The Allman Brothers Band is certainly the granddaddy of what the recording industry christened “new southern rock” around the turn of the millennium. The newest of the New Souths also seemed to demand a new southern rock music—yet most of the young white rock bands embraced neither the label nor the particular New South in which they had grown up, the South of the Sunbelt. It was a seemingly different South altogether that sounded the clarion call of musical resurgence in the last decade of the previous century. By 2004 the erstwhile dominant rap establishments on the East and West Coast respectively had been superseded by the
Dirty South, as almost half of the hip-hop music played on commercial radio that year originated south of the Mason-Dixon Line (Sanneh; Murray El). The prediction that “The South’s gonna do it again” had come to pass—just not in quite the way the Charlie Daniels Band’s flag-waver imagined back in 1975. The Dirty South quickly became such an iconic ritual ground that its influence reached even into that other resurgent genre, new southern rock. Among its banner-bearers are the Alabama-bred Drive-By Truckers, who began as a rough-and-tumble country-rock band and then morphed into a latter-day Lynyrd Skynyrd for a time (the Truckers still retain Skynyrd’s trademark triple-guitar attack) before finding a distinct voice of their own. Curiously at first glance, their path toward aesthetic independence culminated in the 2004 album they titled *The Dirty South*. Partly recorded in Muscle Shoals’ FAME studios just south of W. C. Handy’s birthplace, the record continues the Truckers’ irreverent updating of the staples of southern mythology: requisite references to moonshine, televangelists, Elvis, church, NASCAR, outlaws—and, of course, the devil—are accompanied by a motley panoply in which NASA joins John Henry, Sam Phillips, Buford Pusser, a celluloid John Wayne, and Carl Perkins’s Cadillac.

Although one reviewer clucked that the Truckers’ new disc had “a clever title but remarkably little crunk,” the album is also a nod to that part of the region that has produced what the band considers the most important new music (qtd. in M. Miller, “Dirty”). Leader Patterson Hood—son of David Hood, bassist of the legendary Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section that had backed Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, and many other soul stars—has stated repeatedly that southern hip-hop had been absolutely vital in the band’s development. *The Dirty South* was conceived during a phase when the Truckers, according to Hood junior, listened to nothing but “old-timey country and rap records” (qtd. in Lesemann; Hood, Interview). Most of the stories the songs tell are set in the late 1970s and early ’80s—just before, Hood gripes in the liner notes, “they strip-mined and strip-malled us into bland suburbia and conformist complacency. . . . Hell, even our small towns have sprawl. In some cases, the sprawl predates the town. Many of the hard times being sung about in these songs have been replaced by even harder times. Sam’s Club has got baloney in them big ol’ sticks and we got free samples out the ass but our small towns and court house squares are being boarded up and torn down” (liner notes). Though the lyrics of hard luck and bad times emphasize that not all was good back then, there is nevertheless a certain nostalgia that suffuses the predominantly semirural, small-town settings of the songs. In this respect, *The Dirty South* is in line with a long tradition in white southern culture,
where ‘southernness,’ however ambivalent and ambiguous a collective identity, is perpetually under siege.1

This, then, is what simultaneously echoes and differentiates the Truckers’ South from the Dirty South of African American popular culture. The latter ritual ground is almost always thoroughly urban and rarely displays a sense of nostalgia for the olden days. By contrast, in contemporary black literary criticism the southern city is a setting that is not explored all that often, a tendency that finds its pendant in critical paradigms valorizing the vernacular and the folk, celebrating a “romance of the residual” (Dubey 158–70; duCille 80). The novels of Tayari Jones, however, provide ample opportunity to investigate southern cityscapes. Her urban ritual grounds of ‘the ATL,’ the undisputed capital of the Dirty South and what is often said to be the least ‘southern’ of all southern cities, undermine not only the sense of community and indeed humanity of their inhabitants, but also (vernacular) language and storytelling itself, and yet they still occupy a symbolical crossroads of history and modernity, race and class, life and death, love and loss. Jones’s 2002 debut, Leaving Atlanta, set in the same era as the Drive-By Truckers’ version of the Dirty South, explores the effects of the infamous Atlanta Child Murders on the lives of three fifth-graders, Tasha, Rodney, and Octavia, and their community.

James Baldwin had called it “the Terror” (27): the investigation of the Fulton County Task Force into the abduction and gruesome killing of twenty-nine children, mostly boys, that had begun in the summer of 1979 eventually led to the arrest of Wayne Williams, considered by some to be the first documented black serial killer. In January of 1982, Williams was convicted on two murder charges and brought to Hancock State Prison—a close-security facility located in, of all places, Jean Toomer’s Sparta—where he continues to serve two life sentences today. But Leaving Atlanta focuses not on the grisly crimes, the ongoing controversies over both the police investigation and the trial, or the many conspiracy theories surrounding the killing spree.2 Nor does it aspire to be a philosophical treatise on the geopolitics of race like Baldwin’s take on the murders, The Evidence of Things Not Seen, or to supplement Toni Cade Bambara’s ‘docunovel,’ Those Bones Are Not My Child. Instead, Leaving Atlanta centers on the children themselves, but in doing so, it also probes an epistemological crisis that pits word against world, language against experience, sign against referent.

Leaving Atlanta, like Toomer’s Cane, is divided into three sections, the first of which is titled “Magic Words.” Set in the fall of 1979, when the string of killings was just beginning to register on the media’s radar screens, the opening paragraph’s southern-gothic setting already foreshad-
ows the protagonist’s fall from innocence into experience: “Hard, ugly, summer-vacation-spoiling rain fell for three straight months in 1979. Atlanta downpours destroyed hopscotch markers carefully chalked onto asphalt and stole the bounce from yellow tennis balls forgotten in backyards” (3). The “growling thunder and purple zigzag lightning” was God talking, the children are told, as they “listened to the water smash against the window panes and figured that God’s message must not have been meant for them to understand” (3). The mystery of God’s language as well as the section’s title also point to Jones’s ironic treatment of one salient theme in the African American literary tradition, the trope of literacy. Upon her return to school, the protagonist, eleven-year-old LaTasha “Tasha” Baxter, is confronted with a world that does not seem to make sense anymore: she has diligently perfected her rope-jumping technique over the summer only to discover on the first day of classes that her peers dismiss it now as “baby stuff”; she finds herself ostracized at lunch hour by the complex politics of ever-shifting fifth-grade alliances; and, worst of all, her father, who has been having an affair, has moved out of their working-class household (5). Tasha’s first day back at Oglethorpe Elementary School is characterized by mystery and uncertainty, and for all of it the catalyst is the meaning of the word separated. Attempting to defend the state of affairs between her parents, Tasha clarifies to her nemesis Monica that “[t]hey’re not separated. They’re living apart right now. It’s different.” She paused for a minute, trying to explain what was different about her household and Monica’s, or that of any of the other kids who didn’t have a father anymore. She still had her daddy. He called her on the telephone almost every night and picked her up from ballet lessons on Tuesdays. Separated was different, harsher. Almost as bad as divorce. And not once had her parents used that word” (7). “Separated,” her little sister DeShaun adds later, “was kids who only had a mother to come and hear them say a poem on Black History Day. Or the ones who had stepfathers that they called by their first names” (11–12).

