mesh with the aforementioned local standards of dress and social expectations are especially poignant given his personal history. For instance, as mentioned previously, he had defied his own father’s plans and instead relocated to Nashville where his ambitions could be realized. By the time his own children come of age, however, Mr. Carver has assumed a stance similar to the one his father took when he
was younger. Instead of lauding his children’s achievements, he undercuts their choices and successes with passive aggressive behavior and disarming rhetoric that could just as easily sway a jury of his peers in court. That Memphis might itself be the cause of Mr. Carver’s demeanor toward his children compounds the notion that the city and its inhabitants are comfortable with an ordinary existence.

Where Phillip indicates that Memphians do not find it necessary to aspire to great heights of achievement, his father seems to believe that their fellow citizens have an obligation not to. Instead, Mr. Carver lauds the “unpretentious” mannerisms of Phillip’s best friend, Alex Mercer, who he insists is the “best kind of Memphis boy” (Taylor 75). Unlike his own yearnings and aspirations “for an individuality that could not be accounted for by the components of his own character and his own identity” and an “otherness than what he was by accident of birth,” Mr. Carver finds that Alex Mercer upheld the “puritanical conviction that he must not let himself…yearn after that which was not his by birth, must not acknowledge that yearning even” (Taylor 162). While Mr. Carver’s appreciates Alex’s ready compliance to his circumstances, Phillip later comments that his friend must secretly derive vicarious satisfaction through Phillip’s intellectual life in Manhattan that is free of domestic obligations to parents, wife, or children.

Phillip further explains that it is not merely Alex but the entire Mercer family who exemplifies the complacence characteristic of native Memphians. Alex himself is aware of his role as the standard by which locals are measured, stating early in his friendship with Phillip that he and his family are “‘nothing but plain Memphis – pure Memphis from the word go…Nothing more. Nothing less’,” an indication that there is little else to their
personal or local identities beyond what meets the eye (Taylor 72). Moreover, his parents were “Memphis to the core,” native Memphians whose ancestors had lived in Memphis “since before the Yellow Fever” epidemics of the 1870s (Taylor 72). Unlike Mr. Carver’s longings for a life outside the norms of his small-town roots, Alex’s father argues that the best kind of folks were those who were “best adjusted to the circumstances [they were] born into” (Taylor 72). As an adult, Alex later admits, if only to Phillip, that although society views the Mercer siblings as well-adjusted citizens of Memphis, they have followed in their father’s footsteps and never truly amounted to much.

The layers of irony herein can be neither missed nor underestimated. On the one hand, Taylor presents the image of Mr. Carver, a self-made man whose life goals superseded any that either his family or his homeplace held for him. Having achieved the apex of his aspirations with his family and career in Nashville, Mr. Carver’s fall from society’s graces demonstrates how fragile his social standing actually was, and he quickly returns to a place where he can readily acclimate to local customs. Then, too, if, as he and Phillip clearly believe, the standards of achievement in Memphis are substandard in comparison to those in Nashville, Mr. Carver recognizes that he will have no trouble reclaiming his dignity. His keenly felt disappointment over moving to Memphis in no way impedes his ability to adjust to local customs. It is, however, his selection of and adherence to his own rather capricious social expectations that limits his family’s ability to adapt to their new home. Given that Mr. Carver sets the new standard for what it means to be a Memphian within the context of his own family, it is his wife’s and children’s responses to their move that speak to the ways in which Memphis offers identities other than that which their husband and father prescribes.
Phillip Carver’s monumental conflicts with his father are at the forefront of the reader’s attention, but Phillip’s mother Minta and his two sisters Betsy and Josephine figure prominently into the action of the novel’s plot as well. Taylor’s novel provides a close examination of how each of the female characters harnesses their family’s ambivalence toward Memphis in order to accomplish their own personal goals and achieve varying levels of individual agency. These women’s actions reveal how violations of standards for Southern women’s behavior function specifically in Memphis and how Memphis operates as an agent within Taylor’s female characters’ rather revolutionary behavior.

As a Southern city, Memphis has always participated in the Cult of Southern Womanhood, a sub-component of the Religion of the Lost Cause. Loosely speaking, the Cult of Southern Womanhood is the regional expression of the “Cult of Domesticity” or “True Womanhood” that held sway over “primarily white middle-class” women’s social roles in the United States from the early 19th century through the first and second waves of American feminism (Ford 136-7). In addition to her submissive demeanor and selfless nature, the ‘true’ woman was directly responsible for the physical, emotional, and spiritual development of her entire household (Ford 136). Southern womanhood held onto these same characteristics, but women, specifically white women in the South, were held up to an additional standard. As a “discursive symbol for the region and the land itself” (McPherson 19), the Cult of Southern Womanhood perpetuated the presumed innocence not only of the women themselves, but the South as well (Barker 1). After the Civil War, this association of white women’s fragility and morality with the South’s own moral standing became central to Southerners’ emotions regarding themselves and their
regional identity (Bockting 28). Furthermore, as a means of maintaining white middle- and upper-class social norms, the Cult of Southern Womanhood was responsible for upholding other tenets of the Religion of the Lost Cause, including the practice of Christian morals and religious devotion, the honoring of Confederate heroes, and the continuance of Southern expectations regarding gender and racial roles (Barker 5).

The Carver women’s behavior in A Summons to Memphis not only upsets Southern standards for womanhood but also argues for the singularity of Memphis’s social structure. Moreover, the female characters’ divergence from socially acceptable behavior is heightened by its comparison to that of their white male counterparts. As with other Taylor texts, A Summons to Memphis demonstrates how women might “contrive and implement a complicated plan to achieve [their] goals and gain power over the man who attempts to control [them],” thereby becoming “as ruthless as the men of [their] generation” (Graham). Much like the ambiguity of local identity itself, however, the Carver women will vacillate in their adherence to social conventions and ownership of their true selves.

For example, Minta Carver’s role as the matriarch of the family implies that she is responsible for her husband and children and for the broader image of the South itself; that she is the exemplar of ladylike behavior; and that she also serves as the emotional and spiritual head of her family (McPherson 19; Ford 136). According to Charles Irons, this version of domesticity gave white women a certain level of autonomy within the home that was distinct from their husbands’ authority (254). Any deviation from her role, therefore, would have indicated a lessening of Minta’s limited social agency, not to mention the unraveling of her family’s moral compass and, by extension, the undoing of
the family structure itself. For the Carver family, Minta’s role is defined by the ‘Upper South’ codes of conduct in Nashville; as such, Minta’s behavioral obligations are thus reflective of both local and regional ideals of womanhood for the women of Nashville, and she is expected to be the incarnation of these notions no matter where the family resides.

From all that readers first see of her, Minta Carver epitomizes this notion of the Southern woman. Prior to their move from Nashville to Memphis, Phillip describes his mother as “kn[owing] by instinct or by training how to deal with every problem or situation that arose in [their] family. She knew her role in the family unit so well that she never had any doubt what her behavior should be” (Taylor 20). Though born and bred in Nashville, Minta was also the product of her own mother’s Southern belle upbringing in Richmond (Taylor 22). Peter Taylor’s use of Richmond as the background for Minta’s formal social training is no accident: as the former capital of the Confederacy, Richmond was the very embodiment of Lost Cause ideologies, and namely those of Southern womanhood. With this social pedigree, Minta’s qualifications for the respect and prestige that came with the rank of a white, upper-class Southern lady are unparalleled (Barker 5).

Despite Minta’s characteristic adherence to her prescribed role as a Southern lady, Phillip remarks that she was still not nearly as formal as her female counterparts in their upper-class social circles in Nashville and that she was often prone to say “witty and even risqué things,” such as the occasional joke that “any gin drink made her see double and feel single” (Taylor 22). In a foreshadowing of the coming changes to Minta’s behavior, this penchant for cheeky commentary garners commentary from one of Mrs. Carver’s
Nashville friends who predicts that Minta will “‘love’” Memphis because of its relaxed attitude toward upholding the stiff, formal social mores endemic to Nashville (Taylor 26).

Prior to their departure from Nashville, Minta’s deviances from the standards of Southern womanhood are rare, however, and it is she who counsels her four children regarding social expectations of their behavior as well. Years later, when Phillip recalls the bitterness he held toward his father for having removed the family from Nashville, he remembers that it was his mother’s reminder of his “civilized and Christian obligation to repress [his] feelings of rebellion” against his father (Taylor 133). In one of the few mentions of Christianity in the text, Mrs. Carver’s connection between socially acceptable behavior and Christian praxis parallels the more broadly held beliefs in the South that the region itself best exemplified Christian morality (Wilson 8). Her counsel is also a clear reflection of her place as her family’s spiritual leader; to have advised anything less would have been a failure on her part to maintain the parameters of a Southern woman’s role. Though historical evidence and contemporary trends confirm Memphis’s longstanding majority Protestant population, Christianity does not “play a very direct role” in A Summons to Memphis, but the Religion of the Lost Cause, with all its attachments to Protestant theologies of women’s place in the home, certainly does (Paine 308). As Minta lapses in guiding her family to uphold socially acceptable codes of conduct, the text renders Memphis as a spiritual desert wherein morals are questionable, if not altogether objectionable. In contrast, Nashville remains the “spiritual center” of the Carver family (Paine 304).

Even with the heavy burden of the responsibility for her family’s spirituality surely in her mind, Minta’s arrival in Memphis is met with the most unbecoming and
aberrant behavior for a woman of her social status from the ‘Upper South’ city of Nashville. Much like her friend had predicted, Minta takes to Memphis like a fish to water: she plays cards, gossips with the other women, wears the latest fashions even if they do not flatter her figure, and generally lives to “[amuse] herself” (Taylor 24-5). As opposed to Nashville, Memphis has afforded Minta the ability to imagine her own parameters for conduct and socializing, and the key factor in this phenomenon is that she does it without the input or influence of her husband. For example, unlike “she had [ever] had before,” her social circle is made solely of women (Taylor 28). Moreover, the parties she attends are often hosted and attended solely by women, unlike the formal affairs she herself once planned and hosted in Nashville for the benefit of the men who segregated themselves from the company of their wives after dinner (Taylor 27). Minta “instantly [loves] Memphis and but for [her husband] would have melted into life there” (Taylor 26). Unable to make sense of his wife’s change in conduct, George attempts to remind her of what she was “‘really like’” instead of this seemingly liberated woman she has become since their move to Memphis (Taylor 25). Phillip, too, surmises that his mother has found “a kind of personal liberation for which she was not prepared and of which she did not know how to [take full] advantage” (Taylor 21). From their limited perspective as men, neither Mr. Carver nor Phillip can fathom the possibility that Minta may have genuinely found herself in Memphis, that her newfound freedom genuinely fulfills her, or that her change in behavior is an authentic reflection of the woman she wants to be.

In addition to the respects in which Minta changes her expectations of herself once the family has settled into Memphis, she also lowers the bar for her children’s behavior. As the protector and teacher of Southern culture in the family (Graham),
Minta’s job was to preserve, at bare minimum, the outward appearance of social acceptability. It was Minta and her own mother, for example, who had instructed the Carver children in the ways of their Southern heritage (Taylor 134), but Phillip says that, once in Memphis, Minta no longer quotes her own mother’s adages or other references to how nice ladies and gentlemen ought to behave. Instead, the family is surprised to hear their matriarch openly express her sometimes caustic opinions about their dispirited moods. Clearly unable to suppress their dejection over moving to Memphis, the children especially often succumb to “the doldrums,” to which Minta responds that she would rather jump into the Mississippi than to withstand her family’s depression (Taylor 25). Minta’s acknowledgement of her children’s gloomy moods contradicts her earlier assertion that the family must strive to hide their true feelings about the move to Memphis behind the façade of acquiescence to their father. With this shift in her demeanor, Minta alters the Carver family dynamic from that of the Southern status quo to an environment wherein one’s true feelings are, if not tolerated, at least acknowledged.

No longer eager to participate in the “masquerade” that is Southern femininity (McPherson 21), Minta’s venture into authenticity is not without its troubles. Although she flaunts the fact that she likes Memphis “‘a whale of a lot better’” than the rest of her family and she “assume[s] Memphis’s own way of putting things,” Minta resists a comprehensive transition to a local self-identity. Jealous of Josephine’s easy absorption into local social clubs and cliques, Minta resorts to mocking the very institutions such as the Cotton Carnival that afforded local young people the necessary social capital to move freely within the upper echelons of Memphis’s social circles (Taylor 42). It would seem that, despite her unmistakable desire to loosen the Nashvillian reins of Southern
womanhood that had theretofore guided her behavior, Minta retains some feeling of
distinction between herself and local women, and both she and George are fearful that
their girls will forget Nashville. For both her children and herself, Minta appears to want
to be in Memphis, but not necessarily from Memphis (Graham).

In the end, Minta’s inability to harmonize the two notions of self that vie for
prominence in her identity as a Southern woman manifests itself as a physiological
illness. Unable to negotiate her new expression of womanhood or her fresh attachment to
Memphis – both of which are inextricably tied together – Minta succumbs to “nearly
thirty years of [a] real or imagined invalidism” (Taylor 49). After waking up with a
“strange headache in her right temple” one morning shortly after the family’s move to
Memphis, Minta’s social interaction with anyone outside her family immediately
subsides, and she “seldom [gets] into her daytime clothes” thereafter, “even working in
the garden sometimes in her nightgown and housecoat” (Taylor 28). For all the relative
freedom that Memphis had signified for Minta, the pull of her Nashville upbringing and
the authority of her husband supersede any desires of her own to formulate a new sense
of self. Rather than reveling in the liberation from the trappings of Upper South
womanhood she has discovered in Memphis, the pendulum swings in the opposite
direction, and Minta succumbs to a state in which she is entirely dependent on George,
their children, and their domestic servants for her day-to-day care.

One explanation for Minta’s lapse into this permanent state of depression
becomes clear when considered in light of George Carver’s patriarchal authority. It is not
merely a matter of social custom, however. Rather, it is compounded by the juxtaposition
of Memphis and Nashville traditions, namely the differing levels to which each city
adheres to the tenets of Lost Cause mythologies that in turn inform family structures. Philip’s earlier observation that “Memphis was today [and] Nashville was yesterday” encapsulates how the social boundaries between the two cities differ (Taylor 27). Furthermore, Philip’s astute observation that his father “wished to live Nashville in Memphis” further explains how much of an influence that both the ideas of the past and George Carver’s adherence to them influence the Carver family dynamics (Taylor 27).

Philip believes, for instance, that his father views the members of his family as his personal “chattels” and not independent beings each with their own agency (Taylor 30). Later in life, Phillip realizes that his mother must have recognized this much earlier than the rest of the family, and he hypothesizes that it was merely the “trauma of the move [that] changed her” (Taylor 48). His assumption, however, is grounded in his own understanding of the collective impact the move had on their entire family and not how Minta herself was affected. Convinced that his father had “ruined all [their] lives, except his own,” Phillip cannot see past the end of his own nose to understand how, where Memphis might have afforded his mother the opportunity to start over, Minta is, metaphorically speaking, stuck in Nashville (Taylor 45).

Unlike their mother, who surrenders to her husband’s disdain for her newfound independence, leaving her with little to no individual agency, the Carvers’ daughters only cede to their father’s directives once, yielding “to his wishes in nothing else afterward” (Taylor 56). As mentioned previously, the elder of the two daughters, Josephine, was tentatively engaged to a well-bred Nashville man of means before Mr. Carver insisted upon the family’s collective departure from Middle Tennessee. Likewise, her sister Betsy
quickly becomes attached to one Clarkson Manning of Memphis, a young man with a promising future and an honorable heritage. With both daughters set up for successful and stable futures, one might expect Mr. and Mrs. Carver to both be both elated and relieved. Within months after their move to Memphis, however, Betsy terminates her relationship with Wyatt Brantley. Her conversation with Mr. Carver that precedes the breaking off of her engagement highlights the intense sway that their father holds over the Carver children. In direct contrast to his insistence that Southern fathers surely “had no power over [their children] to tell them whom to marry or not to marry,” Mr. Carver uses his rhetorical prowess to persuade Betsy that she ought not to marry Wyatt Brantley (Taylor 39). In the months subsequent to Mr. Carver’s initial conversation with Betsy, he also encourages her to move her Junior League membership from Nashville to Memphis, a move that would presumably introduce her to local eligible bachelors with no connections to the less appealing characteristics of Nashville boys like Wyatt Brantley.

However, Phillip asserts that their father’s stance on Betsy’s engagement does not stem from a purely paternal sense of concern for his daughter or her future, but that, rather, as a Nashville boy, Wyatt reminds Mr. Carver too much of his former partner and friend Lewis Shackelford. For a man who longs so ardently to carry Nashville with him to his new home in Memphis, Mr. Carver’s overt dismissal of Betsy and Wyatt’s emotional attachment is ironic. Moreover, he is willing to play the ‘Memphis versus Nashville’ card for his own purposes, which is clearly evidenced by his advice to Betsy regarding her Junior League membership and, later, in a similar encounter he has with Josephine about her suitors from Memphis.
Mr. Carver’s disregard for his daughters’ suitors is not limited to those who hail from Nashville, however. In spite of his own West Tennessee roots, Mr. Carver disregards local gallantries in Memphis as inauthentic affectations of politeness, and he is dismissive of the “countrier” Memphis boys, many of whom hail from the Mississippi Delta (Taylor 42). Initially tolerant, if not welcoming, of Jo’s romance with Clarkson Manning, Mr. Carver eventually reveals his overt displeasure with the continuance of their relationship. If his roots in Memphis were not enough to condemn him in the eyes of his potential future in-laws, Clarkson deals the final blow to his own fallout with the entire Carver family. Upon his mention of a distant familial connection to Lewis Shackelford during a Carver family dinner, Clarkson hammers the final nail in his own coffin. Mr. Carver not-so-politely excuses himself from the dining room, Mrs. Carver makes a rather lame excuse for her husband’s departure, and soon thereafter Clarkson Manning is but a memory for the Carvers.

When Betsy and Jo capitulate to Mr. Carver’s wishes regarding their respective romantic attachments, they do so from what Phillip regards as a filial obligation to bolster their father’s morale after the devastating loss he suffered prior to their move to Memphis. Even so, as already mentioned, they do not deign to subscribe to any of their father’s plans for their lives thereafter, and their alteration from “gentle, ladylike, submissive Southern girls” from Nashville to “the wildest things that ever got inside the Memphis Junior League” is a clear indication that their father’s grip on his family has loosened over the years they have lived in Memphis (Taylor 57, 56). Moreover, whether or not Phillip – or even Peter Taylor – recognized it, the family’s move from Nashville to
Memphis affords each of the Carver daughters social mobility of a different sort, one that was previously off limits to them at home in Nashville.

When Betsy and Josephine switch gears from obedience to their father to rebellion against all he holds dear, they are not merely flaunting their father’s codes of conduct – they are flaunting the entirety of the South’s majority culture, that is, white, Protestant, middle- to upper-class social expectations (Ford 136-7). Though held to similar standards as their mother, Betsy and Josephine Carver are merely Southern ladies-in-training at the onset of the novel. On the cusp of adulthood, marriage, and motherhood, the two girls should have theoretically benefitted from their mother’s tutelage in the praxis of the Cult of Southern Womanhood. When Minta begins to shirk her responsibility for instructing her daughters in the codes of conduct appropriate for Southern women, it leaves Betsy and Jo primed for the chance to explore other alternatives to their identities as women.

First, though, one must understand the cultural context in which the Carver sisters find themselves. Specifically, Memphis has historically had its own peculiar institutions for upholding the Cult of Southern Womanhood. Of primary importance to the maintenance of these ideals was the Cotton Carnival, an event that began in 1931 when members of the socially elite Memphians banded together to form a new tradition for celebrating local culture and, in particular, the city’s economic reliance on cotton (Rushing 153). Social clubs in the city would choose entire royalty courts for the carnival via secret ballots, and the annual celebration concluded every year with a parade celebrating the ascension of the selected royalty. Sustained to this day in part by the Junior League of Memphis, the Cotton Carnival hearkens to the days when women’s
social mobility and economic power were sustained almost solely on the basis of race and class.

Requirements for participation in the Cotton Carnival are important reminders of how Southern womanhood was actualized in Memphis. Carnival royalty must fulfill certain societal expectations prior to being crowned, and these roles are strictly essentialized by gender. The Queen is always a young white female, usually a second or third-year college student, who is actively involved in community service and comes from a well-known local family. Likewise, the male candidate for King must be a white well-to-do man. In addition, no woman has or will ever serve as president of the Carnival. Even so, a woman’s involvement with the Carnival offers a certain level of “cultural capital” particularly because Carnival royalty members often marry one another (Rushing 164).

Phillip’s description of his sisters’ debutante experiences in Nashville and their subsequent involvement with the Memphis Junior League explains how Betsy and Jo fit into the praxis of the Cult of Southern Womanhood in Memphis. The girls’ inability, for instance, to repeat their social debuts in Memphis after they have already come out in Nashville the year prior theoretically limits their chances of finding suitable marriage partners. Despite these limitations, the text highlights their involvement with the Junior League of Memphis where they begin “doing good works” within months of moving to the city (Taylor 41). Later mentions of the Cotton Carnival reveal the girls’ familiarity with the event, but it is telling that they themselves never participate as young women. With the knowledge in hand that their father wished for them never to marry, it is possible that Betsy and Jo also forfeited their chances of becoming Carnival royalty to
please Mr. Carver. Just as likely, though, is the possibility that, like many of their other choices regarding their feminine identities, the Carver sisters saw no need to involve themselves in the matchmaking schemes of the Carnival once they had decided they would forge their own way in society.

As young Southern women, Betsy and Jo should have needed the stability and respectability afforded to them by marriage and a husband (Irons 254), especially because domestic life was the “domain of Southern women, who [were] denied power and knowledge beyond their front doors” (Graham). Mr. Carver, however, advocates for the end of his daughters’ romantic entanglements, effectively removing the girls’ access to the social mobility offered by women’s roles within the home and their proximity to their husbands. In response to these limitations, Betsy and Jo emerge as two surprisingly unrestrained, liberated women. Obedient to their father’s wishes regarding their marital status, the two sisters proceed to flaunt nearly every criterion ascribed to their expected behavior by the Cult of Southern Womanhood.

Soon after Wyatt Brantley and Clarkson Manning fall off the girls’ radar, the sisters start a real estate business together and subsequently purchase homes for themselves. Though they remain physically close to their parents’ house in Midtown, these houses represent their individuality and identities separate from that of their father and even each other. In yet another display of the autonomy they have claimed for themselves, the girls also begin competing with their male business and social counterparts in other endeavors, often injecting themselves into sporting competitions where they have “no trouble defeating men who [dare] compete with them” (Taylor 57). Ever concerned with appearances, Phillip expresses his relief that his sisters “never
become masculine in their appearance or in their manner” (Taylor 57). Instead, as they age, they dress “more like young girls than their married contemporaries” (Taylor 62-3). Horrified that they dare expose their “figures [which were] by no means any longer youthful,” Phillip is appalled by his sisters’ low-back dresses with plunging necklines and sky-high slits (Taylor 63).

These forays into freedom are but the tip of the iceberg, however. No longer obligated to submit to their father’s authority, their mother’s input, or the obligations of domestic life, Betsy and Jo gain entrance into local spaces and social circles forbidden to other women of their race and social class. Well after Phillip’s departure from Memphis, he discovers that his sisters frequent “certain night spots” with much younger male companions whom they have paid to escort them out on the town (Taylor 63). In patronizing these night clubs and dive bars, the Carver sisters forego any semblance of appreciation for their white, upper-class Southern upbringing. Their choice in companions on these escapades does nothing to help the situation, but it is their consorting with other men closer to their age and class that evokes an even stronger response from Phillip, particularly given the verbiage they use to describe these relationships. Phillip is much chagrined by Betsy and Jo’s ascription of the term “affair” to their liaisons with these men, though he is convinced they must be ignorant of the word’s sexual connotations (Taylor 59). Considering Betsy and Jo’s strategic disregard for the many other displays of Southern femininity begs the question, however, of whether the sisters intentionally thumb their noses at the pretense of Southern white women’s presumed virginity.
The girls’ taste for questionable humor likewise pushes the boundaries of ladylike behavior, even as it earns them an eager audience among the socially elite with whom they continue to mingle. Phillip explains that his sisters were “well known in Memphis for possessing, each of them, a felicitous if sometimes cruel sense of humor [and] for inventing wickedly funny anecdotes” that they in turn share with their friends (Taylor 52). Although he insists that theirs was a sense of humor “familiar [to] Southern ladies of a certain age,” Phillip also acknowledges that his sisters’ jokes often bordered on the suggestive, despite their insistence on the innocence of their stories (Taylor 52). This trend continues when the sisters relay “funny little incidents and episodes” of their father’s social interactions with Memphis’s widows after Minta’s passing (Taylor 52). Phillip mentions how the girls’ voices would “quaver and tremble seemingly on purpose, as if to insist upon the lady’s delicacy of feeling,” but that, shortly thereafter, “there would come a roar of laughter from the encircling little band of friends, a roar which ladies of [their mother’s] generation (in Nashville, at any rate) would not have been capable of” (Taylor 54). With “a single phrase or with a roll of the eyes of the artful lifting of a plucked eyebrow,” Betsy and Jo could quickly change their innocent tales into “veritable shocker[s]” (Taylor 54). This description of Betsy and Jo’s demeanor whilst telling one of their many humorous narratives further testifies to their ability to straddle the presumed purity of Southern women with their own risqué choices.

Even with their many ventures outside of society’s expectations for them, Betsy and Jo tow the line of Southern femininity just enough to maintain their acceptance in the upper class. Years after their own debutante balls in Nashville, they continue to receive invitations to local cotillions for the daughters and granddaughters of their many friends.
in Memphis. Their ability to navigate their varied social commitments evolves into what Alex Mercer refers to as one of the “seven wonders” of the Memphis social scene (Taylor 63). Eventually, the girls’ penchant for ribald humor, revealing clothing, and untoward coed relationships recedes in terms of importance to their reputation, and they come to be “fully accepted as a remarkable Memphis institution” (Taylor 63). The girls’ relatively stable social status in Memphis does indicate that social rules in Memphis are not those of Nashville. That their young adulthood was first marked by a designation as ‘those two awful Nashville girls’, however, is evidence that, society still expects certain conduct of Southern ladies, even in a ‘Deep South’ city like Memphis. Unencumbered by the trappings of maternal or domestic responsibilities, Betsy and Jo have managed to forge their own definition of Southern womanhood. Even so, Betsy and Jo’s choices ultimately reveal that, for all the latitude Memphis appears to offer women, the social capital afforded by adhering to the rules of the Cult of Southern Womanhood is too alluring to deny or ignore, and much like Minta Carver, they succumb to their roles as exemplars of Southern domesticity.

The entire plotline of A Summons to Memphis revolves around the phone calls the two sisters make to Phillip, insisting that he return to Memphis in order to talk their father out of remarrying a much younger woman. Though Phillip reluctantly accedes to his sisters’ demands, he finds that they are no more in need of his assistance in the matter than they are in any of their other many endeavors. When Phillip and Mr. Carver arrive at the church where the latter is to be married, the men find that Mr. Carver’s fiancée is missing. They slowly make their way back to the Carver family home, where, to neither’s surprise, they are greeted by the sight of a moving truck in the driveway and the presence
of Betsy and Jo in the front doorway directing the movers. Attired in the “kind of modest, simple housedress that [their] mother used to wear on moving day,” the girls eagerly welcome their father and brother back home (Taylor 152). Phillip notes that “[y]ou could tell from the obvious creases that [the girls’ dresses] were spanking new [and] that they had been bought for the occasion” (Taylor 152).

Unable theretofore to participate fully in the formalities of Southern domesticity, the girls return to Mr. Carver’s home so that they can “devote all their time and energy” to their father in his advanced age (Taylor 157). Clearly responsible for Mrs. Stockwell’s disappearance and non-committal plans about returning to Memphis, Betsy and Jo’s role as their father’s caretaker is without a doubt a proxy for the places they might have held in their own families and homes had their father not prevented them from doing so. After decades of biding their time, Betsy and Jo jump at the chance to actualize their roles as genteel Southern women while simultaneously giving Mr. Carver a dose of his own medicine. Even after Mr. Carver passes away the following year, the girls remain in his home instead of moving back to their own. It is as though, for all their apparent nonchalance toward society’s expectations of them, all Betsy and Jo truly do care about are the trimmings of domestic life. In the end, too, Memphis proves itself to be the place wherein the girls could make the decision to choose one identity or another – or even some amalgamation of the spectrum of feminine conduct.

Unlike his sisters, whose ostentatious behavior is a defining component of the novel, or his brother, whose voice narrates their family’s story, George Carver, Jr., or Georgie as he is better known by his family, is the only Carver sibling who never makes an official appearance or utters even the shortest of syllables in A Summons to Memphis.
Although his presence does not figure prominently in the unfolding of events within the novel, the measures Georgie takes to flee both Memphis and his father’s grip are arguably the most extreme of the four Carver children. Having fulfilled Mr. Carver’s wishes for his sons to join him in his law practice, Georgie remains in Memphis for a brief measure of time after law school. For reasons not explicitly stated – though assumed by Phillip as comparable to his own complaints over their mutual need for independence from their father’s expectations – Georgie makes the radical decision to enlist with the Army for combat in WWII rather than waiting for the draft. Moreover, Betsy and Josephine assist him in his deceit by reinforcing the false narrative that Georgie had been drafted; in a fleeting moment of seeming bitterness, Phillip indicates that the girls “made it possible for [Georgie] to go off to Europe and get himself killed” (Taylor 57).

