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*The Short Fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason: Silent Voices, Silenced Voices,  
Voicing Silence.*

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Table of Contents:

Introduction: ..... I-XVIII.

1. Bobbie Ann Mason and the Southern Heritage: Silence in the Literature from  
the South: ..... 1-65.

2. Contemporary Fiction, Bobbie Ann Mason, and the Uses of Silence:  
..... 66-76.

3. Silence in Bobbie Ann Mason's Short Fiction: Introductory Remarks:  
..... 77-104.

4. The Materiality of Silence in Bobbie Ann Mason's Stories: ..... 105-149.

5. Landscape Contemplation and Silence in Bobbie Ann Mason's Characters:  
..... 150-186.

6. The Laconic Dialogues of Bobbie Ann Mason's Southern Characters:  
..... 187-276.

- Afterword: Mason's Conversation with Silence: ..... 277-290.

- Introduction:

“Las Ruinas”

Silencio y soledad nutren la hierba  
Creciendo oscura y fuerte entre ruinas,  
Mientras la golondrina con grito enajenado  
Va por el aire vasto, y bajo el viento  
Las hojas en las ramas tiemblan vagas  
Como al roce de cuerpos invisibles,

[...] (323)

- Luis Cernuda.

Sevillian poet Luis Cernuda (1902-1963) encapsulates in his poem “The Ruins”, published in a collection entitled *Como quien espera el alba* (1941-1944), the ultimate signification of silence in this research project. The poet contemplates the remnants of architecture and the lives and history that an observer cannot help but perceive while facing such spectacle. To accomplish this clarity of thought, which provides synchronized introspection and communion, silence and solitude are indispensable. However, silence comprises all that is distinguishable by sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Thus, sounds are constituents of this silence. The sensuous suggestiveness noticeable in silence generates a vivid image, which, in this poem, cannot be a scene of absolute quietness, as a swallow cries, the wind blows, and leaves rustle. This deliberate gap of utterances within the scene covertly reveals the abounding consistency of this lyrical representation. The traces of significance that emerge within speechlessness have motivated this project about silent voices –

meanings communicated through alternatives to language—, silenced voices – repressed speeches—, and about how to voice silence –the stylistic employment of wordless moments. All of it is applied to the short fiction of contemporary American writer Bobbie Ann Mason.

I have used three main approaches to Mason’s fiction: one that links her socio-historical conditions and circumstances to her writing techniques, characterizations and storylines; a second one, which seeks to establish a dialogue between her and other contemporary writers, from across the world, and how silence permeates their literary aesthetics; lastly, I concentrate on reading her texts closely, to ascertain her specificity when deploying silence as a literary tool.

Mason’s literature is a reflection of the landscape and language of the South of the United States, one that shaped her adult identity; hence, the cultural heritage percolating through her themes, settings, characters and words needed to be considered. A non-southern reader and academic will benefit from a cultural introduction to her work, which will allow for a more nuanced reading of the stories. However, Mason’s works are not impermeable to other literary influences and ontological concerns, both American and international; for this reason, I have examined her texts side by side with writers and critics who share similar preoccupations. Nevertheless, above all, my study of her literature always stays close to her own syntax, semantics and imagery. The core of my dissertation is textual analysis, always looking into the layers of meanings, structures and rhythms of Mason’s texts.

My research tries to ponder on the reasons behind the sustained inclusion of silence as a significant element in the short fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason. After exhaustive readings of her work, I established that silence organically emerges in the

interaction between characters, construction of scenes and fanciful and emotive descriptions. I gathered examples of silence in Mason's stories, and classified them according to settings, moods of the scenes and figurative implications. The resulting pattern demonstrated that Mason's language incorporates silence as a communicative tool, which moreover enhances the musicality of her texts. From the surface of her writing, that is, form and word choice, to the psychological characterization and universal sentiments transmitted in her stories, silence repeatedly materializes. As a consequence, different readings, literal or metaphorical, always lead to a visualization of silence. I concluded then that readers and characters were simultaneously given by Mason quiet spaces to meditate on meanings and contemplate details.