Piece by piece, Tasha’s world begins to fall apart. Even though her father moves back in with her mother after the killings start, Tasha’s tribulations continue as she struggles to make sense of the confusing world around her. Time and time again, it is the fallibility of words that is ultimately the source for all the uncertainty and fear that engulfs the eleven-year-old: “If it hadn’t been for Monica saying separated that day, none of this would be happening,” she even muses (52). But Tasha also discovers that while language and words lack any mimetic, referential power in rendering the world around her more comprehensible, they can have a premonitory authority that is in fact destructive and deadly. In a school-
yard scuffle with Jashante, a thirteen-year-old classmate on whom Tasha actually develops her very first crush, she yells, “I hope you die. I hope the man snatches you and . . . ’ she searched in her mind for the word she had heard on the news. ‘I hope you get asphyxiated and when they find you you are going to be . . . ’ What was the other word? ‘Decomposed’” (45). Later, when her father drives her home from the local skating rink where they happened upon Jashante and his friends, he observes that the boy will “be lucky to see the other side of eighteen” (68). Before long, the evening news reports that Jashante has gone missing, and Tasha blames herself for having cursed him, tearfully promising her mother “to be more careful with my words” (74). The axis of representation has spun completely out of control.

But it is not only the eleven-year-old Tasha whose navigation of the southern ritual grounds is disrupted. The grown-ups, too, struggle to construct a narrative with a representational axis to the puzzling cityscape they inhabit. Tasha’s initiation into the realities of the southern ritual ground, modern, urban, and yet still fraught with the historical legacies of the South, comes when she stealthily overhears a conversation between her parents after dinner. Earlier that day, her father had joined a volunteer search party that ventured into a white suburb: “Out there where we went, is like where I grew up. It’s a trip. Twenty-five miles outside of Atlanta and bam, back in Alabama” (78). As the father—angry, frustrated, confused, and terrified—begins to relate the events of the day in stops and starts, his wife attempts to soothe him, indicating that this was a story he did not really have to share. Hovering in the upstairs hallway, however, their eavesdropping daughter hopes to hear news, any news, of Jashante, who is still missing: “Mama, let him say it,” Tasha whispered. Only words can undo words. Kids say that to take something back you have to say it backward. Like a filmstrip run the wrong way. *Die you hope I. Eighteen of side other*” (79). Instead, her father continues to seek out, desperately so, a connection between language and life as he pleads with his wife, “That’s what I’m talking about. How can I say that I can’t stand to talk about it? And how can you say that you can’t stand to hear it when other people are living it?” (79). But once again, his story of the search explains very little, if anything at all. It certainly does not explain how and what Tasha is living—nor does it really explain what the community at large is living as the southern ritual ground traversed by the volunteers only widens the gap between sign and referent, defying any meaningful narrative deployed to unravel its mysteries: the father goes on to relate that he found only a dead dog in a garbage bag, but that another search party had happened upon skeletal remains in a lake, not too far from the Baxters’ house in fact.
Not only is the father confused by the geography of the immediate terrain of his own neighborhood—he had not been aware of the existence of a lake so close by—the bones are not Jashante’s either, but those of a little girl (80).

It is ultimately the father’s story that Tasha overhears that completes her fall from innocence into experience, her initiation into the exigencies of the urban ritual ground she inhabits, a ground so treacherous that its very own rituals resist delineation in language and words. As she sneaks back to the bedroom she shares with DeShaun, her frightened little sister reminds her of a promise she had impatiently made weeks earlier:

“Remember you said that there was a magic word to keep you safe.”

“Oh, that magic word,” Tasha said, as if there were only one. Words could be magic, but not in the abracadabra way that DeShaun believed. The magic that came from lips could be as cruel as children and as erratic as a rubber ball ricocheting off concrete.

“Shaun,” Tasha said, “there’s no such thing as a magic word.”

“Not at all?”

“Not like you mean.”

“Oh,” DeShaun said, with almost tangible disappointment.

“Well,” Tasha told her, “there is power. But—” She stopped, wanting to comfort her sister with more than flawed, uncontrollable words.

“But what?” DeShaun pressed.

“It’s not a word; it’s a charm.” (81–82)

Tasha’s epiphany reveals language as not necessarily powerless or ineffectual, but certainly as mysterious, obfuscating, evasive, allusive, incomprehensible—as magic. In a gesture of helpless resignation, the charm Tasha passes on to her little sister is one of the green, tree-shaped air fresheners Jashante had been peddling on the side, the one he had given her at the skating rink shortly before his disappearance. Whatever powers language may possess, they cannot be harnessed to make sense of the world—neither Tasha’s nor DeShaun’s. And in whatever shapes they bend their words, they won’t fit their souls, let alone protect them. Frederick Douglass’s mighty pen has been replaced by a tiny air freshener. As a recurrent motif in the novel, the tree-shaped air freshener also harks back to Jean Toomer’s Cane and its various narrator-observers’ futile attempts to “[p]ush back the fringe of pines upon new horizons” (18). Consequently, the novel’s first section releases the two sisters into a barren, urban wasteland, a postapocalyptic landscape whose symbolism freezes them in a perpetual suspension between nostalgic memory and ominous reality: “In
autumn, oak trees drop acorns on Atlanta lawns and cover them with a quilt of decaying leaves. LaTasha Renee Baxter held her little sister’s hand after school as they walked across their lawn, forcing the acorns under their feet into the red earth. The air stank of leaves burning in barrels, but Tasha recalled the clean outdoor smell of pine” (82).