When Georgie dies during the first wave of the Allies’ invasion in France, one of his fellow Army pilots who was likewise from Memphis writes home to the Carvers. Writing that he “knew at once from [Georgie’s] voice” where he was from, this fellow pilot confirms Phillip’s observations about his brother’s seamless adaptation to Memphis ways. Specifically, Georgie’s transition to Memphis was rapid: “within weeks” into their tenure in Memphis, he had “cast off all traces of a Nashville accent in his speech and spoke during the rest of his short and unhappy life almost in the accents of a native-born Memphian” (Taylor 76). Phillip insists that this is but one of the many ways that Georgie differed from the rest of the Carver family, in that he was able to adapt “so readily…to Memphis and its general province” (Taylor 76). Regardless of the veracity of Phillip’s commentary about Georgie’s status as the sole member of the family able to mesh well with Memphis and its ways, the fact remains that the entire family held this view, and the
letter from Georgie’s fellow pilot did nothing but to corroborate their opinion. In fact, the contents of the letter distance Georgie even further from his family. While the rest of the family held onto their Nashville identities – at least to varying, cherry-picked degrees – that Georgie could be identified “so indelibly as of and from Memphis hurt [the Carvers] nearly as much as the first news of his death and was in a sense [their] final estrangement from him” (Taylor 77). Without an actual word on the page to his credit, Georgie’s complete and utter dismantling of his Upper South identity manages to detach his identity from his family in a way that little else might have.

The Carvers’ experience with Georgie’s death lends itself to another conversation about their perceptions of local identity. While not a critical piece of Lost Cause religion – and thus not specific to the Carvers’ notion of their Southern identity – the Carvers mark their attachment to place at least in part based on the length of their tenure within its confines. That Georgie’s accent marks him as a native Memphian ruffles the feathers of a family that was not “after all a genuine Memphis family” since, by the end of the novel, they had “lived in Memphis only thirty years” (Taylor 5). Comparatively speaking, the Carvers’ tenure in Memphis is brief next to, say, the Mercers, who are, as previously mentioned, ‘Memphis to the core’ with their local ancestry stretching as far back as the post-bellum period. Phillip mentions much later in the text that the Carver children at least come to consider themselves “permanent residents” of Memphis, but nary a Carver ever comes close to claiming the identity of a true Memphian (Taylor 79). These remonstrations mark the significant differences between the Carvers and almost all of the other characters and people groups mentioned in this dissertation. For one, no one external to the Carver family questions the authenticity of their status as Memphians;
rather, the assumptions made by others based on their race and socioeconomic status are that they belong—whether or not they want to. Secondly, unlike many of the other individuals in these texts who work enthusiastically to make Memphis their own, the Carvers prefer to remain outsiders and are vocal about their lack of desire to don a local identity.

For all that the Carver family is unwilling to grant that they might one day feel a similar attachment to Memphis that they bear for Nashville, Georgie’s death is but one piece of evidence that proves Memphis holds incontestable sway over their lives. Phillip’s struggle, especially, to “put his Memphis past behind him” lingers well into his adulthood (D. Robinson 754). At the same time, Phillip unmistakably regards his father as the authority from which he cannot seem to escape, no matter his geographical distance. For Phillip, Memphis and George Carver the man are the same: his identity and Memphis have become so entrenched with each other that Phillip cannot disassociate the two. When Phillip first lands in Memphis at the behest of his sisters’ summons to return and prohibit their father’s remarriage, he is met on the landing strip by Mr. Carver, at which point Phillip comments that it felt as though he were “suffocated” by his father’s presence (Taylor 142). Not only does Phillip feel as though he cannot extricate his identity from his father’s expectations, he also feels that he “has never left Memphis” (Taylor 142). In this moment, Mr. Carver’s enmeshment with Memphis is clear.

Truly, it is Mr. Carver’s spousal and paternal influence that leads to the emotional, if not physical, demise of the rest of the Carver family once they have settled into their lives in Memphis. His demands for adherence to Upper South social roles for his wife and children preclude their ability to explore any new sense of identity that
Memphis initially seems to afford them. Herein is Mr. Carver’s hypocrisy most evident. While his family remain siloed in the restrictive traditions of the past that Nashville represents and that he uses to circumscribe their behavior, Mr. Carver himself eventually comes to explore the various pieces of Memphis’s culture he had once deemed unworthy of Minta’s and the children’s attention. The same freedoms that Mr. Carver wishes to squash in his family are the very same ones that grant him the latitude to refine and reclaim various components of his own identity. For all that his complaints about his father resound with a childish petulance, Phillip astutely recognizes that Mr. Carver is the sole member of their family who manages to hold both Memphis and Nashville in tandem. Whether Mr. Carver ‘becomes’ a Memphian or simply lapses into his boyhood identity from West Tennessee is relatively unimportant. The fact remains that he finds it easier to adjust his temperament to Memphis because he is already familiar with its mannerisms and mores. For George Carver, Memphis represents a past that he himself managed to escape. It is hypocritical, then, that he likewise attempts to prevent his children’s flight from the city they are all loathe to admit exudes any potency over their respective identities.

To this end, *A Summons to Memphis* resounds with biting criticism for the culture that Memphis and the rest of West Tennessee represent; it is the same undercurrent of disapproval with which Memphians have reckoned for the duration of the city’s presence along the Chickasaw Bluffs of the Mississippi and the same attitude that the Carver family assumes when comparing their Nashville roots to their Memphis counterparts. On the other hand, Peter Taylor once himself acknowledged that, for whatever its drawbacks, Memphis is the “center of the world” those who live therein (Paine 315). Its citizens find
themselves “inseparable” from the place itself, connected to it in such a way that, were they to leave, they would be “nobody;” conversely, in Memphis, “at least they’re somebody” (Paine 315). As such, it is arguable that Mr. Carver’s return to West Tennessee in *A Summons to Memphis* is inevitable because of the pull that Memphis has on those born therein.

Whether as an active or a passive participant, it is Memphis that houses an environment in which Mr. Carver can actualize his extreme approach to Southern patriarchy. Without the move to Memphis, Mr. Carver would likely have not felt the same need for his intolerably strict adherence to the trappings of the Upper South. Likewise, based on Phillip’s description of their social and familial roles, not a one of the Carvers would have ever had the means – or a reason – to negotiate the terms of their respective social roles had they not left Nashville. Real or imagined, the differences that the Carvers perceive between Nashville and Memphis are indicative of a broader picture, that is, the intersection of place and identity in Memphis. Even though the Carvers suffer their fall from grace in Nashville, the worst of their pain occurs in Memphis. Because of the restrictive social constructs evoked by Mr. Carver upon their removal from Nashville, Memphis is rendered responsible for the Carver family’s unhappiness. The Carver family’s perception of Memphis contributes to widely held opinions that it is but a rural backwater town with little to offer its residents outside of the comforts of familiarity. *A Summons to Memphis*, however, demonstrates that their true feelings toward Memphis are ambiguous. Even Phillip, who returns to his humble apartment in Manhattan after his sisters’ coup, takes on the mantle of a Memphian; despite a measure of success in his publishing career that would enable him to improve his living quarters, Phillip insists that
he is too content to be bothered. In this way, Phillip has become the “the best kind of Memphis boy” his father had once described (Taylor 75). The rest of the Carvers have likewise assumed the identity of true Memphians who are content to rest in the confines of their prescribed gender, racial, and socioeconomic spaces, a status they have so vehemently denied yet ultimately cannot resist.

For the characters in Margaret Skinner’s *Old Jim Canaan*, on the other hand, Memphis is the site of different identity crises within the city’s white population, namely for the Irish Catholic community which has historically been ostracized from social spaces where other white people congregate. The various struggles that the Canaan family encounters in Memphis shed light on the often conflicting values for Irish Catholic individuals who both wished to preserve their ethnic and religious heritage while at the same time integrating with the rest of white Southern society. The fictional Canaans are but one of many Irish Catholic families who settled in the American South during the mid- to late-nineteenth century, but their story is unique to the city of Memphis in the ways that local politics, culture, and geography inform the identity of their community and, reciprocally, how that community influences the overall image and reputation of the city itself.

As a Catholic writer from Memphis, Margaret Skinner’s fictional renderings of the local Irish Catholic population reveal, if not her own struggle to reconcile her Catholic and Southern identities, then at least the unique social structures in Memphis that simultaneously welcomed and isolated her Irish Catholic predecessors. Relying heavily on the metaphor that the Mississippi River represents social hurdles for some of her characters and a crisis of faith for others, Skinner deftly exposes the tenuous
relationship that Irish Catholic Memphians had with their chosen home around the turn of
the twentieth century. By fictionalizing one Irish Catholic family’s willful efforts to
penetrate the socioeconomic boundaries imposed on them by Southern culture, Skinner
likewise exposes the characters’ often ambivalent perspectives and attitudes toward
Memphis. At times represented as a Sodom and at others as the Promised Land, Memphis
figures prominently into Skinner’s plot.

As one of several candidates for the “buckle” of the “Bible Belt,” a subregion first
identified by journalist H.L. Mencken in the 1920s (Brunn et al. 517), Memphis’s status
as a city within the religious bubble of Southern evangelicalism is irrefutable. As a city
where “strict literal interpretations” of the Bible prevail, Memphis’s predominantly
Protestant religious landscape has tended to follow the same pattern of the various
fundamentalist sects of the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations that had
come to dominate Southern religious culture by the 1840s and eventually split from their
chambers of origin in the North over the issue of slavery (Brunn et al. 514, 518-9). Within
this environment, there has historically been little room for religious tolerance, even for
other Christian denominations or practices, including Catholicism. Instead, white
Southerners typically upheld a nativist disregard for non-Protestant, non-white
immigrants and people of color that was predicated on the belief that the social and
political agency of the Protestant majority would be threatened by the growth of the
Catholic churches in the South; as such, many white Southerners made a clear distinction
between “true Americans” and all other outsiders (Remillard 136-7).

Although Catholicism was the first of all European faiths to arrive in the South,
the Church’s numbers have never thrived in the region, to the extent that the South’s
interior was once christened ‘No Priest Land’ by one Catholic leader; instead – and notably for the setting of *Old Jim Canaan*, most Southern Catholics have tended to live along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers (Hudnut-Beumler 177). Even as a clear religious minority, Catholicism has maintained a consistent presence in the “physical and moral landscape” in the South and has shaped the “civil religious discourse of the region” (Remillard 89, 91). In fact, Ralph Wood argues that “[o]f all the qualities that make the South the oddest and most fiercely contested of American regions, surely the role played by Catholicism looms large” (504).

In spite of their vibrant influence on the region, Southern Catholics have long recognized their precarious position in Southern society. James Hudnut-Beumler notes that Southern Catholics “share a palpable awareness that…they are different from the Protestant religious majority in the South” (193). He also argues that being Catholic in the South is different from being Catholic anywhere else in that one has to be a Christian “more broadly” than other American Catholics (Hudnut-Beumler 178, 181). Moreover, according to Arthur Remillard, where the “exclusively Protestant civil religious language” of the South “often left doors open for Jews” to participate more freely in Southern society, those same doors typically remained closed to Southern Catholics (95).

In Memphis, the Jewish and Irish Catholic communities actually lived together in the same impoverished conclave that was the Pinch district. This was despite the Irish Catholic population’s best efforts to integrate with the rest of the city; their settlement in Memphis, then, was, if not “strictly segregated,” then certainly “concentrated in certain areas” (Gleeson 58). In the 1860s, this loose segregation would have been striking, especially since Irish residents comprised nearly twenty percent of the local population.
This trend was not without precedent given that Irish immigrants often created their own ethnic communities (Gleeson 7); the aforementioned widespread nativist attitudes toward Catholic Southerners could also account for the predominantly Irish Catholic community’s social distance from other whites in Memphis.

In order to create space for themselves among their white Protestant counterparts, Southern Catholics were often forced to choose between aligning themselves with the progressive notions of abolition and desegregation or ascribing to the tenets of the Religion of the Lost Cause that upheld antebellum social hierarchies. According to Adam Tate, the post-bellum era saw many Southern Catholics opting for the latter option in order to ingratiate themselves to other Southerners (309). In Memphis, however, these choices appear to have been made somewhat prior to the Civil War. The overwhelming majority of the predominantly Irish Catholic population in Memphis, for example, voted for succession after President Lincoln called on federal troops to stomp out the Southern rebellion, and the Confederacy’s Second Tennessee regiment was largely composed of Irish Catholics from the city’s Pinch district (Gleeson 138, 145). A century later, local Catholic clergy “tolerated [and] even advocated” the segregation of the Church in Memphis (Remillard 162). By aligning themselves in these ways with the racial ideologies of majority white culture in the South, Memphis Catholics poured their energy into finding common ground with other whites who stood in the way of their social mobility.

The Irish Catholic community’s relationship with Memphis has clearly been, at best, difficult. Ann Mulhearn argues that “Memphis’s history in many ways in intertwined with that of its Catholic minority” (363). To some degree, Mulhearn is not
wrong: the first Catholic church in Memphis, for instance, opened its doors the same year the city itself was formally incorporated (Burgess), but her reasoning is largely founded on the difficulties that Catholics encountered in the Bluff City. From the disproportionate toll the Yellow Fever epidemics of the 1870s took on the Pinch to an undated quote from a Memphis newspaper that editorialized white Memphians’ desire to keep racial tensions in the city limited to the familiar black/white divide without an influx of additional immigrants, local Catholics – and, specifically, Irish Catholics – have suffered under the burden of ethnic and religious discrimination (Mulhearn 363; Remillard 145). Although Memphis Catholics received sporadic reprieve from Southern nativist attitudes – such as when the late Boss Crump publicly defended their constitutional right to practice their faith – the Memphis Catholic community, the largest in the state of Tennessee, remained at the margins of local society well into the twentieth century (Mulhearn 363).

In addition to other efforts to align themselves socially and ideologically with other white Southerners, Southern Catholics have used literature as a means of convincing the rest of the region that they deserved “a place at the table” (Cadegan 9). After the Catholic Action Plan, which included a call from the Vatican for more lay people to be involved in the growth of the Church, was enacted by Pope Pius in the 1930s, American Catholics turned to literary publication as a means to modernize their faith, share their moral values, and lead their readers to the ultimate goal of salvation (Cadegan 14, 16, 23-4). As a result, Catholic writers committed to a literary aesthetic that depended on the moral value of the work, and they viewed the writing process as akin to God’s divine creation of the universe (Cadegan 23, 26). Convinced that Catholicism was the “key ingredient that could save the whole [world] from disaster,” Southern Catholic
writers proliferated Catholic values through a litany of literary genres throughout the twentieth century and likewise contrived to confirm their American identities through their writing (Cadegan 11).

Southern Catholics writers’ motivation was not merely the proliferation of their faith-based values solely within the Catholic community. As Flannery O’Connor once expressed, at the core of their faith, these writers wanted the same things as other white Southerners (“A Catholic Novelist”). Ralph Wood takes this notion a step further by indicating that not only did Southern Catholics resemble their Protestant neighbors, but the converse was likewise true in that “Southern folk Protestantism…is latently Catholic” in its theology and praxis (507). As such, it is arguable that Southern Catholic writers depended on the reciprocity between the two Christian practices in their appeal to both Protestant and Catholic audiences. The resulting texts, then, demonstrate how these writers were not merely seeking to cement their Americanism with their writing: they wanted to establish their place within the South as well. Skinner’s Old Jim Canaan similarly explores this literary aesthetic, but with a solitary focus on Memphis and the powerful influence of the city and the Mississippi River upon its inhabitants. While acknowledging that Memphis is situated within the South, Old Jim Canaan might thus be considered a study of place in regard to the local rather than the regional, particularly in terms of how the Irish Catholic community folded Memphis into its own culture and faith practice despite the necessity of balancing two seemingly dueling identities.

As one of Skinner’s residual characters, Merlin Mahon does not heavily influence the plot of Old Jim Canaan, yet it is his voice that articulates the text’s stance toward the city of Memphis. As the most educated member of the Canaan family, Merlin maintains a
rather condescending opinion of Memphis that begins and ends with the influence that the Mississippi River has had on the city. While he concedes that the Mississippi has enabled Memphis to prosper, he snubs the river, citing its stench and the “mischief and deceit” it brings to the Memphian bluffs via the rivermen who carouse in Memphis saloons and brothels as reasons enough to regard the entire city as beneath him (Skinner 59).

The Major, as his family affectionately refers to him, does not end his criticism of Memphis there, however. In particular, Merlin is concerned by the dearth of literate citizens – and therefore literature itself – in Memphis. In Merlin’s estimation, a solid literary base is the “essential prerequisite for the disciplined life, the life in which a higher class of men move forward,” but that it was “almost entirely lacking in [this] city of jocularity and tuneful persuasion” (Skinner 60, 62). Citing Alexis de Toqueville’s historic sojourn in Memphis en route to New Orleans, the Major is loath to recount the other man’s visit “centered on the mud, the cruelty, the ruffians. [de Toqueville] did not stay long enough to find out about the literature” (Skinner 62). Merlin’s commentary about the city’s carefree and uncivilized culture stems from his general disdain for the river and the cacophony of voices and musical expressions of various people groups that converge in downtown Memphis. This “debris” has arrived in Memphis from ports across the world, and the Major has little tolerance for any of it, from the outdoor Italian vendors selling their wares on Beale Street to the oftentimes “aggressively sexual” songs of Delta cotton hands whose music has likewise made its way to Memphis (Skinner 60). Merlin finds the tumult “interminable, like the talk of women,” and he argues quite vehemently that no one could read or think long enough to contribute anything of worth to the
intellectual community were they to try whilst attempting to tune out all the noise in Memphis (Skinner 60).

Merlin’s desire to see more literature published in Memphis does not stem from any inclination as other Southern Catholic writers to spread the good news of Catholicism – his devotion to the sacraments of the Church is obligatory at best – but his eagerness for literary expression nonetheless underscores his community’s need for inclusion in the broader life of Memphis. Much like other groups of people who do not fit into the white Protestant model of the South’s upper class, Merlin’s Irish Catholic community has had to find unique ways of creating space for itself, and the merits of employing literature as a means of cultural preservation has been discussed at length already. That Margaret Skinner, an Irish Catholic woman and a native Memphian, uses Merlin to engage in this conversation about the literary landscape of Memphis cannot be an accident. In many ways, Skinner’s writing follows the tradition of other Southern Catholic writers like Flannery O’Connor and Caroline Gordon whose work was dedicated to the promulgation of Catholic theology and the salvation of nonbelievers. On the surface, Old Jim Canaan moves toward these same goals. A closer examination of Skinner’s characters, however, renders Old Jim Canaan less a portrait of the ideal Catholic family and more an exploration – or even at times a criticism – of the compounded effects of Catholicism and Southern civil religion.

Unlike A Summons to Memphis, in which the presumably Protestant, upper-class Carver family readily vocalize their disdain for their adopted hometown, any frustration with Memphis on the part of the other members of the Canaan family is expressed far more subtly. Compared to A Summons to Memphis in which the characters openly
dialogue about their respective opinions of the city, in *Old Jim Canaan* the characters’ responses to the hurdles they encounter in Memphis are woven into the action of the novel. Though the narrative begins in 1914 with the voice of Jim Flanagan, the primary narrator and Old Jim Canaan’s great-nephew and namesake, the book moves between the 1910s and 20s and Uncle Jim’s childhood in 1870s during the Yellow Fever epidemics in Memphis. As immigrants to the United States, the Canaans start out woefully poor, eking out a bare subsistence in their tiny hut along the banks of the Mississippi. The plight deepens when Thomas Flanagan, their family patriarch, dies from Yellow Fever, and his widow Kate’s grief is compounded by the loss of two of her children within the next two years.

As the eldest sons, Tom and Jim Canaan work diligently to support their mother and remaining siblings after their father dies; even so, Kate dies “‘working like a slave’” (Skinner 103). Years of hard labor take their toll on Jim Canaan’s body, and by twenty-seven, his frame is bent over like an old man from the weight of the bag he carries along his daily postal route. By chance – or by providence – Jim and his siblings receive a letter from their long-lost uncle in Ireland who offers their family a substantial sum of money to use as they wish. Exhausted from the physical labor he has performed for so many years, Jim agrees to his siblings’ proposal that he take the money and buy one of the local saloons (Skinner 189). Capitalizing on this stroke of luck, Jim ventures into other business endeavors, eventually owning several saloons and brothels and currying cocaine in downtown Memphis. Eventually the entire Pinch district does his bidding, with “a hundred eyes and ears” keeping tab on its daily happenings (Skinner 19). Jim’s financial successes coupled with his rather nefarious means of gaining his wealth win him the title
‘Czar of the Underworld’ among locals (Skinner 234). Despite the moniker, the only people who have a real problem with Jim are those who either wish to invade his business territory or those who believe in their own moral superiority over him.

Driven more by the struggle to gain money than from any intrinsic value of the money itself, Jim comes to love the turf wars and the “near calamity of waging [them]” that are part and parcel of his life’s work (Skinner 57). Propelled by circumstance and later by choice to abandon the faith of his childhood, Uncle Jim instead finds solace in the “religion” of his business and in faithfully following his own rules (Skinner 240). Even so, not a soul in the Canaan or Flanagan families would dare utter a word of complaint or criticism for Uncle Jim’s socially unacceptable business endeavors. Instead, they repeatedly offer the opinion that Jim is an honest man who has “‘fought his way out of hard times’” (Skinner 33). Jim’s son-in-law Merlin Mahon respects him “even though he was on the wrong side of the law” because he “either told the truth or said nothing” (Skinner 63). His niece Clare Flanagan, the younger Jim’s mother, echoes this sentiment. Specifically, she hopes that her son will inherit “Uncle Jim’s integrity and stamina, [even though she knew that] some would disdain such aspirations” (Skinner 240). Even Uncle Jim himself acknowledges that the Nonpareil, his first saloon, has been a “‘good family place’” because it has provided for his family (Skinner 105).

When all is said and done, Jim Canaan emerges as a redemptive figure. Wedged between a rock and a hard place, Jim selects the option that will provide him and his family the economic mobility they so desperately need. That he does so through criminal and often violent behavior eventually erodes the moral compass instilled by his childhood faith, though he develops his own honor code to serve as his guide. Though his interests
in drug running, bootlegging, and prostitution diminish his own chances for attaining social respectability, Uncle Jim’s business profits ultimately buys his family’s way into the upper echelons of Memphis’s social circles. To this end, Jim’s sacrifices are readily acknowledged by his family who know that he wants the best for them all. Moreover, they understand that he had “done [so] the only way he knew how,” which leaves them grateful to the primary breadwinner of their family instead of ashamed of the means he used to achieve his goals (Skinner 240). Mama Jo, Uncle Jim’s sister – Clare’s mother and Jim Flanagan’s grandmother – feels the occasional prick of conviction over taking Jim’s money, but it is not enough to prevent her from accepting the cash from his profits to slip to her fellow parishioners who live in poverty.

Because of the financial agency that Uncle Jim’s money affords them, each subsequent generation of the Canaan-Flanagan family finds itself in an even better position than the previous one. On the other hand, as they edge their way into the spaces in Memphis to which they had previously been denied access because of their Irish Catholic heritage, the family finds itself bound not just to the moral tenets of their faith, but to the creeds of Lost Cause religion. Whereas Uncle Jim is absolved of adhering to certain gendered expectations of conduct, the other men in his family, even the male children, are held to the same standards as other white men in the same socioeconomic bracket in the South. There is, for instance, an ongoing conversation throughout the entirety of Old Jim Canaan as to just who will inherit Uncle Jim’s businesses and replace him as the patriarch of the family after he dies. With no children of his own, the role will fall to one of his nephews-in-law, either Merlin Mahon or Nate Flanagan. Though Merlin expends copious amounts of energy brown-nosing Uncle Jim and angling for the
position, Jim clearly prefers that Nate take over his assets. Despite his confidence that Nate is an “Irishman of good stock,” Jim is frustrated that Nate will not commit to participate in the upcoming swimming race in the Mississippi, and he angrily suggests that it is “‘high time he took his place as head of this house [because he couldn’t] live forever’” (Skinner 195). Even so, he insists that Nate must make the decision for himself and that he “‘will get in the water if it damn well suits him’” (Skinner 81).

At this point, the supernatural influence of the Mississippi becomes equitable with the characters’ understanding and demonstration of Southern masculinity, particularly in Memphis. The widely held consensus is that the Mississippi is “the heartbeat that kept things stirred up in Memphis,” though not always in the best of ways (Skinner 59). The river, for instance, carries men into the city who rabble-rouse in saloons and brothels, among them Uncle Jim’s, and they murder one another “for sport, increasing the city’s fame as the murder capital of the world” (Skinner 60). Locals agree that while the Mississippi could “never be entirely tamed,” Memphis “was waiting, however noisily, to be quieted down” (Skinner 60). If winning the race signifies conquering the river and its unseemly influence on local society, the swimming competition thus represents one way that the men who participate might likewise assert their preferred social expectations over the city.

Even with these odds at stake, Merlin swears that he “would not willingly duck [his] head under the damnable waters, not even for God” because its stench and filth was “more than [he] could stomach (Skinner 59). Even so, Merlin acknowledges the pull of the river, a “sorcery,” if you will, “unrelated to its physical force” (Skinner 59). On the other hand, although two of his four children are convinced that he is reluctant to
compete in the race because he is afraid, Nate insists that “river fears never got hold of him” (Skinner 190). At once ashamed of his father’s hesitation to compete and subsequently anxious over his decision to participate, Jim Flanagan notes that, although that the Mississippi had “behaved better than normal” in the spring of 1914, “trusting something with a proven record of wildness was unreasonable” (Skinner 191).

No matter their divergent preferences about entering the water, Merlin agrees to man the rowboat that will accompany Nate during the race, and both Jim and Merlin’s young son George assist in the effort. The personification of the river continues as Jim observes that the “river wanted the boat” and that Merlin “had his hands full of the river” (Skinner 224, 225). As the three aboard the boat wrestle with the river’s current, Nate himself at first appears to have little trouble keeping pace with the favored winner of the race, at times even outpacing the other man. Once he realizes that he will not win, however, Nate dives beneath the waves, and his companions believe that he has either succumbed to fatigue or that the river has overtaken him. When he at last breaks the surface of the water, Nate is laughing, and, though sorry for inciting panic on behalf of the others, claims that he “‘had to do it’” (Skinner 228). Unwilling to fight his battle with the water until the end, Nate “seemed to just die in the water,” and his choice becomes a “clot that blocked [Jim’s] admiration for him” (Skinner 227, 231). When he had the opportunity to flex his masculinity, Nate has “given up,” a choice that he has always advised his son not to make (Skinner 229). Ultimately, Nate loses the opportunity to exercise a win to his social advantage and instead renders himself a coward in the eyes of his son.
As the appointed “standard-bearer for the family [name] and for the Catholic faith,” Jim is set to step into his father’s shoes to lead his family one day (Skinner 232). For any of his perceived flaws, Nate’s manners as a Southern gentleman are those that Mama Jo advises her only grandson to imitate “all the days” of his life (Skinner 152). In keeping with their upwardly mobile social status, Nate admonishes Jim when he is caught fighting the son of Uncle Jim’s business and territorial adversary Jack Shanley. Specifically, Nate informs Jim that he had not been raised for “street fighting;” he also explains that “fighting doesn’t make you a man” even if the other fellow “had it coming” (Skinner 32). In yet another instance where outward appearances mean more than the truth, Jim’s public fight in the streets of the Pinch is deemed socially unacceptable for young white boy on the cusp of adolescence, but his punishment for the grievance will determine whether he and George are able to attend a boxing match between two black brothers at the Nonpareil that same evening. The intersection of social class and race is likewise evident here in that, whereas Jim’s fisticuffs with Red Shanley is a shame to his family, his attendance at a boxing match between two black men is tolerated.

Even as a child, Jim Flanagan’s geographic boundaries are similarly circumscribed by racial dynamics. After his scuffle with Red Shanley, Jim and George meet Moony, one of Uncle Jim’s long-time black employees, who offers to chaperone the two boys on a trip to Beale Street. The sights and sounds they encounter, though largely similar to Main Street in the Pinch, are unacceptable to the boys’ families because they experience them in the company of Memphis’s black community. Upon their return home to the Pinch, Merlin Mahon firmly tells his son that his “world has boundaries [that] do
not include Beale Street” and that the two boys have “stepped outside the perimeter of propriety” (Skinner 28). Even Uncle Jim, whose social limitations are not nearly as strict, is careful to inform Jim before he gets home that his parents and Mama Jo already know about both the fight and his jaunt down to Beale. Uncle Jim’s warning is evidence that, even if he did not feel the need to abide by them, he recognized the significance of these boundaries. Afterward, Jim Flanagan overhears Moony and Distance, another of Uncle Jim’s black employees, arguing about incident. Distance chastises the much younger Moony for escorting the boys to Beale, saying that they “‘don’t belong down [there]’” and that Moony “‘ought to know better’” than to take the boys to Beale (Skinner 30). Distance and Moony’s conversation further solidifies the social boundaries to which the boys must attend if they are be sanctioned as Southern gentlemen.

The Canaans may abide by the literal and figurative boundaries that will keep them closer to the white community than to any other, but they remain staunchly proud of their Irish heritage. Clare especially is never willing to deny her family’s Irish Catholic background. When Mrs. Houston, one of Clare’s bridge club guests, suggests that she can tell their family “hasn’t been in America long,” Clare calmly responds that it had actually been “‘quite a long time’” since their ancestors first settled in Memphis (Skinner 135). Mrs. Houston will not let the conversation die, however, and she continues with her underhanded jabs. “‘Your Jim looks like he just stepped off the boat like the rest of the immigrants’,” she says, “‘He’s got the Irish face’” (Skinner 135). Without batting an eyelash and much to Mrs. Houston’s chagrin, Clare declares that he is proud that her son’s appearance reflects his heritage. In this moment, Clare’s refusal to denigrate her family’s Irish origins further probes the tension that she must certainly feel between her
family’s need to integrate with the rest of local white society and the natural tendency to defend one’s identity.