I hereby put forth the notion that silence, for this specific author, is not total lack of sound, but merely the absence of spoken word, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the muted messages within speeches; that is, what is not said when characters do speak. In both cases, silence performs as a seducing trope, theme and agent, being responsible for the most redolent scenes of Mason's fiction, where her main ideas pass "into the reader's or listener's subconscious" (9), as Nicoletta Simborowski explains in a study of the unsaid in literature.

Mason is one of the most prominent figures of contemporary Southern literature, and this fact has been internationally recognized. She has published novels, short-story collections, non-fiction and a memoir, all of which reveal her interest in the nuances of the South and the contradictions of the southern persona. Her depictions of the state of Kentucky are accurate, objective and respectful. Mason employs simple vocabulary, uncomplicated syntax, and a faithful representation of local accents. She distinctly recreates the musicality of her inspirational South through the words of the narrators and the utterances of characters. Her similes tend to

have as source ordinary objects, details of the landscape –both rural and urban–, and products of popular culture. A pervading lyricism compensates her earthly descriptions, while her delicate use of ironic humor balances the grotesque and tragic within the incongruity of the realistic everydayness of her plots.

The stories Mason creates mainly frame a short span in the lives of unexceptional people, who are encountering a change of no adventurous nature, but, still, unsettling. Her characters are pragmatic and resilient; nevertheless, their personalities are creative, hopeful and reflective. Beginnings are in *medias res* and endings are inconclusive; however, Mason’s characters often reach revelations, or, at least, insights; but those do not necessarily trigger action. Plots evolve but movement takes place within memories, fantasies, perceptions and thoughts, rather than manifesting in actual shifts of setting. The physical surroundings of the characters, the material world and its southern features, prompt the minute descriptions that distinguish Mason’s depiction of the land where she grew up. Her background shapes her fiction in a most conspicuous fashion.

Mason, in an article published in 1995 in *The New Yorker*, described her family’s farm as if she were giving her readers the coordinates of her fictional settings:

The pond feeds into Kess Creek, which cuts across this farm –the one where I grew up, and where my mother still lives. The farm is fifty-three acres, cut into six fields, with two houses along the frontage. We are within sight of the railroad, which parallels U.S. Highway 45. We’re a mile from downtown Mayfield, county seat of Graves County, Kentucky. We are in far-western Kentucky, that toe tip of the state shaped by the curve of the great rivers –the Ohio meets the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois, about thirty-five miles north-west

of Mayfield. To the east, the Tennessee and the Cumberland rivers (now swelled into T.V.A. lakes) run parallel courses. Water forms this twenty-five-hundred-square-mile region into a peninsula. It's attached to land along the border with Tennessee. Historically and temperamentally, it looks to the South. (87-88)

Rural Mayfield offered limited opportunities for an imaginative child like Mason, born on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May of 1940, who was always attracted to stories and alternatives to the harsh conditions that her parents in this dairy farm had to put up with. Thus, she pursued an education that allowed her to leave the claustrophobic environment that the South embodied in her youth. From an English degree in the University of Kentucky (1962), to a Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut (1972), her maturing years were centered on the arts, literature, and the North. Young Mason discovered the writings of James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, J.D. Salinger, Thomas Wolf, John Steinbeck, and Vladimir Nabokov, among many others that she has often mentioned as favorites, being the latter the object of her doctoral research, published in 1974.

