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“Some Say Ain’t No Earthly Explanation”

Excavating the Apocalyptic Landscape of Randall Kenan’s Tims Creek

And I feel Old Earth a-shuddering—
And I see the graves a-bursting—
And I hear a sound,
A blood-chilling sound.
What sound is that I hear?
It’s the clicking together of the dry bones,
Bone to bone—the dry bones.
And I see coming out of the bursting graves,
And marching up from the valley of death,
The army of the dead.

And the living and the dead in the twinkling of an eye
Are caught up in the middle of the air,
Before God’s judgment bar.


THROUGHOUT this book, I have argued that expressions of a southern “sense of place,” aiming for something just short of prophesy, are inextricably bound up with the apocalyptic worldview offered by southern religion. “[A]n overdeveloped eschatological sense is one of the more enduring characteristics of the southern literary tradition,” writes Scott Romine. Citing exchanges between Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, Romine states, “the southerness of place, it seems, is always in danger of expiring” (26). In other words, the South, in its most frequent manifestations, is brought to life out of the fear of its own inevitable disappearance. This brand of Apocalypse promises both the End of Time and the End of this
World; as the events of history finally play themselves out, the geographies in which they take place are ultimately used up.

In the novel *A Visitation of Spirits* as well as in the subsequent short story collection *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories*, Randall Kenan assumes the eschatological burdens of southern literature some sixty years after the Agrarians took their stand. *A Visitation* is framed on one end by a section entitled “ADVENT: or the Beginning of the End,” which laments the increasing infrequency of hogkillings—events that once transcended agricultural necessity, fulfilled the ritual function of sacrifice, and culminated in a communal feast. The frame is closed by “A Requiem for Tobacco,” Kenan’s mythic elegy for the shared labor around which the collective identities of communities like his fictional Tims Creek once coalesced. While Tate, Ransom, Warren, and the rest would perhaps have joined in Kenan’s memorialization (albeit, from a safe, segregated distance), they would likely have rejected what is contained within this frame: the story of sixteen-year-old Horace Cross, struggling to understand how his queer desire can exist within the geography of his southern African American community.

Facing the incongruity of his existence within the cultural and social spaces of family, church, and the rural community of Tims Creek, North Carolina, Horace seeks escape in the unlimited, unseen geography of the southern apocalyptic imaginary. By conjuring this invisible, otherworldly realm into the existence of this world, Horace threatens to initiate a cataclysm that will realize in an explosive instant what was envisioned by the Agrarians as a slow, regrettable decline. Kenan’s novel, like Faulkner’s *Light in August*, juxtaposes the creeping expiration of a community with the possibility of violent eruption within it. While *A Visitation of Spirits* laments the loss of traditional forms of community, mourning alone is an insuffi-

1. Or at least kept quiet. Homosexuality should be anathema to the Agrarian platform; as Gary Richards writes, “there seems to have been little legitimate place for same-sex desire in the Christian South imagined by Agrarians,” given the biblical injunctions against sodomy and the patriarchal society idealized by their platform (216). However, in an autobiographical essay about his time as a tenant and employee of the aging Agrarian John Lytle, John Jeremiah Sullivan effectively outs the author—and perhaps the entire movement. Sullivan writes that, by the time he boarded and worked for Lytle in the 1990s, the author’s queerness was “more or less an open secret” in the community around Sewanee (95). Sullivan describes Lytle’s efforts to seduce him, summarizes Lytle’s stories of being propositioned by Allen Tate, and cites the old writer’s frequent contention that “the idea of there having been a homoerotic side to the Agrarian movement itself.” Sullivan continues, noting “Robert Penn Warren’s more-than-platonic interest in Tate” and reminding the readers that the “rarely mentioned” Agrarian Stark Young was openly gay.
cient response to the novel’s central event—Horace’s suicide. Rather, his
death is an opportunity for exhortation: Horace’s trials and ultimate death
disrupt the romantic, idealizing veil of grief, reveal the original sins that
have doomed the community, and expose the horrific consequences that
will follow the continuing refusal to tell that history. The southern apoca-
lyptic imaginary provides Kenan with the narrative and discursive space
adequate for experiences that disrupt the bivalent, heteronormative ways
of speaking that dominate his community. From the apocalyptic imaginary,
revelation about this southern and black past can proceed.

A Visitation of Spirits eschews a conventionally sequential chronology.
Instead, it explores the causes and consequences of Horace’s death by shift-
ing between the dates of his vision and death, April 29–30, 1984, and the
journey of three surviving family members—his grandfather, Zeke Cross;
his great-aunt, Ruth Cross; and his cousin, Rev. James “Jimmy” Greene—
to visit a dying cousin over a year later, on December 8, 1985. While these
sections are located temporally with great specificity, they are separated
by Jimmy’s chronologically dislocated first person “Confessions.” Despite
the precise chronological markers, the text moves fluidly: the Crosses slip
in and out of time, consistently returning to the family and the commu-
nity’s history in order to make sense of what they witness and what they
have experienced, thus producing deep spatial and temporal maps of their
landscape. The result is a work of magical realism2 that elides any easy
distinction between communal myth, familial legacy, historical fact, and
individual hallucination.

This chapter will examine the role of the apocalyptic imaginary in
Kenan’s Cross/Tims Creek narratives—A Visitation of Spirits and the short

2. Magical (or, marvelous) realism has been most often associated with Latin American
writers; indeed, Terry McMillan has famously called Kenan “our black Marquez” (Betts 17).
According to the Oxford Companion to English Literature, works of magical realism “have,
typically, a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic merges with the un-
expected and the inexplicable and in which elements of dreams, fairy story, or mythology
combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and
recurrence.” The aims of magical realism are closely associated with the revelatory aspects
of the apocalyptic as I have outlined them. Lois Parkinson Zamora notes, magical realism’s
primary concern is “the nature and limits of the knowable” (“Magical Romance/Magical
Realism” 498), which it often explores by flaunting the limitations of conventional repre-
sentations of reality. As Alejo Carpentier writes, “The marvelous begins to be unmistak-
able marvelously when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from
a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the
unexpected richness of reality, or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality
perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a
kind of extreme state” (“On the Marvelous Real in America” 85–86).
story “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead”—with particular attention to how
apocalypse functions to contain and conceal histories that would trouble
the stability of family and community. Unbounded by the laws of time and
chronology, these works expose the contradictions implicit in the southern
and the African American imaginaries. Throughout both, the voices of
millennial victory, so central to black spirituality, are tragically confounded
by the rhetoric of apocalyptic condemnation: while a coherent, narrowly
defined sense of collective identity has allowed this community to survive
and even thrive, despite the oppressive forces upon it, a refusal to change
now threatens to doom its members. However, Kenan abandons neither
place nor the apocalyptic imaginary. Instead, his work interrogates the
complicated ethical implications of eschatological elements of place, and it
takes manifestations of Apocalypse as discursive markers of concealed his-
torical knowledge. Ultimately, Kenan’s jeremiad offers hope and suggests
that, through the revelation and recovery of the past, expiring communi-
ties can be reinvigorated and an affirmative claim to a legacy of triumph in
the face of oppression.

**Tims Creek and the Eschatology of Place**

Not unlike Lena Grove’s entrance and departure in *Light in August*, the
frame of mourning in *A Visitation of Spirits* locates and contains the cat-
clysmic energy that threatens to overwhelm the novel. It also estab-
lishes place—the practices and regular rhythms of human interaction and
exchange that occur in Tims Creek—and introduces its eschatological
quality, even before the apocalyptic madness begin. Barbara Ladd under-
stands the “sense of place” as a contradictory “sense of stability amid flux”
(“Dismantling the Monolith” 46); in this definition, stability should be
neither privileged above flux nor confused with stasis or stagnation. Move-
ment can occur within stable patterns, and indeed, the regular reoccurrence
of events—sunrises and sunsets, the phases of the moons, tides, birth-
days, holidays, and even hogkillings and tobacco harvests—allow us
to make sense of the otherwise infinitesimal passage of time. Thus, this
opening frame is filled with seasonal and temporal images: the “winter rye
grass that just begun to peek from the stiff earth”; the barbeque pit is “a
hole as deep and wide as a grave” (*A Visitation* 7).