Considering the extent to which the family must contend with these nativist attitudes, there is another place in Memphis even worse off than the Pinch where the Canaan family resides. As Mama Jo explains to her grandchildren, the residents of the Pinch in North Memphis refer to the other Irish community in South Memphis as “Sodom”: an “‘ugly term, to be sure, but one was that most appropriate’” (Skinner 139). Even though the two communities share the same demographics, residents from the Pinch and Sodom do not get along whatsoever. It is of interest that, where the Pinch received its pejorative nickname from other Memphians, it is the residents of the Pinch who dub the South Memphis Irish neighborhood “Sodom.” Figuratively speaking, it is yet another way that the Irish Catholics in the Pinch can distance themselves from their immigrant brethren in South Memphis who have arrived in Memphis much more recently. According to Mama Jo, the residents of Sodom are jealous because the Pinch is a much older, more established neighborhood. As dictated by Clare’s conversation with Mrs. Houston at their bridge club luncheon, this jealousy speaks to the necessity of longevity in a place in order to build one’s identity in that place. This longevity, then, for Pinch families, however long as compared to their fellow Irishmen in Sodom, matters, and the length of one’s stay in Memphis is of great importance both within and without communities of immigrants who try to integrate with the wider community. As such, it makes sense that, despite their shared national origins, the Pinch and Sodom are engaged in a long-term turf war between their respective, rivaling gangs led by Uncle Jim and Nate’s father, Emmett Flanagan. It is not until Nate Flanagan from Sodom falls
hopelessly in love with “most beautiful girl in the First Ward” that these two Irish communities willingly mingle for the joyous occasion of Nate and Clare’s wedding. Tensions remain, however, and Sodom and the Pinch remain competitors in business and politics.

It goes without saying that Uncle Jim’s male relatives are not the only ones affected by local and regional expectations of behavior. As in any good, white, Southern family, the Canaan women and their daughters are as equally pressured to abide by gendered codes of conduct in order to overcome the trifecta of factors stacked against them, i.e., their gender, ethnic heritage, and Catholic faith. Because Uncle Jim never married and Mama Jo has outlived all three of her husbands, she serves as the family’s matriarch, and the two siblings lead together in all things, with their attention jointly devoted to the family’s social and financial wellbeing. In part because of her brother’s ostracization from the Church, Mama Jo remains at the helm of their family’s religious instruction. Unlike other Southern women, however, her place as the spiritual leader of her family of their shared family home does not stem from a responsibility to pass along the typical Southern traditions to the next generation. Instead, Mama Jo’s personal religious fervor and her dedication to her grandchildren’s Catholic upbringing is for the sake of preserving their faith in an environment hostile to Catholicism.

As a Catholic woman born into the lowest rung of Memphis’s socioeconomic ladder, only Mama Jo knows as well as Uncle Jim where their family might be were it not for his business successes. Upon this point, the two siblings agree: they “remembered the bad times” and “didn’t want any of [the family] to have them” (Skinner 240). Jim and Jo’s shared dreams begin and end with Clare, the beloved daughter and niece for whom
neither spares any expense. Even though she feels a pang of guilt over accepting Jim’s money to finance Clare’s dresses of “velvet and fine cotton,” Jo knows that her second husband – Clare’s stepfather – has “no notion of [their] dream” for her daughter to move freely in society, and so she takes the money on Clare’s behalf (Skinner 177, 167). In addition to ensuring that Clare maintains the outward appearance of any fine Southern lady, Mama Jo also teaches Clare how to be a lady. Clare reflects that it was unusual for her mother to be “able to teach her the modes and manners of the day, since [Jo] herself had no such exposure” (Skinner 241). “A keen observer,” Jo instructs her daughter in “all the essential things [like] posture [and] grooming,” and they both in turn pass this knowledge on to Clare’s three daughter (Skinner 241). As Clare maneuvers her way upward in society, her girls learn that much more from the society women with whom their mother interacts.

Despite her strenuous efforts to afford her daughter the social opportunities from which she was excluded, Clare notes that Mama Jo unconsciously expresses the desire to eat “from both cakes” (Skinner 240). Though she has misgivings about Uncle Jim’s mode of earning money, she is nearly as protective of her brother’s “tenure as chieftain” of North Memphis as she is of the desire for Clare and the rest of her family to enter high society (Skinner 240). Clare’s opinion that her mother is defensive about Jim’s lofty position among the denizens of North Memphis indicates she believes that Jo regards his role as a point of pride. What Clare fails to recognize, however, is that Jo’s concern for her brother’s fragile grip on his business holdings likely has as much to do with their family’s financial stability as it does with any self-satisfaction she may derive from his accomplishments.
If Clare’s deduction is even partially true, though, it could account for some of Mama Jo’s other proclivities. Though bound to the margins of polite society by birth and by faith, Mama Jo’s behavior also indicates that she has no real desire to enter the realm of Southern womanhood for herself. When Clare and Rosie are young girls, for instance, Jo frequents her brother’s saloons with little regard for any potential marks her presence in such establishments might make on others’ perceptions of her, but she would never have permitted either of the girls the same latitude. Later, when Uncle Jim’s men are present at the Canaan-Flanagan home, they avoid sharing off-color jokes within earshot of Clare and her daughters, but Jim does not believe that his grandmother would have been “all that offended by a dirty joke so long as the Lord’s name was not involved” (Skinner 208). For these reasons, among others, Merlin Mahon declares early in his acquaintance with Jo that she “was no lady” (Skinner 118). Jim Flanagan, however, regards his grandmother as such; in his estimation, his sisters “would be just fine” if they imitated her, though he concedes that she does not “count herself” among the ranks of other local ladies (Skinner 76). Altogether, these observations reveal that, whether or not Jo aspires to Southern ladyhood, her self-imposed standards of behavior would not fulfill the social obligations to which respectable white Southern women must attend.

In contrast, Clare Flanagan becomes the lady her mother always longed for her to be. By the time she has a family of her own, Clare is able to move about in the social circles that Mama Jo believes her daughter is “deserving of” (Skinner 137). It had not always been “the easiest task” to guide Clare, however (Skinner 140). The limitations of Jo’s social education aside, Clare is herself at times difficult to tame. Her first encounter with Nate Flanagan, for example, involves an indignant and mussed Clare emerging from
the basement covered in coal dust and “‘hollerin’ like no lady should’” (Skinner 141). Blessed with a natural beauty and charm, Clare enters society as the “wild Irish rose” with whom other women in her social circles are enamored (Skinner 241). As the token outsider, Clare fills the role of a Southern lady so well that her Irish Catholic heritage does not impede her entry into society in the same way it had for Jo.

Both Mama Jo and Clare also spend copious amounts of energy on educating the Flanagan daughters how to participate in the Cult of Southern Womanhood. Kathleen is the perfect lady, the embodiment of all the knowledge Mama Jo has gathered and the additional exposure to upper class Southern culture that Clare had earned. Nellie inherits her mother’s natural charm and beauty, but Jim’s observations of Rose Kate focus more on the strength of her will, and he claims that he “would want her on [his] side in a war” (Skinner 31). Rose Kate exhibits this strong-willed nature at a young age, both by pressuring her father to join the aforementioned swimming competition and through her insistence that she would march with the up-and-coming suffragettes were she of age.

Rose Kate’s stubbornness is an affront to her mother’s sensibilities, and Clare chides her daughter, saying that “[y]oung ladies do not take charge of the conversation” when Rose Kate attempts to persuade Nate of his obligation to enter the river race (Skinner 81). Clare also insists that Nate “makes up his own mind about such matters,” but Jim calls his mother’s bluff, if only to himself, because he knows that Nate always consults with his wife prior to making important decisions (Skinner 81). Clare’s admonition to Rose Kate, then, is yet another instance in Southern culture when appearances matter more than the truth. If Rose Kate is to assert herself or question a man’s judgment, her mother’s coaching indicates that it ought to be in private. Then, too,
is the matter of suffrage. When Rose Kate boldly expresses her desire to join the suffrage marches, Clare looks at Nate askance, as though their daughter had acquired this additional education from the newspapers he and Rose Kate read together. Clare’s emphasis on Nate’s independence and her concerns about Rose Kate’s exposure to new ideas reinforce the balance that Clare know the women in their family must strike. Even with cash and culture in hand, Clare herself has barely entered the social circles outside of their relatively sheltered Irish Catholic neighborhood. Without these trappings, Clare would never have gained access to this social mobility, and she knows all too well just how tenuous her acceptance as a true Southern lady actually is. Personal ideologies and practice aside, for any of her daughters to defy the training she and Mama Jo had provided could potentially collapse the entire foundation they had built with Uncle Jim’s money and their own social maneuvering.

For all the guidance Mama Jo and Clare give the girls, neither woman accounts for the allure of romance and its possible implications on the girls’ choices. After Mama Jo is diagnosed with cancer, the matriarchal baton passes to Clare, who in turn relaxes restrictions for Nellie that she had previously upheld for her three older children. Clare later explains that she did so because Nellie’s beauty was “so great, greater than [her own],” and she confesses that she finds personal gratification in watching Nellie’s beauty on display in the same social circles for which she and Mama Jo had prepared her. Eventually, however, Clare comes to realize that the manner in which she had used her beauty and had taught her daughter to do the same was not “pleasing to the one who granted [it]” (Skinner 242). When Nellie, as had her mother, succeeds in gaining entry into the upper echelon of society by merit of her appearance, the results backfire in the
worst way possible for Flanagans. Nellie falls for Horace Lester, a much older divorcee; when she elopes with Horace, her Catholic parents are compelled to cut off their relationship with her because there was “nothing so dark for a Catholic in those days as marrying a divorced person” (Skinner 282).

Though it is not clearly stated in the text, Clare’s declaration that God did not approve of her choices either for herself or for her daughter speaks to the conflict between Catholicism and the Cult of Southern Womanhood. Moreover, while Clare may have retained the level of respectability demanded of her by both Catholicism and Southern ladyhood, Nellie’s premature ventures into Southern society make her susceptible to a temptation she cannot resist, thereby rendering her an outcast from her Catholic family. Although Clare takes responsibility for her role in Nellie’s fall from grace, her statement that God himself must not have been pleased by her actions is mutually condemning for the entire family. On the one hand, they have – mostly – made every effort to maintain a strict observation of Catholicism. On the other, they have done so while simultaneously investing their financial and emotional resources into making space for themselves at the altar of the Lost Cause. With Nellie’s marriage and the family’s glum financial outlook after Uncle Jim also passes, the verdict seems clear: for Catholic families like the Canaans and Flanagans, pride – no matter how it is actualized, whether through Uncle Jim’s illegal business schemes or Clare’s unchecked ego – is enough of a sin for God to revoke all the family had gained within the context of Lost Cause ideologies.

In addition to the loss of first her mother and then her daughter, Clare knows all too well the consequences of her pride. Devastated by the loss of Mama Jo, the woman
whom he regarded “as though she were his own mother,” Nate Flanagan’s mental health deteriorates that much further when Nellie marries Horace Lester. As Jim describes, Clare was the “love of “[Nate’s] life, Nellie the brightest offspring of it,” and Nate shrinks “under the weight of his despair” over Nellie’s disgrace (Skinner 282). Skinner’s evaluation of Nate’s compounded grief over the loss of his daughter suggests that his emotions are a reaction to the unforgivable sin Nellie has committed, but Nate’s inability to cope with the depths of his grief culminates in yet another mortal sin: his own suicide. A sensible conclusion, then, is that Nate’s anguish cannot be derived solely from his fears over Nellie’s divergence from Catholic practices. If this were this case, Nate would not have chosen to end his life for fear of his own eternal damnation. Instead, the convergence of Nellie’s marriage with Nate’s failure to keep Uncle Jim’s businesses turning a profit after the latter man passes away speaks to Nate’s failure to fill Uncle Jim’s shoes as the patriarch of the Canaan family.

Nate’s suicide can be viewed at the junction between his Catholic heritage and Southern upbringing. For all that Jim Canaan had sacrificed in terms of his own chances of entering the pearly gates so that his family stood the chance of entering society while also preserving their history, Nate can neither sustain the standard of living that Uncle Jim had earned for them, nor can he compel his children to uphold their Catholic heritage. Were his family not ostracized from polite society and economic surety by the nativist, anti-Catholic attitudes of their Protestant neighbors, Nate would not have to work so hard to keep his family afloat after Uncle Jim’s death. Instead, the Canaan-Flanagan family must strive that much more to maintain the delicate place they have carved out for themselves within the wider Memphis community. For Nate, the pressure
reaches a tipping point, and he opts to “excuse himself from the earth, politely sparing [his wife and children] from finding him blasted by the bullet that dismissed him from the pain of living” (Skinner 284). Nate’s death breeds more trouble for the remaining members of his family who, without the steady income from Uncle Jim, must move away from the family home on Second Street that Merlin Mahon had once described as “the biblical well, since was it was there that [the] family drank milk and honey” (Skinner 111).

Despite Jim Flanagan’s early statement that Merlin was not “much interested in sacraments or ceremony,” it is Merlin who recognizes the family’s continued need for an unblemished source of income after Uncle Jim’s death (Skinner 131). Jim Flanagan wishes to sell the property to generate some income, but Clare will not hear of it because she knows that it is the only piece of property Uncle Jim had owned that “wasn’t tied to whiskey, gambling, and women” (Skinner 110). Even with the immediate need for cashflow, Merlin, too, advises Jim not to pressure his mother to sell the property because it symbolizes the fulfillment of Uncle Jim’s promise to care for his family. The man himself, for all his nonchalance toward the faith of his childhood, had referred to his farm as the Holy Land because of its purity in contrast to the saloons and brothels he also owned. Uncle Jim’s Holy Land offers a more nuanced portrayal of a man who had been backed into a corner by poverty and Southern prejudices toward both the Irish and Catholicism. When offered the opportunity to provide for his family, Uncle Jim seized it and willingly accepted the consequences for his own soul if it meant that his family no longer had to suffer. Finally, in spite of his sincere doubts about the veracity of his ancestors’ faith, Uncle Jim ensured that future generations of his family would have
access to a place bereft of illegal or immoral activity, their very own promised land on earth.

In this way, Old Jim Canaan functions similarly to The Ladies’ Auxiliary, Hoodoo Love, and Another Good Loving Blues in which Memphis factors heavily into the faith practices of the respective text’s characters. For whatever hurdles that the Canaan family has encountered – whether as a result of social ostracization or the consequences of their own decisions – Memphis has offered them the chance to create a safe haven in which to practice their faith and celebrate their Irish heritage. Skinner’s use of Uncle Jim as a redemptive figure despite his many sins is reminiscent of other Southern Catholic writers like O’Connor whose Misfit is perhaps the most well-known of O’Connor’s would-be villains, but Uncle Jim’s presence in his eponymous novel is reliant on its setting. Without Memphis and the vibrant Irish Catholic population that had settled therein, there would be no Uncle Jim. Jim’s ancestry limits his job opportunities, and the lucrative businesses that he ventures into would not have been as prevalent without Memphis’s proximity to the Mississippi. In sum, the relationship between the two is reciprocal: Memphis draws families like the Canaans to its bluffs, and in turn, the family contributes its voice to the moral, political, and cultural conversation in the city.

The differences between A Summons to Memphis and Old Jim Canaan are, at first glance, more apparent than their similarities. The Carver and Canaan families are from drastically different socioeconomic brackets and social backgrounds, and their general attitudes toward their newfound hometown could not be more dissimilar. The reasons they arrive in Memphis also appear drastically different at first, but the truth is that Memphis is a site of renewal for both families. For their own reasons, the Carvers and the
Canaans need somewhere to start over, and, as their chosen destination, Memphis affords them each that possibility. Unlike the rest of the characters in this dissertation, these two families are white, though their distinct religious backgrounds. By comparing *A Summons to Memphis* to *Old Jim Canaan*, readers can better understand the implications of the Religion of the Lost Cause for Protestant individuals and their Catholic counterparts, but the ways that each of these families negotiate their local identities is far more significant. They learn to wield local iterations of the South’s civil religion for their own purposes, and although the means they choose to accomplish this goal differ, both Taylor’s and Skinner’s characters eventually become Memphians – whether or not they want to be.
Nowhere Else to Be: Memphis as Makom

In *A Biblical People in the South: The Jewish Community of Memphis, Tennessee, 1840s-1960s*, author Selma Lewis writes that “[t]he history of the Jewish community in Memphis is a chapter in the larger history of Jews in the United States. It is also a part of the history of Jews in the South” (1). Lewis’s assertion that the Jewish experience in Memphis has been different not only from that of the rest of the nation, but, more specifically, from that of the South as a region and from Memphis’s sister cities along the Mississippi River, also complements the broader picture of Memphians as a whole in their desire to differentiate themselves from the rest of the South. Lewis attributes Memphis’s unique geography along the river’s banks and its centrality within the nation as two of the many factors that contributed to Jewish immigration to the city (14).

Hovering on average at one percent of the total urban population in Memphis, historically speaking the Jewish community would theoretically have been vulnerable to a variety of attacks from a majority white, Protestant population (Lewis 2). In other regions and cities in the U.S., for instance, Jews’ status as immigrants tended to garner unwanted discrimination and racism from other Americans who felt threatened by the newcomers’ social and economic mobility (Dinnerstein and Palsson 6). In Memphis specifically, the Union Army displayed a surprising degree of anti-Semitic sentiments during its military occupation of Memphis when General Sherman enacted General Order No. 11 in order to expel all Jews – particularly Jewish tradesmen – from the area (Jones, Jr. 175). Two months later, however, Sherman’s order was revoked and “[s]uch sentiments were not openly espoused thereafter” by military commanders at post in Tennessee (Jones, Jr. 175). Additionally, although Lewis asserts that early Jewish
immigrants to Memphis tended to live in particular areas of the city in efforts to be close to their businesses, she also acknowledges that some residential areas, schools, and social clubs were off limits to Jewish residents (23, 156).

Ultimately, however, Lewis offers several examples of how the city differed in its treatment of its Jewish population from other Southern cities, namely in terms of religious tolerance and a lack of anti-Semitism. After the Civil War, for instance, any potential threat derived from the Jewish presence in Memphis, however, seems to have been displaced by the white community’s preoccupation with the perceived menace of the black freedmen. Later, under the regime of Mayor E.H. “Boss” Crump, Memphis Jews found an ally when the mayor adamantly declared that all “citizens in ‘his’ city would receive equal treatment and respect” (Lewis 107). Moreover, the perception of Memphis as a safe haven for Southern Jews resulted in a mass exodus of Jewish residents to the Bluff City in 1915 after a local Jewish man in Atlanta was lynched by a mob after having been falsely accused of murder (Lewis 107).

Despite the appearance of maintaining a “calm tolerance for religious minorities,” including Jews and Catholics, the burgeoning Jewish population in Memphis faced a series of identity crises that in many ways stemmed from the immigration patterns to the city (Lewis 111). First and foremost, Lewis has asserted that Southern Jews, and particularly those in Memphis, have been torn between their allegiance to their religious and ethnic identity and the pressing need to assimilate into Southern culture. Lewis’s case has been augmented by other scholars in Jewish studies, namely professor Maya Socolovsky, who writes that, in the South, Jewish American’s struggle to determine their nationhood “is readdressed as a particular source of tension between Southernness and
Jewishness” instead of between a Jewish or an American identity (35). Lewis supplements Socolovsky’s assertions, arguing that Southern Jews have been impacted by the South more so than they themselves have influenced the region. While Lewis contends that the Jews of Memphis became more Southern than they were Jewish, she also suggests that they remained “more Jewish than many [Jews] from other regions” (Lewis 23).

By Lewis’s own reckoning, Jewish Memphians were able to assimilate so well because of the correlation between their own fervent religiosity and the enduring Protestant tradition in Southern culture (23). According to historian Larry H. Griffin, this ability to integrate into local and regional culture was exceptional because individuals and groups with “powerful competing social identities defined by ethnicity, religion, or race” are less likely to self-identify as Southerners (9). As such, by adhering to the religious practices of their forefathers, Jewish Memphians became the exception of Jewish assimilation rather than the rule. The ability of the Jewish community to acquire social acceptance as Memphians while sustaining a fervent dedication to their Jewish faith and identity is indicative that Memphis offered a unique environment in which local Jews could both practice their religion and flex their new identities as Southerners and Memphians. The texts that fictionalize the Jewish experience in Memphis – Steve Stern’s *The Pinch* and Tova Mirvis’s *The Ladies Auxiliary* – relay this story, but they also elaborate on how Jews in Memphis have wrestled with whether or not they want to take on the mantle of a local identity. The characters in Stern’s and Mirvis’s writing walk the same line that that the earliest European settlers historically had to balance, from the
insecurities that stem from incessant negative attention to the fierce devotion they felt toward their hometown.

Integration into the local and regional culture of conservative religiosity was not necessarily a smooth transition from within the Jewish community. Internal struggles from within the various sects of Jewish immigrants to the city created friction in the community, a fact captured by the fractious relationship between non-religious Jews and their Hasidic neighbors in Steve Stern’s novel *The Pinch*. Many German Jews who arrived in Memphis found themselves criticized by their Eastern European brethren for being so assimilated into American culture so as not to be considered Jewish anymore (Lewis 66). On the other hand, the German Jews of the early twentieth century regarded their Eastern European counterparts as a risk to the social progress they had gained in the U.S. (Dinnerstein and Palsson 7). Economically speaking, the German Jews who first arrived at the eastern seaboard tended to be more financially stable, whereas Eastern European Jews were most often not as economically secure (Lewis 143). As a result of this class divide and the Germans’ overriding desire to acclimate to American culture, the German Jews were less inclined to adhere to Orthodox Judaism and were likewise less likely to support the Zionist cause for an independent Israeli state.

As to Zionism and the quest for a designated Jewish homeland, anti-Zionism had been more prevalent in the South than in other American regions prior to World War II. In fact, “of the twenty rabbis on the original board of the American Council for Judaism, the core of organized opposition to Jewish nationalism, a third were from the South” (Lewis 137). The 1940s, however, created unfortunate opportunities for local Jews to simultaneously assert their American patriotism and to ascertain their need for a Jewish
haven in Israel. During the Second World War, scores of men from local temples in Memphis volunteered for the U.S. Armed Forces, and the Jews in Memphis were unwilling to protest the mistreatment of German Jewish refugees in the United States, afraid that doing so would call attention to their own German roots (Lewis 157). By the middle of the decade, however, a majority of Jewish organizations supported a Jewish homeland that would provide sanctuary away from hostile environments elsewhere (Lewis 173). After the conclusion of WWII, subsequent restrictions on immigration had a lasting impact on the growth of the Jewish community in Memphis, and the number of Jews living in the city has remained relatively steady since 1930 (Lewis 178). In fact, in 2014 and in efforts to bolster the numbers of rather stagnant population growth, a group of local Jews formed the Memphis Jewish Recruitment Committee intended to entice Jewish families from across the country to relocate to Memphis (Nieman).

In what is a brief, if poignant, encapsulation of the Jewish experience in Memphis, Richard Wright’s autobiography Black Boy (1945) relates his first interaction with any Jewish person and the local black community’s sentiments toward the Jewish residents of Memphis. Wright describes an unqualified resentment on behalf of his black neighbors toward local Jews, stemming from what he and his playmates had been “taught in Sunday School” about the Jewish “Christ killers” (60). Moreover, Wright recalled memories from his childhood about the ways in which he and his friends actively taunted their fellow Jewish Memphians. Rather than being discouraged from their belligerent behavior toward the Jewish citizens of Memphis, the children were tacitly, if not actively, encouraged by their adult authority figures to continue antagonizing Jewish passersby with horrid ditties they had concocted to shame the Jews for their ancestral legacy of
having participated in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In fact, Wright firmly stated that “[t]o hold an attitude of antagonism or distrust toward the Jews was bred in us from childhood; it was not merely racial prejudice, it was a part of our cultural heritage” (Wright 62). While the marginalized status of these two communities could have theoretically bound them together, Wright’s frank narrative of the black population’s general disdain for their Jewish neighbors underscores the tension that both groups experienced in vying for economic stability, social status, and acquisition of a local identity in Memphis.

Wright’s account of the tension between the black and Jewish citizens of Memphis belies Selma Lewis’s sugar-coated rendering of a seemingly fluid transition from immigrant status to recognition as upstanding citizens for Jewish Memphians. In addition, despite Boss Crump’s verbal promise of religious tolerance in the city of Memphis, the fictional renderings of the Jewish experience in Memphis undermine that idealistic vision of the past and reveal a community that is still sometimes at odds with its local and regional identity. Composed by authors who are both Jewish and native Memphians, Steve Stern’s The Pinch and Tova Mirvis’s The Ladies Auxiliary provide glimpses into a subset of the community that has historically had to utilize its own grit and determination to beat the odds stacks against them as Jews, as Memphians, and as Southerners.

Much like other Memphians who, despite their hometown pride, have gone to great lengths to distance their city’s reputation from the less admirable components of Southern regional affiliation, the Jewish inhabitants of Memphis have, at various points during their tenure in the city, demonstrated similarly ambiguous sentiments toward their
own place identities. In particular, the primary texts discussed in this chapter speak to the convoluted emotional attachment that local Jews have held toward their adopted home. Characters in both Steve Stern’s The Pinch (2015) and Tova Mirvis’s The Ladies Auxiliary (1999) articulate similarly worded sentiments about Memphis, though the connotative indication of each expression could not be further apart in terms of meaning. The two texts indicate ultimately that there is no better place to be than Memphis. First, however, there is an attitude of resignation to circumstances for which there seems to be no better alternative and while also promoting a celebration over the longevity of the comfortable community that the Jewish residents had established for themselves throughout the course of more than a century. Where The Pinch makes little mention of Jews’ Southern identities or of the city itself, the ladies in Mirvis’s novel tout their gracious Southern hospitality and regard anyone in the community – Jewish or otherwise – as outsiders if their roots in Memphis go no further back than at least several generations.

The ambiguous nature of these fictional characters’ feelings toward civic pride or a lack thereof reflects the varying narratives mentioned above about the Jewish community’s integration into the city of Memphis. On the one hand, we have one narrative from within the local Jewish population in the form of Lewis’s A Biblical People that living in Memphis was peaceful and without any serious obstacles. Other historians and sociologists have suggested, however, that this experience was exceptional to Memphis, and that even with the relative calm of a city more preoccupied with racial tensions between black and white residents, the local Jewish experience was not entirely bereft of the social isolation that stems from being ‘other.’ Contemporary Jewish
literature set in Memphis reveals a people that, despite the prevailing narrative of their seamless integration into the city, yet struggles with its religious, local, and regional identity. These difficulties testify to the fact that local and regional affiliation remains a significant part of individual and group identity for the Jews of Memphis.

Although Lewis has stressed the ease with which Jewish immigrants to Memphis melded into the city at large, it was not until 1983 when Steve Stern’s *Isaac and the Undertaker’s Daughter*, which was set in the Pinch District at the north end of downtown Memphis, that a fictional piece of literature from a Jewish author writing about Memphis was widely recognized by a public audience. Stern’s lengthy bibliography of novels published in the last four decades include a number of texts set in the Pinch, where a significant portion of the early Jewish community in Memphis lived. It is his eponymously entitled *The Pinch*, however, that emphasizes the local Jewish community’s struggle over the course of more than a century to integrate, prosper, and retain a sense of their Jewish identity. On the other hand, the narrative of *The Ladies Auxiliary* by Tova Mirvis redirects the conversation about Judaism in Memphis from a discussion about the preservation of ancient mythologies and traditions to a dialogue about the potential for local Orthodox Jews to broaden their understanding of the expectations and protocols of the Torah. Stern’s *The Pinch* and Mirvis’s *The Ladies Auxiliary* offer more varied points of view about the Jewish experience in the Bluff City than the rose-tinted historical narrative that Selma Lewis portrayed in 1998’s *A Biblical People: The Jewish Community of Memphis*. These fictional texts likewise elaborate on the Jewish population’s interaction with other social demographics and internal conflicts within the
community that stem from conflicting theologies, various levels of interest in Zionism, and differing points of attachment to place.

Chronologically speaking, *The Pinch* predates *The Ladies Auxiliary* by a margin of roughly three decades, and both texts demonstrate the religious and geographic identities that Jews in the United States and, namely in the American South, have had to balance. By the 1990s, however, readers can readily observe that Mirvis portrays the Jews in Memphis as having settled comfortably – at least outwardly – into their Southern identity, with multiple emphatic references on behalf of the characters to the longevity of their respective families’ residence in the Bluff City. Even so, Mirvis’s examination of local Jews reveals some of the characters’ ambivalence with themselves and their faith. Stern’s portrayal, on the other hand, presents itself as a means of preservation for local Jews who have lost all trust in Jewish mythology, and he goes to great lengths to recount the myths that the fictional inhabitants of the early Jewish community in Memphis told and retold in seeking to capture the personal and historical phenomena they have experienced.

It is telling that there is very little in the way of critical literary work written about Stern and *The Pinch*. In 2015, *New York Times* journalist Boris Fishman confirmed the lack of attention that has been given to Stern’s work over the years, writing that Stern’s stories could not “seem to get reviewed without reference to the author being not ‘as well known as he should be’. ” Moreover, Stern has bounced from publisher to publisher over the course of his lengthy literary career, never releasing more than one book in a row with the same publisher, indicating that any positive critical reviews aside, Stern has yet to garner traction with a general readership that would ensure his popularity (Fishman). It
would be difficult to argue that the dearth of literary criticism about or publisher allegiance to Stern stems directly from his status as a native Memphian, but the truth remains that Stern writes as a minority writer from within a region that has historically been on the receiving end of more criticism – in this case, not of the literary kind – than praise. Instead, the bulk of textual criticism of Stern’s work and, namely, *The Pinch* has been published in online interviews, blogs, newspaper articles, and only the occasional printed interview in peer-reviewed journals.