The nostalgia to which Tasha clings at the end of “Magic Words” is developed to a tragic extreme in the middle section, “The Direction Opposite of Home.” Its protagonist is Rodney—portly, bespectacled, and highly intelligent, but “locked inside his own head,” he is an outcast not only at school but also in his own home (44). He comes from a black upper-middle-class home, yet his authoritarian father is abusive, his maladroit mother bumbling. In contrast to the conventional third-person narrator of “Magic Words,” the distinguishing feature of “The Direction Opposite of Home” is its narrative point of view: the disembodied narrative voice addresses the protagonist directly in the second-person singular. What is more, this narrative voice has total and complete access to Rodney’s mind; it could access other minds just as easily and exhaustively, but it chooses not to. The shift from the previous section’s narration in past tense to the present tense here suggests that this disembodied, all-knowing narrative voice not only shadows Rodney step by step, but actually choreographs his every action and thought. The axis of representation is turned around: the narrative voice does not so much record mimetically Rodney’s actions and thoughts as dictate them. The effect is that in this section, the narrative voice itself becomes stalkerlike: its relentless immediacy completely envelops Rodney and smothers (asphyxiates) whatever vestiges of agency and self-determination he may have been able to tap.

In her docu-novel of the Atlanta Child Murders, Toni Cade Bambara also uses a second-person narrative voice: Those Bones Are Not My Child is framed by two brief expository chapters summarizing the circumstances that led to the arrest of Wayne Williams and its aftermath. However, the narrative voice of the prologue and epilogue is a sympathetic companion to the nameless black mother, Bambara’s alter ego, engaged in writing a book about the murders (C. A. Taylor 262, 271). Jones’s experimentation with point of view in Leaving Atlanta is much more reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s Jazz or Ann Petry’s The Street—or William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying—than of Bambara’s otherwise conventional narrative (Bleikasten 72–75, 201–8; Grandt 201–2).

In “The Direction Opposite of Home,” the narrative voice’s power—cool, even sarcastic at times, and deadly in its laserlike precision—contrasts dramatically with Rodney’s own inability to express himself. “Since your words are almost invariably misinterpreted, you avoid speech in gen-
eral and abstain entirely from rhetorical questions,” instructs the narrative voice (87). Unlike his classmate Tasha, Rodney is already aware of the abyss between sign and referent, between the horrifying potentials residing in the urban ritual grounds and the language deployed to describe and contain them. Following Jashante’s disappearance and the discovery of more bodies, the Atlanta Police Department sends a (white) officer to Oglethorpe Elementary to apprise the children of preventive measures and warn them of the possibility that the perpetrator may be posing as a member of law enforcement. But Rodney and the rest of the fifth-graders, terrified as they are, remain unresponsive, suspicious: “No one speaks. What all of you already know is too terrible to trust to unreliable words. . . . You know now, as undeniably as if you had read it in the World Book Encyclopedia, that Officer Brown has nothing useful to share. As a matter of fact, you are more fearful than ever to know that this man is all that stands between your generation and an early death” (94–95). Once again, the horrifying ritual that has the city in its grip resists verbal description.

It is not just the public drama of the killings that widens the chasm between word and world, but also the private, individual drama of Rodney. A tenuous friendship between him and the other social outcast, Octavia, is beginning to blossom, but, like Tasha, clinging to the belief that “[t]he antidote for words must be a spoken one,” Rodney is misunderstood even in the simple act of uttering her name (101). Later, Rodney’s father arrives at school to discipline him in front of his class for shoplifting candy, but the first word of his forced confession—a simple “I stole”—beaten out of him by his father’s belt, is misinterpreted as “a cry of pain or admission of defeat,” and during the second word, “Father speaks louder than you and the word is lost” (138). Even his confidential second confession, to his friend Octavia, is misunderstood: “You told?” she says. ‘Told what to who?’ ‘Never mind.’ You reach into your pockets and give her . . . two cherry lollipops” (139). The innocent gesture here echoes that of his classmate Tasha in the earlier section, a pathetic gesture devoid of language.

Where Tasha’s nostalgic yearning is for a time and a world that includes a living Jashante, Rodney’s is much more escapist. Tasha’s fall from innocence to experience occurs with her realization of the inefficacy of language in her world; Rodney’s occurred with his birth into, considering the narrative voice, the world of language: “That night, you lie in bed trying to remember the time before you were born. Father said once, ‘Boy, we talking about things that happened before you were even thought about.’ This is the time that you want to recapture. You are curious about the state of not being, because this is certainly where people go when they leave their bodies in the woods for the police to find” (113). His suicidal
nostalgia is intensified by the humiliating punishment he endures at the hands of his father, and at the end of that school day, Rodney does not embark on his usual route: “Nothing you know is in the direction you’re heading. Home is the other way. You keep moving. . . . At Martin Luther King Drive you dart across four lanes of traffic against the blinking warning of the cross signal. Car horns scream, but the drivers accelerate when you find yourself alive and disappointed on the north side of the road. . . . Home is the other way” (139–40). When a blue sedan pulls up beside him with a driver claiming to be a police officer investigating a bank robbery nearby, Rodney not only notices a green air freshener shaped like a tree dangling from the rearview mirror, but immediately recognizes the badge the driver produces as a crude fake. Nevertheless, Rodney climbs into the car and is whisked away to certain death.