Critically, these seasonal/temporal images, along with the description
of the seasonal ritual of the hogkilling, are not offered by any individ-
ual character but rather by a collective voice, which addresses the reader
directly and intimately. The hogkilling functions as a rite of passage for the adolescent male, who is allowed to pull the trigger and kill the animal for the first time. He becomes an adult; the community welcomes a new member, and with him, the ascendance of a new generation, who will continue their mission. Within this ritual, the members of the community easily assume their roles, determined by age and gender, almost as if by instinct. Of course, it is not instinct but rather the process of acculturation that informs the passing of the gun from an old man to the boy. However, the collective knowledge of the process and its origins are repressed—pushed back into the unconscious until the ritual becomes an ontological certainty. Here (as elsewhere) flux is rejected as an element of place; the community craves stability, both at its center and along its margins.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre investigates this impulse toward stability. He contends that “the material conditions of individual and collective activity” are the foundational elements of human relation to place, preceding any and all systematic efforts to establish and maintain a coherent sense of that place (71). In Lefebvre’s estimation, the secondary abstraction of a place as a singular and stable entity “represses the reality of human labor” (289). Wesley A. Kort surmises that Lefebvre worries that “such constructed wholes” can be mobilized as “a surrogate reality, an agent that particular and economic interests can employ in order to validate themselves” (177). Kenan’s concern about the problematic of place echoes Lefebvre’s worries. In the opening frame and the concluding “The Requiem for Tobacco,” Kenan does not mourn shifts in agricultural practice, but rather the gradual expiration of social relationships that developed through these practices, as well as the community’s subsequent failure to adequately adapt them or develop new forms of community in their place. At the moment described by the narrator, gatherings like the hogkilling are increasingly infrequent: why go through with it—why even raise hogs—when, as Kenan writes, “folks . . . go to the A&P for their sausages, to the Winn Dixie for their liver pudding, to the Food Lion for their cured ham” (9)? An older generation clings to traditions that seem antiquated, and reject the possibility that their traditions might evolve to address new circumstances. They demand stasis beyond the passing of one generation to the next, and they fail to recognize the distinction between the particular tasks of work and its beneficial social consequence. As a consequence rituals, along with its sense of collective identity and mutual obligation, simply fade away.

However, Kenan’s work does not reject *place* as a wholly negative construct. In this regard, his approach to place has less in common with
Lefebvre’s than with Kort’s: rather than narrating place as stable entities, configured around issues of inclusion and exclusion, Kort formulates places “as repositories of meaning” and “sites of social relationships” (196). The contradictory elements of place, at once restricting and empowering, is evident in Kenan’s description of the community as “bound by this strange activity”—i.e., the harvesting of tobacco (A Visitation 257). “Bound” consolidates the contradictions of place into a single verb. Certainly, the word calls up the collective strength of solidarity and the value of obligation; here, it also calls up boundaries, the problematic processes of inclusion and exclusion necessary to configure the community as a coherent entity. The ritual of the gun and the shared experience of farming tobacco provide milestones that, in part, designate full membership into the community. However, the material conditions and historical exigencies under which these rituals emerged have been concealed by the “constructed whole” of place: they now are enacted simply to maintain the community as it exists in memory and to distinguish its members from the rest of the world. Because the result—the binds of community—is never dissociated from the action that fosters it, place seems to drawing to an inevitable end, rather than a transformative moment. This view of place is limited, however, because it fails to account for the legacies of survival, mutual obligation, and collective triumph that are equally a part of the community and its rituals. In order to restore the nourishing possibilities of place and community, Kenan’s work suggests, the genealogies of rituals like the hogkilling must be investigated and the meaning concealed by the “constructed wholes” of place must be reclaimed.

Kenan’s fiction recognizes the difficulty of this task. A Visitation of Spirits makes plain the appeal and power of a stable sense of place, particularly for the members of the Cross family. Their ancestral patriarch Thomas Cross established the village’s most significant institution, the First Baptist Church, where Horace’s grandfather, Ezekiel (or Zeke), wields great authority as the eldest member of the deacon board, and his cousin Jimmy is the new pastor. For Zeke in particular, Tims Creek is an empowering place, where he has access to much of what Jim Crow sought to deny. He has acquired an expansive farm and maintains a generational lineage generally unimpeded by the white world. In this small universe, he has the incredible authority offered by what he believes to be a totalizing knowledge of its geography: at one point, he assumes that he can identify the customers at the local gas station in a given moment by simply surveying the cars out front (46). In the story “Let the Dead Bury the Dead,” Kenan further develops the town’s history through Jimmy’s uncompleted ethnog-
raphy. His research investigates the town’s development, beginning with a maroon community of escaped slaves who established a permanent, stable existence and were able during Reconstruction to officially lay claim to their own town. As such, the legacy of Tims Creek—and thus, the legacy asserted by Zeke—offers a powerful oppositional black subject position. While the southern place-narrative of the plantation (manifest in *A Visitation* via the production of an inane plantation musical, *Ride the Freedom Star*, for which Horace serves as a stagehand) elides the efforts of maroon communities and self-contained African American communities to map their experiences onto the geographies of the South, the black-owned places of Tims Creek, the Cross farm, and the First Baptist Church provide the social spaces in which histories of black expression and black life can be articulated.

This sense of exceptionalism is something of a tautological construction: the Crosses have a special status because they exercise the rights and authority of (white) men, and because they exercise these rights and authority, they have proof of their special status. Jimmy, for instance, views both Horace and himself as specifically chosen to continue that exceptional mission—as destined to bear their burdens and achieve the successes of Tims Creek and the Cross family. His ministry at the First Baptist Church, specifically, becomes a birthright—not something to which he is necessarily entitled but an achievement that realizes his great-great-grandfather Ezra Cross’s “dream that one of his own progeny would stand before the altar as His, and his, minister” (*A Visitation* 115). The fulfillment of this “familial, dynastic hope” establishes the Crosses as “worthy,” according to Jimmy, and thus eradicates the emasculating, vitality-sapping shame of slavery and Jim Crow.

However, something has gone wrong—something so awful that it leads Jimmy to frame the contemporary struggles of the black community as an apocalyptic attrition of a generation. “Why are we sick and dying now?” he asks in the confession that follows the earring episode. “All the sons and daughters groomed to lead seem to have fled. . . . How, Lord? How? The war is not over” (188). Jimmy alone seems cognizant of this crisis; his confessions articulate a prophetic vision of the dissolution of the structures of community and family. Though Jimmy struggles to determine the cause of this problem, the novel offers a clear diagnosis through Horace’s struggle: the best of his generation has left in order to survive. The community rejects difference within its boundaries; anyone who does not fit

3. Zeke, in particular, is representative of this worldview, which imagines “Tims Creek
within its strictly bivalent epistemology leaves or, like Horace, risks their sanity.

While the discursive regulation, concealment, and even expiation of difference in Tims Creek shares much with the collective response to ambiguity in *Light in August*, Zeke is no Doc Hines, and Tims Creek contains no Percy Grimm. Despite the difference in time, both Tims Creek and Jefferson are threatened by undifferentiation and ambiguity, inasmuch as such presences demand a confrontation with the essential instability and permeability of both the boundaries of community and the bivalent categories that configure those boundaries. While the white residents of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha violently maintain these collective boundaries to ensure their individual positions (as white) within the racial order, the maintenance of the boundaries of community has historically been practiced as a means of collective self-preservation against white oppression by the African American residents of Tims Creek. Thus the instability in Tims Creeks is perhaps more ethically vexing, particularly for an outsider to this culture.