In one such article published prior to the release of *The Pinch*, Stern relates the distilled version of Judaism he grew up with in Memphis in the 1950s, thereby reinforcing the local Jewish community’s loss of identity and mythology. According to Stern, “the temple [he] attended as a kid in Memphis represented a variety of Judaism intended to be invisible, to blend indistinguishably with the Christ-haunted Southern landscape” (“In Search of”). Stern’s remark confirms that a strong sense of Jewish identity had been lost by the Jews in Memphis by the time Stern was born. Unlike Lewis’s assertion that by attending to their faith practices Southern Jews simultaneously enhanced both their own Judaism and their Southern identity, Stern’s statement indicates that the local Jewish community in Memphis had lost touch with their roots. Citing his return to his hometown and his employment at the Center for Southern Folklore as the impetus for his renewed interest in his own Jewish heritage, Stern recounts his first venture into an examination of Jewish myths and the Jewish history of Memphis, primarily in the Pinch District, which he ultimately decided that “would be the fixed address where [his heretofore] stateless fictions would come home to roost” (“In Search Of”). For Stern, rediscovering the Pinch district was nigh unto finding the lost city of
Atlantis (Royal and Stern 139); the mythical connotation of Stern’s statement is not lost within the pages of The Pinch wherein the district becomes a timeless place where fabulations and the supernatural abound.

In an interview about the publication of The Pinch, Stern notes the long-standing tradition of the Jewish people to associate themselves with “the Book,” that is, the Torah and its rabbinic explications in the Talmud (“In Search of”). Stern likewise explains that, especially after the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and their subsequent two millennia of diasporic wanderings, the Book became emblematic of a Jewish nation-state, a place where Jewish law and culture could be maintained in the face of exile from the Holy Land (“In Search of”). Other scholars in Jewish studies corroborate Stern’s assertions regarding the significance of textual histories and religious mythologies, namely in regard to the Talmud, other sacred Jewish texts, and the Jewish homeland (Fonrobert and Shemtov 4). The concept of place, then, particularly as it is contained within the pages of a written text, is necessary to a discussion of Jewish identity and a Jewish home.

Stern himself posits The Pinch as a sacred text in this same tradition in that it straddles the boundaries of genre between historical fiction and religious mythology. When Lenny Sklarew, the first-person narrator from 1968, first finds The Pinch at his employer’s used bookstore, he reads that he himself and his discovery of “the book” are mentioned in its final pages. After questioning Avrom the bookseller as to the significance of his presence in the book, Avrom’s response is to tell Lenny that “[i]f you knew what means these things, you would rip down to the pupik [bellybutton] your clothes for the grief of having lost in the very place this wisdom” (Stern, The Pinch 5).
He later reaffirms their collective Jewish identity, saying “‘Sweetheart, we are all people from the Book, which it got a long time ago lost’” (Stern, The Pinch 37). Avrom’s reply implies that there is a body of knowledge that has been lost to the Jews of Memphis and that its loss is worth mourning. His admonition likewise alludes to the subtext of the Jewish experience in a majority Christian city like Memphis. After having immigrated to a new country in the search for their best lives, the Jews of Memphis appear to have lost what Avrom considers their authentic selves in their efforts to blend in with the largely Protestant community. Stern’s text further indicates that, not only has Muni’s The Pinch collected the mythologies forgotten by the Jews of Memphis, it has also captured the essence of the place itself, that is, the Pinch district wherein they live. In fact, during a conversation with Lenny, Avrom swears that the book and the place are the one and same (Stern, The Pinch 36). Eventually, as Lenny feverishly consumes the pages of The Pinch, he too, begins to feel the pull of North Main, the main thoroughfare of the Pinch district and a place that he describes as “‘a welcome home every time [he] stuck [his] nose in those pages’” (Stern, The Pinch 80).

One of the stories embedded in The Pinch is that of Pinchas Pinkser and his family. An unintentional immigrant to Memphis, Pinchas arrives in the River City as a salesman caught inside a citywide Yellow Fever quarantine. Infected by the oft-fatal disease, Pinchas is nursed from the brink of death by a young Irish Catholic woman named Katie Keogh, and the two marry, much to the chagrin of Katie’s family. In time, Pinchas and Katie together rescue Pinchas’s nephew Muni from a Russian katorga, or prison camp. Traumatized by his experiences as a political prisoner and refugee, Muni eventually succumbs to the lure of the Pinch, the “tohu b’bohu, a mishmash of stories that
needed only some designated scribe to apprehend and record them for all time” (Stern, *The Pinch* 108). Muni comes to regard himself as “North Main’s instrument” in that “‘when [North Main] speaks – and it don’t never stop talking – [he had to] listen and take down every word’” (Stern, *The Pinch* 122). According to Muni, the Pinch “seemed to clamor for a translation back into text,” and as a result, Muni becomes stuck within the past and its influence on the immediate present. As the Pinch and its residents begin to assimilate further into a majority white Protestant society, Muni becomes a storyteller, the keeper of myths for the Jews of the Pinch, and the original author of *The Pinch*. His effort succeeds in capturing what Lenny later comes to believe is an accurate history of the Jews of Memphis and fulfills the Jewish community’s need for a book that can capture the essence of a homeland for a people in exile from Zion (Stern, *The Pinch* 39).

As his future wife Jenny observes, however, it is North Main, the primary thoroughfare through the district, that has driven Muni to the point of absolute distraction (Stern, *The Pinch* 123). He comes to believe that “the Pinch itself might no longer exist, or at best revert to what it used to be” and that the very lives of those who “inspired those stories might be curtailed” if he fails to continue recording the happenings along North Main (Stern, *The Pinch* 247). Muni’s determination to faithfully record the history of the Pinch district likewise leads to the written record of his own horrific experiences in the katora, that is, the Russian labor and penal system from which he escaped after receiving financial assistance from his Uncle Pinchas in America. The fact that Muni’s story comes to life within the confines of the Pinch leads one to believe that Stern purposefully rendered the Pinch as a proverbial safe place for its residents to reckon with their
traumatic pasts. As further evidence will show, Muni is not the only of Stern’s characters who finds himself again – literally or metaphorically – in the Pinch.

After Muni’s death, his cousin Tyrone illustrates The Pinch, ultimately succumbing to a mental state not unlike that of a dementia patient. Tyrone’s interaction with the text mirrors the interconnectedness of the text to the district. According to Stern’s description, “[Tyrone] had only to cast his eye over the text to feel he was present at the events it described” despite the many alterations in Muni’s choice of language, from Yiddish to English and then to Hebrew (Stern, The Pinch 315). In reading the original Pinch, Lenny contemplates whether it was the fabulations of Muni’s text that led to Tyrone’s altered mental status or if his mental health issues were spurred on by his visual interpretations of Muni’s writing (Stern, The Pinch 84). As further evidence from the text suggests, Lenny’s musings mirror the unanswerable question of the chicken or the egg, and the answer, quite frankly, does not really seem to matter.

Lenny, too, falls victim to the supernatural tug of The Pinch, unable at times to distinguish his own environment from the historical descriptions he finds in Muni’s original text, and he avers to curb his drug use in an effort to regain his grasp on the present (Stern, The Pinch 47). As he recovers his sense of reality, Lenny slips back into his old habits, but he later recommits to a degree of sobriety after meeting Tyrone when he realizes the impact that illustrating The Pinch had on him. During his brief conversation with Tyrone, Lenny recognizes that the other man’s reality consists solely of the images his mind concocted to coincide with Muni’s story of the Pinch district. To this end, each of these characters’ experiences in recapturing lost knowledge for the Jews of Memphis indicates that the recovery process is traumatic, in many ways a reflection of
the heartache that the Jews suffered over the collective loss of their ethnic and religious identity to social pressure in the American South. That they found the need to recover their Jewish identity in Memphis is also telling given the degree to which historical narratives such as Selma Lewis’s have argued that Jewish Memphians have seamlessly integrated into local culture without compromising their Jewish identities.

Stern’s use of Muni’s rendering of *The Pinch* and even his own novel speak to the significance of textual representations of space and place in the Jewish experience. In addition to the monumental role that the Talmud serves in the practice of Judaism, Jewish scholars have noted that other texts by Jewish authors have functioned similarly as the “‘mental space’” wherein diasporic Jewish communities have historically participated in “nation-building,” both prior and subsequent to the recognition of the Israeli state (Fonrobert and Shemtov 2). Specifically, these texts have become “a space in which collective identity can be formed without territory, and consequently it can be a metaphor for exile and homelessness” (Fonrobert and Shemtov 3). Moreover, as the nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine so eloquently articulated, “a book is [the Jewish] fatherland, their possession, their ruler…They live between the boundary markers of this book, here they exercise their inalienable civic rights, here nobody can chase them away” (Fonrobert and Shemtov 3). For the Jews of Memphis, their ethnic and religious identity was often thwarted or diluted by their proximity to their primarily white, Protestant neighbors. With *The Pinch*, Stern provides a substitute for the Jewish homeland and the *eruv* of Orthodox Judaism in which the entire community is enclosed by physical or symbolic boundaries that enable the residents to roam and practice their faith freely (Mann 139-40).
This same sense of homelessness or placelessness that has long been identified by Jewish scholars and historians as a deep-seated component of the Jewish diaspora is reflected within *The Pinch*. Despite their relatively peaceful existence nestled within the confines of the Pinch district, most of Stern’s characters express, at one time or another over the course of the entire novel, a lack of attachment to either the Pinch or Memphis as an actual place. More than once the dialogue reveals that various characters regard the Pinch as “nowhere,” “someplace else,” or “a place [they’d] never been” (Stern, *The Pinch* 282, 65, 81). Alternately, they likewise regard the city itself as a “‘primitive place’,” a “malarial swamp,” and “Sitzfleisch,” that is ‘butt flesh’ (Stern, *The Pinch* 17, 18, 87).

The latter sentiment is expressed by Avrom who, having learned of the Pinch from Tyrone Pinchas, one of the soldiers liberating concentration camps during WWII, feels betrayed by Tyrone’s promise of this “fabled place” upon his arrival in the Pinch (Stern, *The Pinch* 87). When Pinchas follows the Hasidic rebbe to the underworld to retrieve Katie from the hands of death, he asserts that he wants to take her “back” to the Pinch. Katie’s response, however, readily nips that notion in the bud when she replies, “‘Back to where?’” (Stern, *The Pinch* 230). This belief passes through multiple generations of Pinch residents; when Lenny later questions Avrom about his appearance in Muni’s book, Avrom merely congratulates him of having found himself “‘someplace’” because, from his perspective, “[Lenny had been] no place at all” by living in the Pinch (Stern, *The Pinch* 36).

With each of these observations about Memphis, Stern’s characters reflect longstanding critical tendencies of insiders and outsiders to Memphis alike. For the Jewish community in particular, Stern’s description of the city renders it a dirty,
unwelcoming, unremarkable place wherein non-white, non-Christian residents do not appear to flourish in any way. Of these many comments, Tyrone’s is the solitary exception to the negative opinions about Memphis that the other characters share. Moreover, Stern’s revelation that Tyrone suffers from an altered mental status further compounds the notion that his promises to Pinchas of finding an almost supernaturally safe haven in Memphis are entirely without merit. Within the context of *The Pinch*, then, Memphis seems little more than a hovel without an attractive sense of place or local identity.

Not only do the residents of the Pinch criticize Memphis from the perspective of the historical moment in which they reside, they likewise call into question the very origins of the city’s formal settlement in 1819. Jenny’s proclamation that the city was cursed by the Chickasaw people, the original inhabitants of the bluffs along the Mississippi, comes as a surprise to Muni. Although he insists that he does not ascribe to faith in the supernatural, Muni casts a kaynehoreh, or “evil eye” against the curse because, as Jenny insists, the worst of it has yet to befall the city (Stern, *The Pinch* 62). During the course of Jenny’s and Muni’s conversation, she follows up her conjecture about the longevity of the curse’s impact on Memphis with the sweeping declaration that there is “nowhere” along the Mississippi between New Orleans and St. Louis worth mentioning (Stern, *The Pinch* 62). Moreover, even though Muni reminds her that Jews are dying in large numbers in places like Palestine and that a Jewish man had been lynched in Atlanta, Jenny is dissatisfied with her existence in Memphis and she wants to “kick from [her] heels the dust of this town” (Stern, *The Pinch* 62). Whether she acquired or concocted it herself, Jenny’s belief in this myth about the curse on Memphis is
sufficient to sway her opinion of the city despite her acute awareness of the potential
danger for Jewish people that she would no doubt encounter elsewhere.

For Muni’s part, his half-hearted defense of Memphis echoes his Uncle Pinchas’s
statement that, for as little as Memphis may have to offer them, “‘[t]here ain’t no place
else’” better for Jewish immigrants to land than in Memphis (Stern, The Pinch 21).
Pinchas’s comment reveals his reluctant acceptance of Memphis as a hometown, his
sentiment echoing the notion of a choice between the lesser of two evils. Pinchas
elaborates on his sentiments about the city with his assessment about the primitive views
of his fellow Memphians: “[they are] pig-ignorant…[and t]here ain’t no superstition that
they don’t accept it’s true. They don’t none of them share the progressive views of
scholars like me” (Stern, The Pinch 17-8). Pinchas’s disregard for his compatriots in the
city stems in part from his view that rural-minded whites are scaring off black workers
who contribute to the local economy. He reserves the bulk of his disdain, however, for
the Hasidic Jews who have recently arrived in Memphis and who Pinchas blames for
disrupting the relative calm of the Pinch with their belief and practice of the supernatural.
Pinchas scoffs at the locals who give credence to the Hasidic rebbe and his followers who
perform various tricks and miracles for their entranced audience. Like Muni, Pinchas
chalks their antics up to the charlatan performances of false prophets and credits himself
with the ability to see past their charade.

The arrival of the Hasidim coincides with a terrific earthquake in Memphis, and
the aftermath reveals the schism between the Pinch and the rest of Memphis, which
provides further insight into why the its residents regard the city at large with such spite.
Despite the ensuing floods that left the Pinch in shambles after the earthquake, the city feels it has fulfilled its duties toward the ghetto, “at least in print,” and awashe[s] its hands of North Main Street. After all, the city proper was perfectly intact; the banks, theaters, and retail stores that composed the heart of downtown Memphis were unharmed by the misfortune that had visited the Pinch. That district had always been a flyblown excrescence anyway. Moreover, there seemed a common reluctance on the part of outsiders to enter the self-styled Pale north of Poplar Avenue. It was as if, since yesterday, an invisible wall had been erected; and after giving short shrift to the disturbance and boasting of the city’s unstinting aid efforts, the local press for the most part forgot about the quake. (Stern, The Pinch 98)

Thus left to their own devices, the residents of the Pinch find themselves in a new reality as their physical access to the rest of the city is cut off by the walls of water that have encased the district. Moreover, any standard concept of time is suspended as the Pinch slips into “a peculiar time zone” that has “relinquished its linear progress” (Stern, The Pinch 192, 103).

Stern foreshadows this peculiarity when Pinchas “early on advise[s] his nephew that time was prone to a certain elasticity in the Pinch,” a phenomenon he attributes to the “cabalistic meddling of the crackbrained fanatics [that is, the Hasidim] in their midst” (The Pinch 103). The majority of the Pinch appears immune to the stagnation of time subsequent to the earthquake, and although the primary characters in The Pinch seem to recognize its lapse, they are untroubled by it, noting that though it was “impossible,” the fact seemed “irrelevant” (Stern 102). Soon after the earthquake, Jenny remarks to Muni that each day, though new, is the same as the day before, and Muni merely nods in confirmation.

Muni in particular, though cognizant of the change, becomes locked in some semblance of the past as he begins to compose the original text of The Pinch. Where
painful memories of his own and of the collective Jewish community had once been too
difficult to confront, Muni is now able to capture their very essence onto the pages of *The
Pinch* with such authenticity that Lenny later reports feeling that “the no longer so distant
past had come to hold such sovereignty over [his] present that immediate events didn’t
always make a strong impression” while he was reading Muni’s book (Stern, *The Pinch* 116).
Muni barely notices the departure of Jenny or the arrival of Tyrone, Pinchas and
Katie’s son, convinced instead that “if he stopped telling stories about the street mired in
timelessness…the Pinch itself might no longer exist” (Stern, *The Pinch* 247). Unworried
that North Main was “at the same time itself and a fanciful stage version of itself” (Stern,
*The Pinch* 103), Muni pushes through, full steam ahead, through the process of writing of
his book.

These descriptions of the unusual chronology of time in the district bring attention
to more than one potential identity crisis for the Jewish community of Memphis. First,
Pinchas’s disdain for the presumed involvement of the Hasidim in the events surrounding
the earthquake and the subsequent suspension of real time highlights the tension that
existed between the various sects of Jews who settled in Memphis, among them the
Orthodox and Hasidic Jews whose religious practice was typically more devout than that
of secular Jews like Pinchas. As Pinchas clearly understood, the Jews of Memphis faced
not only the potential for isolation from the goyim, that is, the non-Jewish, but they also
continued to grapple with internal disagreements about their own theology and faith
practices. This internal friction would in turn certainly impede the community’s
integration into local culture and identity.
The timelessness of the Pinch also demonstrates the lack of connection that Stern believes the contemporary Jewish community in Memphis has to its rich history in the city and its own Jewish tradition. Without a sacred text to bind them to their past, Jewish Memphians have a sense of their identities both as Jews and as Memphians. Stern himself elaborated on this concept and the notion of timelessness, commenting that while Jewish history seems a tale of misery and poverty, there is a timelessness to the myths in the Talmud that transcend the mundane and the miserableness of Jewish experience (Stern, “In Search of”). In one of the few critical reviews of The Pinch, Boris Fishman makes the same observation about Stern’s writing. In a compelling correlation to the tales from which Stern derives inspiration from his fiction, Fishman comments that there are “[s]ome things” about Stern’s writing style, specifically his plot and his prose, that are “timeless.”

As such, The Pinch seems to be Stern’s own contribution to the folklore of the local Jewish community in Memphis. Intentionally or otherwise, it would seem that Stern has managed to compose a text that will restore the local Jewish community’s rich mythical heritage to itself by invoking the concept of timelessness and weaving folktales from the Talmud and their rabbinic explications in the Misnah to the Jewish community in Memphis. Where Stern once claimed that folklore is a weak substitute for literature (“In Search Of”), Fishman clearly identifies Stern’s writing in The Pinch as a “folk tale masquerading as a novel and part-timing as history.” Despite his earlier protests, his fiction clearly demonstrates Stern’s belief that the folklore of a people serves as an intermediary between history and myth and provides a means for people to reckon with the cognitive dissonance between a reality steeped in heartache and persecution and the
promise of divine salvation (“In Search Of”). Collectively speaking, the role of *The Pinch* is not solely an additional representation of ‘The Book’ that holds a Jewish homeland within its pages, but also as a bridge between the past and the present, belief and disbelief, the mundane and the supernatural.

Half a century after Pinchas’s initial observations about the city of Memphis, Lenny’s comment that “the Bluff City…would never be mistaken for a bookish town” reminds Stern’s audience of the occasional contempt with which locals regard the city (Stern, *The Pinch* 35). One place in which Lenny’s observation finds representation is in the dearth of local history generally available to native Memphians. It is to his great surprise that Lenny discovers a narrative history of his hometown within the pages of *The Pinch*, particularly given that he has never really considered whether or not the city even had a history. For as much as Memphis’s identity has long been anchored in its position as the Bluff City on the Mississippi, Lenny grew up “so far from the river that the river was only a river” and not the “‘Father of Waters’” that Muni and Jenny observe from the riverside where pock marks made from Yankee minié balls still dotted the cobblestone wharfs (Stern, *The Pinch* 303, 61). Moreover, much like Stern himself, Lenny’s knowledge of his ancestral religious tradition is limited at best, and his ignorance of his city’s past is similarly reflected in his lack of knowledge regarding the Jews of Memphis. Having been raised thinking he “was a Methodist,” Lenny is completely oblivious to the existence of the Pinch district as an internal haven for Jewish Memphians; in fact, it is Avrom the bookseller who informs Lenny that he now lives in the same building where the Pinchas family once resided (Stern, *The Pinch* 133, 36).
The fact that poor Jewish Memphians of the 1960s reside in the same spaces where their predecessors had lived nearly a century before is evidence of the persistence of racial tensions in Memphis. As depicted in The Pinch, the racial and ethnic relationships that have historically held sway over Memphis’s social dynamics are telling reminders of just how much Old South traditions are engrained into the city’s psyche. Pinchas had, for instance, arrived in Memphis in 1878 convinced that the “population [of the South] viewed the Hebrew with the reverence as a person of the book” (Stern, The Pinch 143). Much to his chagrin, however, he finds that the “Irish were a long-standing scapegoat [for local woes], there being none lower on the social ladder but poor blacks, at least not until [he] had come along” (Stern, The Pinch 161). Little did it matter that the Pinch would ultimately earn the city’s approval as subsequent waves of Jewish immigrants established themselves as a “solid mercantile class” (Stern, The Pinch 171). As previously established, the district had been left to its own defenses after the earthquake and ensuing flood, and decades later Lenny would awake in the back of an ambulance to the tune of two contemptuous paramedics cracking jokes at the expense of their patient’s ethnic background.

Because of their tenuous social stability, the Jewish inhabitants of the Pinch find themselves balancing relationships with the white leaders of the city from whom they desperately require a baseline tolerance of their presence in the city and the black citizens with whom they often did business. Their reactions to the presence of the Ku Klux Klan during tashlikh, a Jewish ritual of atonement that involves casting breadcrumbs into the water as a symbol for casting off one’s sins, is likewise one of reluctant tolerance of the KKK. Stern’s description that the Jews were “more amused than afraid” of the Klan
initially makes one question their empathy for their black counterparts in the citizenry of Memphis (Stern, The Pinch 27). However, deeper examination reveals that their amusement could just as easily serve to mask the Jews’ underlying fears for their own safety. During the group’s encounter at the riverside, the various storeowners from among the throng of Jewish practitioners make a game of identifying the pieces of material that the white men had purchased from them for their white robes, which highlights the economic, if not the social, arrangement between the two groups. Their sport with the Klan is a defense mechanism, a means of deflecting their discomfort with the Klan’s burning cross, the “holy standard of Caucasian Christendom” that symbolized their desire to rid their “beloved Southland of the mongrel element…[and] their satanic chicanery” (Stern, The Pinch 28). Intended as a means of intimidation against these non-Christian immigrants to Memphis, the burning cross becomes an opportunity for the Hasidic Rabbi Eliakum ben Yahya to level the playing field: according to local lore, the rabbi’s sneeze stirred the blaze into such a frenzy that “Jews and gentiles alike had to hold on to one another to keep from being swept away” (Stern, The Pinch 29).

The Jewish inhabitants of the Pinch similarly do not have a very intimate relationship with the local black population. Pinchas specifically is dubious about the presence of Asbestos, a blind fiddler who has wandered from his usual haunts on Beale to the environs of North Main where he busks for spare change. The black man’s arrival is the first significant interaction in The Pinch between the two communities, and it is his desire to trace the scars on Muni’s back from his time at the Russian labor camp that first begins to draw parallels between their mutual sufferings. According to Jenny, Asbestos “reads the stripes on the backs of former slaves and makes from them his musical
compositions’. Having exhausted his supply of the freedmen on Beale, Asbestos has moved northward in search of further inspiration and finds it in the wounds Muni sustained from the prison guards’ knout, a leather thong filled with metal fragments and a hook attached to the end. Though Muni cannot see the wounds on his back, he regards them as “a sort of topographical map leading back to the torments he’d fled” (Stern, The Pinch 33). Where Muni’s interaction with Asbestos is a singular recognition of the pain and persecution their respective people shared, The Pinch eventually provides an update to the relationship between the Jewish and black residents of Memphis.

Decades later, Lenny too begins to wonder about the correlation between the historical oppression of the Jewish nation and the marches being led in Memphis on behalf of local sanitation workers. During his first encounter with the protestors, Lenny is caught in the fray when the police begin to attack them, and he escapes by running to safety in the Pinch. Exhilarated by the experience, Lenny commends himself as a “champion of the oppressed” for his ‘participation’ in the march, though he immediately follows this self-congratulatory thought process with the notion that “the whole affair was none of [his] concern” (Stern, The Pinch 38). His attitude evolves over the course of the novel, however, and eventually he maintains that the next march in Memphis “would be composed of the persecuted and dispossessed…shouldn’t [he] – who paid such lip service to championing the underdog – be in their number?” (Stern, The Pinch 275). According to Lenny, he knew “next to nothing” of their trials, and he tended to feel that he had “trespassed on an affair that was none of [his] business.” Even so, he feels energized by the spirit of the movement, and he “beg[ins] to exult a little in the largeness of the event” (Stern, The Pinch 298). Lenny’s decision to participate in Dr. King’s final march lands
him in the hospital after he receives a beating when one of his black acquaintances is lethally shot by the police and Lenny futilely attempts to avenge him.

The relationships among these various groups of races and religions are not an anomaly in a Southern city such as Memphis, but the incidents that Stern portrays, if fictitious, do provide a lens through which to view the ways in which they each found ways to develop their own sense of local identity and the hurdles they had to overcome in order to do so. In particular, for the Jews of Memphis to keep the peace with their white counterparts, opting for a distant tolerance of white supremacy, both as it was directed toward themselves and toward the black citizenry, was a better choice than making proverbial waves with the upper echelon of local society. In addition to their reluctance to resist the machinations of the Ku Klux Klan, they also observe as complicit bystanders at the lynching of Asbestos in 1921. Muni, having recently returned from the stupor of his furious writing spree, arrives at the lynching, and notes with great surprise the irony of the occasion: it is a Friday evening, “when all good Hebrews should be in shul” (Stern, *The Pinch* 289). Whether in active support of Abestos’s murder or in tacit compliance with the KKK’s sociopolitical authority, the Jews of the Pinch have been compelled out of the synagogue and into the streets. On the other hand, the presumably white, Christian Klansmen are exempt from breaking their Sabbath by executing Asbestos on a Friday night.

The glaring discrepancy between the commandments of the Torah to observe the Sabbath and the attendance of the Jewish community at Asbestos’s murder brings the distinction between the two populations into sharp contrast. The only person – Jewish or otherwise – who moves to free Asbestos from his predicament is Jenny Bashrig, Muni’s
erstwhile girlfriend who had abandoned Memphis in favor of life with a traveling circus that made its way up and down the Mississippi. One interpretation of Jenny’s motivation to interfere is the idea that her absence from the Pinch had enabled her to release the deeply entrenched notions of white supremacy that otherwise held sway over the city of Memphis. Unsuccessful in her rescue attempt, Jenny’s efforts and Asbestos’s death reset the chronology of time that had paused after the earthquake, and the residents of the Pinch quickly succumb to the process of physical ageing and urban decay deterioration that had theretofore been kept in abeyance. Given its place in the chronology of The Pinch, it is also arguably a turning point for the changing tide of support from the Jewish community for the civil rights protests in the 1960s.

The conclusion of The Pinch, however, does not end on a particularly high note. The text reveals perhaps Stern’s own uncertainty about whether his work will fulfill the Jewish community’s need for a connection to its historical and mythical heritage. If Stern’s Pinch is to be read as a parallel to the text that Lenny first picks up in Avrom’s bookstore, then Lenny’s sentiments regarding the eventual publication of Muni’s The Pinch provide insight into Stern’s feelings toward the release of his novel. After Lenny rereleases The Pinch at the end of the 1960s, he feels an immediate disconnect between his prior emotional attachment to the text and his current feelings about its polished veneer. It “no longer seem[s] to belong to him” and he worries that, “in selling the book, he’d betrayed Muni Pinkser and the entire vanished community of North Main Street” (Stern, The Pinch 329). As the book continues to gain traction with the reading public, the Pinch itself experiences a renewed interest as a historical site, and people flock to its environs in search of authentic expressions of Jewish artisanship and cuisine. The
eventual gentrification of the district leads to – as expected – the displacement of the longtime, if largely impoverished, Jewish residents and business owners; nonetheless, in Stern’s version of history at least, the reinvigoration of the Pinch likewise promotes interest in “the dust of Beale Street.” (Stern, The Pinch 338). Eventually, downtown Memphis “risen from its longtime repose, [begins to flourish] like never before” (Stern, The Pinch 338). In the wake of these many changes, Lenny impetuously decides to set fire to the bookstore he has since inherited from Avrom, marching away from the conflagration fully aware that, in direct contrast to the other rehabilitation efforts in the Pinch, he was leaving both the book and the district behind as nothing but “rubble and ashes” (Stern, The Pinch 346).

Given Stern’s penchant for self-deprecating criticism of his own writing (Beifuss), it is as likely that his choice to conclude his tale with the virtual destruction of the neighborhood about which he has seemed so intent on reconstructing for the Jewish community of Memphis could just as easily be read as his thumbing his nose at his own work. Unlike the Hasidim who urged the earliest residents of the Pinch to “‘live in the book’,” Stern uses the conclusion of The Pinch to remind his readers, and in particular his Jewish audience, that his book is but one realm in which to find one’s home and oneself. For a community that has long struggled to find acceptance in Memphis, Stern’s account seems to imply that Jewish Memphians have not only fail in their strides toward social acceptance, but have also failed to cling to their heritage. Moreover, he indicates that the city’s delayed interest in Judaism is a threat to authentic expressions of Jewish faith and culture. Instead, The Pinch implies that Jewish Memphians ought to resist any appropriation of their culture.
If, as Stern suggests, this resistance is possible, several conclusions regarding Jewish identity in Memphis may be made. First, unlike the earlier accounts of a Jewish population who lived in fear of retribution by their white Christian counterparts, Lenny’s blatant disregard for the potential harm the fire in the bookstore may have on the rest of the newly gentrified Pinch district demonstrates his freedom from the fears carried by his Jewish predecessors. Lenny’s abandonment of the book, and, ultimately, of the Pinch, however, speaks to the tenuous relationship that he and his community still have with Memphis. According to Stern’s narrative, Lenny’s departure from Memphis is easy, unencumbered by any regrets or sadness about leaving his lifelong home. With the destruction of Muni’s Pinch, Lenny has destroyed his community’s textual record of their shared history and adopted myths that might have secured their attachment to Memphis and a local identity. Instead, his choice to abandon the book and the city leave the local Jewish population in much the same position as described from the beginning of the novel: unattached to either their Jewish identities or status as Memphians.

