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Gina Caison

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GINA CAISON
University of California, Davis

Claiming the Unclaimable: Forrest Carter, *The Education of Little Tree*, and Land Claim in the Native South

FOR THE PAST TWO DECADES SCHOLARS OF NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE have continually returned to a perplexing question in the field: what motivated Asa Carter, a notorious white-supremacist from Alabama, to re-invent himself as a Cherokee man named Forrest Carter and to compose one of the most successful Native American literary texts in history, *The Education of Little Tree*? The corresponding question, of course, is why did audiences, publishers, and scholars—Native and non-Native alike—fall for it?¹ Typically, examinations of this text begin with a discussion of Carter’s identities, real or imagined, and end by asserting the implications of the controversy for Native (and occasionally ethnic) literature as a whole. This approach does give us specific insight into the *what*, *how*, and *why* of the ever-growing interest in, and canon of, Native American texts. However, it neither enacts nor encourages a prolonged consideration of Carter’s novel within the field to which it might most rightly belong: the literature of the US South. Instead of revealing only the false preconceptions about Native American literature, *Little Tree* has equally serious implications for audiences’ conceptions and misconceptions of the South. Rereading the text as Southern rather than as Native literature may not generate the answers critics desire regarding Carter’s identitarian motives, but to do so may begin to explain the novel’s early and continued popularity. Considering Carter and *Little Tree* as a part of the discussion in Southern as well as Native literature foregrounds the need that Eric Gary Anderson identifies when he asks that “American and Southern Studies . . .

¹The author extends thanks to Mark Jerng, John Garrison, Karolyn Reddy, and the readers for *Mississippi Quarterly* for their thoughtful and precise suggestions on previous drafts. For the background on Forrest Carter’s identity as Asa Carter and his political activities, see Allen Barra, Dan Carter, and Jeff Roche.

reimagine their own provocative presences and absences within Native Studies, to rethink . . . the tenets and governing assumptions of these disciplinary ‘regions’” (par. 16). In other words, this examination of Carter’s novel argues for a more dynamic exchange between the two often separated conversations. *Little Tree* necessitates such an engagement as it pushes audiences to consider their expectations, valuations, and analyses of texts based upon their correspondence to an author’s racial or regional identity. Additionally, *Little Tree* highlights the role of the US South in the nation’s imagination as an emotive and abject space and provides insight into where the construction of a popular Southern identity formulation fits within the American literary landscape. Through the novel’s temporal and spatial construction of an imagined Native South, *Little Tree* foregrounds the deep historical narratives that continue to affect the way we read within Native American and Southern Studies today.

Carter’s problematic conflation of generalized Native and white southern character constructions is not the only reason that we could productively read *Little Tree* as a work within the canon of US Southern literature. Rather, reading *Little Tree* as Southern fiction yields insight into the terrain of racial identities within the region that extend past the familiar black-white binary and renders visible the ways in which the US South has been imagined by the rest of the nation as a paradoxically romantic and disavowed space. Instead of simply identifying Carter’s false construction of Cherokee culture in the novel, it also seems necessary to consider why he chose an escape into Native identity, not as a generalized instance of “playing Indian” or “going Native” but rather as an act deeply invested with his own specific regional identity as Southerner. The book and the discourse surrounding it—including celebratory reader responses, national awards, and scathing critiques—are infused with concerns over genealogy and origins. This genealogical concern constitutes one way that the South has continually constructed and reconstructed racial identity and the fear of racial amalgamation. The text’s articulation of a Confederate Lost Cause ideology further connects it to larger trends in Southern literature, as does its appeal to an affective bond of Southern identity that is highly invested in a quasi-mystical attachment to the land. Significantly, on a syntactic and narratological level, *Little Tree* compulsively deploys ellipsis, among many other forms of anachrony, in order to imagine a space both

geographical and temporal where history—particularly Southern history—can be rewritten towards differing ends.

These textual elements do not differ altogether from some of the readings primarily concerned with the novel's place in the canon of Native literature. The three most common claims regarding *Little Tree* have been that it 1. represents Carter's atonement for his racist past; 2. hides a sinister narrative of white supremacy beneath a hopeful exterior of "Cherokee" mythology; or 3. produces such positive valuations of good morals that these contradictory possibilities and the immorality of its author become irrelevant.² Each of these interpretations offers an important way into the text and its attendant issues, but because each of them stays primarily concerned with Forrest Carter as Native, they never quite reach the important issue of Asa Carter as Southerner. It almost seems obvious that Forrest Carter has little to offer in the way of Native identity constructions past the superficial and pervasive stereotypes of Native people. When the critiques of *Little Tree* remain at the level of debating or revealing Carter as non-Native, they unconsciously perpetuate these identifications. While the *nom de plume* Forrest Carter cannot provide answers to questions of Native identity, the authorial figure Asa Carter abounds with insights into the workings of Southern identity in literature. These moments go past the superficial: in Carter's attempt to erase himself as Southerner and redraw himself as Native, he casts the region and its worst desires in the most striking relief. Furthermore, it seems unfair that Native critics and authors such as David Treuer, Sherman Alexie, and Daniel Heath Justice are continually asked to atone for Carter's sins as impostor. By repeatedly framing this debate as one about Native identity, critics and popular audiences engage in an intellectual equivalent of waste-dumping, failing to account for what Carter says about the worst impulses in white Southern identity. This essay attempts to reclaim the unclaimable—not to celebrate it, but to work against the impulses of intellectual colonialism that continually figure the Native community as having the "problem." Reading Carter as Southern helps the region possess its own colonial ambivalences and realize that as Anderson suggests, even when

²For differing, although representative, readings of *The Education of Little Tree*, see Shari Huhndorf, Laura Browder, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., David Treuer, Daniel Heath Justice, and Sherman Alexie. Even Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* includes a character who questions the inclusion of *Little Tree* on an American Indian literature syllabus.