Such questions of identity and self-preservation are posed by the family’s reaction to the earring Horace wears to Thanksgiving dinner. The scene itself, rendered as drama rather than prose, seems on its face to be a fairly conventional intergenerational family squabble, indistinct from thousands of other conversations adolescents have had with their elders over earrings, long hair, fashion, or make-up. However, this particular argument is notable as it marks the convergence of two discourses that are often ruthlessly and unfortunately kept distinct: race and gender. The earring registers first as a contravention of gender norms, and Horace’s great-aunt Jonnie Mae states the piercing makes him look “[l]ike some little girl. Like one of them perverts” (184). However, Horace’s transgression of racial divisions becomes the dominant theme of the evening. Ultimately, Zeke forbids his grandson from associating with his new white friends with whom Horace got the piercing as a sign of solidarity. “But they’re my friends,” he protests, “But they’re different. They aren’t from around here” (186). Here, Horace implies that, by virtue of their northern and western backgrounds, his friends exist outside the divisions that define the southern places and histories that the Crosses inhabit. Responding almost as a chorus, his aunts

and the Cross family as impermeable spaces with established racial and gender borders” despite the inevitable appearance of the “uncanniness of difference,” according to Lindsey Tucker (315).
immediately restore the binary divisions destabilized by Horace’s assertion of undifferentiation:

RACHEL: They’re white, ain’t they?
HORACE: Yeah, but—
REBECCA: You black, ain’t you?
HORACE: But they don’t—
RUTHESTER: He’s just foolish. He just don’t understand.

Specifically, what he does not understand, according to his aunt Rebecca, is “all the white man’s done to us.” When Horace reacts by proclaiming his disapproving family members “bigots,” Jonnie Mae sternly rebukes him with by narrating the history of bigotry she and the generations before him have faced: “Do you have any idea how many white men have called me girl and aunt? Out of disrespect? Out of hatefulness? How many white men called your late Uncle Malachi—God rest him—boy and uncle?” (187).

Like the ultimate confrontation between Horace and Jimmy, this episode is presented in Jimmy’s Confession as a dramatic exchange, complete with stage directions. There is no mediation and no comment on the confrontation until it is over and Jimmy’s narration resumes. The reader is left alone to observe and to sit as a judge weighing the merits of the various positions. Given both Horace’s position as the protagonist and the dramatically ironic knowledge of his homosexuality, the reader is perhaps inclined to sympathize with Horace. However, Jonnie Mae’s conclusion of the dispute reminds the reader (and Horace) of the stakes of African American solidarity at moments in which lynching might be the consequence of a violation of the boundaries of race. Indeed, the Crosses, along with the community of Tims Creek, have thrived precisely because they have sought to distance themselves from white people as much as possible and to strictly regulate necessary or unavoidable moments of contact. While they have been relatively successful in their efforts to create a black-controlled space, that space is itself ultimately restrictive. Once the regulation of difference was a matter of self-preservation; now, it is necessary to preserve their senses of themselves. The Crosses can neither brook ambiguity along the margins of their community nor tolerate any threat to the purity and stability of its center—that is, to the patriarchal legacy that designates Horace as “[s]omebody who’s gone make us proud,” as Jonnie Mae says (187) and as “a son of the community, more than most,” in Jimmy’s words (188). And while Jonnie Mae’s rebuke responds to Horace’s
violation of racial boundaries, it is articulated as a reinforcement of gender roles: among the worst crimes of white oppression, she makes clear, were the restrictions levied upon her ability to express her femininity and the emasculation of the now-dead Malachi.

Thus, in counteracting the marginalizing power of white domination, the Crosses have constructed their family and their community as unified wholes, complete with collective boundaries that distinguish them from an imagined Other and keep them separate from the evil it poses. Like nearly all forms of apocalypticism, this is a radically bivalent view, imagining existence in terms of an ongoing conflict between a chosen few and those who oppress them. This eschatology is both patriarchal and messianic, in which past suffering and sacrifice are redeemed by the ultimate victory of the community, perpetuated and led by its male heir. While the solidarity fostered by this eschatological vision was perhaps necessary in the face of Jim Crow, the ongoing reproduction of a stable collective identity—particularly one centered on a patriarchal lineage—“denies or represses the heterogeneity of social difference,” according to Iris Marion Young. “It denies the difference among those who understand themselves as belonging to the same group; it reduces the members of the group to a set of common attributes” (335). In particular, the production of a stable black identity often fails to account for the presence of homosexuality: “Men who love men and women who love women disrupt this system along many axes,” she writes, but not simply because they challenge a Levitical injunction. Rather, she contends, “the need to make homosexuality invisible is at least as much existential and ontological as it is moral” (335–36); in order to survive, communities have demanded a rigid sameness, which severely limits the potential for empowerment and political movement that the group identity offers by denying someone like Horace full access to its sustaining power.

4. As Albert Raboteau notes, the spiritual nourishment offered by the black church was bound up with the exercise of gendered citizenship rights from the earliest moments. He cites Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church’s assessment that slaves “‘found freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of action, freedom for the development of a true Christian manhood.’ Significantly, Payne and other black clergymen linked ‘True Christian manhood’ with the exercise of freedoms that sound suspiciously like civil and political rights. The ineluctable tendency of the black evangelical ethos was in the direction of asserting ‘manhood’ rights, which were understood as a vital form of self-governance” (94). This notion of masculinity and citizenship strikingly—and troublingly—converges with the conflation of citizenship and rape that informs the discourse of lynching as it is modeled by Robyn Wiegman.
Apocalypse as Alternative Discursive Space

The Crosses’ brand of black millennialism, it seems, imagines victory specifically as the establishment of a new patriarchal order and a generation legacy. Its terms, then, are ineluctably heteronormative, leaving Horace in a difficult position: reject his most intimate self, or abandon all that has sustained him. Horace’s struggle to determine how he can exist within this place—how he can lay claim to this empowering but limited collective identity—leads him away from the narratives of millennial victory and to Apocalypse—that is, to the discursive space, within an otherwise bivalent worldview, through which he can articulate the experiences of ambiguity and undifferentiation. Well before he conjures a demonic vision, he imagines Tims Creek as fraught with apocalyptic signs and images. Contemplating the “transformation” he hopes will provide an escape, Horace imagines the land, “the soybean fields surrounding his grandfather’s house, the woods that surrounded the fields, the tall, massive long-leaf pines. . . . He thought of the sky, not a blue picture-book sky with a few thin clouds, but a storm sky, black and mean, full of wind and hate, God’s wrath, thunder, pelting rain” (14). This image is not just Horace’s: after his death, the narrator offers a winter sky that is “white-grey and desolate, stretched like the hand of God, high and wide” (45). Horace’s interest in the quantitative, methodological engagement with nature offered in his science courses does not suspend his belief “in an unseen world full of archangels and prophets and folk rising from the dead, a world preached to him from the cradle on, and a world he was powerless not to believe in as firmly as he believed in gravity and times tables” (16).