The significance of Memphis as a home space for Jewish immigrants to the American South finds a far different rendering in the work of Tova Mirvis, a native Memphian who, unlike Stern, grew up inside the Orthodox community about which she writes. A critical distinction between The Pinch and The Ladies Auxiliary is the level of collective attachment that the respective Jewish neighborhoods have to the city of Memphis. Where Stern depicts a forlorn, forsaken wasteland besot by flooding and the forgetting of a sacred heritage, the women living within the eruv of the Orthodox Jewish community in Memphis have forged a proud identity that is wholly Jewish, wholly Southern, and, at least by their own determination, most decidedly Memphian. Another
pivotal difference between the two texts and the ways in which the respective characters establish their attachment to Memphis as a place is the level of religious fervor – or lack thereof – to which the various individuals adhere over the course of the novels. While Stern’s intent for the The Pinch is to recapture lost Jewish myths for the sake of the community’s history and heritage, the women about whom Mirvis writes cling to a dogged orthopraxis in efforts to maintain their connection to one another, to their community, and to God himself.

First published in 1999, The Ladies Auxiliary was Mirvis’s first novel. Similar to Steve Stern’s fiction, Mirvis’s work has yet to receive the same level of critical attention from the academy as other well-known Jewish-American authors like Cynthia Ozick or Isaac Bashevis Singer. Jewish literature scholar Maya Socolovsky confirms the scarcity of information about the Southern Jewish population, saying “[H]istorians agree that despite a long presence in the South, there is relatively little historical research on Southern Jews;” moreover, they have likewise commented on the “paucity of [Jewish] texts coming out of the region” (34). Despite the limited historical research and literary production from the Southern Jewish community, The Ladies Auxiliary has drawn considerable criticism from the Orthodox Jewish community itself, namely in an article published in The New York Times by author Wendy Shalit in 2005. In her “widely read” article, Shalit accuses Mirvis of portraying Orthodox Judaism in an “unflattering or ridiculous light” and argues that this type of ‘insider’ fiction does little more than to expose the author’s “estrangement from the traditional Orthodox community, and sometimes from Judaism itself” (Freedman; “The Observant Reader”). Shalit attributes the discrepancy between Mirvis’s upbringing and the portrayal of Judaism in her writing
as one of the “ways different Jewish communities understand and misunderstand one another” (“The Observant Reader”). Shalit thus reveals both her belief that Mirvis’s place within the Orthodox community is one of distance or exclusion and her opinion that Mirvis’s fiction reflects the author’s own discontent with the faith tradition in which she was raised.

Shalit’s argument certainly has merit – Mirvis left her Orthodox upbringing shortly after the publication of *The Ladies Auxiliary* – but a closer examination of the text quickly reveals Mirvis’s esteem for her past and her hometown. Fondly attached to the tradition and place in which she grew up, Mirvis’s writing reads more like a love letter to her past than an indictment of Judaism. Instead, *The Ladies Auxiliary* warmly describes the close-knit atmosphere within the local Orthodox community, one that the author plainly respects and admires. Where the text expresses any criticism of Orthodox Judaism, it does so in the posture of peeling away layers of tradition for the purposes of self-reflection and the discovery of truth and knowledge.

Other critics have similarly dubbed Mirvis’s novel about the Orthodox community in Memphis as a ‘coming out,’ indicating their belief that she no longer considers herself Orthodox (Goldmeir; Miller). Writing for the *Israel National News*, Harold Goldmeir reads Mirvis’s text as a holistic condemnation of the Orthodox precepts that hold her in “shackles” instead of the “structure” they provide for “those who practice them with love.” Goldmeir’s title alone is dismissive enough toward *The Ladies Auxiliary*; in deeming Mirvis’s abandonment of Orthodoxy ‘selfish,’ he renders her book as the embodiment of all that is wrong with leaving one’s faith and family behind.
Blogger Rosa Miller similarly regards Mirvis’s writing as the reduction of “a lifetime of religious observance [into] a series of ‘thou shalt’s’ [sic] and ‘thou shalt not’s [sic].”

In speaking for herself, however, Mirvis does not present the image of a bitter dissident hell bent on calling out the hypocrisies of Judaism. Instead she notes her comfort in her role as a Jewish writer. In an interview with the Jewish Book Council in 2014, Mirvis clearly states that her various books, The Ladies Auxiliary included, are “clearly Jewish novels…steeped in questions of Jewish belonging and identity, belief and doubt” (“Stained Glass”). Rather than a limitation, Mirvis sees her Jewishness as the place from which she writes, “the world from which her imagination sprung” (“Stained Glass”). Although Mirvis has been incredibly transparent about her decisions to divorce her first husband and leave the Orthodox community where she grew up in Memphis, she maintains that her Jewishness is “part of everything [she writes]. It’s entrenched inside [her], a permanent part of [her] eye, even as [she] looks out at other worlds” (“Stained Glass”).

Mirvis’s attention to the ideas of “homecoming and home-space” finds itself, quite frankly, at home in contemporary Jewish women’s writing (Socolovsky 34). In another interview from 2011, Mirvis elaborates on her relationship with her hometown and the community she left behind. After the publication of The Ladies Auxiliary, Mirvis recalls that some of her friends and acquaintances in Memphis felt that her novel was not the type of writing that “‘a nice girl should do’” (Jacobs). Some were offended because they thought she was airing their dirty laundry to the world, while still others were defensive about their presumed presence – or lack thereof – in the text. According to Mirvis, their criticism made Memphis feel less and less like home. She continues,
however, to say that Orthodox Judaism is her “spiritual home” and that, although she has not resided in Memphis for many years, the “richness of Jewish tradition” so vividly present in New York City where she moved to pursue graduate studies and her writing career ensures that she will “never really be that far from home” (Jacobs). It is with Mirvis’s own words, then, that we can find alternative meanings to her community’s criticism of *The Ladies Auxiliary*. Whether intentionally or otherwise, Mirvis’s statement that the Jewish tradition she finds alive and well in NYC fills her with a sense of home returns the conversation about *The Ladies Auxiliary* to Judaism, its connection to place, and especially to Memphis.

Jewish tradition is at the forefront of Mirvis’s novel as she traces roughly a year in the life of the local Orthodox congregation. Together, the families and individuals that reside within the East Memphis enclave they have established for themselves celebrate Passover and Purim, along with ‘lesser’ holidays and weekly Shabbos dinners on Friday evenings. As the collective voice and advocate for their community, the women narrate the novel’s plot, with very little mention of their male counterparts. Most of the women are stay-at-home-mothers fixated on their families and homes, but there is one other thought that preoccupies their minds: the very ground on which they live and breathe in Memphis, the place that ties them to the very traditions of their faith and heritage. Their parenting revolves around the idea that they want their children to “always feel rooted in their tradition, to be close to their families, to their community, and God” (Mirvis 137). For several of the mothers in *The Ladies Auxiliary*, their greatest fears are realized when their children move or run away from Memphis, unlikely to return. It is, in fact, the departure of the rabbi’s own son that provokes some of the fiercest gossip among the
women as they consider the fact that, “[i]f he could leave Memphis and all that [they] believed in behind, then any of [their] children could” (Mirvis 302). As such, readers ultimately find the women engaged in what the characters perceive as their very own cultural “war” against Batsheva Jacobs, who, as an outsider to Memphis, has dared to challenge “the way they’ve always been” and whose influence on the teenage girls in their community has no parallel (Mirvis 242, 271).

The women’s attachment to Memphis is grounded at least in part by the city’s place within the South. Socolovsky speaks to the many ways that the women endeavor, whether consciously or subconsciously, to assimilate into local culture via Southern traditions and tendencies. At one point, the women observe that their culture has so melded with the local as to become “a strange new combination” of Judaism and Southernness, so much so that they can barely remember where their own culture ends and the South begins (Mirvis 10). Socolovsky concurs, though she attributes the enmeshment of the two cultures as part and parcel of a “Southern intolerance of difference” that precludes a Jewish identity distinct from a Southern regional identity (41). For as much as Memphis has strived to distance itself from association with the Deep South or the Old South, it remains a Southern city, and, for these women, taking on a Southern identity is critical to their status as native Memphians instead of perpetual outsiders to the city.

Socolovsky also elaborates on the women’s generally nonconfrontational demeanor, saying that this trait is derived from a “communal and pleasantly Southern ‘need to emphasize the positive’” (38). Socolovsky’s identification of the Jewish exile from the Holy Land as the primary subject to avoid in polite Southern conversations
demonstrates how the Jewish community must forfeit part of its inherent identity in order to be fully absorbed into their Southern homeland. It fails, however, to account for the women’s disagreements amongst themselves and their general reticence to discuss their issues in healthy, meaningful ways. By shoveling their spats and criticisms of one another under the rug of Southern pleasantries, the women succeed in presenting themselves as true Southern ladies. Socolovsky argues, however, that their behavior is but a “mock assimilation of manners disguise[ing] their legacy of homelessness and difference” (38). This assertion fails to recognize that, for the women of the Ladies Auxiliary, their Jewish and local identities work in tandem, not in conflict. For the women themselves, their Southernness is an authentic point of pride, not a fake identity to be assumed or shed at any given moment.

Their demeanor is not the sole method these women use to blend in. According to the text, the women can meld into the parameters of local identity more readily than their male peers because their code of dress does not overtly distinguish them from other local women. In fact, Helen Shayowitz, one of the members of the Ladies Auxiliary, notes that it is easier for Orthodox women to “pass” as “any other Memphis lady” than is for the men of their community, and she urges her husband to wear a ball cap over his yarmulke when they are in public so as not to stand out (Mirvis 56). The Ladies Auxiliary does not directly comment on the women’s sheitels, or the wigs that Orthodox women wear to cover their hair in public as an act of modesty, but it does mention how “natural-looking” Tziporah Newburger’s sheitel is; without confronting the issue head on, Mirvis’s narration highlights yet another means of assimilation that the women of the community have at their disposal. If, as Tziporah does, the women can afford to pay for such an
expensive sheitel, they can further blend into local society. Without access to appropriate financial resources, however, they may not blend as easily into public spaces next to other, non-Jewish women in Memphis.

The women’s inability to withstand divergence from their long-held beliefs and traditions even within their own community is another tool by which they protect their identities. Because their attachment to Memphis as a homeplace is built on the notion that they have created a safe space in which to practice Judaism, any failure to conform to their standards of Orthodox tradition also challenges the women’s notions of home. The most obvious example that troubles the women’s understanding of their faith and its practice is Batsheva, whose comparatively liberal implementation of orthopraxis fails to meet their litmus test of what it means to be a faithful Orthodox woman. One might think that Batsheva’s ability to mesh so easily with the larger Memphis community would be a boon to the women’s confidence about their capacity for fitting in. Instead, deep down the women recognize that, for as much as they dearly love Memphis, they yet remain only part of the city but not truly of it. For this reason, they refuse to accommodate Batsheva’s differences, jealous of her social mobility within and outside the Jewish community and afraid that her ideas will undo the ways they have reassembled their sense of self into something that straddles the line between both a Jewish and a local identity.

Despite their treatment of Batsheva, the women tout their “‘good ol’ fashioned southern hospitality,” attributing their collective warmth and generosity of spirit to the longevity of their respective families’ tenure in the city of (Mirvis 16). Unable to climb to the highest rungs of the Southern social ladder because they are neither white nor
Christian, the women establish their own pecking order within the Orthodox community of what it means to be an authentic Memphian that is based on just how far back in the history of Memphis their respective families are rooted. Mrs. Levy, the local busybody and self-designated boss of community affairs, proclaims that “her family was from Memphis. Not just living there for a generation or two, but deeply and most certainly from the innermost core of this city” (Mirvis 88). Bessie Kimmel also asserts her family’s lengthy history in the Bluff City: they, “of course, were from Memphis. Fourth generation” (Mirvis 4). When Helen Shayowitz’s out-of-town guests arrive for her daughter’s wedding, they similarly recognize how well the Jews of Memphis have melded into their adopted regional culture: “What a wonderful community this was, so friendly and warm, such genuine southern hospitality” (Mirvis 293).

Batsheva’s arrival to Memphis and her rather nonchalant attitude toward her rootless state puzzles the women and threatens their sense of home (Socolovsky 43). On her first day at shul, the women ask about her background, but, in their minds, her answers do not suffice. In response to their inquiries about where she is from, Batsheva replies, “I was living in New York for a few years, but I’m not from anywhere in particular. I’m a mix of a lot of different places” (Mirvis 40). Her response and the Northern inflection in her accent lead the women to decide that she “must be from up North…[e]ven if she wasn’t going to admit it” (Mirvis 40). After their first impressions of Batsheva, the women’s suspicion about her identity and her character increases. As they continue getting to know Batsheva, her relatively lax attitude toward the tenets of Orthodoxy, compared to their own at least, similarly convince the women that she either cannot or will not ever be able to fit into their strictly defined sense of belonging in the
local community. For the women of the Ladies Auxiliary, identification with the local has as much to do with their adherence to the religious rules that protect them from secular influences external to Judaism as it does with the longevity of their relationship with the city, and Batsheva’s failure to comply with the former and her inability to claim the latter prohibit her from fully becoming what the women consider an authentic member of their community.

As to their own relationship with Memphis, the Jewish women in The Ladies Auxiliary reveal a similarly ambivalent attitude toward the city as many other Memphians have likewise expressed throughout the city’s history. While they spend copious amounts of time and energy defending their hometown, they occasionally acknowledge, if only to or amongst themselves, that Memphis has another reputation, even within the national Jewish community, as less than the stellar oasis they have deemed it. On the one hand, Becky Feldman’s kneejerk reaction when she discovers that members of Batsheva’s synagogue in New York City are aware of the Orthodox community in Memphis is defensive: “I hope you let them know that we are a very old and distinguished community’,” she says. Having lived for a time in New York City, Tziporah Newburger is well aware of the backwoods reputation her hometown had; growing tired of New Yorkers’ teasing inquiries about whether or not she had lived on a farm in Tennessee or if she had seen Elvis recently, Tziporah convinces her husband who is not from Memphis to move their family back home. Moreover, the women also find it “impossible” to understand why anyone would want to leave Memphis because it was “peaceful, it was pretty, the houses were large and inexpensive, there was a school, a bakery, a shul, and a restaurant. What more could [anyone] want?” (Mirvis 55, 156). When anyone from their
community actually does move away, they reject the notion that “it has anything to do with the city itself,” instead convincing themselves that anything but dissatisfaction with Memphis could justify one’s willing departure (Mirvis 55). Even Batsheva, new as she is to the city, urges the teenagers she teaches to reconsider their plans to escape Memphis. “‘Maybe for a while it would feel exciting,’” she says, “‘but don’t you think you’d eventually feel like you’d left something special?’” (Mirvis 135). The women’s responses to the idea of leaving Memphis vary only slightly, and they cling fiercely to their conception of the city as a refuge for their community, a place wherein they can be both wholly Jewish and wholly Memphian.

On the other hand, despite their hesitation to articulate it aloud, the women acknowledge a time or two that, with changes to the city’s downtown riverfront, Memphis has transformed into a city that “could have been anywhere” (Mirvis 9). Compared to the decline of downtown Memphis after the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, the “tall office buildings, luxury hotels, and parking garages” have changed, if not gentrified, the landscape of a once far more static business district (Mirvis 9). In the minds of the Ladies Auxiliary members, the homogenization of Memphis has slowly crept eastward and invaded their own carefully constructed neighborhood; as the seasons change and the traditions they have worked so hard to establish and maintain for decades begin to crumble, the brown, dingy humdrum that is winter in the Mid-South reflects the women’s despair. With its “trees bare, the grass stiff and brown, Memphis no longer looked beautiful. It was dismal and gray. It could have been any city in the world” (Mirvis 178).
Unlike *The Pinch*, which delves into the depths of the National Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the interaction between the Jewish and the black residents of Memphis, *The Ladies Auxiliary* has nothing to say about the interaction of the Jewish community with other minority populations in the city. It does, however, speak of anti-Semitism in the South to some degree, and it sharply contrasts the experiences of the Orthodox community with other Jewish congregations in the city. Edith Shapiro relates the time she and her brother were accosted in their front yard by their next-door neighbors, two little boys who shouted racial epithets in their direction while riding past on their bicycles. Edith seems to take the confrontation in stride and seems resigned to the reality that “[t]his was the South, after all; as at home as she felt down here, it didn’t have the reputation for being the most accepting of regions” (Mirvis 157).

In addition to any potential racism and discrimination the characters in *The Ladies Auxiliary* face, these Orthodox women and their families are an anomaly, a “minority within a minority” of Jewish practitioners in a majority Protestant city (Mirvis 136). Given the relatively small size of their congregation, the Orthodox community is compelled to mix with other Jewish congregations to form sports teams and other extracurricular groups for their kids, and some of the high school girls insist that they “couldn’t imagine going to public school [instead of their private Jewish school], where it would hard, if not impossible, to maintain their Jewish identities” (Mirvis 122). Finally, despite all their protestations to the contrary, the women agree that they can relate to the feeling of being “strangers in the land of Egypt” because they live in “the desert of Tennessee” (Mirvis 93, 115).
Defense mechanisms aside, the women in *The Ladies Auxiliary* are extraordinarily proud of their community. Memphis is a “special place,” there is “nowhere” like it, and it is a “wonderful community” (Mirvis, 37, 38, 41). By and large, the women also agree that they are connected to Memphis. Naomi Eisenberg tells Batsheva, for instance, that she wonders “if [she] would feel tied to anything if [she] didn’t live in Memphis” (Mirvis 39). She later ruminates about her childhood in Memphis, thinking to herself how “she had always felt safe, part of a large extended family…it had been a wonderful way to grow up” (Mirvis 71). Not only do the women affirm their own attachments to Memphis, they believe that “Memphis isn’t just anyplace.” It is, after all, “the only home [they’ve] ever known” and the only one they care to claim (Mirvis 41). Their belief in Memphis’s status as an exceptional place similarly fosters a belief that the tight-knit, independent Orthodox community that Jewish Memphians had spent over a century building was just as exceptional in its ability to balance on the tightrope between social isolation or thorough integration.

According to Tziporah Newburger, Memphis was “perfectly safe” and nothing bad should, could, or would happen in the city (Mirvis 67). Along this line of thinking, it is crucial to understand that, for the women of *The Ladies Auxiliary*, there are two degrees of Memphis: both the entirety of the geographical space within the city limits and, more specifically, their own “city within a city,” or the eruv that contains their Orthodox community in East Memphis (Mirvis 10). When Batsheva moves to Memphis and begins to travel beyond the parts of the city the rest of the women frequented, they regard her movements with a large dose of suspicion coupled with a dash of envy. Unlike themselves, these women who feel confined to the areas of town in which they feel their
Jewish identities can easily remain intact, Batsheva’s excursions outside the Orthodox community and her familiarity with the rest of the city make it seem as though “she [too] had lived in Memphis her whole life” (Mirvis 45). However, for Batsheva, her ramblings outside of East Memphis and her more liberal adherence to the dress code for Orthodox women afford her the opportunity to meld more freely with the city at large and not just the microcosm of Memphis that the ladies inhabit. Batsheva can therefore outwardly present as a native Memphian in ways that the rest of the women feel they cannot.

The isolated community within Memphis in which the women live and move is an important construct of the Orthodox traditions they uphold. In much the same way that ‘the book’ functioned as a symbol of the homeland for the Jewish residents of Memphis in *The Pinch*, Memphis itself represents the reclamation of a homeplace for the women in *The Ladies Auxiliary*. Unlike the characters in Stern’s novel, however, the Jewish residents of East Memphis have assumed a collective identity that is tightly woven into the fabric of Memphis and have little need for any book outside the Torah to capture the essence of home for them. Barbara Mann speaks to this phenomenon in her book *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* in which she explains the interconnectedness of God, people, and place in the Jewish tradition. In Mann’s careful definition of the Hebrew word *makom*, she explains that, according to rabbinic explanations of the Torah, the term is used alternately as ‘place’ or as ‘God,’ meaning that God is “‘the place of the world’” (11). If, then, God is in some way equitable with place, the idea of *makom* “suggests an intermediary location between heaven and earth, between transcendence and the earthly profane, one in which God potentially ‘stands beside’ human beings” (Mann 12).
Moreover, it mandates the need for sacred spaces where the people of God can maintain a purity and a readiness to meet their creator wherever he may be found.

For the Orthodox Jewish women in Mirvis’s novel, this sacred space they have claimed for their own is Memphis. The first chapter of The Ladies Auxiliary refers to the city as the “Jerusalem of the South” (Mirvis 10), an overt indicator that these women have mentally and emotionally consecrated the space in which they live. In order to understand the significance of the ladies’ attribution of holiness to the city of Memphis, it is crucial to grasp the importance of the Jewish diaspora’s connection to Jerusalem. Mann says that “there is one site whose significance would seem to exceed any other in Jewish experience: this is the Land of Israel, with Jerusalem, historically, at is metaphysical center” (25). She elaborates, saying that Jerusalem, as a “particular space[,] has fundamentally shaped Jewish culture” (Mann 25). If it is the case that the Orthodox congregation in Memphis views their home as a second Jerusalem, one can easily conclude that the city has taken up copious mental and emotional space in the psyche of their collective identity. It also renders the women’s staunch defense of their community as rather reasonable. As a proxy for the Holy Land, Memphis has become not only a place to be at home, but also in which to find God.

In this “the Jerusalem of the South,” Batsheva’s unconventional approach to religiosity both surprises and mortifies the long-term residents of the East Memphis neighborhood where the Orthodox community resides. From her continued participation in the mikveh, a ritualistic, cleansing bath usually reserved for married women, to her willingness to discuss sexual health and education with the teenage girls from their synagogue, Batsheva’s presence deals a blow to her new-found community’s
determination that the ‘city within a city’ they had built would forever endure as it always had. Isolation from the broader community in turn has, in direct opposition to the wishes of the adult members of the synagogue, the effect of driving a portion of the younger generation of Jewish families away from the faith. Unlike Stern’s presentation of the watered-down version of Judaism of the 1960s, Mirvis’s portrayal of the city’s Orthodox heritage is one that had previously remained an unbroken “chain of Jewish Memphians that would extend into the future forever, as long and as far away as God in Heaven” (10). When Batsheva disrupts a social dynamic that has been established over the course of generations, little does she realize that various members of her new community will begin to question not only individual tenets of Judaism, but the very basis of the faith itself.

It is no wonder, then, that both The Pinch and The Ladies Auxiliary relate the chaos that ensues in the Jewish community when the city of Memphis is turned, magically or figuratively, upside-down. During the observance of Purim with the fellow members of their congregation, the women in the Ladies Auxiliary note that, “just as Haman’s decree against the Jews was reversed and he was hanged on the same gallows he prepared for Mordechai, [they were celebrating] this day where everything is turned upside-down” (Mirvis 245). It is during the seudah, or the third Shabbos meal, of Purim that Batsheva has prepared for her high school students that the equilibrium in the community is at last thrown off kilter by the departure of Shira, the 18-year-old daughter of Becky Feldman. From this point forward in the novel, the cracks that had first begun to show in the beginning of the story widen, and the fortresses that the women had spent years building for themselves, their families, and their community begin to crumble. In
much the same way that extraordinary events in the Pinch inverted the reality of the Jewish people of Memphis, the celebration of Purim, with its costumes and parties and copious imbibing of alcoholic beverages, provides the impeccable opportunity for the dissolution of the women’s artificial assurances in the safety and sanctity of their carefully constructed community.

Despite their continuous protests about their valid status as native Memphians, the Jews who Mirvis has described have constructed a private sanctum for themselves within the city limits that theoretically protects them from the prying eyes and curiosity of their non-Jewish neighbors. It is as though Mirvis’s characters wish to have their cake and eat it too: while they long to be as much a part of the city as the rest of Memphis, they simultaneously keep to themselves in an effort to preserve their Jewish heritage without being labeled as ‘other.’ Moreover, in spite of their valiant efforts to mesh Jewish practice with local traditions, the women fully, if only inwardly, acknowledge their perpetual status as outsiders to the overall community. Thus, when their carefully managed social order is disrupted by immigrating outsiders and doubting teenagers, the women from the Ladies Auxiliary batten down the hatches in efforts to keep the unraveling of their community in check.

At the conclusion of The Ladies Auxiliary, the women have gathered for Shavuot celebrations, a time during which the giving of the Torah from God to the Jewish people is celebrated (“What is Shavuot”). There is a legend that at midnight on Shavuot, a flash of lighting in the sky will reveal Mount Sinai and a vision of the Jews of every preceding generation. On their walk home from the synagogue that evening, the women pause of one accord in anticipation of such a sight. Just as they are about to turn away from the
night sky, a flash of light illuminates the heavens, but instead of the Jews of yore, they see:

Memphis high on this bluff and the Mississippi River winding its way around… [Their] houses were lined up in neat rows, their lights on as if [they] were inside going about our lives. [The] shul was there and [the] school, and the restaurant and the kosher grocery store and the shops [they] frequented. Everything looked exactly as [they] saw it everyday, only against the backdrop of so many stars, it seemed smaller and less important. (Mirvis 309)

For as strongly as the women of the Ladies Auxiliary have fought to maintain the fine balance between their Jewish and local identities, they find in these final moments that their efforts to glorify Memphis as the ultimate safe haven in which to practice Orthodox Judaism is an illusion. Instead of the holy place they had deemed their hometown to be, they find that Memphis is as ordinary as ‘any other city’ and that, despite its “powerful and mythical pull far beyond the region,” the version of Memphis they have created for themselves is no more and no less than any of the other myths they cling to (Socolovsky 38). Abruptly brought to their senses by the arrival of an outsider to their community, the women find themselves at a sincere crossroads, in a place where their beliefs about what is safe and what is sacrosanct have been called into question by their children’s willingness to challenge their understanding of right and wrong or abandon their faith and their community altogether. Often the purpose of a myth, though, is to create a manageable narrative for those who believe in it. As such, the ladies remain attached to their view of Memphis and remain there because their belief in what Memphis offers them makes them feel safe.

Where critics have chastised Mirvis for this fictional upending of her own community, believing her storyline to be an intentional plot to dissuade other faithful Jews from religious practice, another alternative reading of the text is to consider the
continued presence of Batsheva and her persistent zeal for the Jewish faith as a plea for open-mindedness and the valuing of curiosity in the face of doubt. Instead of a tell-all report about the glaring inadequacies of the Orthodox community in Memphis, *The Ladies Auxiliary* serves as a thought-provoking tale quite the opposite of *The Pinch*. Where the latter is a fictional rendering of what happens to people when they lose touch with their heritage and mythology, *The Ladies Auxiliary* instead offers a word of caution about what can occur when those same individuals cling too tightly to the past and to tradition.

These two texts piecemeal together the extremes to which belief and orthopraxis can extend, but they also offer alternative perspectives of the ways that Jews in Memphis can take on the identity of a Memphian. For the people of the Pinch, Memphis offered little but a physical space in which to reside, and they have little esteem for the city; without any attachment to the ‘Book,’ they likewise lose any connection to their own history. For the women of the Ladies Auxiliary, their religious practice is as equally flimsy because it is so tightly and unquestioningly interwoven into the fabric of a false narrative about an imperfect place; their idolatry of Memphis does not preclude them from persisting feelings of isolation from the broader community or from losing members of their community who do not value Memphis to the same degree. Given the nature of Memphis’s longstanding dicey reputation and its citizens’ frequently negative self-perceptions, the characters from *The Pinch* actually embody a certain degree of local identity: their very disregard for Memphis arguably makes them Memphians. On the other hand, *The Ladies Auxiliary* shows how a weakly cloaked ambivalence toward local
identity – which is part and parcel of being a Memphian – can also backfire for residents who theoretically wish to create space for themselves in local society.

In conjunction, *The Pinch* and *The Ladies Auxiliary* trace a cyclical process for the Jewish people of Memphis. Beginning with their immigration to a foreign country, they experience the necessity of acclimating to a new place and culture, the dilution of various aspects of their native identities, the eventual reclamation of the traditions they have lost, and the subsequent rebellion against the boundaries defined by their ethnic and religious heritage. In fact, when the cumulative events from the two books are viewed chronologically, they clearly delineate the repetitive nature of the discarding and reclaiming of cultural identity. Where Lenny Slaew’s publication of *The Pinch* renews interest in all things related to the first Jewish neighborhood in Memphis, roughly a quarter century into the future *The Ladies Auxiliary* picks up in the environs of East Memphis where the Jewish community has fled as the residential areas along the Mississippi grew rougher and the city sprawled eastward. Similar to the flood that devastates the Pinch, this contemporary community experiences significant loss and disruption when multiple congregants from the Orthodox synagogue begin to rebel against various traditions or abandon their faith altogether. Mirvis’s narrative concludes on this note need not be read as an indication that the Orthodox community has met its demise, however. Batsheva’s continued presence in the neighborhood, especially, suggests that the women of the Ladies Auxiliary will learn to cope with the ways their narrative of place and self-identification require change. If they can relax their concept of their *eruv* in Memphis as the idyllic place wherein to practice their faith and raise their
families, the ladies can reinvent their definition of local identity without compromising their Jewish faith or their civic pride.