Southerners invoke a “sense of home” this home remains on Native ground (par.16).

To offset Forrest Carter’s autobiography as Native, I would like to re-read Asa Carter’s history as Southerner, not simply to rehearse what we know about his forgery, but rather to place *Little Tree* in the context of the Southern novel. Placing the book in the context of Carter’s history as a Southerner allows us to see the intersections, investments, and exchanges between constructions of the South and constructions of Native America. Originally published in 1976 by Delacorte Press as *The Education of Little Tree: A True Story*, Carter’s “autobiographical” tale enjoyed a moderate amount of success in its initial run.³ That same year, Carter enjoyed an even more phenomenal success in convincing Clint Eastwood to make a film version of his first literary venture, *Gone to Texas* (1975) or, as it was originally entitled, *The Rebel Outlaw Josey Wales* (1975). The film, released in 1976 as *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, quickly became an iconic Western. Two years before Eastwood’s cinematic adaptation of *Josey Wales*, Asa Carter entered the FBI headquarters in Anniston, Alabama and announced his plans to what we might term “go off the grid.” As an anti-government white supremacist with a violent past even by KKK standards, Carter had long been under government surveillance as a suspect in numerous bombings of African-Americans’ homes in Birmingham and in the violent abduction and castration of Edward Aaron, a black resident of Bessemer, Alabama. Carter informed the federal agents that he was “for the first time in his life . . . going to make some money, and he did not want anything to go wrong” (Roche 236). He specifically requested that they not contact his publisher or literary agent and, after providing them with two other contact numbers, he left. Historian Jeff Roche says that at this moment, Asa Carter “ceased to exist” (236).⁴

³Moderate may even be an understatement. Allen Barra quotes one representative from Delacorte as claiming that the book sold more than a million copies before the University of New Mexico Press began publication in 1985.

⁴For comprehensive histories of Asa Carter see Allen Barra and Jeff Roche. For the most sustained reading of Asa Carter’s history in Alabama, see Dan T. Carter. Interestingly, Dan Carter labels Asa as a Southwestern novelist even though much of his history (and fiction) generates from the Southeast. These are two separate and discrete regions in the imagination of the contemporary US. For a general overview of Forrest/Asa Carter’s life, see the Alabama Center for the Book’s online entry on Forrest Carter.

This was not the first time that Carter tried to remove himself from the federal government's view. In 1970, he attempted to form a white-supremacist commune in southern Alabama with his organization, The Southerners. The organization built a school, a church, and a grocery store. Through an internal flow of capital, Carter thought that the group would achieve self-sufficiency. The Southerners would shop at their own grocery store, work for one another, and circulate their own newspaper, *The Southerner*, which would be printed on their own printing press.⁵ Carter hoped that the group might lie in wait for what he saw as the immanent race war, when, because of their isolation, The Southerners would be prepared to rise up and inevitably come to their rightful place of power. Although Carter saw this community as a means to obviate federal oversight, the FBI monitored The Southerners' actions closely when they began stockpiling weapons.⁶ The group was virulently anti-Communist and anti-Socialist, so their strategic move into an isolationist commune where labor, goods, and services were regulated by a central governing body was, in many respects, ironic. Ultimately, The Southerners' inability to adhere to the basic tenets of the commune—for example, buying wares at the cooperatively owned grocery store—led to their downfall. When this neo-secessionist project failed, it seems that a dejected Carter took to novel writing.

Carter's whole sordid history might seem like the work of an insane outlier, too much even for the endemically racist climate of mid-twentieth century Alabama. In the 1950s, he was fired from a white supremacist radio station for being too Anti-Semitic. He had even left the KKK to form the Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy, an organization devoted even more to racism than its predecessor. However, while a belief that Carter represented the marginal edge of Southern racism during the fifties would provide some level of comfort for the majority of self-identified "moderate" Southerners, he was figuratively and even literally its voice. Working in secret in the basement of the governor's offices, Carter might be considered Governor George Wallace's most successful speechwriter. He penned the infamous "Segregation Now! Segregation Tomorrow! Segregation Forever!"

⁵According to Roche, Carter later used this printing press to self-publish *Gone To Texas*, essentially funneling money from The Southerners to launch his literary ambitions.

⁶See Roche for a brief history of The Southerners.

inaugural speech for Wallace's 1962 term. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending upon how one looks at it, Wallace's advisors had the good sense to maintain public distance from Carter. Wallace denied that he had ever met Carter and that Carter had worked for his team (even though many mutual friends and records of the money trail suggest otherwise). Eventually, the Wallace team measured the political climate, took a more moderate turn, and severed all ties with its basement speechwriter. This prompted Carter to run against Wallace in the 1970 Democratic primary for governor; he came in last place. Following his loss, Carter and The Southerners protested Wallace's inauguration, and at the event Carter reportedly said: "I am a racist. I understand that. I fight for a cause I hope to win" (Roche 242).