While the denizens of this world might be invisible, their existence is integrated into the maps of community constructed in memory and narrative. Thus, abstract concepts like evil and judgment are tangible and projected onto people and place. In the discussions of older men in barbershops and the fields, “the evils of the world had been put before [Horace], solidly and plainly,” and located in the figure of “the white man” (89). And it is not just residents who formulate the landscape in this manner. In his confession, Jimmy recalls his expatriated siblings begging him to “Leave North Carolina. Get out. As if it were on fire. As if, like Sodom or Gomorrah, the Almighty would at any moment rain down fire to punish the wicked for all the evil done on Southern soil” (35). An apocalyptic sense of place is evident in even ostensibly secular narratives of the region: according to his brother Franklin, Jimmy has been “brainwashed and pussywhipped” into joining his wife Anne, a “high-minded, high-yalla,
rich, militant-talking Northern girl,” on the frontlines of a delusional holy war for social justice in “the big bad, bloody South” (35). Horace’s visions thus amount to more than a hallucinatory conjuring of the “unseen world of archangels in prophets” into visibility; the visitations of the past make apparent all of the overdetermined associations of judgment and cataclysm layered upon imaginary landscapes of southern places. In the various articulations of Horace’s sexuality, the convergent nature of evil and ambiguity is painfully apparent. He is variously “possessed of . . . a wicked spirit” (28); an “aberration”; sick and “diseased” (160); and even “curse[d],” “doomed to hellfire and damnation” by the desire he cannot escape (101). Even Horace’s masturbatory fantasies end with a “thunder[ing]” deity: “this God bellowed in his head when the need arose and Horace had conjured up the pornographic images he had seen of women and men in unholy congress.” Again, Horace does not conjure these images out of a vacuum but rather appropriates them from the apocalyptic discourse of difference specific to his environment.

Horace confronts the apocalyptic elements of place via the vision initiated by his entry into the church. Here, Horace is visited by (or perhaps visits, depending on one’s reading) the memory of Rev. Barden’s sermon on Romans I and the biblical injunction against homosexuality. Barden uses the scriptural language of pollution and uncleanness; moreover, he recites a familiar argument by locating the source of the pollution outside of his community in the fallen culture of the modern world threatening them via mass media (here, an afternoon talk show). The sermon constructs Tims Creek as isolated, culturally and temporally, but Barden counters any argument that would position him “behind the times”: “Brothers and sisters, there is no time but now, and I am telling you: It’s unclean” (79). The sermon amounts to a rhetorical display of purity and unity via a refutation of the ambiguity posited by homosexuality and to a call for steadfast, absolute maintenance of the borders—cultural, spatial, and temporal—that preserve the coherence of the community. “See, the soul is a valuable thing,” Barden tells the congregation. “And it’s our responsibility to keep it up, like a house. . . . You got to lock the door when you go to bed at night or you might find somebody there when you wake up that you didn’t leave there when you went to sleep” (80). Barden ascribes cosmic significance to the maintenance of these boundaries and applies the discourse of sin to delineate the margins of community. However, it is vision fraught with cosmological contradiction, as it seeks to both claim the community of the church as the source of divinely ordained stability amid the earthly chaos and situate this same community on the precipice
of a cataclysmic dissolution. The result is a collective paranoia—a demand for the obsessive maintenance of boundaries via the individual display of purity.5

In the vision he experiences in the church, Horace is both horrified and thrilled by the cataclysmic consequences of the disruption of community: the scimitar-wielding demon demands that Horace kill Barden. When he fails to do so, the demon takes matters into his own hands, beheading the pastor and, thus, unleashing the possibility of cataclysm. The floor rumbles, and the baptismal font below explodes “as if it were alive—like a wave, sending splintered wood, chairs, lamps, Bibles, plants, tatters of carpet, and hymnals in a moist conflagration, wet fire, into the air” (83). The threat to community posed by Horace, it seems, is so complete that the church—its central physical structure—cannot withstand his presence. However, the church does not collapse; instead, the focus of the cataclysmic inertia is redirected, as it inevitably is, back upon Horace. Barden reappears, head on shoulders, to lead a baptism—Horace’s. And though he wants to accept the redemptive waters, he fears that he will “fall, crack his skull on the cold concrete and turn the purifying water to scarlet,” thus polluting the holy, healing water (84). After he relents, he stands at the front of the church, haunted by the realization that he cannot take his inherited place there and “overwhelmed” by the desire to be like his grandfather and the knowledge that he never will. The parishioners hurl homophobic invectives at him until he flees—out of the church doors and back into the world of “unholy elves and imps and griffins and werewolves and pale-faced phantoms” (87).

Though he does not know it, he becomes like Zeke in this very desire. Just as he does, his grandfather and his cousin are both troubled by their perceived failures to live up to the legacy of the Cross men. In his youth, Zeke imitated his father, “his way of standing, his talk, his talk,” but, “in the end, he didn’t grow up to be more like him . . . and that was a hard thing for him to settle to square with himself, for in a strange way he was

5. Barden’s sermon engages the same preacherly tradition assumed by Rev. Dan Taylor in Wright’s “Fire and Cloud.” Houston A. Baker, Jr., writes that while “God was generally viewed as the exclusive agent of the apocalypse” in spirituals and hymns, in sermons, the black preacher “generally identifies himself as the person chosen by God to herald a fiery end of time that will come unless his listeners repent” (Long Black Song 51). However, the ends to which Barden deploys the rhetoric of apocalyptic prophesy have more in common with those of Faulkner’s Doc Hines: rather than leading his community toward social change or offering hope of deliverance, Barden uses Apocalypse to stabilize the racialized, gendered boundaries of community.
glad” (53). While Zeke imagines Horace as “foreign to me,” this is hardly an anomaly within the Cross lineage; the stability of community and patriarchy, it seems, is tenuous at best. Consequently, they must be actively maintained through a variety of strategies including the imitation of the previous generation; rites of passage, such as depicted in the hogkilling; and, indeed, by the election of individuals, like Jimmy and Horace, to the status of “Chosen Nigger.” Rather than confronting the challenge Horace’s behavior and ultimate suicide pose to the patrimonial narrative, Zeke locates his grandson as “foreign,” discursively exiling him from the space of family and expiating the existential threat that his difference poses. Indeed, he is all but absent from Zeke’s internal monologue and is never mentioned during the conversations in the car. The script of abjection is thus enacted in order to preserve the coherence of Zeke’s “surrogate reality.” Though Horace’s homosexuality poses a seemingly insurmountable contradiction to his familial legacy, his suicide ironically enacts the sacrificial associations invoked by their last name and links him to Faulkner’s Joe Christmas, another source of collective existential angst. In death, both Horace and Joe are removed from the communal bodies that their existences so trouble. Consequently, Zeke can retrospectively exile his grandson to the margins of family and community and designate him as “foreign.” In Tims Creek, as in Jefferson, the center, at least rhetorically, holds steady once the threat is removed.

Of course, the distinctions between center and margin affirmed by Zeke are destabilized for the reader who, unlike the old man, is privy to Horace’s dissolution. Unfortunately, Horace imagines these boundaries of community and family as no more permeable or dynamic than his grandfather does. Instead, he internalizes the incongruity and locates himself as the source of instability. Kenan seems to take Eudora Welty’s counsel to writers—to be careful to locate characters within places, lest they “fly to pieces”—not as a warning but rather as a road map for Horace’s descent into incoherence, which parallels the dissolution of Joe Christmas (122). In fact, the multitude of demonic voices visited upon him, as well as his own visitations to the past, are indicative of the dissolution of Horace as a unified self that moves sequentially through time and space. Rather than challenge the location of his queer desire outside the boundaries of community, he seeks to conjure the “unseen world” of archangels and demons of this plane into visibility, hoping that coherence will be possible in this seemingly limitless supernatural possibility of this realm. So powerful is the hold of this “surrogate reality” and so entrenched are the boundaries of community that Horace attempts to escape into a fantastic, unseen world
that is freed from the inviolable laws of physics, rather than questioning the instability of the structuring narratives of this realm. Social or communal change is far more implausible, in Horace’s view, than his transformation into a hawk. He imagines this bird of prey and its hunt of a rabbit in explicitly apocalyptic terms:

Talons would clutch the thrashing critter tighter than a vise, its little heart would beat in sixteenth notes, excited even more by the flapping wings that beat the air like hammers and blocked the sun like Armageddon. Then the piercing of the neck, the rush of hot, sticky blood. The taste of red flesh. He felt a touch of empathy for the small mammal, its tail caught in the violent twitching of death thralls, but he was still thrilled. (*A Visitation* 15)

While Horace’s fantasy begins by identifying with the predatory, his focus moves in short order onto the prey, and his own feelings of incoherence are displaced onto the torn flesh of the rabbit. The fantastic existence of the bird is “thrilling,” not just in this displaced violence but also because, he imagines, it offers the possibility of sailing above the terrain, “unfettered, unbound and free” and without having to leave. Indeed, he chooses a red-tailed hawk because it is indigenous to North Carolina (14). Even in fantasy, Horace cleaves to his grandfather’s farm and to the community that has granted him chosen status; he even believes he will be reunited with his family at the Rapture, the moment at which the faithful will bodily ascend to heaven (22). In the next world, he imagines, the contradictions and confusion that plague him in his human form will simply melt away.