Together, *The Pinch* and *The Ladies Auxiliary* recount the specific difficulties that Jews in Memphis have historically faced as they have wrestled to establish a perfect balance between their longings for a Jewish homeland, their desire to create safe spaces for themselves in a new place, and their efforts to meld the uniqueness of their faith with the idiosyncrasies of their newfound hometown. Even so, despite their admitted struggles to unite the various tendrils of identity that stem from religion and place, both Stern’s and Mirvis’s books confirm that the Jews of Memphis often have little desire to be elsewhere. For better or worse, the city’s Jewish population seems to have placed Memphis on a high – if wobbly – pedestal and have built a secure place for themselves in which to explore and reconcile the various components of their ethnic, religious, and geographic identities.
“Vodou, hoodoo or whatever-you-do”

“Maybe it was Memphis/Maybe it was Southern summer nights/maybe it was you, maybe it was me/but it sure felt right”

- Pam Tillis

“Take that night train to Memphis, take that night train to Memphis/and when you arrive at the station/I’ll be right there to meet you, I’ll be right there to greet you/So don’t turn down my invitation/Hallelujah, hallelujah! /We’ll be shouting hallelujah all the day/Oh, we’ll have a jubilee down in Memphis, Tennessee/And we’ll be shouting hallelujah all the way”

- Dolly Parton

Contemporary studies of the American South often seek to include a diversity of voices that have traditionally not been a part of the racially bifurcated Southern literary canon. It is important, however, to remember that the South has historically depended on the black/white dichotomy for its own self-determination of place and region (T. Davis 25). According to Southern and African American literary scholar Thadious Davis, the human landscape of the South is a “landscape of exclusion”; that is, from slavery to Jim Crow and even well into the 1980s through the early oughts, writers writing about the South have primarily written about the white South (Davis 27, 29-31). Davis conceptualizes the South as both “a spatial object and [an] ideological landscape” that has perpetuated its own ideals of racial segregation and white superiority (2). The legacy of segregation, in particular, has long allowed Southern whites to psychologically distance themselves from their black counterparts in the region, to treat black bodies as “threats” or “pollutants,” and to ignore their own race in favor of othering and downplaying any racial minority presence (Davis 8, 27-8). As Southern whites have perpetuated the notion that race is a determinant different from themselves and not a “self-defining factor,” the experiences of Southern blacks and whites, respectively, have been divided into racial
and regional categories (Davis 28). On the one hand, black individuals from the South, and more specifically, Southern black writers, have been classified solely along racial lines with no regard for their regional affiliations. Conversely, the Southern white population and its writerly representatives have closely identified with their regional identities in complete disregard for their race (Davis 26).

Such an attitude toward excluding voices from the Southern literary canon, however, renders an insufficient portrait of the region. As French philosopher Michel de Certeau asserts, place requires a variety of mobile pieces with which to constitute a place; moreover, interaction between a space and its people is necessary to the creation of a place identity (Davis 5, 24). As such, the racial-spatial representation that has typically been used to define the South as a place is, as celebrated black feminist and critic bell hooks argues, a political strategy that deserves a counternarrative to white racial hegemony (Davis 3). As Davis has noted, more and more black voices have begun to contribute to the regional literature of the South in the interests of restructuring the dynamics of “marginalization and domination” in the region (3, 32). Davis notes this “return migration” of black writers to the South that has resulted in a rediscovery of the region as a “homeplace” for black bodies, a “southscape” that defines place not merely in terms of race or region, but at the intersection of both (2, 19). Along those lines of argument, a singularly homogenous white narrative of place would be insufficient to encapsulate the South and, more specifically, a majority black city such as Memphis (“QuickFacts”).

With the exception of George Washington Lee’s 1937 publication of River George, however, literary texts that are both from Memphis and about Memphis have
been those limited to those written by white men. William Clark Falkner published *The White Rose of Memphis* in 1881; in 1962, his great-grandson William Faulkner’s *The Reivers* appeared. Shelby Foot’s *September, September* arrived in 1977. Peter Taylor, whose *A Summons to Memphis* is of fundamental importance to this dissertation, received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1987 (“The Pulitzer Prizes”). It was not until 1993 that Arthur Flowers’s *Another Good Loving Blues* was published and that the first fictional text about Memphis by a black Memphian was widely disseminated (“c.v.”). Eric Jerome Dickey’s *Milk in My Coffee* followed in 1998 (“Eric”), and Katori Hall’s first play *The Mountaintop* opened in London in 2009 (Bosnja).

For Thadious Davis, a critical piece of black literary criticism is identifying the ways in which “blackness has served itself” and how blacks have disseminated their own ideas in spite of segregation, not necessarily because of it (17). To this end, black literature is “generative” and not reactive in the sense that it consists of the work that occurs within the black community and not solely how the community reacts to inequity. In the literature of Memphis, one of the ways that black Memphians have served their community and reasserted both their racial and regional identities is with the reclamation of traditional, old-time religious practices. Anecdotally referred to as the buckle of the largely white Protestant Bible Belt, Memphis is also “Mojo City,” a place where hoodoo has been widely practiced (Kail, “Preface”). It is also a place where not only have Christian and West African religious practices comingled within the context of hoodoo itself, but where Jewish, Christian, and hoodoo practitioners likewise cooperated in the sale and distribution of hoodoo objects such as candles, incense, and mojo hands (Kail 92-4, 120). Finally, it is likewise the site where the identity of the black Christian church
has been hotly contested by members of the opposing Baptist/Methodist and COGIC denominations, a struggle that has further contributed to the social, cultural, and religious dynamics of the city of Memphis (C. White 3).

As one of the many contemporary black Southern voices using literature as a means of empowerment and cultural diffusion (Davis 10-1), Arthur Flowers is a likewise self-proclaimed activist and griot – a keeper of his people’s oral histories (Rao; Flowers, Another 1). Like many native Memphians, Flowers clings to the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a template for his own activism, a legacy which Flowers defines as “the struggle for human dignity” (Toffoli). Despite Davis’s counsel that the injustices black Americans have suffered are a heritage best left in the past (4), Flowers finds that Dr. King’s teachings about racial equality are relevant to contemporary issues within the black community because King understood social uplift as a spiritual matter, one that must “illuminate and not degrade [the people] as struggle can sometimes do” (Rao). Moreover, even as he notes that the black community is “bound by suffering,” Flowers does not pause to dwell on the struggles of his people (Rao). Instead, he argues that the community has “moved from a time when [they] had to be Black to now, when [they] choose to be Black” (Rao).

As a testimony to his hopes of uplifting his fellow black Southerners, Flowers composed Another Good Loving Blues (1993), a novel in which he affirms his position as a hoodoo conjurer, a “man of power” (1). Flowers’s confidence in the authority of his written word reflects the hoodoo belief in ashe, or the “power to make things happen” (Cartwright 160), and through his narrative, it is clear that Flowers aims to use Another Good Loving Blues to actualize certain goals for his community. A particular
combination of factors – the amalgamation of the religious practices that West African slaves meshed into their newly adopted culture on the American continent; the call and response pattern curated in black church services and blues music; and the notion of literacy as a means of empowerment – that define Arthur Flowers’s self-described “literary hoodoo” (Another 125). Considering the timeframe during which Flowers was writing Another Good Loving Blues, the correlations between his literary aesthetic and the criteria that Ishmael Reed spelled out in his “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto” from 1970 are undeniable. When Memphis and Flowers’s purpose in writing are considered in conjunction with each other, the parallels to Reed’s work are that much stronger, particularly his references to the cultural borrowing between hoodoo and ancient Egyptian religious practices and to his assertion that hoodoo is “the Bar-B-Cue of America” (419). Reed’s adamant opposition to the process of studying literature in higher education, however, exposes a critical difference between the opinions of the two men. Where Reed fervently believes that departments of literature propagate and proselytize Christianity (420), the plot of Another Good Loving Blues leads Flowers’s characters down a path of an increasing reliance on literature and literacy for the very purpose of documenting hoodoo and making it both accessible and relevant to contemporary and future hoodoo practitioners.

To this end, Flowers testifies in Another Good Loving Blues as to the role of Beale Street as a sacred space for hoodoo practitioners in Memphis just prior to the Great Depression. He addresses the intersection of hoodoo and the blues, especially in Memphis, and emphasizes the ways that the two traditions can serve the black community from within. According to Flowers, his efforts to incorporate the spiritual
traditions of hoodoo and the legacy of blues music into the written word are part and parcel of his endeavor to modernize the black American spiritual tradition (Rao). In addition, the overlap between the blues and hoodoo manifests as a point of pride for black Memphians in need of a way to anchor themselves to a local identity and to the city itself.

A discussion about the practice of hoodoo in Memphis necessitates a comparison to her sister city of New Orleans, another river city cited more often than Memphis for its associations with voodoo, santería, and famed conjurers such as Marie Laveau (Chireau 7). As Albert Raboteau noted in his commentary on slave religions, voodoo prospered in the Big Easy because of the city’s “cosmopolitan and permissive atmosphere” (80). While Memphis has oft been referred to as a place more influenced by rural sensibilities than by the sophistication of big city ideals, Calvin Whites argues that, particularly during the decades of the Great Migration, Memphis “represented modernity, urbanism, and industrialism” to poor black folk from the rural Delta who hoped to improve their quality of life by moving to Memphis (99). Noted anthropologist and native Memphian Zandria Robinson likewise brings this discussion surrounding Memphis’s place within the spectrum of rurality and urbanity into the twenty-first century in her 2014 book, This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South. Citing the return of the region’s former black residents to Memphis, Robinson notes that where the urban North failed to meet black Southerners’ expectations of economic and social equality, the South – still predominantly rural in its ideologies if not in actuality – has come to offer a “better blackness” rooted in what Robinson calls country cosmopolitanism (29). A combination of “rural values and urban sensibilities,” country cosmopolitanism represents a “best-of-both-worlds” mentality toward regional and racial
identities for black Southerners and has resulted in the perspective that Southernness is no longer “a source of shame,” but a piece of social capital to be wielded for the benefit of black Southerners (Z. Robinson 17, 161). The connection can easily be made, therefore, that if cosmopolitanism and progress are the necessary prerequisites for non-traditional religious practices to flourish, the culture of Memphis is sufficiently balanced between its rural roots with a contemporary, ‘country’ cosmopolitanism for the practice of hoodoo to take root and prosper.

Memphis’s place in the development of a vibrant hoodoo community is also natural given its geographical location. Lindsey Tucker has noted that places along former slave trade routes often retain strong connections to African culture and religious practices such as hoodoo (181); as a significant transportation hub along and across the Mississippi River, Memphis’s significance in the North American slave trade has been well-documented by local, regional, and national historians. From 1850 to 1860, the number of slave traders in the city grew from just one to ten, including Nathan Bedford Forrest, the eventual Confederate general and Civil War hero who had moved to Memphis (Huebner). By 1860, roughly three thousand slaves lived in Shelby County; by the end of the Civil War just five years later, the number of African Americans living in the vicinity had more than quintupled with the arrival of former slaves moving to the area (Kail 16). It stands to reason, then, that the city would retain the influence of hoodoo among its residents given its proximity to the river and its role in the nation’s slave trade. Today, Memphis is a majority black city ("QuickFacts"), one that continues its lengthy association with the practice of hoodoo.
Tucker has made additional observations about places that have been prosperous for the hoodoo community, namely that sites that have the strongest ties to African traditions, and especially hoodoo, are “place[s] of myth” (180). Moreover, black writers’ fictionalization of the mythical influence of hoodoo on the American continent embodies the “other expressions of the supernatural [that] informed black American popular culture” such as the blues and literature (Chireau 8). Chireau’s postulation that musicians’ and writers’ creations assure the future of hoodoo and other traditional African customs for black Americans also reflects White’s assertion that black Southern writers have shifted to exploring how the black community serves itself instead of merely reacting to the oppressive forces of slavery, segregation, and other modes of inequality. As has been noted time and again by scholars and practitioners alike, hoodoo is one of multiple instruments that has enabled the black American population to achieve a sense of individual and collective agency, namely black women (Hucks 104-5), and both blues and literature have served to capture its essence for future generations.

In addition to the agency that these cultural productions have afforded the black community, conjurers are thought to be more connected to their African ancestors than their fellow black Americans who do not participate in hoodoo (Tucker 176). Moreover, the practice of negotiation between the physical and spiritual worlds for “power and…alternative modes of healing and recovery” offers practitioners additional means of overcoming their suffering (Hucks 90). One such monumental instance is when Christianity contributed to the persecution of black Southerners. Where the Great Awakening that swept United States in the eighteenth century had promised hope to disenfranchised peoples such as the black American slaves, Christian orthopraxis of the
times continued to subjugate the very people it vowed to protect to the ills of a patriarchal and racist society (Cartwright 167). In contrast, hoodoo offered a means of karma or vengeance for those who had no other means to seek justice (Tucker 176).

After Emancipation, however, respectability and assimilation became critical to the black community’s ability to rise above their social stations, and hoodoo and other religious practices such as the Holiness movement from the early twentieth century that were rooted in slavery were relegated to the margins of polite society (Hucks 92; C. White 3). According to Tucker, not only was hoodoo discredited by society at large, it also existed on the margins of ethnographic study (173). The reasons for hoodoo’s status as ‘less than,’ even within the academic community, were many and varied, but they largely boiled down to two primary concerns. When viewed through the Western, Christian, largely Protestant lens of the American South, hoodoo’s “vision of reality…[was] neither merely fantastic nor magical” and it gave its practitioners “an authority that exceeds Euro-American” perspectives and expectations (Cartwright 162). Essentially, the introduction of otherworldly notions and practices into an everyday understanding of the physical world was untenable to white Protestants whose theology condemned such interactions with the spirit world.

As such, despite the popularity and profitability of hoodoo in Memphis, life for local hoodoo conjurers has not typically been easy. Widely held public opinions in the community have long dictated that hoodoo is imbued with superstition, paganism, barbarism, and terrorism (Kail, 16-7). White Memphians have historically looked upon hoodoo as a “primitive” faith practice and its conjurers and rootworkers as “con artists, drug dealers, and murderers” (Kail 18). In the earliest accounts of hoodoo in Memphis
during the 1870s, local headlines often touted the inherent danger of hoodoo, particularly to the white community in Memphis, given the assumption that any African-based religion was viewed as evil (Kail 17-8). In 1867, the Memphis Public Ledger reported that a local conjureman had been assaulted, and the community at large generally ridiculed hoodoo as something that practitioners “ought to have better sense than to believe in” (Kail 17, 19). In spite of its consistent popularity in marginalized communities and underground practices, by the 1960s hoodoo was still considered a “quackery” of false leaders, and conjurers were often arrested and jailed by local police (Kail 20).

Not only does hoodoo introduce an unwelcome sense of the magical into a rather staid version of Protestantism, it also lacks any semblance of a sacred written text like the Christian Bible or Jewish Torah (Cartwright 159). Rather, hoodoo practices are transferred orally from one generation of conjurers to the next. This oral tradition of preserving sacred texts is privileged over the written word in West African religions like Yoruba on which many hoodoo practices are based (Tucker 181). In fact, in another short story that Flowers published online, he writes about the distaste among hoodoo practitioners for “book learning,” though one of the prominent conjurers in the tale concedes that a written record of hoodoo practices might be necessary to keep conjurers abreast of changes to their methodologies (“No Rest”).

Flowers makes no pretense about his intention to use the written word, and namely his fiction, as a form of social activism to keep hoodoo alive. As a black writer interested in the preservation of West African traditions, Flowers considers himself heir to the different literary traditions of hoodoo and Western literature, and he views his
fiction as an innovative fusion of the two (Rao). In Flowers’s opinion, the synthesis of hoodoo traditions with the power of the written word serve to fulfill his desire to modernize the black spiritual tradition, and he seamlessly weaves these notions into the body of Another Good Loving Blues. Flowers first paints a fictional encounter between Luke’s longtime companion Melvira Dupree and Zora Neale Hurston, who actually did live in Memphis for a time in the 1910s and introduces the significance of Hurston’s work and the preservation of hoodoo tradition as “sacred literature” (Library of Congress “Collections”; Another 119). He then addresses the significance of literacy when the male protagonist, blues musician Luke Bodeen, encounters W.C. Handy on Beale Street and asks for his famed colleague to teach him how to read music. Lastly, Flowers foregrounds the need for education and literacy within the black community by comparing various characters’ ability to read and write against their fellow Memphians’ illiteracy.

Memphis’s role in the creation of Flowers’s literary aesthetic is critical in Another Good Loving Blues. On the most basic level, it is the site of much of the action in the novel, and it is bluesman Luke Bodeen’s hometown. It is the city to which several of the primary characters travel on their various journeys seeking truth and self-knowledge, and it is a pit stop along the northward paths of the Great Migration for the throngs of poor black individuals and families attempting to flee the South in search of safer and more stable lives and livelihoods. According to Flowers’s own reckoning, it is fitting that one would find a conjurer as powerful as the female protagonist Melvira Dupree in Memphis. The city’s settlement along the banks of the Mississippi River, a body of water that elsewhere Flowers identifies as “Oshun’s oldest water,” makes it the prime location for hoodoo to flourish (“No Rest”). As one of the primary female deities in Yoruba, one of
the West African religions in which hoodoo finds its roots, Oshun is the goddess of the river, and the bluffs of the Mississippi are “Oshun’s porch” (Hucks 95; Flowers, “No Rest”). According to Tracey Hucks, Oshun’s role as a feminine deity in Yoruba, and subsequently in the practice of hoodoo, is especially alluring to women who are attracted to the “intrinsic power of femaleness and maternity” found in the presence of Oshun and her companions Yemoja, the goddess of the sea, and Oya, goddess of the wind (95). Whether intentionally or otherwise, it is telling that Flowers has positioned his tale on the bluffs of the Mississippi and used the voice of a female hoodoo conjurer. In doing so, he not only reasserts the diminished reputation of hoodoo in Memphis, but by connecting the city to a female deity, he also raises the respectability of the female conjurer’s place within the community, a role that has traditionally “existed mostly on the margins of folklore and ethnography” as a “barely credible” source of religious power and very little social capital (Tucker 173).

Flowers likewise posits Memphis against its sister river city of New Orleans. Though the juxtaposition of Memphis and New Orleans does not appear until well into the plot of Another Good Loving Blues, it is crucial to understanding Memphis’s role as a sacred place in the novel. Although a majority of the action in Another Good Loving Blues occur in Memphis, most of the primary characters do not hail from the Bluff City. Rather, they are drawn to the city for one reason or another. Most notably, Hootowl, a conjure man who eventually assists the female protagonist along her spiritual journey, leaves New Orleans at the prompting of his Fa, or guardian spirit. With no particular destination in mind, he reaches Memphis, where he immediately feels a “strong, almost mystical sense of being finally home.” “Holyground,” his Fa whispers when Hootowl
steps off the boat and onto the Memphis bluffs, furthering the notion that Memphis is consecrated ground, set aside for a spiritual purpose (Flowers, Another 124).

On the other hand, when Melvira Depree, a noted and powerful conjure woman from the rural Arkansas community of Sweetwater, first travels to Memphis with her lover Luke Bodeen, she finds herself like a fish out of water in the bustling urban setting that is Beale Street. In pursuit of the mother who had abandoned her at birth, Melvira has left her home behind at the prompting of the hoodoo god Legba who delivered his message through the Old Oak tree in the forest near Sweetwater. Melvira understands that there are mysteries that await her in Memphis, but she cannot foresee the perspective that her time in the city will provide her. Initially confident and comfortable in her own capability as a conjurer, Melvira later discovers that the conjuring powers that gave her the reputation as a “known hoodoo” in her hometown fail to measure up to the vast store of hoodoo knowledge that her newfound Memphis colleague Hootowl possesses (Flowers, Another 16, 109). It is on Beale, the “black magic district” of Memphis (Kail 79), and at the behest of Hootowl, that Melvira expands her spiritual knowledge and powers, thus enabling her to participate in the literary hoodoo tradition Flowers touts as a potential solution for the disintegration of the black community’s culture.

Upon their arrival in Memphis, Luke teases Melvira about her wide-eyed awe of the hustle and bustle that is Beale and compares her naiveté to other country folk who have journeyed there. On their first night in town, Melvira acknowledges to herself that “Memphis was going to be real enlightening” and that it was “humbling, how much she didn’t know, how far she had to go” (Flowers, Another 59-60). Melvira quickly acclimates to her new-found home, however, and though Luke mocks her awe of big city
life, the merits of Melvira’s rural background foreground her acclimation to the city. In a nod to the country cosmopolitanism that Zandria Robinson suggests has become the new calling card of racial authenticity for black Southerners, Melvira’s hoodoo training from her foster mother Maggie in the backwoods of Arkansas coupled with her own innate access to the supernatural soon set her apart from the rest of the expansive hoodoo community in Memphis. As she begins to explore the city, Melvira begins to realize that, although “Memphis ha[d] always been a hoodoo town,” most of the practitioners were “charlatans, fools preying on fools [and]…peddling cut-rate dreams” (Flowers, Another 63). In an environment primed for the arrival of Melvira’s authentic spiritual prowess, she quickly finds a niche for herself among her colleagues. So too, as her reputation as a powerful conjurer spreads, does her air of confidence increase. “[A]t home now on Beale,” Melvira adopts a new style of dress that she finds adds a certain flair to her appearance as well as her standing within the hoodoo community (Flowers, Another 110). People notice Melvira when she walks down Beale Street, and she appreciates the public’s open acknowledgement of her appearance and her status.

Melvira’s name as a respected conjure woman is likewise bolstered by a factor that readers could easily skip past if otherwise unaware of its significance. Clearly comfortable with multiple points of access to God, Melvira’s attendance at a Christian church is by no means a surprise to scholars and historians who have long understood the overlap between hoodoo and the Christian faith. As Hucks notes, black Americans, especially black women, have “historically engaged in the negotiation of multiple religious worlds for accessing spiritual power and for obtaining alternative modes of healing and recovery” for their day-to-day ailments and suffering (90). The dialogical
relationship between hoodoo and Christianity indicates that, what Christianity could not offer to the black community’s faith practice, hoodoo could provide or supplement (Hucks 91). Much like contemporary female practitioners of hoodoo, Melvira’s consistent church attendance seems to bolster her faith and spiritual practices instead of distracting her from hoodoo (Hucks 105). More specifically, Flowers’s brief mention that Melvira attends services at Beale Street Baptist furthers her respectability in the local community. Clearly able to provide for herself even after Luke leaves home in pursuit of greater larks than those she can provide, Melvira is uniquely situated in the burgeoning black middle class of Memphis. Unlike her impoverished fellow citizens of color, Melvira has had access both to a formal education and economic stability, and her participation in the Baptist denomination is a reflection of those factors that have set her apart from those in her community who are not as economically stable as she is.

In contrast to the charismatic black churches that first developed around the turn of the twentieth century, their Methodist and Baptist counterparts were conservative in their approach to church liturgy (C. White 4). Chagrined by the “carnival-like atmosphere” of Pentecostal worship services, middle class blacks saw these expressions of faith as a “threat to racial advancement” for former slaves and their descendants (C. White 108, 101). Hoping to distance themselves from every remnant of slavery, including the old-time worship practices of the Holiness movement from which the charismatic congregations derived their church praxis, black Baptists and Methodists were more interested in a “refined rational religious liturgy” than the emotional distractions of spiritual experience more common in charismatic congregations (C. White 3). As such, Melvira’s participation in the black Baptist church would not only have served to cement
her social standing, it could have possibly protected her from attacks by the wider
community that would not have tolerated her conjuring. To a degree, the church provided
more than merely a sanctuary for her spirit, but a safe haven for her person as well.

Melvira’s church attendance was in no way problematic for her hoodoo practice.
As previously mentioned, Melvira herself is at ease with the idea that there are “many
ways to God’,” and her openness to a multiplicity of faith traditions is common to many
hoodoo practitioners who similarly fuse elements of Christianity and hoodoo together.
The physical embodiment of the syncretism of Christianity and hoodoo, Melvira’s church
of choice, Beale Street Baptist, is a real-life house of worship in Memphis. As Tony Kail
mentions in his seminal text on the practice of hoodoo in Memphis, the construction of
Beale Street Baptist reveals the influence of West African religious beliefs in the very
architecture of the building. Built by freed African slaves after the Civil War, the
church’s façade consists of a series of circular windows “reminiscent of the African
prayer symbol known as the cosmogram [that] symbolizes the movement of the sun
through the lives of the living and the dead” (Kail 80). Just as Melvira herself personifies
the intersection of hoodoo and Christian beliefs, so too does the very edifice in which
many of the inhabitants of Memphis’s Beale Street worship the God of Christianity
symbolize the inextricable overlap between the two faiths.

At Melvira’s attachment to her new home grows, so too does her desire to be of
service to her community. Never one to use her hoodoo power for illegitimate purposes
even prior to her arrival in Memphis, Melvira had instead often been responsible for
removing other practitioner’s tricks or helping to find missing or lost items. Her practice
of using hoodoo to help others expands that much further, however, at the behest of her
developing worldview and her growing affection for the people of Memphis. In 1919, the year of Melvira and Luke’s arrival in Memphis, “Beale was still Beale” in that it was still “the heart of colored Memphis” despite the growth of a number of other black neighborhoods in the city that resulted from an influx of people during the Great Migration (Flowers, *Another* 62). One of Melvira’s early customers in Memphis is Cora Robinson, a woman who, along with her husband, had intended to settle in Chicago, but had gotten stuck in Memphis. Lured away from his family by the sights, sounds, and women of Beale, Cato Robinson abandons his family, and Cora appeals to Melvira for assistance. Having survived “everything the delta ever threw at her,” Cora is determined not to “let Beale Street beat her. Or her family” (Flowers, *Another* 72).

Per Melvira’s interactions with community members such as Cora and her own continued observations, “Beale Street circa 1920 was breaking up colored families as quick as they came to town,” and she feels a pressing need to help “[h]er sad beautiful people” (Flowers, *Another* 84, 107). It is not solely the loss of the family unit in Memphis that Melvira finds troubling, however. Even the families and individuals who make it out of Memphis leave her with a sense of “sadness, regret, [and] guilt” that she does not yet know how to do more on their behalf; in “fleeing an implacable enemy” in the South, Melvira’s fellow black folks know not what they will discover in the North, and she does not know how to prepare them for what may come (Flowers, *Another* 107). As already proven by Zandria Robinson, hindsight teaches that the migrating black population would be disappointed with the North and its failure to fulfill their dreams of economic and social stability, thereby accentuating the significance of Melvira’s inability to foresee
what her black sisters and brothers might face once they depart Memphis for unknown places.

Melvira’s desire to assist her community stems from what Zandria Robinson has observed in her interviews with local black citizens of Memphis. As more black people return to the South, not only do their numbers increase, so too does their sense of ownership about the places in which they reside. For many of Robinson’s respondents, the mentality that one has a stake in the successes of one’s home likewise results in the goal of becoming a part of the solution to a place’s problems. Essentially, emotional attachments to place “transform” into “place projects” with defined goals for improvement (Z. Robinson 177). Though initially compelled to journey to Memphis in search of her long-lost mother, Melvira finds herself squarely in the middle of what Flowers clearly considers a cultural crisis. Unsure of how to solve the obvious heartaches that her fellow black residents are suffering, Melvira continues to offer the assistance she is certain will work.

The answer to Melvira’s despair comes in the figure of Hootowl, the local “High Hoodoo” who lives in a boathouse at the foot of Beale (Flowers, Another 116). Although Melvira initially seeks him out for the sake of discovering information about her missing mother, Hootowl has other intentions for their partnership, particularly after he discovers that Melvira can read and write. Fearful that the Great Migration will render hoodoo obsolete, “left behind with the mules and outhouses of the delta,” Hootowl recruits Melvira, echoing Maggie’s early assertions that she is a powerful conjurer who cannot escape the fate that the gods have set before her (Flowers, Another 125). Like many black individuals of his time, Hootowl is illiterate: reading and writing are “power[s] he had
never mastered,” and he sees in Melvira his last chance to “serve the colored race” (Flowers, Another 126). To this end, Melvira’s literacy is yet another tool – or power – that can be wielded to benefit the black community that both she and Hootowl serve, and it is another means of appropriating Western notions of literacy for the purposes of legitimizing black cultural and religious traditions. Instead of spelling the end of hoodoo, written records of hoodoo beliefs and practices will, by Hootowl’s reckoning, preserve it for future generations.

As such, Hootowl plans an encounter between Melvira and a newcomer to Memphis, the folklorist Zora Neale Hurston who really did visit Memphis in the 1910s (citation). Prior to their arrival at Jackson’s Drug Store where Hurston has settled in for a visit with the locals, Hootowl primes Melvira for the coming conversation by articulating his theology of the Divine. When pressed to provide her own definition of God, Melvira “would [have] declared[d] that there is but one God and Jehovah is His name. Or Allah. Or even better, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” Though the historical intersection of hoodoo and Christianity is well-documented, Melvira, is clearly discomfited by Hootowl’s talk of black, African gods, and she is reticent to concede to his assertion that “blackfolks…worship black gods” even though Hootowl insists that “[h]umanfolk have always seen their Gods in their own image.” Melvira reluctantly concedes that Hootowl’s perception of the Divine might have merit as another means of access to God. Hootowl happily accepts Melvira’s tacit acceptance of his faith creed, but he scoffs at the notion that “‘God is some bearded whiteman sitting on a golden throne in heaven,” and he argues that “the African way of seeing God is as valid as the one [Melvira] is using” (Flowers, Another 112). On the other hand, the Western Protestant understanding of God
is, per his calculations, an “[o]utdated mythology” (Flowers, Another 112). According to Hootowl, however, hoodoo practitioners “still got God in they hoodoo,” but “the old gods are forgotten [and] remain only as spirits” instead (Flowers, Another 112). His probe into the depths of Melvira’s knowledge of hoodoo and her familiarity with African religious practices confirms Hootowl’s suspicions about her innate hoodoo power. Though Hootowl is satisfied with her answers, Melvira inwardly confesses that, to her, Africa actually means very little. Even so, as Hootowl rattles off the names of significant African gods, she “let[s] her soul taste [them] and she judged [them] sweet and spiritually satisfying” (Flowers, Another 111). In this moment, readers discover that the syncretism of Christianity and hoodoo her theretofore only been comfortable for Melvira if it operates on the plane of social respectability with a primary reliance on the Christian God and a behind-the-door infusion of hoodoo rituals.