Mason has always been passionate about storytelling, from her early career as a journalist in the *Kentucky Kernel* to her teaching position at Mansfield University, in Pennsylvania, from 1972 to 1979. But, eventually, as Joanna Price explains in her monograph on Mason, she became a full-time writer (4). Mason persistently submitted stories to *The New Yorker*, until "Offerings" was published in 1980, which ignited her devotion to creative writing and attracted both readers and publishers (she has never stopped contributing to that magazine). She published her first collection of short stories *Shiloh & Other Stories*, which won the P.E.N/ Hemingway Prize, in 1982. These stories point at a southern writer who enables meta-nostalgic passages to illustrate her complicated relationship with the South: a source of inspiration and

dissatisfaction, in equal measure. However, moving back to Kentucky in 1990 signaled her reconciliation to the land and its people. In the journal *PifMagazine*, Mason declares: “my real sources, the influences that were of value to me later as a writer, were the natural world — the infinite sensory details of growing up on a farm — and the language of country people. No amount of reading could have given me those treasures” (Alger, Online source). The later publication of her memoir, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, was aptly entitled *Clear Springs* (1999).

She has been recognized by academic institutions (she was a “writer-in-residence” at the University of Kentucky for ten years, 2001-2011) and literary circles<sup>1</sup>, and has always been a prolific author. She has published four more collections, three of which included previously unpublished stories: *Love Life* (1988), *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* (2001), and *Nancy Culpepper* (2006). *Midnight Magic: Selected Stories by Bobbie Ann Mason* was published in 1998, compiling seventeen stories from her two first two collections (1982-1989), which provides the reader with a global perspective of a decade of Mason’s writing, and it also includes a discerning introduction by the author, reflecting on her inspiration and artistic progression. There is a constant in all her collections: a feeling of estrangement pinned on her characters, who, as the writer herself explained in her memoirs, can only make sense out of their existence by sorting “through the scraps of the past, looking for the patterns of [their] quilted-together lives” (xi). Mason’s insistence upon

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<sup>1</sup> She is a member of the Authors Guild, *PEN*, and the Fellowship of Southern Writers, as well as a former Guggenheim Fellow (1983) and National Endowment for the Arts grant award recipient (1983). Mason was also honored in 2010 with The Appalachian Writer’s Heritage Award.



quilts, a recurrent symbol in her collections, signals the relevance of her background and the parallelisms with her own biography in her literary production<sup>2</sup>.

Most of the stories of her second volume, *Love Life*, focus on the difficulties of maintaining a love relationship in small towns of Kentucky, featuring middle-aged young families and retired couples struggling with changes in their lives that are, most frequently, synchronized with changes in the South as a whole. Linda Adams Barnes states:

One of the most prominent features of Bobbie Ann Mason's short stories is her painstaking use of detail. The theme of modern life encroaching on traditional Southern lifestyles dominates her work: family farms have to be sold, malls replace corner grocery stores, fast food replaces home-cooked meals. Mason makes the reader feel the clash intensely by employing vivid, true-to-life detail in depicting the incongruous elements that result from this transition in the South. (137-38)

Other than a general grimness in the tone and subject matter, there is as well as a temporal evolution in this second collection, which we see in the references that Mason makes to elements of popular culture, which are more recent and provide a different time frame. Mason explained, regarding the evolution of this collection, in an interview for *Bomb Magazine* in 1989, that due to the access her characters then had to better technology, such as cable TV, for instance, they were more prone to leave the house, and less attached to broadcasted popular culture; she also added that in *Love Life* her characters are less desperate to find answers for the conundrums they

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Michael Sims she explained the following regarding her memoirs: "I think it's a natural impulse to want to find some kind of coherence and meaning in your life, to find that it has a narrative, and that there are patterns. There are themes in your life, and themes that connect back to previous generations. You can see where you fit into the puzzle" (Online source).

find themselves at (Gholson, Online source). However, she maintains, and will do so in later stories, the duality of parables and flattened language, and the lack of continuity in the lives of her characters.