The apocalyptic elements of Horace’s visitations only become more specific and more elaborate. As he stands on the football field, for instance, another denizen of the unseen world comes into view, who is described as “a manlike figure, dark, clad in what appeared to be thick, black robes, wearing a silver helmet and armed with a gleaming scimitar” (165). As he watches him, the voices he hears begin to speak:

*For behold, the day cometh, that shall scorch as an oven; whispering whispers, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble. Come, come. Horace, afraid to do otherwise, stepped forward slowly. Come. The voices whispered whispering, But unto you that fear shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings, whispered, whisperings, whispered, Come.*
The words the voice speaks are from scripture. Specifically, they are from Malachi 4:1–2, the final chapter of the final book of the Christian Old Testament, and they offer a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. The nature of the figure in front of him is not clear: is it a demon? An angel? Christ himself? The text offers little illumination, and perhaps, it is of no consequence. The vision is quickly broken up by the appearance of several white teens who see that Horace is armed and naked and come after him. Believing himself to be in cosmic battle, Horace runs and then opens fire. If the “day cometh,” Horace must fight for its healing promise.

The possibility that Horace might maintain coherence—albeit, in non-human form—is quickly ended. During the course of the April night, his alienation from place becomes so complete that he does indeed “fly into pieces,” losing himself amid the voices of the demons and in the memories that leap up from the terrain. After he conjures the demons, Horace moves across the Tims Creek landscape and becomes dislocated from time and place in a manner not unlike Joe following the fire at the Burden place in Light in August. While Faulkner shifts his narrative perspective away from Joe before he finally falls to pieces, Kenan allows the reader to experience Horace’s descent into incoherence. The conventionally-perceptible landscape of Tims Creek fades into the background as the heretofore unseen geographies of the apocalyptic imaginary increasingly dominate the landscape. These images loom larger and larger, increasingly dominating the space through which Horace moves until they ultimately overtake him completely.

This process of dissolution culminates in a confrontation with a grotesquely costumed doppelgänger he finds in a mirror at the Crosstown Theatre, the site of the previous summer’s “lavish” production of Ride the Freedom Star (213). The play is an inept epic historical musical written, produced, and funded by the last scion of the white Cross family, Philip Owen Cross; its comically banal version of the region’s plantation past offers more in the way of elaborate fireworks and sumptuous costuming than historical accuracy. Crucially, this specifically antebellum southern narrative is situated as national: it draws upon the rhetoric and iconography of the Revolution and early Republic, recasts the plantocracy as the Founding Fathers, and disconnects the word “freedom” from the African American experience. Though far from view, Horace’s work as a stagehand is the closest Ride the Freedom Star comes to incorporating the presence of black Crosses. The play’s black characters fail to transcend the familiar stereotypes, eliciting the white audience’s laughter with their buffoonery and inspiring awe with the “raw and dynamic singing” of black spirituals and
faith through a minister’s sermon, “which was the most passionate, hell-raising moment in the play” (214).

Nonetheless, Horace’s experience with *Ride the Freedom Star* is empowering as it offers his first exposure to the possibility of a community open to the expression of queer desire. The cast features eleven “young, ambitious” professionals brought in to perform the lead roles, many of whom are gay (215), including both Horace’s lover Antonio and the object of his desire, the bourgeois African American co-star, Everett Church Harrington IV. While the members of the troupe openly express their desire, it is a desire that seems, at best, vacuous and fleeting and offers none of the transformative, healing possibilities Horace seeks. The emancipatory possibilities offered by the troupe are further tempered by their work on stage, which seeks to reinscribe the plantation myth as the region’s singular historical and sociospatial narrative, thus silencing the story of the black Crosses. The script is so crass, however, that it only serves to empower Horace by reminding him of both the difficulty and the success his family has faced to maintain their story. “Damn, you know, I never put two and two together. That’s your fucking family too, isn’t it?” Antonio asks Horace, assuming that he must be seething with anger (224). That is hardly the case: “It’s funny. I’m kind of proud, too. You know. Not about the slavery stuff, but to know where we’ve gotten, you know?” The legacy of the black Crosses is an enormous source of strength for the adolescent, and he seeks to insert himself into its narrative as “the next generation,” the Chosen Nigger: “You know, I often think of how I’m going to make my family proud of me.” Antonio’s amused response—“Look out world. Superfag is on the move”—disgusts Horace, and he rejects the attempt to locate him as “fag,” as he did with his first lover, Gideon. The confines of the Cross patriarchy offer no space for queer desire, it seems.

On the night of Horace’s death, these memories loom up from the Theatre. Ultimately, they yield the stage of Horace’s consciousness to his doppelgänger who is costumed as a clown, “white-faced” and applying the make-up of black face (220). In the figure of the doppelgänger, who offers and then demands that Horace put on his make-up, Kenan conjures all of the overdetermined associations of minstrelsy and elides any easy distinction between the silencing of the black claim to place and the silencing of Horace’s queer desire by the narrative through which that claim is made.6 Though Horace cannot transcend the heteronormative boundar-
ies of the Cross legacy, this visitation nonetheless embodies the normally abstracted and fragmented creation of cultural and discursive borders in a single matrix of marginalization and cultural amnesia. Moreover, the consolidation of this matrix in the doppelgänger suggests the necessity of an individual's complicity with their own silence. Thus, Horace's rejection of the possibility of queer desire is no less a masking than the educated, bourgeois Everett Church Harrington IV’s performance as a buffoonish slave in service of the play’s “conflagration of counterfeit glory” (211).

When the phantasm finally speaks, it offers the tube of make-up as a “way” out and an escape from the demons that embody Horace's queer desire. The rejection of the doppelgänger falls short of an affirmation of self; rather, it is the ultimate and traumatic dissolution of Horace as a unified subject. The result of this dissolution, presented earlier in the dramatic confrontation with Jimmy, is Horace’s disappearance into a persona of the demon, which claims to be in possession of his physical form. In his final attempts to resist this possession, Horace invokes the hope of Apocalypse: “Where will it end? Will it end?” he asks. Here, he begins the chain of apocalyptic associations by imagining an end to the narrative of his own existence: a grave, and its promise “[n]o more, no more ghosts, no more sin, no more, no more” (231). This conclusion is the specifically personal End of death, not the world-shaking End of cataclysm, and it is articulated only after he forgoes the possibility of individual transformation, either through the supernatural metamorphosis into something nonhuman or the expression of queer desire. His dismissal of possibility of escape through conjure is preceded almost immediately by the visitation of the memory of the cast’s drunken, drug-fueled orgy in the cemetery the prior summer. Frustrated by his inability to confess his love to Harrington (or ECH IV, as he is known), Horace follows his lover Antonio to the graveyard where the orgy develops almost organically. The experience is hardly transformative; in fact, it is not even a positive. Instead, it is rendered in unmistakably supernatural, even wicked terms—“like witches in a coven” (230)—and is fraught with the “strange inevitability” that is characteristic of Apocalypse. However, Horace is removed from the moment, observing “as a true scientist—clinical, clean, objective.” His assessment: the moment is empty, existing as almost a last recourse for the participants who lack an appropriate space to express their desire; they therefore conjure the moment “in

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well as “a celebration of an authentic people’s culture, the dissemination of black arts with potentially liberating results” (17). See also Robert C. Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America.
lonely inarticulateness.” Despite the language of sorcery, the orgy is “not the otherworldly event he knew it should be,” Kenan writes. “The moon did not change color or phase, lightning did not flash, the earth did not quake, the sun did not rise. They were left only tired and stoned and dirty and smelly and empty” (230–31). The orgy announces a subversive claim to space, boldly refusing the location of their desire outside margins of gender and community by violating those boundaries—indeed, enacting that desire in extreme—in a public space. However, for Horace the orgy amounts to little more than this. It fails to offer the human intimacy of family and community from which his desire threatens to exile him; it fails to end, transform, or reveal anything.