It is difficult to reconcile this sentiment with the imagined motives of the author of a book touted as a multicultural masterpiece of tolerance and respect, particularly one which has been called "a fine sustaining book"; "a human document of universal meaning"; and a "deeply moving story which informs the heart and educates the spirit" (Strickland v). And these statements are just from the introduction.⁷ Of course, we might forgive the author of that introduction, Osage and Cherokee legal scholar Rennard Strickland, for these pronouncements from the 1986 University of New Mexico reprinting of the text; after all, he did not know that Forrest Carter was in fact Asa Carter. That truth did not break until 1991, when the book was already the cash cow for UNM press, had spent fourteen weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller list, and had won the inaugural American Booksellers Book of the Year (ABBY) award.⁸ But the story of Forrest/Asa Carter actually broke in 1976, the

⁷Admittedly, all book introductions are typically flattering, but I find the precise language of Strickland's praise to be both representative of the larger critical reception and interesting for a reconsideration of the novel within the canon of Southern literature.

⁸The website for the American Booksellers Association says that the ABBY award was created to honor "'hidden treasures' that ABA bookstore members most enjoyed recommending to their customers during the previous year" (ABA par. 1). Asa Carter was perhaps more of a "hidden treasure" than they had bargained for, and an asterisk next to the book's listing in 1991 notes that, "*The Education of Little Tree* was honored in April 1991 as an outstanding memoir. It was subsequently proved that author Forrest Carter was, in fact, Asa Earl Carter, an Alabama native, and that the account of his life was a hoax" (ABA par. 2); here the phrase "Alabama native" seems to mean non-indigenous malevolent white man. Additionally, to call the work a "hoax" suggests

same year as *Little Tree*'s initial publication by Delacorte. That year, Carter, on the *Today Show* in an interview with Barbara Walters, flirted and engaged in what some have described as "charming banter" with the host. Immediately following his appearance, NBC received numerous calls from the Birmingham-Anniston area code informing them that its guest, Forrest Carter, was not a Native American novelist but a violent white man named Asa with a grisly past. According to many, Asa Carter still existed, and though he had attempted to escape into a new Cherokee identity by playing to the national audience's desire for the Native American novel, those who had known Asa in the South spotted the disturbing fraud. Later that same year, Alabama journalist Wayne Greenshaw published a piece in the *New York Times* exposing Carter as a fake. Nobody, however, paid much attention to this charge.⁹ And this is where the story of the little lie of *Little Tree* gets interesting.

The fact that almost nobody took these charges seriously, or at least not publicly so, speaks to the way that Native identities and Southern identities are represented in literature, showcasing the need to keep both fields equally in view when reading the novel. Audiences' desires for a common people's folklore and a seemingly transcendental authenticity reappear in conversations regarding both Native and Southern literature. For example, Peter Shaheen recalls his initial reaction to the book as thinking of it as "the hottest new text since *To Kill a Mockingbird*" (82). He also admits praising the novel's "folksy wisdom," before he learned the truth about Carter. After this revelation, he says he realized that the book promotes a "manifesto for the message of states' rights" (85). Undoubtedly, the book is a manifesto for states' rights. However, Shaheen's association of *Little Tree* with Scout Finch, and other readers' associations of *Little Tree* with Huck Finn, suggests something about the ways that Southern texts do work for the literary imagination. Each of these texts is told from the point of view of a child, each appeals to a type of authenticity of voice, and each depicts the protagonists as having to make sophisticated moral decisions beyond their years. From this

that *Little Tree* constitutes merely a failed joke, which mitigates the seriousness of Carter's deployment of indigenous and Southern history.

⁹Not insignificantly, some scholars still do not discuss the 1976 outing when analyzing the text. Perhaps they too are unaware of the earlier revelations, or perhaps thinking through the 1991 exposure alone serves for a neater temporal reading of the controversy and the novel.

triangulation of works, it seems that the South is most well received when presented through the perspective of a precocious youngster who, by the accident of birth, has to deal with the morally corrupt region into which s/he was born.

Carter's novel tells the story of a five-year-old orphan, Little Tree, who goes to live with his maternal grandparents after the recent death of his mother. His grandmother is a "full-blood" Cherokee, and his grandfather is half Scottish and half Cherokee. Set in the Appalachian Mountains, presumably east of Chattanooga and just west of the North Carolina border in the present-day Cherokee National Forest, the story showcases lush landscapes in which the main character learns about life in harmony with nature. His "education" comes from his grandparents, who insist that he learn five dictionary words a week as well as the medicinal uses of local botanicals, and from his encounters with the outside "white" world, where Christians cheat him out of money and "the law" attempts to ruin his grandfather's moonshine business. Against the historical backdrop of the Great Depression, the text considers the role of government and politicians in everyday mountain life. While most of the characters in the book are supposedly Native, they read more generally as a group of stereotypical mountain "folk." Without the occasional references to the "Cherokee Way," which David Treuer describes as just a lighthearted form of social Darwinism in its ethic of "only the strong survive," one might altogether forget that *Little Tree* is not a book about poor white people living in rural isolation in the mountain South.¹⁰