Symbolically, the terrain Rodney navigates here at the end of the novel’s middle section is steeped in multiple layers of tragic irony. First of all, it is the disembodied narrative voice itself that literally sends Rodney to his death. In Frederick Douglass’s archetypal southern ritual ground, the discovery of the power of literacy illuminated “the pathway from slavery to freedom”; here, language is just as powerful, but it is deployed—or, rather, deploys itself—to kill, not to liberate (38). Moreover, Rodney’s flight across Martin Luther King Drive harks back to the perilous journey of the runaway slave; only now, the only freedom to be found north of “the direction opposite of home,” even in the newest of the New Souths, is the liberty that comes with death. Significantly, Rodney’s last act after he has crossed the busy road named after the hero of the Civil Rights movement is one of passive resistance. Ironically, tragically, King’s strategy to integrate the South Rodney turns on its head here: his act of climbing into the serial killer’s car is an act of passive resistance against his violent, domineering father, his outsider status at almost all-black Oglethorpe Elementary, his seemingly hopeless life. Cruelly, the danger to Rodney and his peers—the still unfulfilled promises of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil Rights movement—emanates from within the black community itself (although the driver of the blue sedan, fittingly, is not identified as Wayne Williams). But perhaps the cruelest irony of them all is that the narrative voice may very well protect the community in sending Rodney to his certain death, for Rodney’s mind and background actually point to some alarming possibilities: his obsession with death; his abusive father and distant mother; his outsider status at home, where his parents dote on his younger sister but, at best, ignore him; his outsider status at school, where he suffers constant teasing and bullying; his indifference to moral precepts (he realizes very well that shoplifting is ‘wrong,’ but never
expresses any sincere guilt or remorse at all)—all of this amounts to a textbook background profile of a psychopathic serial killer. So at the end, perhaps with pitiless but final foresight, the narrative voice has Rodney “snatched” by the bigger, badder, grownup version of himself. Either way, Rodney’s fate echoes Atlanta’s original name—Terminus.9

The other outcast of Oglethorpe Elementary, Octavia Fuller, is the protagonist of the novel’s last section, “Sweet Pea.” Living in the projects with her single working mother, Octavia is heckled by her schoolmates as “the Watusi” for her jet-black skin (40).10 Unlike Rodney or Tasha, precocious Octavia tells her own story in her own words. Even so, her section, too, highlights the unreliability of language from the very beginning: “My mother tells lies. She tells them all the time. For all kinds of reasons. Some of them make sense and other times it’s like she lies just to hear herself talk. It gets tricky because she can mix a lie and the truth together so it ends up like Kool-Aid, and you can’t really separate what’s water, what’s mix, and what’s sugar” (143). More than any of the other characters, she is acutely aware of the chasm not just between sign and referent, but between signifier and signified, too. When her concerned mother attempts to defuse her daughter’s fears with the usual euphemisms, Octavia retorts, “‘Why everybody always say you lost somebody? Rodney not lost. They make it sound like you mislaid your lunch box or something.’ Now I was the one irritated. People need to say the words they mean. Rodney not lost, he dead” (251).11 The dissociation of word from world Octavia also notices in the shifting, multiple perceptions that attempt to circumscribe the rapidly changing ritual grounds of the newest of the New Souths: “Chicago is the windy city, but what is Atlanta? I asked Miss Grier [Octavia’s teacher] one time and she say, ‘Atlanta is the city too busy to hate.’ Mama say it’s the ‘Chocolate City.’ Kay-Kay [Octavia’s cousin in Macon] probably think everybody up here smile all the time and eat Hershey Kisses wearing velvet dresses” (184).

In this respect, Jones’s novel echoes Bambara’s Atlanta, which is also marked by the paradoxical juxtaposition of the Second Reconstruction with the actual terror and confusion engendered by the killings: the newly polished image of the city is that of “Gone With the Wind Atlanta. New International City Atlanta. Black Mecca of the South. Second Reconstruction City. Hope of a bulk of Fortune 500 companies. Scheduled host of the World’s Fair in the year 2000. Proposed site of the World University. Slated to make the Top Ten of the world’s great financial centers” (18). In reality, Atlanta has become “a magnet for every bounty hunter, kook, amateur sleuth, soothsayer, do-gooder, right-wing provocateur, left-wing adventurer, porno filmmaker, crack-shot supercop, crackpot analysts,
paramilitary thug, hustler, and free-lance fool” (5). And for James Baldwin, “Atlanta became, for a season, a kind of grotesque Disneyland” (11). All three of these narratives—Jones’s, Bambara’s, and Baldwin’s—navigate the same crossroads of time intersecting in Atlanta, a city that, according to Eric Anderson, remains characterized by “natural and built urban environments that have, since the late 1970s, borne the conflicting burdens of memory and forgetting, of terror and banality, of old and new and never-changing and ever-changing Souths” (206).

It is precisely this burden that Octavia feels weighing heavily on her shoulders. Although of all the characters, she is best able to contend with the tragedies surrounding her, her mother, with a heavy heart, decides to send her away to live with her estranged father, who teaches at a South Carolina college. On the day of Octavia’s departure, mother and daughter attend the funeral of Octavia’s friend, Rodney Green. Her story ends as she and her mother wait for the taxicab outside of the church:

She speaks and the lies curl from between her lips like smoke, getting into the fabric of my clothes and twining through my hair. “I love you,” she says.

Today is an ugly day. The clouds, dark and cold, hang close to the ground, like they might start raining gray ice and broken glass.

I turn my face away from Mama and look toward Fair Street. I don’t see the yellow taxi. For Mrs. Grier, all it took was a car trip and a eyelet pillowcase to make her forget her home. But not me.

I’ll be missing my mama for the rest of my life. (255)

Ironically, and sadly, this is one of the very few instances in the novel where words do fit the world, where the accuracy of language is not undermined or diminished, where a character succeeds in shaping words to fit her soul. Octavia’s mother truly does love her, and Octavia’s loss of the camaraderie she has shared with her is real and permanent. The tone of the emotionally charged ending is in stark contrast with the concluding author’s note, where Jones summarizes, in three short paragraphs and a language that is deliberately cool and detached, the Atlanta Child Murders and the Wayne Williams case. The note emphasizes a salient theme in “Sweet Pea,” namely the complex relationship between the ‘truth’ and a ‘lie’ and how that relationship evinces itself in language. The author’s note attempts to put forth, in a matter-of-fact, impartial language, a summary of the ‘truth,’ which Jones ends with the aloof non sequitur “I have made slight alterations to the chronology as it suits the purposes of the novel” (257). Everything preceding the author’s note is a work of fiction
and hence, by definition, a ‘lie.’ Tasha, Octavia, and especially Rodney exist only as verbal constructs, as text. However, these fictive constructs tell us much more about what it means to be human in a most terrifying southern ritual ground, and thus are much more ‘truthful,’ than the author’s note—or, for that matter, the voluminous FBI case file, or any other nonfiction account. “Fiction,” says Eudora Welty, “is a lie. Never in its inside thoughts. Always in its outside dress” (119). This, then, is also the reason why the author herself makes brief cameo appearances in each section: in “Magic Words,” Tasha significantly mentions that she likes to sit next to little Tayari Jones, her classmate, in the cafeteria, “because she was really good at imitating people’s voices”; in “The Direction Opposite of Home,” Rodney spots Tayari sniffing glue during art class; and in “Sweet Pea,” Octavia is relieved to hear her classmates direct their gossipy attention to Tayari’s mother, president of the PTA, who “always came to the school wearing weird square shoes with laces up the front” (54, 165–66). Thus, in a novel that is very much about the epistemological crisis occasioned by the dissociation of word from world, the appearance of the one ‘real’ person, Tayari Jones, is not just the author’s confrontation with herself, but also the author’s confrontation with her craft—which, after all, is in some ways all about being “really good at imitating people’s voices.” It suggests that the chasm between sign and referent can be bridged after all, if ‘only’ imaginatively.