What sort of transformation does Horace anticipate? A personal one, an awakening of a queer self that will be unconcerned with all that pains him, that will be able to leave behind the old realm of Tims Creek for the new world offered by the troupe? Or a transformation of the space he inhabits via a cataclysm which would end that world that cannot contain him and create a new realm in which the contradictions between the various subject positions he occupies would simply be erased? Regardless, in the wake of the failure of the transformation to come, it is those boundaries transgressed by his desire that seem unshakable and impervious to the efforts of the orgy to collapse them. Horace is thus only more certain in the location of the instability in himself, and he thus envisions his removal from those boundaries as the only solution. Physical exile, however, is insufficient; indeed, the possibility that Horace might simply leave Tims Creek is never mentioned. Even elsewhere, he remains located within the narrative of familial legacy as the “next generation” of Cross.

Horace does not imagine his death as a sacrifice necessary to maintain that order but rather as the only available escape. His invocation of various apocalyptic narratives marks a final attempt to find solace in the traditional African American faith so crucial to the Cross identity, and delineates Horace’s loss of faith when the apocalyptic salvation it promises fails to materialize. While that narrative’s hold upon his family and himself remains intractable, Horace recognizes that its failure for him is not unique but rather symptomatic of the African American experience. The narrative is broken up by the apocalyptic assertions of African American hymnology—God showed Noah the Rainbow Sign . . . Said it won’t be water, but fire next time—that are never realized.7 “[T]he gods have new names

7. Fire, of course, is a central trope of apocalyptic, evoking the torment of hellfire, as well as the possibilities of purification, renewal, and sexual passion. Thus far, this project
and sit high and look low, but never reach down” (233). Despite the promises, “there is no Pentecost, no Ascension, no Passover,” Horace eventually comes to believe (233); cataclysm is not a matter of God’s imminent judgment but rather is a threat posed by “men breath[ing] hateful fumes and . . . try[ing] to unleash God’s own sun.” Horace’s vision moves from his own memories to images from the collective traumatic memories of African American people, “[w]omen and children big-eyed and big-bellied, no food” (234), people without “voices” to articulate and counteract their oppression, with neither the possibility of purifying rains and fire from above nor a savior on their horizon. The only End that Horace can initiate is to end his own life, and so he does.

The Possibility of Revelation: Excavating Apocalypse

*A Visitation of Spirits* concludes on April 30, 1984, at 7:05 a.m.—immediately after Horace’s death. The narrator inhabits the perspectives of none of the Crosses but a detached, observant story-teller who ultimately rejects any effort to determine the reality of Horace’s possession. Such concerns are “irrelevant” (253), the narrator tells us, in the face of the unquestionable reality of Horace’s pain and death, which are alternately rendered clinically and awfully. “Most importantly,” the narrator says of the night’s events,

> the day did not halt in its tracks: clocks did not stop. The school buses rolled. The cows mooed. The mothers scolded their children. Plows broke up soil. Trucks were unloaded and loaded up. Dishes were washed. Dogs barked. Old men fished. Beauticians gossiped. Food was eaten. And that night the sun set with the full intention of rising on the morrow. (254)

has documented the ritual burnings of lynchings in Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home”; the “pillar of fire” which Rev. Dan Taylor becomes in “Fire and Cloud”; the “roman barbeque” at the Burden place in *Light in August*; and Bone’s fiery fantasies of nascent sexual desire and retribution in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Here, Kenan calls up both the African American spiritual “God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign”—a central expression of black apocalyptic spirituality—as well as James Baldwin’s succinct 1963 examination of U.S. racial politics, *The Fire Next Time*, which drew its title from this song. Indeed, Kenan’s most recent work, *The Fire This Time* (Hoboken: Melville House, 2007) is a twenty-first-century response to the Baldwin text.
In other words, the Apocalypse does not come. What, then, are we to make of Kenan’s engagement with Apocalypse? Does A Visitation of Spirits amount to a refutation of the formative faith traditions of Kenan’s youth as, at best, offering false hope, and, at worst, agents of oppression? In its plea for the necessity of remembering, the “Requiem for Tobacco” suggests otherwise. The consequence of Horace’s death is the destabilization of the absolute boundaries of community and its patriarchal center. Kenan implores the reader to remember the actual practices, obligations, and responsibilities that constituted the *bonds of community* rather than the narrative of patriarchy and patrimony that narrated the *boundaries of communities*.

It is, however, insufficient simply to memorialize these bonds. Rather, Kenan suggests that it is necessary to excavate them—to dig up the past and bring what has been concealed into the light and what has been silenced into speaking. This, in fact, is how Jimmy responds to Horace’s death in Kenan’s revisitation and reexamination of the Cross narrative in the titular story of his subsequent collection, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stores*. The story is an elaborate and playful exploration of genre, presented in the form of an ethnography composed by Jimmy from research conducted during graduate work toward a degree in history at the University of North Carolina and published after his death in a car accident in 1998 (Kenan’s story was published in 1993). The story includes a foreword from fictional anthropologist Reginald Gregory Kain, who both shares the author’s initials and is a member of the faculty at Sarah Lawrence College, where Kenan taught at the time of the story’s publication. Setting oral and archival histories alongside one another, the text moves between the unmediated transcript of Zeke’s account (including the various interruptions of a skeptical aunt Ruth) of the maroon origins of Tims Creek as “Snatchit” and later “Tearshirt”; the narrative counterpoint offered by the cotemporaneous diary of Rebecca Cross, the nineteenth-century matriarch of the white branch of the family, and the letters of her son, Phineas; and finally, Jimmy’s own meditations on his place within the family. All save the latter contain voluminous footnotes, referencing actual and fictional historical and anthropological research.

Derided by Ruth as merely a “haint” story and as a bunch of lies, Zeke’s tale begins at a specific site—a curious mound, according to Jimmy’s footnote, located six miles outside of Tims Creek—and moves outward, spatially and temporally, to narrate the creation of the community and the beginning of its evolution from a maroon community of escaped slaves into an organized municipality. Central to the story is the conflict between the legacy of its founder, the runaway slave and conjurer Pharaoh, and the
subsequent leadership of his successor, a Christian Preacher of gargantuan gastronomic and sexual appetites. Despite its generic trickery, “Let the Dead Bury the Dead” is perhaps best described as a parable—one that prompts the reader to consider the powerful histories of African and African American resistance that have been silenced by dominant historical discourses and necessarily forgotten by the descendants of slaves as they seek to engage in those discourses.

As Jimmy comments in a footnote, “Not enough has yet been written about maroon activity in the southern states” (283); indeed, research of marronage has almost entirely focused on the Caribbean. Herbert Aptheker, one of Jimmy’s sources, conducted the pioneering studies on U.S. maroon communities beginning in the late 1930s. Maroon communities, writes Aptheker, were a “seriously annoying” and “ever-present feature of antebellum southern life,” providing “havens for fugitives” and “bases for marauding expeditions against nearby plantations” and even “supplying the nucleus of leadership for planned uprisings” (151). In his groundbreaking 1939 article “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” Aptheker suggests at least fifty distinct maroon communities existed in the U.S. South between 1674–1864. Of these, a community in the Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina seems to have been the most “settled,” complete with homes and successful agricultural efforts. “It seems likely that about two thousand Negroes, fugitives, or the descendants of fugitives, lived in this area,” Aptheker writes. “They carried on regular, if illegal, trade with white people living on the borders of the swamp” (152). Indeed, the swamp provided Harriet Beecher Stowe with the setting for the follow-up to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the maroon novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*.