With Carter's history as a flagrant and profitable fraud, no educated reader really wants to claim *The Education of Little Tree* or its author; most prefer to keep both in the basement of literary studies. The whole farce has proved to be a significant embarrassment for many Native Studies scholars who extolled the book as "authentic." However, in the field of Southern literary studies, where we have learned to accommodate the faults and ambivalences of our various Faulkners, Twains, and Mitchells, we have yet to reconcile ourselves with the fact

¹⁰Many scholars such as Huhndorf, Justice, and Treuer have thoroughly and precisely read the book's theme of social Darwinism. In a nutshell, Granpa teaches Little Tree that the "Cherokee Way" is to allow bigger, stronger animals to eat the weaker ones. Likewise, the two of them hunt the weakest deer in order to "help" with the evolution of the species. Appeals to a "survival of the fittest" worldview occur throughout the text.

of Forrest/Asa Carter. Even if he did so as a forged Native American, Carter, the Southerner, wrote about the South, and in so doing he exposed the worst parts of the region's history and wove a narrative that attempted to represent an "authentic" South. His lies speak volumes about Southern racial desire and the dangerous ways it has been rigged up to meet what Tara McPherson calls ways of "feeling southern" (5). She suggests that Southern feelings have been based traditionally upon white racial nostalgia, guilt, and melancholia, and McPherson hopes to engage emotive desire to direct Southern feelings in new directions that do not play into guilt-laden nostalgic narratives. However, in his act of racial appropriation, Carter averts both white guilt and racial melancholia and possibly even keeps antebellum nostalgia at bay by relying precisely upon readers' emotive assumptions of Native identity, including a preoccupation with the noble savage doomed to lose his land and eventually disappear. McPherson's idea of an "affective mobility that moves . . . toward forms of southern reparation" (6) may work in some contexts, particularly in her examples (all of which fall within a black/white racial binary). However, the equation of emotive resistance may not always add up when considering indigenous identity in the region.¹¹ Because of this, I wish to extend McPherson's astute analysis of Southern feelings past the black-white construction into the consideration of Native identity within the South to examine how an affective attachment to the land as a means of reparation may become more complicated. On the surface, *Little Tree* shifts readers' emotive registers about the mountain South, and it points towards some of the promising new ways of feeling Southern that McPherson imagines such as a shared investment in land attachment and cross-racial alliance. However, because Carter has affected a Native persona, we see that these feelings are easily manipulated around narrative assumptions, thus leaving the register of land attachment as another node in an ahistorical

¹¹Affective mobility represents for McPherson a movement from the unproductive registers of Southern white emotions, including guilt, melancholia, and nostalgia to a more productive whiteness that engages genuine reparation through other emotive registers such as land attachment. I agree that we must move from emotive narratives of white guilt, melancholia, and nostalgia toward more promising ways of McPherson's "feeling southern," but I see a slight danger in leaving such a shift to the realm of affect. While affect can denote a sense of feeling and emotion, it can also mean "to assume a false appearance of" or "to counterfeit or pretend." All dictionary references are to the *Oxford English Dictionary* online at dictionary.oed.com.

white Southern identity. In cases such as *Little Tree*, the novel's affective mobility may even perpetuate ways of feeling Southern that continue a legacy of racial oppression within the region and a nostalgic desire for the rest of the nation. The novel creates an affective realm of the Lost Cause, where like the doomed noble savage, the region must continually mourn for the loss of an agrarian and isolated existence. Each of these narrative constructions is out of step with the reality of Native people and the complexity of the South. However, in Carter's appeal to emotions, he is able to move readers from one narrative assumption about Southern backwardness into another regarding the tragic and vanishing Indian. Therefore, the novel requires a reading that keeps popular (mis)conceptions of both Native and Southern identities within view.

Several critics have used the Southern backdrop as a way to locate Carter's use of Native stereotypes, but this figuration remains unbalanced. Although Shari Huhndorf has rightly criticized Carter's Indian characters as "rendered placeless and timeless, divested of history, community, and claims to the land . . . [and] dissociated from a concrete Native presence" (160), she does not acknowledge what they do have: a concrete sense of place and time in regards to Southern identity. Michael Marker suggests that readers of *Little Tree* find out that "Indians are just like the rest of us. They like to hunt, make moonshine, gather wild herbs in season, and have a close relationship with the earth" (226). As a Southerner I may have a skewed point of view, but I have met few people outside of the rural South who describe themselves as "hunters and moonshine makers," and so I am led to ask what "us" Marker is referring to. Treuer also offers a nearly perfect reading of the book's use of hyperbole and argues that the novel hides bad writing under the guise of indigenous identity. Hyperbole, however, is a common literary device in much Southern literature. From the beginning then, at least some readers should have suspected that *Little Tree* offered not a Native autobiography but a white Southern one.