To put it differently, Leaving Atlanta corroborates what Ralph Ellison has called “the novel’s capacity for telling the truth while actually telling a ‘lie,’ which is the Afro-American folk term for an improvised story” (Introduction xxii). Jones’s novel is therefore less a postmodernist text, despite its self-reflexivity, but engages a modernism with an historical conscience, and its postmodernist touches are extensions of an Afro-modernist aesthetic. The narrative technique of “The Direction Opposite of Home” constitutes perhaps the most recognizably postmodernist element, where Rodney Green’s story comes into existence only in the interplay between the protagonist as the signified and the narrative voice as the signifier. The section exemplifies a postmodernism in which, as John Duvall puts it, “the self is always unavoidably elsewhere, only emerging in the act of inscription” (68). At the same time, Rodney’s section, like the entire book, is suffused with a discourse of corporeality—recall, for example, the fifth-grader’s obsession with dying or decomposing human bodies, his wish to escape his own physical existence, or the humiliating beating his father metes out at school. Rodney-as-text hence ‘embodies’ Christian Moraru’s assertion that postmodernist texts can “pervade their material horizon because they are material, because their ‘bodies matter,’ too” (Postmodern 32).
Thus, even though Rodney does not, cannot, know how he fits into the larger text of history, the fact that his body isn’t ‘real’ does not diminish the corporeality of those who actually lived through this particular time in history—on the contrary. For Jones herself, the Atlanta Child Murders are a “memory that we never spoke aloud but carried with us in our bones” (“Toxic” E1). Writing an op-ed piece for her hometown paper, the Journal-Constitution, on the reopening of the case in 2005, she lamented that “[t]he world has forgotten these murders because the victims were black and mostly poor. And I believe that on many levels this simple explanation is sadly accurate. But it cannot explain away the silence in my own community, the hush in southwest Atlanta, the home of many of the murdered children, the area of the city where many of those whose lives were directly touched still reside. The question still eats at me” (E1). Thus, bearing witness was not enough: “For us,” she concluded, the memory is like a bone poorly set—painful, crooked, and gimp. The events of 1979–81 so ravaged our community that we have been unable to speak of them in the years since. The arrest and conviction of Williams for the murders of two adults, and the subsequent closing of the children’s cases, was neither balm nor tincture. Rather, it was just a plaster cast, ensuring that the fractured bones of our community would never properly mend.

Re-examining this case will cause great pain to Atlanta, the city of my birth, the place where my family still lives. I don’t anticipate that this will be easy. Tempers will flare, as will old rivalries and grudges. But as we know, the only way to repair a bone badly set is to break it again, and then set it right. (E1)

Thus, Jones’s shaping words to fit her memory is done not only to reawaken historical consciousness, but, much like Frederick Douglass placing his pen in the gashes on his feet (or later standing before Niccolò Paganini’s violin), to tap a historical conscience—an act that surpasses mere witnessing and remembering.

In the world of Leaving Atlanta, the southern ritual grounds’ historical legacies manifest themselves also in the characters of the fathers. Tasha’s father, as I have already pointed out, is reminded that the new, post–Civil Rights urban South he inhabits has not left behind southern history after all, even though the younger generation may not be aware of it, when he volunteers to join the search party. Rodney’s father, an unapologetic advocate and practitioner of corporal punishment, lectures his son over breakfast about the benefits of the Washingtonian pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps philosophy his own father had passed on to him, and when his wife attempts to defend Rodney’s failing grades by arguing that
he may not be challenged enough at school, Claude retorts sneeringly, “Challenged? . . . This boy's problem is he never had to pick cotton. When you pick cotton you don’t sit out there and see if you can be challenged by the cotton. You don’t bring your bag in empty at the end of the day and tell that white man that the cotton didn’t challenge you. You just pick the goddamn cotton!” (128). In a sense, then, Claude Green is therefore perhaps as much a victim of southern history as he is a perpetrator of abuse.¹⁴