In its explicit concern with contradiction, and specifically, with what has been concealed by dominant historical discourses and what other forms might yet reveal, Kenan’s faux-ethnography proves to be the ideal text to demonstrate the apocalyptic model I have sought to develop. Multigeneric and polyphonic, the many voices evident in the text—the nineteenth-century white Crosses, the editor Kaine, Zeke, Ruth, and Jimmy himself as both an ethnographer in the footnotes and as a member of the community in the reflective components—allow Kenan to contrast not just the variances among individual interpretations of experiences but also the limits and boundaries of conventional historical narrative. For instance, several of Kaine’s additional footnotes effectively contradict Zeke’s story: “There is no documentation of a town or community named Tearshirt in any state or federal files or records” (304 n17). Yet, in every other
way, Jimmy's work supports its existence; his own footnotes frequently point to the incomplete nature of the historical record, and his recovery of Rebecca Cross's diary and Phineas Cross's letters operate to fill in those gaps through the conventional methodologies of an archival historian.

In fact, the story of Tims Creek's maroon origins is made all the more powerful by its persistence in the face of documentary evidence; its vitality is suggestive of the possibilities, even necessities, of different sorts of knowledge in order to come to grips with the appearance of contradiction. Barbara Webb argues that the novels of Caribbean writers like Alejo Carpentier and Wilson Harris explore the figure of the maroon and maroon communities “in order to bring the repressed knowledge of the past into historical consciousness” (58). Kenan employs marronage similarly: dominant racial and historical discourses sought to silence narratives of U.S. marronage almost immediately, as the very existence of such communities, as Aptheker shows, posed a dangerous threat to the white plantocracy and to narratives of racial inferiority. Aptheker was not careless with his words when he described marronage as a “feature of antebellum Southern life” (151), for runaways and maroon communities existed as an aspect of, rather than as an alternative to, the plantation system. In Richard Price’s words, maroon communities were “a ubiquitous presence” in and “a chronic plague” on New World plantation life, which served to make the possibility of black resistance “embarrassingly visible” (2).

A century later, Zeke Cross’s story serves to challenge the officially sanctioned brand of history and its repression of African American resistance. The narratives of dynastic republican glory and enlightened patriarchal mastery upon which Philip Quincy Cross bases the play *Ride the Freedom Star* fall apart when confronted with the existence of a self-sufficient maroon community. These communities have been ignored by the historical record, and their existence has even been denied in order to maintain the surrogate realities that map such geographies as spaces of white domination. The boundaries of the plantation, static and hermetically sealed in the play’s romantic imagination of moonlight and magnolias, are so destabilized by the knowledge of the interaction and exchange between the plantations and Tearshirt that they ultimately dissolve away. Indeed, while the concealed maroon community exists on the geography of the plantation, it would be free from the structures which produce it as the locus of black oppression.

However, the contradictions posed to dominant historical narratives by marronage are not the only such opposition being worked out in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead”: Jimmy's ethnography works also to uncover
the repression of the Africanist elements of slave culture. While it is clear in *A Visitation* that Zeke’s identity is inexorably bound up with both the moral vision of his Christian faith and the institution of his church, this story engages the conjure traditions of African cosmologies and African American folk religion. Pharaoh is presented as conjure man endowed with various otherworldly abilities, and his proselytization of traditional African religious practice is positively characterized. Upon his death, Pharaoh is buried with an unknown book, access to which he expressly forbids prior to his demise. The mysterious Preacher arrives to fill the absence of leadership. Calling Pharaoh’s teachings “the sure way to hell and damnation” (319), he demands absolute adherence to the Christian gospel and an immediate disavowal of all Africanist elements of the community. The relative harmony that coincided with Pharaoh’s holistic spirituality almost immediately dissolves into chaos: three young girls and two boys lose their minds and are ultimately killed, either at their own hand or by the townspeople. Each child, Zeke believes, had been sexually abused by the Preacher. Finally, the Preacher demands that Pharaoh be exhumed and the secrets of the book—perhaps, he tells the townspeople, a map to treasure—be revealed. This act results in the resurrection of the town’s dead, who have returned to life to exact retribution upon their kinsfolk and neighbors. The Preacher appears to lead the living dead against the town, but he is beheaded by the returned Pharaoh, who declares, “Damnation and ruin. What began as good has ended in evil. We are not ready” (332). Pharaoh takes a baby, whom the Preacher had earlier captured, and leaves; following his departure, “fire rained down from the sky, just like Sodom and Gomorrah and none of the wicked escaped . . . ,” Zeke tells Jimmy. “When it died down, wont nothing left. Nothing. Just that mound you asked about, smoking hot.”

Zeke’s story is prompted by Jimmy’s (unrepresented) inquiry as to the origins of the mound near Tims Creek. As the tale’s central chronotope,8 the mound serves as the physical feature of landscape upon which the spatial and temporal maps of the community most obviously overlap. Just as important, however, is Pharaoh’s book, which signifies the lacuna within both the oral and textual histories of African Americans. The story itself

8. The most succinct English definition of *chronotope*, famously formulated by Bakhtin in the essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” can be found in Michael Holquist’s and Caryl Emerson’s glossary in their translation: “A unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented. . . . The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring” (Glossary to *The Dialogic Imagination*, 426).
articulates this lack, but it fails to preserve what is lost; consequently, the book exists only as a present absence. This absence is so central to the community’s collective identity that the possession of the text is a source of immense authority: once the Preacher has sole control of the narrative of the past, he can control the past and even activate it against the community. If we consider this ethnographic record alongside A Visitation, it seems that Jimmy is prompted by Horace’s death to investigate the origins of the collective narrative in which his cousin Horace could not exist. The parable here poses two central questions: what has been erected to fill the place of the absent text, and is its preservation worth the cost of continued forgetting? The first question is relatively easy: the contents of the text, along with the structures of utopian community preached by Pharaoh, have been replaced by a narrative of patrimonial legacy, which both resists and mirrors the very white history that seeks to silence it—the history narrated in the Ride the Freedom Star. That history contains some of the same absences, as Jimmy learns from the unrestrained queer desire expressed in the letters of his white nineteenth-century cousin Phineas Cross.

The second question might be more difficult to answer. In a footnote, Jimmy Greene cites various speculations into the book’s origin: “an Arabic version of the Koran,” a Carthaginian text “stolen from the library at Timbuktu,” the text of a Zoroastrian creation myths, “a book of spells, the Book of Life, the Book of the Dead,” and even “a time-travel device.” But his speculations focus on a single hypothesis: that the book is “a transliteration from the one of the traditional Yoruba oral libraries” into either English or “an approximation of the Yoruba tongue,” an act that amounts to blasphemy in the oral traditional of Yoruba culture (287n6). Regardless of which, if any, might be true, the text nonetheless signifies an absence—the gaping hole left by knowledge of an African past that is no longer accessible within African American culture. In the introduction to the collection Maroon Societies, Price argues against the notion that maroon cultures were structured around a common “collective memory” of a pan-African past (26). Such models elide the particularities of African cultures as well as the “nascent but already powerful plantation-forged” African American culture. Instead, Price presents the Africanist presence in maroon cultures as a matter of rhetorical and ideological commitment. Rejecting the notion that slave and maroon cultures “mechanistically” developed as a “mosaic” of strands of European culture with some common, base-line African culture that organically and unselfconsciously adapted to the necessities of New World life, Price posits “commitment to ‘things African’” (27) and to
a “home-land” ideology” (28) as the means by which maroons negotiated the diversity of African cultural practices. Thus, this commitment was “the cement” that allowed it all to cohere. While the various social practices that characterize marronage necessarily included Western forms of knowledge and the experience of slaves, runaways, and freed persons of color within various New World cultures, this commitment to Africa configured the unmapped geographies of the maroon community as a space in which black suffering could be articulated.