Indeed, Strickland's introduction suggests that, "*Little Tree* is one of those rare books like *Huck Finn* that each new generation needs to discover and which needs to be read and reread regularly" (v). This is a natural comparison considering that *Little Tree* actually is *Huck Finn* divested from any white guilt through the narrator's claims to be Native, thus loosening the reader's narrative suture from a protagonist that

might have some problematic issues regarding race. Both novels claim to be autobiographical reflections of their respective protagonists; each narrator is an orphaned boy; and like most narratives of and about the South, paternity and origins function as nodes of instability. Furthermore, Strickland's injunctive to compulsive rereading speaks to the ways that the region obsessively calls upon forms of historicity that rely upon shoring up popular narratives through repetitive story-telling in order to consolidate Southern identity into a privileged whiteness. Carter evades the complications of this procedure for a larger national audience by deploying Native identity. In so doing, the novel hides a specific historical framework under the ahistorical and stereotypical tropes attached to Native identity. By acting on readerly assumptions about Native people based on false ideas of timelessness and a lack of history, the book avoids a black-white Southern frame of reference that installs a very specific affective history. This is not to say that *Little Tree* is Southern literature simply because it makes use of certain common narrative tropes. Rather, I suggest that readers engage in a certain set of expectations when reading Southern and Native literatures and that it is not a little conspicuous that so many cling to these common elements from the Southern novel as evidence of a "Native" authenticity when what they were perhaps responding to was a depiction of their own desire for a sympathetic whiteness.

Carter's own responses to the 1976 allegations are also telling when we consider the way that racial identity is constructed in the South and in the nation. He continued to rest his laurels on an illusion of country charm and the power of outright deception. In response to the original 1976 challenges to his Native identity, Carter initiated a series of defensive maneuvers regarding his genealogical origins and paternity. He insisted to his agent, Eleanor Freide, that he was not Asa Carter, and he volunteered to take a fingerprint test. She did not take up his offer. He also sent her a "genealogical record" (what essentially amounted to a family tree) documenting his Cherokee heritage. He offered to send her a copy of the record with a "seal" but insisted that he had to keep the original because it proved he was "legitimate" (Roche 236, 251). When friends and acquaintances asked Carter directly about his connections to Asa, he reportedly would say something about Asa as a "no-good" brother or cousin. Most oddly, he began referring to his sons as his nephews, and his wife, India Thelma, even wrote to the *Times* author,

Greenshaw, to explain that Forrest was Asa's "sensitive, artistic nephew," and that she had left the racist Asa to marry his more appealing relative (Browder 138). Each of these cover stories attempts to rewrite genealogy, and Carter's disavowal of his sons specifically marks a move whereby questions of biological origins and legitimacy intertwine with the novel's own paternal plot lines.

The story of *Little Tree* repeatedly turns on the meaning and use of the word "bastard." Legitimacy in birth constitutes the terrain where Little Tree's origins come into conflict with differing models from the state and his Cherokee relatives. The initial concern over the "bastard" begins when two crooked "big city" moonshiners, Mr. Chunk and Mr. Slick, come to persuade Granpa to run moonshine for them. With his seemingly inherent distrust of rich outsiders, Little Tree correctly leads the two men through the woods away from the still, protecting his family's business. When Mr. Chunk asks Little Tree about his Pa, he responds that he doesn't recollect his Pa. A little later, Mr. Slick follows up on this inquiry:

"You don't remember your Pa, huh kid?" I stopped and said I hadn't no recollection of him at all. Mr. Slick said, "That would make you a bastard, wouldn't it, kid?" I said I reckined, though I had not got to the B's in the dictionary and had not studied that word. They both laughed until they commenced coughing. I laughed too. They seemed like happy fellers. (Carter 127)

Little Tree's ignorance of both the denotation and the connotation of the word "bastard" provides a comical and hurtful twist. While the outside world constructs cultural meaning around words, Little Tree remains blissfully ignorant of the play at his expense. When read against Carter's own disavowal of his sons, the concept of bastard becomes the terrain around which Southern identity (de)constructs itself. The novel suggests that personal histories can be rewritten through the negation of paternal origins. This narrative construction becomes metonymic of the region in its desire to redeploy an affective Southern history that imagines solidarity between poor white Southerners and Native Americans. Little Tree's lack of semantic distinction does not change the tenor of the situation. Regardless of his awareness, he is, by US legal definition, still

a bastard.¹² When Carter creates bastards out of his own sons by negating his paternal relationship to them, he showcases a Southern logic that wants to invest in original attachment to the land while simultaneously and paradoxically divesting the historical facts of indigenous removal and slavery. In other words, Carter's white South desires a guilt-free nostalgia where bastardized histories erase problematic fathers, leaving the simple language play of "happy fellers."

After Little Tree relates this story to his grandparents, they remain silent while engineering revenge on the two city slickers. In the next chapter, Little Tree comes to the Bs in the dictionary and discovers that "one of the pages was torn out" (Carter 144). Little Tree narrates:

Granma said that page was not important, and the next time me and Granpa went to the settlement, he paid for and bought the dictionary from the library. It cost seventy-five cents.

Granpa didn't begrudge the money. He said he had always wanted that kind of dictionary. Since he couldn't read a word that was in it, I suspicioned that he had other using for it, but I never saw him touch it. (Carter 144)

By destroying the dictionary, Little Tree's grandparents keep him ignorant of the perceived importance of western imposed genealogical origin. With this origin would necessarily come a discussion of his white father and his Cherokee mother. While the scene might be read as the means by which Carter acts to protect Little Tree's innocence, it also reads as a missing page in the history of miscegenation in the Southeast. Carter's book, like Carter the author, becomes peculiarly invested in disavowing paternity. In the case of this scene, bastards as well as children of interracial mixing cease to exist by definition. In Carter's case, he might erase his racist past by divesting his sons of their paternal