The father figure, however, is noticeably absent in the novel’s last section. Ray, as Octavia refers to her father, appears only as a voice on the telephone. But “Sweet Pea” does not need a father figure because Octavia, precocious as she is, has already been exposed to and is beginning to understand, if only dimly, the exigencies of southern history, both personal and communal, in her contemporary ritual grounds. First of all, Octavia is learning how to face her personal history by telling her story in the past tense. Second, her mother’s stories of growing up in racially segregated Macon—the original Allman Brothers Band’s home base—have prepared her, in contrast to Tasha and Rodney, to recognize the continuities, subtle as they may be, between the pre- and the post-Civil-Rights-era South, her communal history. Accordingly, the open-ended “Sweet Pea” delineates a southern ritual ground that contains possibilities as well, beset with profound ambiguities though they are. As Ellison maintains, “fiction is but a game of ‘as if,’” yet “therein lies its true function” (Introduction xx). While the quasi-postapocalyptic urban landscape of the final goodbye-scene echoes the gothic foreboding of the initial setting of “Magic Words,” Octavia, at the end, is facing “Fair Street,” suggestive of a future that holds at least the possibility of renewal and redemption—quite unlike the fate of her unfortunate friend, Rodney. On the other hand, Octavia, like her literary ancestor Huck Finn, none too thrilled at the prospect of being “sivilized,” is about to be sent to South Carolina—after all, the first state to secede from the Union. There is, for her, no more territory “to light out for” in the Sunbelt South (Twain 49, 367). Even so, her father, who is a professor at a college in Orangeburg, is presumably teaching at South Carolina State or at Claflin University, two historically black institutions, where Octavia will therefore be at least somewhat sheltered from the more egregious, lingering manifestations of unreconstructed racism. There is a future for her beyond the terrain haunted by the Atlanta child murderer, even as that future comes at the cost of being separated from her mother. Accordingly, Octavia’s narration shifts from the past tense to the present tense in the novel’s very last scene, and then shifts to future tense in Octavia’s touching last words, “I’ll be missing my mama for the rest of my life” (255).
For the time being, though, Octavia feels unjustly disempowered. It is this sense of entrapment delineating the fate of each of the three major characters, albeit to various degrees, that informs this urban ritual ground of the post-Civil Rights era. Nelson George, riffing on Stephen Henderson’s “‘Soul-Field’ of the black experience,” has called its African American denizens the “post-soul generation,” and indeed, the urbanized southern ritual grounds traversed in Leaving Atlanta bear a striking resemblance to what has become but the latest reincarnation of the New South, the Dirty South (Henderson 49; George 3–11; Neal 3). In its original cartography by the Atlanta-based hip-hop group Goodie Mob on their 1995 debut album Soul Food, which primarily maps the East Point suburb and its vicinity, the Dirty South is a territory fraught with injustice, betrayal, and confusion. Although Soul Food is not fueled by the disconnect between sign and referent as is Leaving Atlanta—after all, hip-hop is a musical genre in which rhetorical prowess and virtuosity are at a premium—the album’s ritual grounds similarly engender a pervasive sense of disorientation. On the claustrophobic track “Thought Process,” guest vocalist André 3000 (one half of the Atlanta rap duo OutKast) notes that

Now as an outkast I was born,  
Wasn’t warned of the harm  
That would come to meet me like Met Life,  
But yet life done sent me through a lot of ups and downs like it ain’t nothin’—  
Like elevators, but I ain’t the one that’s pushing the buttons.  
I got off at the thirteenth floor when they told me that it wasn’t one;  
They said it skipped from twelve to fourteen.

The sense of disorientation acquires special poignancy here considering that the elevator analogy harks back to the rhetoric of racial uplift—and is set in the same southern city that, by 1908, had implemented racially segregated elevators (Woodward, Origins 355). The starkness of this ritual ground is reinforced, here as elsewhere throughout the album, by the minimalist beats and arrangements of the production squad Organized Noize. It is therefore no coincidence that in this urban landscape of disorientation and confusion where “[w]e trapped off in this maze with walls made of layers,” the infamous “child snatcher” also has a cameo appearance: “Huh, the only thing we feared was Williams, Wayne,” André volunteers. The child murders had exposed a side of Atlanta, “the Black Mecca of the South” and “the city too busy to hate,” that had remained invisible to many during its dizzying economic rise: in 1980 about one-third of the city’s population subsisted below the national poverty level, and almost
all of the victims came from the underclass of the working poor (Headley 14, 26). Fifteen years later, Goodie Mob reminded those atwitter with the excitement of hosting the world for the 1996 Olympic Games that this ‘other’ Atlanta was still very much around.

Like the characters in Leaving Atlanta, Goodie Mob and their collaborators inhabit a territory where they appear to be trapped, tragically so, in an inescapable present. Soul Food’s splintered, fragmented, confusing southern landscape is also suffused with a pervasive sense of entrapment: on the satirical “Live at the O.M.N.I.,” for example, Goodie Mob transform the name of the Atlanta landmark from an entertainment and sports venue into an acronym for “One million niggers inside.” It is a Dirty South that seems to have left history behind. This, then, also reflects the significant shift in African American cultural production that Mark Anthony Neal has diagnosed:

The post-soul generation becomes the first generation of African Americans who would perceive the significant presence of African-American iconography within mass consumer culture/mass media as a state of normalcy. It is within this context that mass culture fills the void of both community and history for the post-soul generation, while producing a generation of consumers for which the iconography of blackness is consumed in lieu of personal relations, real experience, and historical knowledge. (121)

However, “Dirty South,” the track that codified this, the newest of the New Souths, also implies that the current, bleak present of crime, drugs, corruption, poverty, and despair is indeed in part the legacy of southern history: “See, life’s a bitch, then you figure out / Why you really got dropped in the Dirty South. / See, in the third grade, this is what you told: / You was bought—you was sold.” Just as Tasha’s father complains bitterly, “I won’t hush. That’s the problem. We been hushed up too long. These children don’t know nothing about lynching. They don’t know about white folks burning niggers alive” (76–77). Goodie Mob, in the booming 1990s, attack not just a sociopolitical power structure that continues to thrive—if by other, more complex means—on the continued subjugation of Americans of African descent, but also a complicit educational system that trivializes the history of blacks in the New World and ignores their suffering. The result is not just a sense of betrayal but also a pervasive uncertainty: if Goodie Mob’s Dirty South does not so much defy the very language deployed to map its geography, their rhymes still capitulate often before the underlying reasons that inform the rituals of death and
deprivation taking place within its boundaries: “I struggle and fight to stay alive / Hoping that one day I’d earn the chance to die. / Pallbearer to this one, pallbearer to that one— / Can’t seem to get a grip ’cause the palms sweatin’” (“I Didn’t Ask to Come”). The origin for this pervasive uncertainty, Toni Morrison would now counsel, lies in the absence of “[t]he advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor” who “is imagined as surviving in the village but not in the city,” and certainly there is no such ancestral spirit in either Jones’s Atlanta nor in Goodie Mob’s Dirty South (“City” 39). Even so, Leaving Atlanta and Soul Food do not represent so much a break with the (literary) past as a transference of the rural Black Belt’s vernacular semiotics into the city: yes, the ancestral spirit is present indeed in Jean Toomer’s Cane—in the person of Father John, for instance—but Toomer’s various observer-narrators consistently fail to capture its essence in words. The absence of any ancestral spirits in the Dirty South of Tayari Jones and Goodie Mob is counterbalanced by a conscience that recognizes the legacies of history in a landscape that places “one million niggers inside” a postmodern temple of mass spectacle—a landscape that continues to put Americans of African descent ‘in their place.’