Despite what Price calls “commitment to ‘things African,’” the particularities of African experience were inevitably lost; according to Webb, “even among maroons, knowledge of an African past is, at best, incomplete” (55). In the production of a grand new syncretic culture, which allowed these groups to survive and even thrive, something was inevitably lost: while many particular elements of African American cultures have traceable African origins, “no maroon social, political, religious or aesthetic system can be reliably traced to a specific tribal provenience,” writes Price (29). Interestingly, he further argues that, generally, the cultures furthest removed from “the vital African past” often display the most “tenacious fidelity” to the idea of an African past. While Price is unwilling to specifically locate the phenomenon of marronage “along a continuum of forms of resistance” (23), the “fidelity” of this ideological commitment is unequivocally, if not quantifiably, a resistant act.

In Wesley Kort’s sociospatial terms, the maroon community functions as a “repository of meaning” (196) that Kenan, like Glissant and Wilson, seeks to recover. However, the exact forms of the social relationships that generate this meaning are not accessible or perhaps even knowable by the conventional methodologies of an archival historian. That does not mean that, even when concealed, these forms of knowledge are not useful. In Kenan’s story, the maroon origin of Tims Creek affirms its latent but still accessible emancipatory legacy and offers the possibility of alternative cultural forms and systems of knowledge that would threaten the oppressive and repressive production of southern spaces and places. The recognition of maroon culture destabilizes the borders of the plantation as the governing spatial construct of a static narrative of southern history that would silence both the victories and suffering of African Americans. Likewise, it requires that African Americans consider the stability of their own collective and communal boundaries by prompting reconsiderations of the ontology of their own culture and revisitations of the experiences that they too have ignored. The discourse of marronage provides a model for syncretism and for the negotiation of cultural difference.
Though *A Visitation* and “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” are two separate works, it is useful to consider them together. In this context, we discover that Horace is the lacuna in Jimmy’s ethnography—the absent presence to which Zeke and Ruth pointedly do not refer. Snatchit and Tearshirt are perhaps logical destinations in Jimmy’s attempt to wrestle with the death of the boy he describes as having “been created by this society” and “a son of the community, more than most” (*A Vistation* 188). Scott Tucker notes that “maroon societies were, like the constructions of gender and race . . . , a function of the hegemonic institutions that seemingly excluded them” (314). They were also spaces within which difference had to be negotiated, as neither exile nor scapegoating would be possible under such circumstances. Unfixed on any map and unrecorded by the documents of history, maroon communities function as the repository of historical contradiction for Kenan and, thus, are the apocalyptic space *par excellence*. Just as Zeke’s story does for Jimmy, Kenan’s writings implore us to revisit the past and demand that we confront the inherent instability of the locations of center and margin, not so that we might bring place to an end but rather so that we might open it up to those who have been denied its nourishment and to those whose claims to it have been silenced. Again, Apocalypse becomes the site for our explanation, a signal of deferral, of trauma, and of productive instability. The unmistakably apocalyptic nature of Zeke’s story—the dead rise to mete out justice upon their kin—is appropriate in the context of a maroon community.

As Paul Gilroy writes, “creolisation, métissage, metizaje, and hybridity” constitute “a litany of pollution and impurity” (2)—imminent concerns of the apocalyptic, as we have seen. However, Gilroy formulates *pollution* as a threat to the hegemonic position of dominant narratives of history. While Zeke’s tale certainly destabilizes the official narrative of regional history, the story cannot be considered an attempt to regulate or conceal a threat to the plantation narrative; it is, after all, an *African American* text that is transmitted orally within an *African American* community. The impurity that it seeks to regulate, then, must constitute a threat to the *African American* historical narrative of Tims Creek. Its maroon genealogy destabilizes a collective identity bound up with the institutions of church and patriarchal order: the possibility of hybridity troubles the ontology of a homogenous blackness and its component rigid black masculinity, which has been imagined as the only available avenue of survival in the face of oppression. Once again, Apocalypse signals a site in need of excavation. Despite the terrific ending to Zeke’s story, the community of Tearshirt does not end in a bang, or even a whimper, but rather persists as Tims Creek
and in Zeke’s story. Likewise, Horace’s death in A Visitation does not bring about the cataclysms of which they dream. Once again, even when the End does not come, the apocalyptic imaginary remains the culturally specific space in which undifferentiation and uncertainty might be confronted.

The Uses of the Past

By painstakingly excavating the consequences of those boundaries that are not readily accessible, Kenan begins to work through the contradictory possibility of place in fiction and in public discourse. This is difficult work: as a gay black man writing the story of a gay black teenager, Kenan seems nothing if not the consolidation of the sort of radical social change that the sense of place, when formulated as a desire for stability instead of flux, can be mobilized to lament and even reject (Ladd, “Dismantling the Monolith” 52). As such, the sense of place in southern literature would ostensibly seem to have little to offer either Kenan or Horace. And yet, Kenan can make no move more subversive than claiming place as the matrix through which he can articulate an empowering subject position. 9

The implications of affirming Horace’s homosexual identity in Tims Creek, rather than exiling him from it, are far more radical than moving him anywhere else. 10

9. McRuer suggests as much in taking exception with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., over the novel. In a 1991 interview, Gates told Charles Rowell that he hoped Kenan would “take Horace to the big city in his next novel”—that is, to one of the urban centers historically more amenable to the expression of homosexual identities and, indeed, in which gay men have claimed their own spaces in neighborhoods such as New York’s Greenwich Village or the Castro in San Francisco. “What Gates elides in his suggestion to Kenan is the fact that taking Horace to anywhere also entails taking him from somewhere,” McRuer writes (185).

10. Indeed, in Robert McRuer’s estimation, by locating Horace at the center of this southern place, the place where he might be least likely to come out, Kenan advances the goals of queer theory articulated by Michael Warner and “confront[s] the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet” (194). Such a confrontation is certainly valuable within the context of this project. However, my aims are somewhat different from Warner’s. In excavating the apocalyptic as a discursive site of concealment and revelation, this book seeks to confront the default resistance to progressive political movements held by U.S. political and religious culture with the challenging and even liberating possibilities of Apocalypse, and thus, to activate the emancipatory potential of place. I am less interested, then, in how Horace’s particular presence challenges and disrupts the heteronormativity of Tims Creek than how the telling of his story, along with the oral history of the community’s maroon origins in the story in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” can transform Tims Creek into a more open and accessible matrix for the expression of an oppositional, resistant subjectivity.
Furthermore, by embedding Horace so deeply within his community, Kenan creates a space for meaningful discussion of the possibility of difference within community. The literary map of Tims Creek confronts the instability of the community’s boundaries; the consequences of the boundaries’ long maintenance suggest the necessity of moving away from a formulation of margins as borders to change and instead prompt the reader to investigate them as sites of dynamic exchange between the self and the other, between the local community and the world outside, that are informed by the experiences and folkways framed within. The ethics of Kenan’s fiction require the remembrance of the past, not in order to maintain a stable identity but rather in order to create a usable history that will guide these exchanges and that will be accessible to all who wish to claim it. In this effort, Apocalypse is our site of excavation, the proverbial “X” marking the spot: both Horace and his cousin, Jimmy Greene, turn to Apocalypse in order to understand the contradictions to community and family posed by, among other things, the presence of homosexual desire. The otherworldly discourse of Apocalypse functions as a narrative space in which the unspeakable can be addressed indirectly and where contradiction is negotiated through deferral to a cosmological myth. Where it occurs, something has been silenced.