¹²According to Carter's fictional genealogy for Little Tree, the boy would fall within a Cherokee clan membership because his maternal grandmother was "full-blood," and clan membership is traditionally matrilineal. Thus, the understanding of a "bastard" son without a father would only be in terms of a US state identity of patrilineal identification or belonging. Carter does not make this distinction—perhaps because he had little knowledge of how Cherokee clan membership and identity works. It is also strange that the boy does not remember his father at all since we are told in the first lines that his mother dies a year after his father, making Little Tree four at the time of his father's death and five at the time of the novel's opening. This quick lapse of Little Tree's memory of his father might echo Carter's wish to be quickly forgotten by his own sons and the South's own quick lapse of memory regarding Native possession and inhabitation of the region.

claim; in this fallacious and fictitious space, Carter could reinvent a history and new genealogical origins for himself and his characters. By simply removing the page from the dictionary, *Little Tree* can remain legitimate and metaphorically, by removing a page from the history books, Carter (and the South) can manufacture a legitimate narrative of ascendant historicity.

Just as dictionary pages go missing, other parts of Carter's narrative seem invested with loss. In 1991 *Entertainment Weekly* heralded the book as "bring[ing] alive once more, in luminously remembered detail, the shape and spirit of a world we had lost" (Goreau par. 8) In fact, the entire narrative may be viewed within a general Lost Cause ideology. In a Southern context, the Lost Cause refers to the Confederate cause of the Civil War. Many canonical Southern texts invest themselves with the deployment of this history. In his 1960 analysis of Southern history, often-quoted C. Vann Woodward writes:

[The South] had learned to live for long decades in a quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission. For the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America—though it is shared by nearly all peoples of Europe and Asia—the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction. (190)

Themes from this history are common in works from other Southern authors, and in *The Education of Little Tree*, loss certainly functions as a central issue. In this respect, as other critics such as Treuer have pointed out, Carter's choice of a Native narrator becomes understandable. Carter hits on precisely that which Woodward's analysis misses: the South shares this experience of un-American military defeat with *original* Americans. This of course does not allow Carter or any Southerner to force an affective bond-in-anguish with the experience of Native Americans. However, regardless of its infelicitous nature, such theoretically empathetic attachment with Native Americans seems to have existed (and may still exist) for many white Southerners who see a correlation between colonialism and Reconstruction. Ironically, the ideology of states' rights that precipitated the Confederate secession is the same ideology that allowed indigenous removal from the region in the 1830s, when the state of Georgia and Andrew Jackson appealed to states' rights as the grounds by which they could ignore the US Supreme Court's ruling in *Worcester v Georgia*. Therefore, the revisionist

histories that claim a unilaterally shared experience of oppression among Native Americans and white Southerners at the hands of the centralized US government represent one of the more tangible syntheses of a master-slave dialectic in the nation's history.

With its opening scene, *Little Tree* foregrounds its investment in a Lost Cause ideology. As Granpa and Granma walk with Little Tree to his new home in their forest cabin, Granma alerts Granpa that Little Tree is "tiring out" and Granpa responds by asserting, "It's better to wear out when ye've lost something" (Carter 3). Right away, the reader knows that the text is primarily about loss, a theme that evolves as the narrative continues. Granma reads Shakespeare's tragedies to Little Tree and Granpa, and she reads *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Each case signals the sense of loss through tragedy. In the case of Julius Caesar, Little Tree notes that Granpa feels especially angered towards "Brutus and all the others" for the way they outnumbered and "slipp[ed] up on . . . Mr. Caesar" without making their differences "known and settled . . . square out" (Carter 15). A Southern reading of the text underscores the implications for whites within the region who were accused of betraying the South if they expressed solidarity with members of other races or sympathy with the civil rights cause. The South's "Lostness" becomes the fault of treacherous backstabbers who are unwilling to express racial solidarity with their white brethren. Loss continues as a theme to the end of the novel when Little Tree must go to a boarding school where he will be the only Native child. After realizing his inevitable fate of being shipped away, he says, "I knew we had lost" (Carter 177). Throughout, Carter generates a connection between the Lost Cause of the South and a sympathetic Indian boy whom the audience does not want to lose. While few *Little Tree* readers in the mid-1970s might openly express sympathy with a Lost Cause of neo-Confederate Southern identity, Carter seems to have bet that a precocious Native would incline audiences towards such foregone conclusions.

In this regard, Carter was certainly right although perhaps not for the reasons he or other critics have considered. Treuer asserts that authors deploy false Native identities so that they may compose the "shortest" story told. He argues that "wrapped up in that one word [Indian] is a host of associations, images, and ideas, but primary among them is tragedy" ("Going Native" par. 7). While Treuer's critique certainly rings

true in many cases, *Little Tree* constitutes more than a simple reliance upon associative popular images of Native Americans as tragic. When placed into a context of Southern literature, *Little Tree* requires a reading that is attuned to a specific type of ideological tragedy particular to the region, and the way that this regional consciousness plays out in the larger reading public. The white South needs the vanishing Indian in order to empty the land for antebellum Southern ascendancy, and then, following the defeat of the Civil War, it needs the tragic Native to explain its own fall. In both cases, the larger national audience looks to the South and to Native America as the sites of cathartic pathos. We can see this through audiences' willful blindness after Forrest Carter's initial outing as Asa in 1976, when nobody gave much pause. The difference between this moment and the later 1991 media frenzy says more about the psychic state of the nation than it does about Carter's temporarily successful production of his "genealogical" record.