To be sure, since Goodie Mob’s initial staking out of Atlanta as the capital of the Dirty South, this territory and its rituals have undergone many alterations and transformations. Southern hip-hop, previously dismissed somewhat derisively as “south coast” or “third coast” rap, found in the flexibility of its ritual grounds a launching pad that catapulted the Dirty South from the rap underground into the cultural mainstream (Krims 145–46; M. Miller, “Rap” 181). But even in some of its commercially successful variations, often utterly devoid of historical consciousness, let alone conscience, its urban landscapes sometimes defy, if not language itself, then any reasonable explanations for why “you really got dropped / In the Dirty South.” This is the case in fellow Atlanta rapper Ludacris’s “Growing Pains” from his 2001 hit album Word of Mouf. The Dirty South of Ludacris and his Disturbing Da Peace posse is “dirty” in a different way from the ritual grounds navigated by Goodie Mob. Ludacris’s Atlanta is characterized by stability and certainty: its braggadocios, gregarious macho-hedonism leaves little room, if any, for social satire or political commentary, certainly not for contemplative uncertainty. Even so, “Growing Pains,” though uncharacteristic of the rest of the album, is, like Leaving Atlanta, suffused with a pervasive sense of nostalgia tempered by violent death. In its specificity, Jones’s novel might at face value be mistaken for merely a contemporary update of the local color school of writing, but it actually negotiates a tension between a nostalgic look back at childhood on the one hand and violent death on the other very similar
to that of “Growing Pains” (a nostalgia not unlike the one both cultivated and satirized on the Drive-By Truckers’ The Dirty South):

Played with Transformers, G.I. Joes and Thundercats—
We was loving that
Before they started jacking Jags,
'Fore notes from Red Oaks had folks scared to come through
College Park after dark—
Crown Victorias, police unmarked cars,
Be aware: Wayne Williams was out there.
But we didn’t care kids was getting stabbed and ditched out there:
Too busy playing double-dare.

The specter of Wayne Williams, evoking here a very different facet of southern history, disrupts the nostalgic look back, if only briefly, and is in stark, ironic contrast to the ‘old school’ sample—the signature guitar riff is lifted from William Bell’s Stax hit “I Forgot to Be Your Lover”—and to the voices of children at play that frame the track. “Growing Pains” thus corroborates Jeff Abernathy’s point that “[t]he American Eden—ever a racially charged atmosphere—is always ready for the fall,” in the South in particular (156).

It is the loss of innocence that is also at the center of Jones’s second novel, The Untelling, set in the West End neighborhood of pre-Olympics Atlanta. Like its predecessor, this novel too revisits and revises the central tropes of the African American literary tradition such as invisibility, naming, and literacy. But now it is no longer so much the southern landscape itself that is the site of confusion and disorientation, but the southern body, especially the female body.

The catalysts for the individual, quieter dramas of The Untelling are found in the body of Aria Jackson, the narrator, who experiences a false pregnancy and is later diagnosed with extremely rare premature menopause at the age of twenty-five. “A sensible person,” muses Aria upon leaving the doctor’s office,

would have taken a home pregnancy test first. I hadn’t because I was convinced I knew my body. Now I couldn’t even take the expression seriously. What did it mean, to know your body? This was a phrase that I’d picked up from women’s magazines and television talk shows. I’d been living in this body twenty-five years and it was a stranger to me. I had gone through the Change and hadn’t even seen the signs. Dr. Blackwelder had said that it was easy enough to miss, that my body had been responding to the years of birth control pills I’d swallowed, taking
its cues from the synthetic hormones. But still, a person who knew her body should have known that something was seriously wrong. I felt like an idiot, like the wives who are always the last to know. (162)

Aria’s alienation from her own body, her rare physical condition, and her strong desire to bear a child are exacerbated by the fact that seemingly everyone she knows has children of their own already, even if they hadn’t wanted any: seventeen-year-old Keisha, Aria’s foil, is pregnant with her second child, which she also wants to give up for adoption; Aria’s boyfriend, Dwayne—a locksmith, no less—has a son living in Alabama; her baby sister was born despite her mother’s tied tubes and is hence referred to as the Jacksons’ “miracle child” (2); her older sister Hermione bears witness to the family legacy after having married her prematurely deceased father’s best friend and given her firstborn her father’s name; and her best friend and roommate, Rochelle (who is herself adopted), had an abortion in college.

It is Rochelle who sports the most visible corporeal idiosyncrasy: she is the same age as Aria, but her hair color has aged prematurely and is “as white and sparkly as the snow” (209). Her trademark is an expensive pen “stabbed . . . into her hair like a chignon stick” (36). Back in college, she and Aria became friends when she confided that she was pregnant and Aria agreed to lend her money for an abortion. What convinced Aria that Rochelle had not lied to her, did not have a drug problem, but really did need help, was when Rochelle “leaned forward, showing me the groove where she’d split her hair apart with the pen. The part, marked with blue ink, was flanked by Rochelle’s new growth; her real hair was kinky in texture and the soft gray color of old roads” (57–58). Aria lent her what little money she had because, she concluded, Rochelle “had told me her truth and shown me her hair” (59). Thus, the pen in Rochelle’s hair fulfills the same symbolic function as the pen in the gashes of Frederick Douglass’s feet, tracing the same old road: the instrument of literacy as a measurement of the wounds of the past and their import in the present. Like Douglass’s, Rochelle’s parentage is uncertain, and like the nineteenth-century autobiographer, she too is concerned with literacy as a form of social activism: Rochelle works at the Literacy Action Resource Center (LARC for short), which trains juvenile delinquents, all of whom are black and female. That Rochelle has neither the time nor the inclination to write the invitations for her upcoming wedding and outsources the job to Keisha, the pregnant seventeen-year-old charge of LARC who is functionally illiterate but extremely talented at calligraphy, is just another one of the many ironies marking The Untelling’s southern ritual grounds.
But, even more so than in Leaving Atlanta, these are personal dramas, nowhere near as epic as Douglass’s battle of civilization against barbarity. For the characters, though, their significance is little smaller. They may not have developed a historical conscience of their own, or may be only dimly aware of it, but The Untelling certainly is, and the novel casts it also in one of the most southern of southern symbols, the magnolia tree: it is such a tree, a century old and surrounded by dogwoods, that years ago claimed the lives of Aria’s father and baby sister in a car accident—on their way to the annual spring recital at the Phillis Wheatley YWCA, so named after another former slave who availed herself of the power of literacy. The final two paragraphs of Aria’s story end the novel with a Faulknerian (or Ellisonian) indeterminacy, one that is again linked to the continuing reassessment of historical conscience in the form of the magnolia tree overgrown with dogwoods:

There is balm in the telling, and in the hearing too. These words, these truths, will ride on the air like ragged scrap of song. With every lamp burning I will speak while Dwayne touches my hands and listens. I will ask him what he knows about the dogwoods, crooked and ashamed, their stained petals an annual remembrance. Although Hermione is right about a great many things, she was wrong about the nature of things gone by. This is what I have come to know: Our past is never passed and there is no such thing as moving on. But there is this telling and there is such a thing as passing through. (324)\[18]

The sudden stateliness of the diction, its self-consciousness that recalls Jean Toomer’s hapless narrator-observers bent on catching the “spirit” of the place, casts doubt on the integrity of the epiphany, especially since Aria is someone who is given to acting out roles well disseminated throughout mass culture—from sitcoms such as Good Times to Anita Baker songs or movies such as Lady Sings the Blues—and most especially in her desire for marriage and motherhood. But Aria has begun to transform herself, from a mere witness of family history to an advocate of its meanings, through acknowledging the historical conscience symbolized by the dogwoods. The Toomeresque songs carrying “truths” she imagines wafting through the Atlanta air, the shaping of words to fit her soul, will probably take on manifestations different from the songs of the Drive-By Truckers. But they arise out of the same puzzling, paradoxical Dirty South.

The semiotics of the Dirty South as arranged by Goodie Mob, the South of Tayari Jones’s post-soul generation, suggest that there are new borders to be negotiated within southern culture in general and southern literature in particular. And so, for Jones, “Atlanta is the perfect setting
for dramatizing the modern American predicament. . . . In my view, this is where the rubber hits the road in America” (“(Un-)Telling” 71–72). At the same time, Jones’s relationship to her native region remains as ambivalent and complex as that of her literary forebears. She recalls that her first big lecture tour took her

out on the Southern Circuit. That would be Jackson, Oxford, Memphis, Blythesville, Arkansas—you get the idea. And I found myself interacting with self-avowed ‘southern’ writers and the people who love them. While many of the people were quite kind and even interested, it was clear that my brand of southernness . . . one that is black and urban and middle class, was clearly out of place in these settings. I still hold on to my ‘southern’ badge however, because the South is my home. But I feel sort of uneasy. (72)

It is that same uneasiness which Jones lends her protagonist in *The Untelling*. There, Aria remarks about someone who would not feel displaced anywhere within the territory of the old Confederacy, “His accent was sugary, southern white. Whenever I heard someone speak that way, the words so lazy they seemed to be lying down, it made me feel like only white people were really southerners. That the rest of us were just squatters” (65–66).

Jones’s Afro-modernism therefore recalls what Hugh Kenner apprehended back in 1975, and what seems still relevant in the new millennium: “the homemade world of American Modernism terminates not in climactic masterworks but in an ‘age of transition’—we live in it—where the very question gets raised, what the written word may be good for” (*Homemade* xvi). Accordingly, the image of Du Bois’s blackboard recurs in Jones’s Sunbelt South as well. In *Leaving Atlanta*, for example, Octavia seeks counsel from her former second-grade teacher and mentor, Ms. Grier, as she is worried about being sent away to live with her biological father in South Carolina. Ms. Grier tries to console her by sharing a story from her own childhood, about the premature death of her parents and her growing up in the home of relatives. As she is recounting these reminiscences, Octavia is cleaning the blackboard in the classroom—or trying to: “I had the whole board wiped down but soon as it dried, traces of the chalk letters started showing through again. I dunked my rag in the water and started over” (234). Octavia, ironically the most articulate of the children in the novel, confesses to having “word problems” and even has her spelling book stolen at school (140). Yet, her story is the most “telling,” one whose articulacy on an emotional level surpasses even the laserlike precision of the narrative voice stalking her friend Rodney. Words, stories,
may be infested with incurable inarticulacy—but, as Nathaniel Mackey’s phrase underlines, it is a *telling* inarticulacy: language remains the primary means by which we attempt to make sense of the world around us and by which we seek to explain our humanity to it, and to ourselves.

In *The Untelling*, Du Bois’s blackboard has been slightly transformed. After Aria follows her friend Rochelle to a teaching position at LARC, she is shocked at the Center’s dilapidated, ramshackle infrastructure. The blackboard has been demoted to a dry-erase board, but there is an overhead projector:

I dimmed the light and clicked on the overhead projector. In the dark, with the door closed and the shades down, I was aware of the room’s narrow dimensions. It was silly, really, to think that an old house could be converted into a school. . . . Idealistic and silly. This room was not a classroom. Where was the chalkboard and the pull-down map of the world? This was a bedroom and a small one at that. We were eleven people crammed into metal desk chairs, which were then all crammed into a guest bedroom. What did we really think we were accomplishing here? To teach students this far behind you needed computers, current hip textbooks. Hell, you needed a real teacher. Not just me and Rochelle, people hired for our “energy.”

I heard myself asking for a volunteer to read a passage beamed onto the white bedsheets used as a projection screen. (164)

Aria’s sense of claustrophobia, deprivation, and futility not only echoes Goodie Mob’s but also reinforces the dramatic division into two distinct territories, for LARC is indeed a world away from, say, Atlanta’s Emory University, or even Aria and Rochelle’s alma mater, Spelman. And so, Aria the college graduate, still behind the veil, reenacts the role of Du Bois the former Fisk University student. Revisiting this particular tract of his southern ritual grounds in his autobiography, Du Bois conspicuously leaves out the pale blackboard; instead, he adds the following sentences tailing the description of the treacherous floorboards: “All the appointments of my school were primitive: a windowless log cabin; hastily manufactured benches; no blackboards; almost no books, long, long distances to walk. On the other hand, I heard the sorrow songs sung with primitive beauty and grandeur. I saw the hard, ugly drudgery of country life and the writhing of landless, ignorant peasants. I saw the race problem at nearly its lowest terms” (117). Whether post-Reconstruction, rural Watertown, Tennessee, or pre-Olympics, metropolitan Atlanta—“the meaning of progress,” it seems, can often be measured in inches.