Abandoning his usual habits of keeping to himself and obliging seekers of truth to find him, Hootowl leads Melvira down Beale, where their combined presence attracts a great deal of attention from passerbyers. They reach Jackson’s Drug Store, the “premier gathering hole of Beale Street’s resident intellectuals,” where educated people from the community gather daily to discuss their community’s issues and “appropriate strategic responses of the colored world” to their problems (Flowers, Another 113). One such discussion organically moves to a debate about the legitimacy of hoodoo as a potential solution for the oppression of the black community. The conversation results in an ideological impasse, however, with the conversants’ opinions in clear opposition with one another. Miss Rush, a teacher at the local black normal school, argues that it “represent[s] a fundamental drive of the colored race” (Flowers, Another 114). Everyone
else, it seems, “could not for the life of them see what value magic and magicworkers had for the Negro struggle” (Flowers, *Another* 114). In much the same way that middle-class blacks have historically disregarded any and all expressions of faith rooted in slavery (C. White 3), the regulars at Jackson’s generally agree that “hoodoo was embarrassing, outdated behavior that weakened the colored race and should be allowed to die off at first opportunity” (Flowers, *Another* 114). Dr. Blassingame elaborates, saying that black culture needs to be “‘refined and made suitable for the twentieth century’” (Flowers, *Another* 117). Their concerns about outsiders’ perceptions of hoodoo likewise apply to a collective worry that visitors to Memphis will also consider the city itself as “backwards” Memphis’s black populace is associated with the practice of hoodoo, and they attempt to deflect their subsequent conversation Zora Neale Hurston away from the topic (Flowers, *Another* 117).

Hootowl clearly disagrees, though he notices the shifting attitudes toward hoodoo; as the black population of Memphis grows, he readily perceives that “what they once had feared and respected they now considered a joke and an embarrassment” (Flowers, *Another* 125). At a loss for how to preserve the traditions of hoodoo and their attachments to African culture, Hootowl yet feels “with all his heart that the colored race deserved a spiritual tradition of its own. Needed one desperately. He [also] knew that if the hoodoo way was to remain valid, it would have to find new life and purpose” (Flowers, *Another* 125). When Melvira enters Hootowl’s radius, he quickly recognizes the calling that the gods have placed on her and the favor with which they view her. Quick to remind her of her significance within the hoodoo community, Hootowl orchestrates Melvira’s visit to Jackson’s so that she can meet her “sister…of the cloth,” Zora Neale Hurston –
anthropologist, writer, and recorder of black culture (Flowers, Another 118). Hurston’s records of the stories of conjurers and the traditions of hoodoo is arguably one of the most enduring testaments to the legitimacy of hoodoo as a religious practice (Hucks 92), and it is Hurston with whom Hootowl wishes for Melvira to engage.

During their introduction, Melvira is surprised by the notion of “coloredfolks as writers [because her] reading consisted of the Bible and the newspapers that the Hootowl often asked her to read to him. The thought of writing books on hoodoo was totally news to her” (Flowers, Another 119). Moreover, if, as Hurston has suggested, Melvira is to provide the necessary insight into hoodoo for Hurston’s book, she feels that “the hoodoo world…was in big trouble” (Flowers, Another 119). From the first, the two women recognize themselves in the other woman’s eyes, but Melvira’s insecurity and Hurston’s pride initially impede the progress of their conversation. Mutually intrigued, Melvira and Hurston are “too much alike not to try each other,” and their chat begins as a battle of the will, with neither woman ready to concede her authority for honesty and vulnerability (Flowers, Another 118). When Hurston puts her pen and paper away and discards the demeanor of a formal interview, Melvira responds in kind, surprising even herself with the transparency of her responses and exposing her awe of Hurston’s aspirations to write “[i]mmortal” books (Flowers, Another 119). But for one fleeting moment when Hurston pauses to consider Melvira’s inquiry as to whether she intends to author books specifically about hoodoo, Flowers limits the scope of their conversation primarily to an exchange of their respective motivations for their vocational choices. This moment, however, is critical. From the beginning of Hurston’s interaction with the locals, her regard for hoodoo had been non-committal, even flippant, but her affirmative response to
Melvira’s question is filled with certainty. While not explicitly stated in the text, the tenor of Flowers’s narrative communicates that it is Melvira herself who inspires Hurston’s lengthier exploration of hoodoo.

When Casey, the Beale Street postman, demands to know why Hurston would be interested in writing about hoodoo, Miss Rush gently interjects and says, “‘Why not hoodoo[?] Both…[l]iterature and hoodoo…are tools for shaping the soul’.” In a moment that startles nearly everyone in the drugstore, Hootowl pipes up, adding that “Spiritwork [is] sacred literature” (Flowers, Another 119). When Hurston presses him to elaborate, nothing that “‘[t]here’s a lot of good in Christianity’” and that “‘coloredfolks trust it a heap more than they do hoodoo’,” Hootowl does not disagree, but responds that hoodoo is necessary because it is the black community’s “‘slice of Godhome’” and the source of their “‘African soul’” (Flowers, Another 120). He elaborates, saying that the “only way [the African soul] and the African way [grow], evolves and continues to serve us is when those of us with power choose to serve it,” indicating that it is both his and Melvira’s responsibility as hoodoo conjurers to serve the practice of hoodoo by maintaining its traditions for future generations of the black community (Flowers, Another 120).

Hootowl’s willingness to explore options outside of the historically oral tradition of transferring hoodoo knowledge from one generation to the next bridges the others’ discomfort with how hoodoo’s presence in Memphis impacts perspectives on local identity with the pressing need for the hoodoo community to adapt to changing times. For Hootowl, the preservation of hoodoo ways aligns with Thadious Davis’s and Flowers’s assertions that black Southerners’ must maintain their cultural heritage and create space for themselves inside the social constructs in their local communities. By compiling
hoodoo knowledge into a literary text, Hootowl envisions the multi-fold goal of preserving hoodoo tradition, offering it as a tool for black Southerners migrating elsewhere, and legitimizing hoodoo outside of the black community where white, Western expectations of literacy and literature prevail. A likely byproduct of this endeavor, Memphis would also enjoy an elevated reputation as the place where the literature of hoodoo originated.

When Melvira agrees to converse with Hurston about her knowledge of hoodoo, she also joins a literary movement of other female conjurers who, decades later in the 1980s and 90s, began textualizing their hoodoo beliefs and practices (Hucks 97-8).

Tracey Hucks contends that the move from oral to written sacred texts is troubling, particularly because the transition is indicative of other religious and cultural influences on hoodoo (99). Flowers, on the other hand, clearly believes that, in order for the legacy of hoodoo to be maintained for future generations of black Americans seeking a spiritual and cultural connection with their West African ancestors, it must be recorded in such a way as to be accessible to a broader audience than the ones Hurston initially encountered during her forays into Southern communities where folks were hesitant to vocalize their knowledge about hoodoo or their relationships with conjurers (Hucks 89). As previously mentioned, Flowers acknowledges the dualistic oral and written traditions that he himself has inherited as a black man in a thoroughly Western majority culture, and he remains unconcerned about the intersection of the two literary forms. As such, unlike Hucks, Flowers and the characters he fictionalizes do not find the influence of Western religious and literary traditions on hoodoo problematic; rather, the amalgamation of West African and Western mythologies and traditions merge to form the new spiritual tradition that
Flowers – and Hootowl – so eagerly crave and serve to forge new cultural spaces for the black population in the South.

The fusion of Western and African cultural and religious practices is yet another reason that Hootowl has identified Melvira as the answer to his concerns about the preservation and perpetuation of hoodoo in the black community. In addition to her abilities to read and write, Melvira is also well-versed in the doctrines of both Christianity and hoodoo. Although Hootowl presses Melvira to reconsider the precedence of Christianity in her own belief system, he recognizes that the fusion of the two religious traditions is necessary to the Americanization of hoodoo and its continued presence, if syncretized, in the South, if for no other reason than the fact that the merger of Christian beliefs into hoodoo makes for a more palatable faith practice than hoodoo relying on its own social standing.

The unification of the various dichotomies inherent in hoodoo become that much more apparent near to the end of the novel when a client brings her sick child to Melvira for healing. Realizing the limitations of her own practices, Melvira carries the dying infant to a medical doctor, who, despite his clear disdain for Melvira’s occupation, brings the child into his clinic. Discouraged by her presumption that the “old ways no longer worked,” Melvira falls into a fitful sleep (Flowers, Another 161). In a poignant reminder that the ways of her ancestors are not yet obsolete, Melvira’s dreams on the very night she is losing confidence in her practice finally lead her to the source of her own power, that is, the location of her biological mother in Taproot, Mississippi. Melvira’s eventual reconnection with her mother and her recognition of all that she has inherited as a hoodoo conjurer are further reminders about the significance of connecting with one’s ancestors.
That Melvira ultimately discovers her mother’s location during her tenure in Memphis is further confirmation that the city itself is marked by a potent mythological connection to the West African roots of its black residents.

Hootowl’s insistence that Melvira participate in the written record of hoodoo reflects Flowers’s own agenda of using literature as a vehicle to not only preserve the traditions of the past, but also to create this modernized black spiritual tradition. Hoodoo, however, is not Flowers’s sole means of exploring the juncture between literacy and the collective memories and identity of his fellow black Americans. Memphis’s role—authentic or presumed—as the proverbial ‘Home of the Blues’ is likewise a critical component of Flowers’s literary activism. Mentioned even less often in the annals of local history than hoodoo itself is the lasting intersection between these two cultural traditions: in Memphis, bluesmen on Beale, particularly during the early twentieth century, often purchased mojo hands in Memphis and incorporated various components of hoodoo into their music as well (Kail 19-20). In Another Good Loving Blues, hoodoo meets the blues when Melvira first steps on Beale Street and notes that “[i]t was like the blues were a part of the air she breathed” (Flowers, Another 54). Heavy with the influence of the musical genre for which the city was first known, Memphis was not just the prime location for hoodoo to flourish and console the woes of its black citizens. As the text reveals, the same struggle to survive has historically prompted the origins and practice of both hoodoo and the blues (Kail 84, 162), and it is these social struggles about which Flowers writes in Another Good Loving Blues. Though Flowers swiftly introduces Memphis’s relationship with the blues, it is not until the concluding pages of the text
when his characters finally recognize how the blues and hoodoo can cooperate with each other.

Much like hoodoo, which has alternately been embraced and despised by the black community, the blues have similarly experienced an ambivalent relationship with the general public. On the one hand, blues music has typically been accepted as part of mainstream culture (Cartwright 158). On the other, despite their ability to capture the essence of struggle for their fellow man, bluesmen have not always been respected as steady members of their own communities. Citing a general “non-preoccupation with religion,” Kubik notes that blues music has often been attributed to musicians whose ideas and behaviors did not conform to social expectations of respectability, particularly those held by their Christian counterparts (23). As Adam Gussow explains, the blues were perceived as the “devil’s music” to “God-fearing black parents and ministers” in large part because any “young man who traffics in such profane, unsanctified, low-class” behavior such as “adultery, fornication, gambling, lying, and drinking” has, in fact, “‘sold himself to the devil’” (199-200).

Flowers’s Luke Bodeen embodies this lack of religious fervor, defiantly arguing that that God has little to nothing to do with his drinking and blues playing: “‘God is for folk that cant deal with real’,” he says. “‘I’m a bluesman. God don’t have to carry my load’” (Flowers, Another 42). Moreover, as a roving and rambling bluesman, Luke’s music is appreciated, but folks “never did love those traveling bluesmen like they did their locals – the ones that stayed home and raised families and could probably play you a gospel song as quick as a blues” (Flowers, Another 24). Even among his blues musician peers, Luke’s public reputation pales in comparison to other men like Jake, his musical
partner in Sweetwater, who has a steady day job and a family. Moreover, though Luke himself regards his musical reveries on Beale as akin to a worship service, both Melvira and the community at large appear to disagree (Flowers, *Another* 61-2).

Given that his behavior is generally held in disregard by the Christian community, Luke finds himself – like many of his fellow bluesmen and whether by choice or otherwise – without a permanent home or life partner. Despite his eventual semi-permanent relationship with Melvira and in spite of historical evidence proving that other bluesmen in Memphis sought spiritual assistance from local conjurers, Luke does not hold much with hoodoo either. The interconnected relationship between both traditions, however, cannot legitimately be ignored, and Flowers skillfully narrates Melvira’s and Luke’s journeys toward a deeper understanding of each other’s professions and cultural practices.

As two emotionally broken individuals, Luke and Melvira both find healing through their respective occupations and the spiritual power intrinsic within hoodoo and the blues. Melvira’s connection to her ancestral heritage and her realization for the need of the adaptation of hoodoo to contemporary spiritual needs have already been established. Luke’s journey to taking full responsibility for his role as a keeper of his people’s stories takes much longer, however. From the very beginning of his career Luke firmly believes that his blues help his people to overcome the difficult times, rejoice in the good ones, and “draw strength from adversity [and it] made him feel good to do for blackfolks. To be able to” (Flowers, *Another* 40). Luke knows that “back on the delta, long before books and poems, it was the blues that kept the record. The blues told the stories, they held the delta’s history, they held the delta’s soul” (Flowers, *Another* 39).
Even so, his understanding as to the import of his music to the collective black community does not come until much later in his journey when he correlates the function of written music to his own musical storytelling.

To much the same degree that West African religious practices have been preserved in the American South via oral records passed from one generation of practitioners to the next, the value of the blues as an oral archive of black folks’ stories has been studied at length (Kubik 21). Accounts of musical trends on the African continent note that “the meaning of a song derives from its lyrics rather than from ‘melody,’ ‘rhythm,’ or chord sequences. Devoid of words, the sound patterns lose much of their original meaning.” Borrowing from this concept, it is probable that “early expressions [of] the blues were somewhat more literary than abstract musical (Kubik 26). In Another Good Loving Blues, for example, Luke expresses a distrust of “Jass” music from New Orleans because he prefers words with his music (Flowers, Another 56).

Luke’s first step to awareness about the place that literacy must take on in the preservation of the blues is his introduction to the historical figure of W.C. Handy, one of the most widely recognized Memphis bluesman of all time. Prior to meeting Handy, Luke had acquired his piano-playing skills by ear, learning tricks and tunes up and down the Mississippi as he rambled from town to town. However, much like Hootowl had early on recognized the need for literacy in the preservation of hoodoo, Luke has discovered that, much to his chagrin, reading music has become necessary to keep up with the ever-changing dynamics of the blues. After his arrival in Memphis with Melvira by his side, his instincts tell Luke that “[a] man had to keep up [with learning how to read music] or fall behind [the musicians who already could].” While Luke and his colleagues had been
playing the music for years, Handy had come along and “put [it] down on paper [making] it bec[o]me real for a lot of folk” (Flowers, Another 59). Although Luke insists that “a good blues will last forever” (Flowers, Another 39), he appreciates the fact that his own legacy – and even his livelihood – will not endure if he does not play by the rules of the burgeoning blues industry. Embarrassed by his ignorance, Luke strikes a deal with Handy when the latter offers him a place in one of his bands: in exchange for agreeing to play for Handy, Luke wants the professional musician to teach him how to read music so that he can “‘stay ahead of the changes’” in the blues, thereby securing his reputation as the Delta Luke Bodeen (Flowers, Another 69, 157).

The legitimization of the blues via written records parallels Melvira’s interaction with Zora Neale Hurston and her presumed influence on Hurston’s subsequent literary records of hoodoo narratives, but the intersection between the two traditions does not end with their respective need to be preserved for future generations in the black community. According to the legends that swirl around the origins of the blues, many of the earliest bluesmen like Robert Johnson participated in hoodoo rituals derived from West African religious practices in order to obtain their musical prowess. In more than a passing nod to the West African gods Esu and Legba, who are often symbolized by the presence of a crossroads, the myth that bluesmen acquired their musical acumen by way of a meeting with the devil at a crossroads of two lonely roads somewhere deep in the rural South is a “fairly common motif” in narratives about the blues industry and in blues music itself (Gussow 199; Kail 85). Gerhard Kubik reports that, in Africa, the idea that musicians would make agreements with spiritual beings or the trickster gods is “well documented,” though the emphasis on the nature of the encounter is less on the polarized ideas of good
and evil, mankind and the devil, and more so on the exchange of goods and skills between the two individuals involved (24).

Although Luke lives with Melvira for more than two years and he easily recognizes the signs of spirits interacting with the physical world, he opts to trust his own instincts and talent instead of any supernatural or divine access to power. He does not really lend much credence to hoodoo either, which is ironic given the mystique that hoodoo has historically provided bluesmen (Flowers, Another 104). Luke’s reticence to pay homage to the Christian God quickly comes to light when Melvira presses him to attend Sunday church services with her, and he merely rolls over in bed and goes back to sleep, confident that his performance on Beale the night before was sufficiently reverent to satisfy any deity. In spite of this self-assured demeanor, Luke’s confidence requires a boost from his trusty friend, Tennessee whisky, a glass of which is ever next to him on the piano bench, loosening his fingers and enlivening his blues (Flowers, Another 23). Despite his protests to the contrary, Luke’s reliance on alcohol to ameliorate his performance anxiety undoubtably confirms his need for external assistance.

Even though Luke does not ascribe to the notion that his musical genius was born of anything other than his own innate talent, he is more than willing to acknowledge the potentially magical influence of his music on the natural world. According to Luke, his piano riffs combined with his buddy Jake’s guitar picking had the local blues joint in Sweetwater physically rocking to and fro (Flowers, Another 22). Though he admits to himself that his description is nothing short of a white lie, Luke declares that his blues are critical to poor, rural black counterparts’ cultural identity. Prior to his realization about the significance of the blues outside of his own self-satisfaction and successes, however,
Luke’s life takes a much darker turn in that he ultimately winds up homeless, penniless, and addicted, presumably to the cocaine introduced onto Beale by folks arriving from New Orleans (Lauterbach 126; Kail 105). Unable to articulate his attachment to his music or to entertain the notion of committing himself to another individual for the rest of his life, Luke ultimately leaves Melvira in their shared home on Beale Street and attempts to drink his way to emotional oblivion. His eventual sobriety and stability lead him back to Melvira, and the combined strength of their connections to their ancestors, cultural heritage, and the needs of their community fulfill Flowers’s desire to pave a fresh means of social uplift and preservation for the Southern black community.

During the final stages of novel’s plot, Luke and Melvira find themselves together once again, this time in search of the unincorporated rural community where Melvira has been led to search for her mother. Deep in the backroads of northern Mississippi, Luke and Melvira stumble across the remnants of a recent lynching. Disgusted by the injustices the man suffered, Luke unloads his pistol into the trunk of the tree in which they found the man’s body. As equally disgusted, Melvira holds her tongue until Luke is done expressing his anger, at which point she reminds him that his behavior has not helped the dead man, but rather injured the tree. It is this moment in the action of the novel that Luke’s and Melvira’s respective callings merge for the same purposes. Together, Luke and Melvira remove the man’s remains from the tree and bury him in a shallow grave beneath its branches. Afterward, they individually honor the man’s life, Melvira by praying over his grave and Luke by his vow to write the man a blues song that will preserve the memory of his life and suffering. Having concluded at long last that “[t]he blues [is] about accepting life for what it is, good and bad,” Luke has arrived at a similar
point of self-awareness about his responsibility to convey the “people and life and stories” of his community through the medium of his music (Flowers, *Another* 184).

Memphis’s role in the fusion of Luke and Melvira’s occupations does not end with their respective epiphanies about the spiritual power that undergirds both hoodoo and the blues. After they complete their quest to find Melvira’s biological mother, Luke mentions that he intends to travel to New Orleans where he hopes to learn more about jazz. When he tentatively offers for Melvira to accompany him so that she can meet Marie Leveaux, she agrees, but she quickly reminds him that New Orleans is but a stop on the way to their eventual return home to Memphis. Though the text concludes with the two lovers strolling into the sunset together on their way toward Louisiana, the narration suggests that they fulfill their promises to each other and to their people. It would seem, then, that in the end, Melvira and Luke satisfy Hootowl’s earlier proclamation that Memphis is ‘holyground,’ a place where black folks such as Melvira and Luke can find their spiritual power and work toward the collective good of their community.

As a literary text, *Another Good Loving Blues* serves as the proverbial crossroads of various dual cultural traditions in Memphis. Unlike historical precedence would suggest, however, Flowers holds space in his novel for all of these traditions, thereby suggesting that the tension between them need not create irreversible conflict. Christianity coexists peacefully alongside hoodoo; hoodoo and the blues reside in mutual respect. By integrating the customs of hoodoo and the blues via the written word, Flowers renders black Memphians’ history more readily accessible to the general public, including the white community that has historically sought to suppress the rhythms of minority culture in Memphis. Moreover, by presenting hoodoo as a relevant part of
Memphis’s history, Flowers questions the homogeneity of the Bible Belt’s religious persona and presents a renegotiated version of Beale Street’s reputation strictly as the site for the birth of the blues. In turn, Flowers also makes room for the oral narrative traditions and religious practices inherited by black Memphians from their West African ancestors and demonstrates their influence on the blues in Memphis and the nation at large. Flowers’s contributions to the literary narrative of black Memphis is likewise undeniable given the ways in which he seamlessly ties together historical and contemporary renderings of hoodoo and the blues for the sake of establishing a renewed spiritual tradition for his fellow black Memphians. As literary scholar Patricia Schroeder has stated, “[l]ike the blues, like conuring…Another Good Loving Blues exists in its time and place as evidence of Arthur Flowers’ [sic] literary ‘Rootwork’” (271). In sum, Another Good Loving Blues fulfills the notion that Flowers first presents in the introduction to his novel: “I am hoodoo, I am griot, I am a man of power” (Another 1). By assuming the responsibility for the preservation and continuance of his race’s shared spiritual traditions, collecting them into a written record, and inserting himself into the text as a hoodoo griot and narrator, Flowers has filled his own desire to create a sustainable means of safeguarding black culture and, in particular, those features that have historically been rendered as less than respectable by majority culture.

At first glance, Katori Hall’s Hoodoo Love could simply be a retelling of one of Melvira’s many heartbroken clients. A closer look into the nuances of Hall’s characters and setting, however, provides an alternative view into the gritty poverty in which many of Beale Street’s black residents live. Hoodoo Love portrays varying levels of individuals’ belief in the efficacy and credibility of hoodoo, from Candylady’s adherence
to its rituals, Toulou’s fear and reluctance to utilize it, Jib’s absolute disdain for it, and Ace’s open acceptance of its truth. The figure of the conjure woman Candylady and her methods of practicing hoodoo subtly reveal how poverty impacts the faith traditions of the black community in Memphis, both in terms of hoodoo and its intersection with the black church. Specifically, Hall’s portrayal of Candylady elaborates on the relevance of Christianity within the practice of hoodoo. Lastly, Hoodoo Love’s deep dive into the intersection of religion, social class, race, and gender peels back additional layers of local identity in Memphis, a city where cultural realities perpetuate social marginalization and folks have found or created their own means to survive.

Hall’s writing in Hoodoo Love has been lauded repeatedly by critics for, its “distinct flow and rhythm” and its “killer” and “period-right” dialogue delivered “through the filter of regional dialect” (Nottage; Bommer; Midgette). While Hall’s attention to regional accuracy – presumably from a familiarity that stems from Hall’s status as a native Memphian – is detailed at length, less understood is Hoodoo Love’s presentation of the hoodoo faith tradition. Critics varyingly refer to the hoodoo practiced in Hall’s play as “pagan,” “magic,” “witchcraft,” or the “occult” (Bommer; Thielman). Critics’ understanding of the hoodoo faith further devolves in their appraisals of Candylady, one of the primary characters and a local conjure woman on Beale Street. Alternately referred to as a “helpful elderly woman,” a “sorcerer,” or a “hoodoo witch” with an “occult prescience,” Candylady’s figure is, in the minds of drama critics, delineated by the marginalized status to which hoodoo conjurers, and female conjurers in particular, have historically been relegated (Jones; Bommer; Sparks; Thielman).
Whether conscious or otherwise, this marked distinction between critical reception of the two conjure women in *Another Good Loving Blues* and *Hoodoo Love* is not entirely unprecedented. Several factors account for the differentiation between Melvira and Candylady, among them their respective use of regional dialect (or lack thereof), their socioeconomic status, and their associations with two different black church traditions in Memphis. As previously mentioned, critics have remarked on Hall’s “splendid ear for dialogue” that is rich with the local dialect of Memphis, but what they have failed to mention is just how those same speech patterns likewise tend to predetermine outsiders’ perceptions of the individuals who employ them (Beckett). Where Melvira’s conversations seldom lapses into the Southern dialect a reader might easily anticipate of a character from rural Arkansas, Candylady’s speech is replete with the modified subject-verb agreement, missing transitive verbs, and other patterns indicative of both Southern and Black American English. If common knowledge did not already inform readers about societal perceptions of non-standard versions of American English such as the ones employed by Hall’s characters, and in this instance, Candylady, linguistic researchers from various institutions have concluded that, if not accurate, overtly negative stereotypes of Southern speech yet remain (Amira et al. 1066).

In addition to her Southern dialect, Candylady’s impoverished socioeconomic status further renders her a less respectable character. Although she, too, owns her business and runs her own home in the same way that Melvira operates her hoodoo practice, Candylady’s store in the shanty town at the end of Beale Street has evidently not alleviated her poverty any more than to keep her from the brink of destitution. Because she cannot afford to rise above her station, Candylady’s hoodoo practice is further
maligned as less than acceptable, even by theoretically non-biased critics. In an article from 2011, journalist Chad Beckett openly acknowledges the fact that Candylady’s presence in *Hoodoo Love* highlights the plight of black women and their “lack of control over any meaningful aspect of their lives,” but he is just as ready to condemn various aspects of the play as dangerous because “some viewers [could] come away with justifications for reinforcing stereotypes of African-American speech, manner and customs” (“‘Hoodoo Love’ disturbing”). Beckett concludes his observations of this production of *Hoodoo Love*, saying that director Robert Romirez does not allow his portrayal of the play to “descend to that level” of primitivism and focuses instead on an “accurate portrayal of the world,” a world that “we should dedicate our lives to change for the better” (“‘Hoodoo Love’ disturbing”). Beckett’s diction lends itself to a rather condescending tone that in turn fosters a negative perception of the cultural mores of poor blacks such as Candylady that he clearly feels ought to be rectified, if not eliminated altogether.

The final nail in the coffin for Candylady’s ability to earn respectability is her faith practice. Other researchers have long noted that the intersection of her gender with her place within the hoodoo community would have further limited her social mobility; ultimately, the undercurrent of charismatic Christian traditions in her practice of hoodoo would likewise restrict her social status. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the rise of the Holiness movement from which the Pentecostal black church developed during the turn of the twentieth century was not widely welcomed by American citizens – black and white alike – who believed that social uplift for former slaves and their descendants was dependent on the notions of educational achievement, a diligent work
ethic, and social respectability, none of which the wider public felt were embodied by the emerging Pentecostal churches. Although the Holiness movement originated on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906, the largest charismatic black denomination that rose out of the movement first put its roots down in Memphis. Founded by Charles H. Mason, a former Baptist minister himself, the Church of God in Christ started in Memphis in 1907 after Mason carried the doctrine he learned at the Asuza revivals back home to Memphis (Tucker 90).

As equally dedicated to the ideals of hard work and integrity as their Baptist and Methodist counterparts, members of the COGIC church were less concerned with formal education and public quests for social equity (Tucker 97, 100). Instead of focusing on the uplift of the collective black community through later ventures such as the Civil Rights Movement, the COGIC denomination preoccupied itself with the mission of alleviating their congregants’ daily suffering. Contrary to their Baptist and Methodist predecessors who sought to earn majority culture approval and achieve future success through formal education and job training endeavors, the COGIC church chose to focus especial attention on the afterlife as a means of reminding members of the church that their day-to-day sorrows would eventually find solace in heaven (Tucker 87). Categorically stereotyped for their early refusal to participate in civil rights efforts and their overall lack of appreciation for formally educated ministers, COGIC members did not enjoy a similar status of social respectability as their other black Protestant counterparts.

Other COGIC doctrines and practices furthered the church’s diminished social standing. These rituals were held over from traditions endemic in slave religious practice and were widely held in disdain by black Methodists and Baptists who preferred a
“refined rational religious liturgy” (C. White 3). Largely defined by their adherence to what religious scholar Vittorio Lanterari once referred to as a “passionate religio[us]” experience, COGIC congregants were more often than not far more prone to incorporate the traditions such as the “emotional prayer, song, [and] dance” practiced by their enslaved ancestors (C. White 11). Founder Charles Mason’s promises of divine healing were also appealing to individuals whose access to healthcare was severely limited (C. White 105). Moreover, Mason’s willingness to entertain the notions of magic, spirit possession, exorcism, rootwork, and speaking in tongues further ostracized the COGIC church from the wider community who often criticized these practices as disingenuous or the result of overactive imaginations (Tucker 91). When criticized for his tolerance of such beliefs, Mason “made it clear that Jesus himself believed in healings, spirits, and demons,” thereby justifying his own involvement and that of his church in practices that were not tolerated by other Christian denominations (Tucker 92).

Whatever the drawbacks of Mason’s permissive attitude toward these long-held beliefs that had bled over from West African religions and the religious practices of their forefathers and mothers, the role of Mason’s congregants in the preservation of hoodoo in Memphis is undeniable. According to Tony Kail, the institution of the church was the very “vehicle by which [h]oodoo and African American folk practices” survived in Memphis, and despite the many protests from other Christian churches as to the validity of hoodoo, the relationship between the COGIC and hoodoo communities in Memphis was a friendly one (136). Reverend A.B. McEwen, a COGIC bishop in the 1960s, worked alongside Lucky Heart, one of the most prominent manufacturers of hoodoo products located in Memphis, to recruit salespeople from within his own church congregation
Another local hoodoo manufacturing company, Keystone Laboratories, sometimes operated sales booths at the annual COGIC Convocation during which members of the entire international denomination gathered in Memphis for teaching and fellowship (Kail 128).