During the last year of the Vietnam War, the nation at large was for the first time considering the same conditions of military defeat and submission that Woodward had imagined as indicating the South's mentality in 1960. By 1976 it was clear that the US was fighting a "lost cause" in Vietnam and that with the domestic economy, the nation was not "winning" at home either. Therefore, it seems that the larger public paid no attention to Carter's false narrative because they were content to find refuge in the state of the Lost Cause; or rather, the nation was happy to engage in "feeling southern" as long as that affective attachment could be deployed under a more popular counter-cultural racialized aesthetic of Native American. In her consideration of Forrest Carter, Huhndorf touches on the importance of the Vietnam War as contemporaneous with the book's initial publication. However, she reads the historical juncture of the publication of *Little Tree* as a point when US citizens were questioning their "faith in civilization" and considering "other racial conquests in their collective past" (Huhndorf 133). This is surely an optimistic reading. Instead of some sort of radical re-visioning of collective guilt, it seems more likely that the larger US audience saw in *Little Tree* what some Southern whites such as Carter saw in a false solidarity with Native people: a way to feel like a victim in a lost cause. This would explain why nobody paid attention in 1976 when people from Alabama came forward to denounce Carter as a fraud and racist. If Americans were searching for reformulations of racial oppression, it

seems they would have gladly sacrificed Carter to the cause of purging past destructive ideologies. Instead, they chose to ignore the issue and indulge in the narrative of loss for another fifteen years.

Very few Americans in the seventies would have wanted to admit that their feelings mirrored those of one of the most violent and notorious white supremacists of the Civil Rights era. If the South had served scopically as the location of “racism” for the larger nation, exposing all of the fans of *Little Tree* as likewise invested in that same ideology might have been an unpleasant realization for many well-meaning leftists who flocked to the text. It would mean that anyone could be a proponent to a white-supremacist ideology of racial loss and self-pity that drives much of *Little Tree*'s narrative. Good intentions would mean nothing and progressive movements of the time would seem deflated of their differentiations between progressive and backwards versions of whiteness. Perhaps this is what Carter wished—to create a commerce between the Native and neo-Confederate senses of loss. It seems unlikely that in the late 1970s, even with Jimmy Carter as President, the larger nation would have admitted to finding a backwoods Southern child living in isolation with his moonshining Confederate grandparents as a compelling narrative for their own concerns over Watergate-style government corruption in an increasingly consumerist world. For most well-meaning Americans, it seems that this narrative had to be removed from whiteness if it was to offer a way to be in the world. When this story could have been potentially wrenched back into the most disturbing form of white racial ideology, audiences simply refused to let it go.

In a textual mirror to the issues surrounding the novel, Carter figures concerns of racial identity and white affective historicity for the region through his frequent use of syntactical and narrative ellipsis. The text uses ellipsis to mark temporal lapse, missing material, and pregnant pauses. As Roche notes in a footnote regarding Carter's letters, his “use of ellipsis in place of commas, semi-colons, and often periods is one the hallmarks of his particular writing style. It is perhaps a lingering result of writing speeches in which ellipsis might signify a dramatic pause” (Roche 248 n27). In both his syntax and his narrative, Carter's frequent use of ellipsis of narrative time and knowledge creates uneasy gaps, highlighting the fact that all is not as it appears to be; in other words, the ellipsis suggest that the “true story” of *Little Tree* does not engage with

the full story of its author's biography. In one scene towards the end of the novel, Carter depicts an elliptically self-reflexive moment: "Fall is nature's grace time; giving you a chance to put things in order, for the dying. And so, when you put things in order, you sort out all you must do . . . and all you have not done. It is a time for remembering . . . and regretting, and wishing you had done some things you have not done . . . and said some things you had not said" (170). As a form of punctuation, the ellipses in this passage signal both missing knowledge that the reader must supply, and moments of silence during which audiences are forced to engage in self-reflection with the author. The use of the second-person pronoun further anticipates a sutured engagement between *Little Tree* and the audience as readers fill in Carter's narrative gaps. As the signal of intentionally omitted material, it is in the ellipsis that we may read Carter's buried past within his novel writing. In these gaps, one is encouraged to fill in any information s/he desires, and in these spaces the complications of a reading audience's desire to see *Little Tree* as indicative of multiple bathetic associations with Native identity come forward.

Likewise, these ellipses mark the obvious place where Carter toys with his racist past, and in the above passage a reader could see Carter as repentant white supremacist. An apology in syntactical absentia, however, is hardly an apology at all. Instead, these points mark the spaces where Carter cannot reconcile his conflation of Native and Southern white history. He leaves this difficulty for the reader, who may be ready to attach romantically the two historical experiences under one narrative of regressive space and time. In this elliptical aperture, Carter elicits desire from his readers regarding alternative historical narratives.¹³ On so doing, he does not absolve himself from racism, but instead pulls readers into a similar position in which the conflation of historical time allows affective associations of white supremacy to have large-scale appeal. By shifting the terrain of racial identity, Carter changes the stakes of Southern history for his audience. Carter does not have to rewrite the South; his readers have done so for him.

¹³Significantly, though, Carter does not express regret in the passage for what he did say. Rather, he laments that he failed to say and do enough. If read autobiographically, in the autumn of his years, it seems that Carter does not revoke his racist sentiments, but instead states that they were not sufficient.

In addition to a syntactic use of ellipsis, the entire novel in its episodic structure engages with narrative anachrony, including ellipsis and analepsis. Carter creates a geographical space of loss with many scenes of the Reconstruction South and Indian Removal. By omitting blocks of narrative time and inserting anachronous scenes, Carter also marks lost time for the region. As both the South and Native America have been connected to various alternative temporalities, including the perpetual time-lag of modernity, Carter's manipulation of time becomes a technique by which he romantically associates Southern backwardness with constructions of the noble savage. Carter, however, is not the first author to do so. In what might be read as *The Education of Little Tree's* New England antecedent, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) connects noble Southerner and noble savage. Adams writes that his boarding school companions from Virginia are, "as little fitted for [school] as Sioux Indians to a treadmill" (52). He continues by stating that "no one knew enough to know how ignorant [the Southerner] was; how childlike; how helpless before the relative complexity of a school. As an animal, the Southerner seemed to have every advantage, but even as an animal he steadily lost ground" (53). He closes by noting, "The Southerner, with his slave-owning limitations, was as little fit to succeed in the struggle of modern life as though he were a maker of stone axes, living in caves" (53-54). In this way, Adams puts forth the Southerner as anachrony itself. Unfit for modern life like the "Sioux Indian," the Southerner, and by extension the region, become a site for loss and out-of-place time. Carter redeploys this analogy for his education narrative by utilizing formal elements that ask audiences to reconsider progressive time. Without the romantic association of Native American identity and its corresponding appeal to counter-cultural stereotypes, the temporal and geographical setting of *The Education of Little Tree* starts to look a lot like the space/time of the contemporaneously popular novel and subsequent film, James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970). Despite being superficially hyperbolic, this comparison reveals something about the ways that a 1970s audience considered whiteness in the mountain south as synonymous with a monstrous abjection that is inhospitable to outsiders. When Carter, however, manipulates this space and time of the region to be non-white, he finds an audience willing to suspend temporal constructions in order to weave counter-historical narratives that link an abject white burden with a noble Native one.

One of the novel's most significant and often-examined moments of analepsis recounts Granpa's childhood in 1867 when he witnessed Government Regulators murder a seemingly innocent family. In this section, a one-legged former Confederate soldier, his wife, two daughters, and a former slave attempt to farm a small clearing. They are terribly unsuccessful because they do not even have a mule and in its place, the one-legged man and his wife pull the plow while the black man drives the reins. From his vantage point in the woods, Granpa realizes that the family is as good as dead until two Union officers come to their aid, bringing a mule, corn seed, and apple seeds. The officers assist the family in their planting and all seems well until the government claims the land for unpaid taxes. Regulators come to kick the people off their land, and when the family resists, the Regulators kill everyone, including the Union officers. Huhndorf correctly reads this scene for the way it maintains racial hierarchy between the white men and former black slave on the farm clearing and keeps young Granpa, as Indian, hidden in the forest. However, this scene also performs another function as it interrupts the time of the novel to showcase an unlikely solidarity around the land in 1867. It creates an alternative history for the region where racial and regional alliances seem to yield fruit. Through analepsis, Carter creates another space of loss, where he briefly showcases what could be read as a moment of profound contingency.

Significantly, this moment of possibility coalesces around an attachment to the literal earth of the mountain south. Carter's use of analepsis links with the theme of land connection because in this moment of temporal displacement, Southern affective attachment to the land can ignore the history of initial indigenous claim. In the scene, after the Regulators murder the entire rounp, Granpa witnesses the preparation of the remains of the Union officer: "He said when they went to fix him and dress him, one of his hands was clenched into a fist. They tried to unclench the fist, and finally had to take tools to do it. They got his fist open, but there wasn't anything in it worthwhile. Nothing but a handful of black dirt fell out" (Carter 122). The Union officer's love of the land renders him worthy of a Southern affective bond with both the white family and the Native characters. Little Tree's concern with the sanctity of the land traces across much of Southern literature. However, the Southern obsession with land will never be unmediated by the region's relationship with the original inhabitants. The only way to justify

“feeling Southern” through a connection to the land is to figure the history of the region in analepsis where alternative histories can disrupt indigenous land claims. Therefore, Carter’s depiction of the Union officer’s love for the land suggests to a Southern audience that reverence for Southern dirt absolves past differences. Correspondingly, white Southerners can absolve themselves from crimes against the Native population by appealing to a common reverence for the materiality of Southern earth.

This materiality of Southern earth may suggest a strategy for shifting critics’ traditional readings of *Little Tree* as primarily speaking to the field of Native American Studies and instead show the importance of engaging in a productive dialogue between Southern Studies and Native American Studies. Ultimately, instead of rehearsing Forrest Carter’s biography as a problem to be solved for Native literature, reading Asa Carter’s novel, *The Education of Little Tree*, as also invested in Southern literature forces audiences to consider their own narrative emotive expectations, educations, and historicities. While we might be tempted to leave *Little Tree* as a bastard text, justifiably unwanted by Native literature and precariously unclaimed by Southern literature, this would serve only to perpetuate the sins of the South against its original inhabitants. Instead of making the same claim as Governor Wallace, that we never knew Asa Carter, we should take the worst parts of our history out of the basement. Not because we want to celebrate them, but because we want to move forward—honestly and legitimately.

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