Even with Mason’s tolerance of beliefs and rituals rooted in African American folk faith traditions, it was the practice of “speaking in tongues,” or, more formally, glossolalia, that formally divided the Holiness movement from its other black Protestant denominations. In fact, the Methodist Episcopal Church South formally ratified a statement condemning the entire movement over the doctrine of glossolalia in 1894, and other black mainstream churches soon followed (C. White 9-10). Likewise, it is Candylady’s practice of speaking in tongues in Hoodoo Love that subtly reminds readers about the intersection of Christian and hoodoo traditions and further cements Candylady’s lower-class social standing within her community. Unlike Melvira, whose association with the Baptist church rendered her a more trustworthy member of her community, Candylady’s incorporation of glossolalia into her religious practices amplifies the other preexisting strikes against her. If the intersectionality of her race, gender, and hoodoo faith were not already enough to back Candylady in a proverbial corner, the implications of her integration of COGIC rituals into her hoodoo practice further discredit her social respectability.

Despite their many differences, Melvira and Candylady share a certain level of acceptance of Christian beliefs. Candylady’s appreciation for Christian doctrine is much more limited than Melvira’s, however, and she confidently tells Jib, the protagonist Toulou’s preacher brother, that if he wants salvation, he can go to church, but if he wants
“‘somethin’ done’,” he should come to her (Hall 18). According to this statement, Candylady appears to recognize the power of one’s Christian faith, but she also gives more credence to her own ability to make faith become sight. Where Christian faith may save one’s soul, Candylady’s hoodoo can actualize one’s workaday desires into reality.

That Candylady’s hoodoo practice incorporates components of Christianity, and specifically Pentecostalism, in no way diminishes the fervor of her religious beliefs. If anything, the syncretism of the two faiths demonstrates how they supplement each other in ways that are not problematic for the practitioner. As Rabateau explains, “[t]o add the power of Christianity to that of African [faiths] made sense,” because it was better to rely on two sources of magical power than merely one (25). In addition to scholars’ understanding of the historical borrowing between hoodoo and Christianity, Tracey Hucks provides the example of a real-life contemporary Yoruba priestess who, having been raised by her grandmother, found her faith home at the crossroads of her grandmother’s COGIC faith and indigenous heritage (Hucks 101). Moreover, as noted by Kail, the Spiritualist churches in Memphis like St. Paul Spiritual Holy Temple have likewise blended traditions from hoodoo, Catholicism, and Pentecostalism to forge a new spiritual tradition (141). These historical and contemporary precedents for the confluence of hoodoo and Christianity thus normalize Candylady’s lapses into glossolalia during her conjure rituals.

The brief references to the moments when Candylady speaks in tongues are actually notes from the stage directions and not directly a part of the dialogue. Even so, their significance to the text should not be underestimated. In addition to the way that speaking in tongues is a clear borrowing from Christian tradition, Candylady’s
experiences with glossolalia also overlap with a Yoruba practice of being possessed by one of the gods (Rabateau 21). In fact, according to Rabateau, the “phenomenon of possession is the climax of the [religious] service in every one of the [West African religions]” he and his colleagues had studied (36). Although Rabateau and other anthropology scholars have noted that there is an interpretive distinction between West African possession by the gods and the American Protestant filling of the Holy Spirit, they also acknowledge that the two experiences create a “two-way bridge” between the traditions that African slaves brought with them from their homeland and the Christian faith they discovered in the Americas (73). This bridge between the two faith traditions is unmistakably present in Candylady’s hoodoo practice. As has already been documented, Candylady vigorously defends Jib’s dismissal of her rootwork early in *Hoodoo Love* with her assertion that her hoodoo fixes are as equally grounded in faith as the Christian theology he touts. Similarly, the convergence of Candylady’s charismatic experiences with her hoodoo rituals reveal how she herself upholds the various manifestations of her ancestors’ Christian and hoodoo faith practices. Her willingness to modify her own hoodoo fixes also demonstrates her adaptability to the limitations of her circumstances. Unable to procure the “real conjure” materials she needs from Africa, Candylady has learned how to accomplish the same ends with different means (Hall 35). Her recognition of the need to adjust one’s religious rituals to one’s circumstances speaks to Candylady’s resilience in the face of the factors working against her as a poor black conjure woman and the many difficult losses of husbands and children she has endured over a lifetime of pain.
The juncture of African folk faith practices with American Christianity likewise finds expression in the character of Jib, Toulou’s brother and an itinerant preacher recently relocated from Northern Mississippi. It is actually the juxtaposition of Jib’s religious demonstrations against Ace’s doubts about the former’s sincerity that reveal Jib’s denominational background. Though the text does not explicitly indicate Jib’s role within any particular church, context clues about his religious rituals indicate a theological leaning toward Pentecostalism. In addition to Jib’s exuberant scriptural expositions reminiscent of emotive call-and-response tradition prominent in COGIC churches, Jib also upholds other tenets of charismatic faith praxis. Upon their return from a jaunt down to Beale Street, Ace reveals that, in a drunken stupor, Jib had attempted a “layin’ on of hands” with one of the women they had encountered. In turn, the woman’s partner knocked Jib to the ground. Jib replies that he was merely “‘tryin’ to heal her’” in the spirit of another COGIC tradition known as being “slain in the spirit” during which a pastor or preacher places his hands on a congregant for the purposes of manifesting the Holy Spirit’s power to heal (Hall 30; Bolinger).

This moment in the text is one of many revelations about Jib’s ignorance and hypocrisy. Though Jib freely belittles Candylady’s hoodoo practice, he is unaware of the correlations between his own faith rituals and West African and African slave religious traditions. Jib’s attempt – though clearly not innocent – to lay hands on the wayward woman on Beale theologically serves the same purpose as Candylady’s lapse into speaking an unintelligible language during her hoodoo rituals: to fortify the believer with the power of the spirit, whether that of the Holy Spirit or the spirits of West African gods and ancestors. Contemporary charismatic practitioners often experience the phenomena...
of speaking in tongues and being slain in the Spirit concurrently, thus making the assumption that Jib comes from a charismatic, Pentecostal, or even COGIC background a logical one (Hinn). Even so, Jib’s lifelong hypocrisy has far more of an impact on his reputation than does his faith, and his failures to maintain the integrity of his supposed salvation subject his sister Toulou to more than her fair share of trauma. Although Jib’s denominational history theoretically impacts his social standing, it is his duplicitous practice of Christianity that traumatizes Toulou and creates the need for her to escape to a safe place. That she settles in Memphis, yet destitute and lacking in opportunities to alleviate her poverty, still speaks to the city’s critical role in her self-actualization.

Of the four primary characters that Hall introduces in *Hoodoo Love*, it is Toulou who drives much of the action. She is the figure that the text, and thus the readers, are rooting for, and ultimately it is her dreams alone that come to fruition at the conclusion of the play. Similar to Melvira from *Another Good Loving Blues*, Toulou has come to Memphis by way of her rural hometown in Mississippi. Their rural background is where the similarities between the two women end, however. Although Toulou is financially independent in that she lives alone and provides for herself, her day-to-day subsistence hinges on the meager income she brings in toiling as a domestic worker in white families’ homes. Like many others who migrated to the big city in search of jobs and security, Toulou has found herself at the mercy of an economy that is predominantly managed by a privileged few white folk, and her wages are insufficient means for her to rise above her circumstances. She lives in a shanty town at one end of Beale, where her neighbors are likewise inhibited by their socioeconomic insecurity.
Hoodoo Love is, primarily, the narrative of Toulou’s growth from a girl who kowtows to the men in her life to a self-aware woman capable of relying on herself. Part of this journey is Toulou’s entry into the practice of hoodoo. Initially, Toulou is cautious about dipping her toe into the waters of hoodoo rituals, in large part because of her conservative Christian upbringing. Albert Raboteau indicates that Toulou’s reaction to hoodoo is normal, but that Christians who believed that the practice of hoodoo was evil did not necessarily deny its power (287). In fact, “what the intellect denied [about hoodoo], the emotions and the imagination affirmed” about its ability to influence people and events (Raboteau 281). Though clearly hesitant to access it for herself, Toulou appears to fall into this category as a believer in the power of hoodoo. Her unwillingness to participate in hoodoo is evidently from a place of fear and not disbelief. From the moment she first refuses to relieve herself out of doors due to her fear of “‘haints jumpin’ up” inside her, Toulou demonstrates an avid appreciation for the sway that hoodoo holds over the day-to-day lives of mankind (Hall 7). According to Raboteau, Toulou’s fears are not unfounded in that a similar “fix” among enslaved hoodoo practitioners “culminated with snakes or spiders roaming up and down inside the victim’s body” (278). Though traditional hoodoo lore would have demonstrated that rootwork and fixes are practiced for the sake of the “safety and security” of the individual and not the “good versus evil” binary that is present within the Christian faith (Raboteau 287), Toulou’s awe of hoodoo’s latent power does not induce her to partake of its ability to provide for her well-

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1 See also Yvonne P. Chireau’s explication of “bodily intrusions” in Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition, pg. 104-6.
being. Candylady, however, like her fellow conjurers, finds it foolish that Toulou would deny hoodoo’s capacity to protect her (Raboteau 287; Hall 16).

Toulou’s hesitation to find solace in the practice of any religion stems largely from her own experience with having been abused and manipulated by men of faith. “Toulou,” a nickname given to her by her father, is a testament to her past, as it refers not only to her diminutive stature, but also to the fact that she was “too lil’” to understand what was happening to her when her brother began sexually assaulting her as a child (Hall 8). In addition to her initial refusal to partake of Candylady’s generous offer, Toulou candidly informs her brother that, for all his preaching, he “might as well be talkin’ jibberish for all the folks [in Memphis] know” (Hall 20). According to Toulou, the poor residents in her part of town, herself included, do not attend church, and Jib would be better off establishing a juke joint than a church. While Toulou’s assertion is grounded in a practical approach to Jib’s venture, it also speaks to her own apathy toward religion.

Desperation changes Toulou’s tune, however, when she falls in love with Ace. Determined to know what it feels like when “somebody love you…wit’ all they heart,” Toulou reaches out to Candylady for a conjure fix (Hall 68). In one production of *Hoodoo Love*, Toulou’s acceptance of Candylady’s faith practice is symbolized by a clothesline strung between the two women’s homes, a metaphor for the bridge that has been constructed between the old ways of Candylady’s conjure and Toulou’s heritage as the daughter of a Christian preacher (Finn). When Toulou finally consents to Candylady’s offer of a mojo bag, it is an impulsive decision, again driven by her pressing desire to be fully loved, though her initial doubts about hoodoo remain intact as she questions the power of the materials inside the sack Candylady hands her. The elder
woman defends her repurposing of everyday objects, telling Toulou that “‘[she] can’t go all way ‘cross the ocean back to Africa to get the real conjure’,” so she had to replace the original conjure objects with what she has on hand (Hall 35). Candylady’s use of materials at her disposal is emblematic of the “historical process of localization and innovation” that Hurston first noticed in her landmark record of black American folklore and hoodoo traditions *Mules and Men* (Hucks 90), and it also reflects Ishmael Reed’s insistence in his manifesto that hoodoo is adaptable, that practitioners might “modif[y] and chang[e] the ceremonies in various ways” in response to their circumstances (418). In this way, Candylady’s substitution of traditional rootwork practices for what is readily accessible to her reflects the overall adaptation of West African religious rituals to American soil. As Rabateau explains, the “unavailability of certain African [materials] did not lessen the responsibility felt by [the gods’] devotees” to find “fit offerings in America” (39).

Candylady’s reference to her mojo bag as a nation sack is yet another way that the localization of hoodoo is revealed in *Hoodoo Love*. As Tony Kail mentions in *A Secret History of Memphis Hoodoo*, the use of a nation sack is local to the greater Mid-South region in and around Memphis (47). As detailed by Kail, these bags were often used to secure a husband or lover’s “nature” and thus his faithfulness to the relationship (48). In *Hoodoo Love*, Candylady offers to lend Toulou her own nation sack for the sake of not only preventing Ace’s wandering eyes from seeking sexual fulfillment elsewhere, but also for the purposes of acquiring his heartfelt love for Toulou (Hall 16). Moreover, the connectivity between Candylady’s nation sack and Memphis gestures toward the idea that the city is an active agent in Candylady’s ritual.
The hoodoo rituals that evolved in the environment local to Memphis are not the only unique manifestations of hoodoo in the city. Memphis’s location along the bluffs of the Mighty Mississippi and its connection to the hoodoo god Oshun have already been mentioned in this chapter, but they are of much greater import in *Hoodoo Love*. Mentioned only in passing in *Another Good Loving Blues*, Oshun comes to life in *Hoodoo Love* as an active conversant in Candylady’s and, later, Toulou’s faith practices. Though not explicitly named, Oshun participates in the lives of the characters in the form of the Mississippi River, which, in keeping with hoodoo beliefs about the goddess of the river, Hall identifies as a feminine persona (56). Mere pages into the text, Candylady reveals that “[t]he river” has spoken to her regarding Ace’s philandering tendencies. Toulou’s general unwillingness to give credence to such presumed superstitions persists, and she argues the validity of Candylady’s knowledge, insisting that she does not “believe in all that” (Hall 14). In a parallel to the scenes in *Another Good Loving Blues* in which Maggie and Hootowl both remind Melvira of the gods’ confidence in her hoodoo skills, Candylady informs Toulou that, despite her unbelief, the river still believes in her.

Candylady’s assertion indicates a certain degree of protectiveness that Oshun offers Toulou, a sentiment that is repeated several times throughout *Hoodoo Love*. Toulou’s move to Memphis from the fields of northern Mississippi was supposed to offer her protection from the sexual advances of her brother Jib, who eventually follows her to the city. After yet another traumatic assault, Toulou becomes pregnant and is uncertain whether the child is Ace’s or her brother’s. Determined to rid herself of what she firmly believes is Jib’s baby, Toulou presses Candylady to provide her with the same fix that could have prevented their neighbor Rhonda from birthing her many children. Candylady
hesitates, reminding Toulou that, as a conjure woman, she should heed Oshun’s instructions not to give Toulou the tincture. Angry at the world, Toulou defiantly maintains that she had her own conversation with the river, who told her that the baby is hers to do with as she pleases (Hall 56).

Protestations to the contrary, Toulou also recognizes the Mississippi’s supernatural might. In telling Jib and Ace that the river has the power to “fold a year back on itself,” Toulou addresses her newfound respect for Oshun’s ability to direct the lives of humankind (Hall 72). Having resolved to heed the river’s wisdom, Toulou abandons the notion of using Candylady’s liquid concoction to force a miscarriage and instead chooses to utilize its power to rid herself of Jib. In her efforts to poison her brother with the tincture, Toulou hopes to turn back the hands of time and divest herself of his ability to thwart her dreams of true love and public renown. Despite her best laid plans, it is Ace – and not Jib – who partakes of the poisoned flask, and instead of a long, happy life with her love, Toulou finds herself a single mother compelled to find more secure economic footing in order to provide for her daughter.

Frustrated by her lack of certainty about the future, Toulou has opted to take control of her own life, the consequences of which are both a cautionary tale regarding her lack of obedience to Oshun and a word of encouragement that the universe will find its own way to remain in balance. The results of Toulou’s plan to remove Jib emphasize Candylady’s ongoing admonitions throughout the text to take Oshun’s instructions to heart. Instead of joining Ace on the “Cotton Belt” to stardom, Toulou must forge her own way to a successful musical career, this time as much out of necessity as from desire (Hall 11). When she finally recognizes her need to travel the river’s route as she pursues
a career as a blues singer and seeks the fame she so dearly craves, Toulou comes full circle in terms of her attitude toward the Mississippi’s authority over her circumstances. In fact, the connection that she has forged with Oshun has likewise anchored her to Memphis; although she will follow the river in pursuit of her musical career and to provide for her child, Acie Mae will remain in Candylady’s care in Memphis, the home to which Toulou will return time and again as she raises her baby.

Through her insistence on taking her fate into her own hands and her failure to adhere to the river’s counsel, Toulou ultimately learns the lesson that Candylady had been trying to teach her all along: that though hoodoo will tell her what is “most like[ly] to be possible,” it cannot predict “what will finally be,” and she ultimately has a shared responsibility for her destiny (Hall 58). Had Ace survived Candylady’s poison, his attitude toward Toulou’s desire to pursue a musical career through the text indicates a general unwillingness to support her efforts. Although Toulou’s happy ending has come at great cost to herself, Hoodoo Love concludes on a high note. Despite her obvious heartbreak, Ace’s death and Jib’s apparent departure leave Toulou to her own devices and she is free from anyone else’s plans to curtail her achievements. As such, the play ends with Toulou optimistic about the future and confident in her own agency: for the first time, Toulou will not be at the mercies of any man and will be able to “[n]ame [her]self for once” (Hall 85). Thus, Toulou’s foray into hoodoo comes full circle – from a place of fear and disbelief, to an effort to subvert Oshun’s intentions for her life, and, finally, to an ownership of her own identity, once that is highly influenced by the city in which she lives and its firm attachment to hoodoo.
Altogether, Melvira Dupree, Luke Bodeen, and Toulou’s respective growth or acceptance of their hoodoo practice creates a unique space for black Memphians within local society. Although Memphis’s notoriety as an oasis for hoodoo practitioners has been studied at length by folklorists and other academics (Kail 19), Arthur Flowers and Katori Hall lend their literary voices to reclaim the actual agency of the “‘Lost American Church’” that had been compelled to move underground and “forced to say/Goodbye to America” (Reed 417, 421). In Memphis specifically, hoodoo practitioners have withstood persecution from the community and the justice system from their earliest days in the city and well into the 1970s. So, too, had the Spiritualist churches that sprung from hoodoo been as equally scrutinized and subjected to accusations of witchcraft, Voodoo, and midnight orgies (Kail 140). Flowers’s and Hall’s active repossessio of hoodoo in contemporary texts set in Memphis thus pulls back the curtain behind which hoodoo has hidden for decades and renders it a living, thriving practice of faith rather than a mere object of academic interest or public curiosity. Ultimately, their work provides profound insight the culture, faith-based mythologies, and racial and local identities of Memphis. With the city’s placement on the bluffs of the Mississippi, Memphis has a natural connection to hoodoo and the god Oshun, thus making it a beacon for individuals who wish to settle in a place with the inherent power to actualize the rituals they practice. In celebrating hoodoo as a relevant piece of historical and contemporary black culture, Flowers and Hall have redirected the narrative about black Memphis from a focus on the demise of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the overall plight of black Memphians, to one of individual and collective agency and local pride that simultaneously forges a creative and cultural space for the local black population.
A Love Letter to Memphis

*I love Memphis. I guess you could say, in the way that you love a brother even if he does sometimes puzzle and sadden and frustrate you. Say what you want about it, it’s an authentic place. I was born and raised in Memphis, and no matter where I go, Memphis belongs to me, and I to it.*

--Hampton Sides

The same year that Private Joe Heath joined the ranks of the Memphis Fire Department, his fellow firefighters conducted a demonstration of new equipment at a controlled fire in downtown Memphis. Their target was a large Queen Anne-style home originally built in the 1880s by Robert R. Church, the South’s first black millionaire and a preeminent Memphian at the turn of the twentieth century (Lauterbach 305). When Bob Church died in 1912, his body was interred at Elmwood Cemetery, the resting place for veterans of both the Confederate and Union armies from the Civil War, victims of the 19th-century yellow fever epidemics in Memphis, author Shelby Foote, and other noteworthy Memphians (Lauterbach 304). In 1960, the ashes of a one Robert Richard Gray were likewise buried into his family’s historic plot at Elmwood. After his untimely death at the age of twenty-four, Gray’s burial would, in due time, influence the direction of this project. Two decades later and just fourteen years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I was born in Memphis to two native Memphians who were themselves the children of Memphians. Joe Heath and Richard Gray were my grandfathers, both of whom were bound to this city on the bluffs in different ways. The former served the City of Memphis for over thirty years in fire services and public works,

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and the latter was the descendent of a long line of Memphians who had lived in the city since before the Civil War. Not to overstate the facts, but my roots run deep in this place.

With that legacy intact, one might think that I grew up with an unequivocal sense of civic pride in my hometown. For example, in Memphis, one of our most dearly held myths is that the Chickasaw Bluffs deflect the wrath of our Southern tornados and send them elsewhere, notably the more sparsely populated Tipton County to our north or DeSoto County just across the state line in Mississippi. The belief in this nearly supernatural safety net around Memphis is just another one of the many ways we have tried over the years to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the region. I also know that Memphis is the biggest small town ever: in Memphis, we don’t ask where you went to college, namely because those of us who go to college mostly attend the same handful of schools. Instead, we ask where you went to high school because we can ascertain a lot more about you with that information.

The converse, however, of finding satisfaction in my identity as a Memphian would prove true well into my young adulthood. Unlike the rest of Memphis’s meticulously censored narrative of self that failed to account for repeated variations of over a century of racial violence and terror, the city has never been able to fully release its mantle of shame over Dr. King’s death within its environs or shirk what some presume was the city’s responsibility for the circumstances preceding his assassination. To this day, matters of social import in Memphis are often colored along the black-white racial binary, and it is not uncommon for conversations behind closed doors to attribute social and political discord in the city to the respective race of whoever may be involved. Mutual accusations of racial privilege are often cast between parties from either side of
racial lines, and I cannot count the number of times I heard it said that someone else’s success was based on the merit of the color of their skin. Disheartened by the persistent, nagging, divisive overtones in my city, I was determined to leave as soon as I had two nickels of my own to rub together.

That said, I was certain that the possibility of my successful departure from Memphis was, at best, doubtful. Over the course of my childhood and young adulthood, everyone I knew from Memphis who had moved away had likewise eventually returned. At the time, I could not think of a single exception to this phenomenon, and I began to refer to the city as a black hole, a place from which no one could truly escape. Even after high school, many of my classmates who attended school or moved elsewhere returned to the same suburb where we had spent many of our formative years, but I was determined that, if I left, I would never come back. Two years ago, I shared this metaphor with Courtney Miller Santo, a creative writing professor at the University of Memphis and published author of *Three Story House*, another novel set in Memphis. When I shared my thoughts with her, Courtney replied, “Yes, but think about the kind of power that indicates about Memphis.” Courtney’s positive spin on what even then was my lingering negative attitude toward Memphis took me by surprise, and it has since become one of those defining moments that has shifted my mentality about my hometown from one of resentment, to resignation, and, eventually, to respect.

Another pivotal moment in my journey of recognizing and claiming my identity as a Memphian occurred during a conversation with my friend and colleague Alana Prashad, the director of professional practice at the British Columbia College of Social Workers. When I had finished describing the meandering path that led me to write this
rendering of my dissertation, she adamantly proclaimed that my dissertation was a “love letter” to my city. Alana’s profound observation about my attachment to Memphis succinctly captures the full circle of my journey of finding myself in Memphis and encapsulates my intentions in conducting the research and presenting the information I have discovered in this dissertation: that is, as a native Memphian, I have stepped outside of my social status as a white woman and a native Memphian to access the perspectives of other citizens of Memphis who have had to wrangle with local and regional social structures in order to gain their much-deserved recognition as Memphians.

My personal narrative is absolutely critical to this dissertation because it informs the perspective from which I have evaluated and written about the texts herein. As Scott Romine suggests, a sense of place – its local identity, if you will – may “very well be just that – merely, a feeling or an idea” (21). Particularly given my lifelong relationship with Memphis, my assessment of its identity is undeniably influenced by my emotional ties to my hometown. Certainly, the authors whose work I have showcased in this dissertation likewise suffer from a similar predicament. As Yi-Fu Tuan theorizes, however, sentimental attachments to place need not impede one’s intellectual understanding of it. Rather, he claims that “thought and feeling” are not polar opposite means by which to evaluate place, but that they fall on a spectrum of knowledge; therefore, emotional perceptions of place – and, subsequently, mythologies of place – are as equally valid contributions to place narrative as verifiable, sensory observations (10). My choice, then, to use authors who are native-born Memphians like myself or who, like Peter Taylor, at

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2 A. Alana Prashad, personal communication with the author, January 14, 2021.
least lived here for a lengthy period of time, likewise adds to the scholarship about Memphis. With the combination of their intuitive perceptions of the city and my insight into all things Memphis, my dissertation serves the purpose of expanding our knowledge of Memphis’s place identity.

From the start, *A Summons to Memphis* anchors my project in that it offers readers a fresh perspective about the trappings of the Religion of the Lost Cause and the Cult of Southern Womanhood from a white upper-class family new to Memphis. *Old Jim Canaan* elaborates on the influence of Christianity in the South, but through the viewpoint of Irish Catholics who immigrated to the Bluff City and found a measure of acceptance via their whiteness; their story provides an alternative to white Protestant civil religion through the lens of Catholicism. Together, these two texts contextualize how the contrasting Protestant and Catholic white communities in Memphis have regarded their position within the local social infrastructure; they also provide insight into how race, ethnicity, social class, and religion impact the formation of a local identity in a city already struggling to define its identity and reputation.

*The Pinch* and *The Ladies Auxiliary* offer a glimpse into the history and contemporary reality of the thriving, if small, Jewish community in Memphis. In each text, the intricacies of Jewish mythology and Orthodox praxis are woven together beautifully into an original depiction of local Jewish identity. *The Pinch* challenges its readers to consider what the community loses when generations of Jewish Memphians gradually begin to shed the tenets of their faith and the cultural myths that preserve the history of their people. In its final pages, however, when Lenny Slarew sets fire to the bookstore on North Main where copies of Muni’s republished novel are stored, Stern’s
narrative implies that, no matter how strenuously the Jewish traditions may attempt to disappear, they can never truly be forsaken. The ‘reappearance’ of *The Pinch* as Stern’s own book attests to that. According to Stern, for all of Memphis’s faults, it yet remains a safe space where Jewish residents can assume and maintain both their religious and their local identities.

With *The Ladies Auxiliary*, we find a body of Jewish women on the opposite extreme of religious fervor. So terrified of losing their children, their faith, and the safety of their small Jewish community to the secular world, the women overcompensate with an intensity of religiosity that is difficult to sustain. In turn, they succeed in doing the very thing they dread the most when several of their children abandon the community to pursue their lives elsewhere. Despite the departure of various characters from Memphis in each of the two texts, they both still communicate the magnetic pull that Memphis has on its homeborn citizens.

And, lastly, with the cumulative power evoked by *Another Good Loving Blues* and *Hoodoo Love*, we see a group of Memphians who have taken charge of their destiny. Although the local black community has historically been the most visibly marginalized population in Memphis, both Flowers and Hall present narratives that speak to the community’s resilience. In these texts, the community’s ability to embrace its ancestral heritage and fortify itself is remarkable. Specifically, a key difference between *Another Good Loving Blues* and *Hoodoo Love* and the texts from the first two chapters is that the characters in these two texts express little to no reluctance about assuming a local identity. Instead, they steadfastly pursue all manner of outlets to convey their enthusiasm for an identity that is at once uniquely black and uniquely Memphian. Hoodoo especially
fulfills the requisite criteria for the residents of Beale Street who need something that anchors them to their past and tethers them to their present reality. The blues, too, offer them the chance to record their cultural narratives with an eye both toward their historical woes and their hopes for the future. Melvira, Luke, and Candylady’s eager acceptance of hoodoo and the blues as authentic expressions of black culture and their dedication to preserving these traditions bridges socioeconomic and educational gaps in their community and ensures that future generations of black Memphians will have access to their knowledge. Moreover, by weaving Memphis itself into their cultural expressions, these Memphians has likewise found a way to attach themselves to the city. Regardless of their various reasons for traveling outside of Memphis, Melvira, Luke, and Toulou express their intent to return, thereby reinforcing the notion that Memphis exudes an almost supernatural force that will summon her citizens homeward.

I fully recognize that the texts and communities I have surveyed in this dissertation can in no way represent the totality of our local population. One obstacle is that, per my research, certain communities in Memphis do not appear in the local literary canon, at least not in texts published by local authors. Our burgeoning Latino community lacks representation, as do our refugee neighbors, Muslim friends, and the LGBTQIA community. The lack of narratives that might tell their stories has certainly limited the scope of my dissertation, but my earnest hope is that, as these stories enter the local literary landscape, they, too, will contribute to our understanding of local identity and culture. In the meantime, the current availability of texts about Memphis, namely those that are considered in this dissertation, offer readers interested in Memphis and its
citizens the singular perspective of native Memphians writing about the city where they were born and raised.

As evidenced by these narratives, we as Memphians jump at the chance to assert the exceptionalism of our local identity. I nearly missed another of these occasions when I first saw the director’s cut from the 2011 remake of *Footloose*, which was directed by Craig Brewer, also a native Memphian. As he introduced one of the more prominent dance scenes in the film, Brewer mentioned that the bold and brassy steps of a particular dancer embodied his idea of an authentic representation of Memphis. At first, his comment seemed nothing more than a passing remark about his directorial role. A second pass through his commentary about the film, however, had me raising my eyebrows, and I recognized that Brewer’s notions of Memphis paralleled many other Memphians’ conception of their hometown as a city that has had to ‘grit and grind’ its way to recognition. Whether in literature, film, or other genres of cultural production, this mentality undeniably continues to define how Memphians see themselves.

Whether local mythologies such these are rooted in historical accuracy or in the bluffing we swear isn’t part of who we are is not really all that significant; rather, the fact that these stories orient how we feel about ourselves and about Memphis is far more important. As Tuan notes, individuals tend to regard their homes as “intimate space[s]” that center their experience of the world around them (144); to this end, the intimate portraits that, as Memphians, Peter Taylor, Margaret Skinner, Steve Stern, Tova Mirvis, Arthur Flowers, and Katori Hall have each painted of Memphis celebrate how the city has participated as an active agent in the development of local identity. If these texts function as means of hanging onto our dignity as Memphians, then so be it. The fact
remains that literary narratives serve in a profound capacity for both insiders and outsiders in search of intimate knowledge about a place. For Memphians, this has entailed using literature as one means of coming to grips with a historically dissatisfactory local identity. In the end, however, what local literature tells us is that we have access to traditions, rituals, and people in our midst that elevate our community and give us more than enough reason to be proud of where we came from.