Her next collection of short stories, *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail: Stories*, published in 2001, was reviewed by Walter Kirn in *The New York Times*, where he wrote: “Not much happens, but what little does is squeezed for every last drop of metaphor” (Online source). In these tales there is a contrast between the characters’ capacity to elaborate complicated metaphors through their thoughts, which mainly symbolize their feelings, fears and needs, and their inability to articulate those same emotions through a verbal intercourse. This disassociation between their imaginative productions and their linguistic communication translates into dialogues mostly emptied of personal information.

In 2006, Bobbie Ann Mason published her latest short story collection, *Nancy Culpepper: Stories*, a cycle that includes the tales on the eponymous character, Nancy. Spanning through Nancy’s adult life, the reader receives a depiction of the Culpepper family and their socio-cultural environment. Mason’s only short novel *Spence + Lila* is also included in this collection. The novella depicts the struggles of an elderly couple and their family, when they have to face illness and death, after the woman is diagnosed with cancer. It contains unquestionably autobiographical details as the writer’s mother went through a similar process. The setting resembles Mason’s farm, and the characters of the siblings make life choices that resonate with the different paths Mason’s two sisters and brother have followed as adults: some of them leaving Mayfield behind, some staying. The novella portrays these “incongruous elements” that Barnes mentioned before, which result from cultures, settings, emotions, generations, and lives in transition.

Mason has also published four novels: *In Country* (1985), *Feather Crowns* (1993), *An Atomic Romance* (2005), and *The Girl in the Blue Beret* (2011)<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of the critical recognition that *Shiloh & Other Stories*, her first published collection, received, it was *In Country* that actually provided Mason with popularity, mainly due to its film adaptation in 1989<sup>4</sup>. The novel received an award, *The President's Citation*, granted by the Vietnam Veterans to a civilian that contributes significantly to their cause. *In Country* narrates the maturing process of a seventeen-year-old girl, Samantha Hughes, living in a small town in Kentucky with her uncle Emmet, who is a Vietnam veteran with posttraumatic stress. This peculiar bildungsroman traces the main characteristics of the New South of the 80's, highly influenced by the media, lowbrow culture and K-Mart consumerism. However, the traumatic effects of war, adolescence and family bonds constitute its actual backbone.

Mason's involvement with her country's history and the legacy of collective memory reflects on her next novel as well, *Feather Crowns* (1993), which won the *Southern Book Award for Fiction* and was also a runner-up for the *National Book*

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<sup>3</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason employs the dynamics of silence also in these novels; that is why, at certain points of this chapter, her long fiction has also been mentioned. However, this project is focused on the short story form because it encapsulates Mason's stylistic techniques, themes and settings. The basic requirements of the short story favor the use of silence. The conciseness that develops a plot in a few pages would naturally be aided by moments where the characters do not talk to each other and a detail takes over the passage to symbolize their inarticulate emotions, because this limitation of length creates tightness in dialogue. The strong images contained in the silent moments of Mason's stories equally favor the inconclusiveness inherent to the short story. Hence, the reader is left with an imprint of the general mood of the story: an imprint of the single effect that short stories should achieve. That final image in Mason's stories is, in most cases, a moment without dialogue, one of quiet observation. That single effect is multiplied in her novels, with characters that maintain more frequent and longer conversations as Mason finds the space to explore different moments in their lives. However, even if silence does not function as a backbone to structure her long fiction, it is still present therein.

<sup>4</sup> The movie was directed by Norman Jewison, starring Bruce Willis and Emily Lloyd; and it was filmed in Mayfield, Mason's hometown, and the near-by city of Paducah. Bruce Willis was nominated for the *Golden Globes* as a leading actor. Mason especially appreciated the participation of locals in the production.

*Critics Circle Award*. The story departs from the main temporal framework of Mason's literary production. It is set in the beginning of the twentieth century when a humble couple give birth to the first quintuplets of the nation; however, the location and topics remain close to her central interests: women struggling to overcome the limited roles of motherhood and wifhood, the suffocating standards of Southern society, etc. Religion, while ignored in most of Mason's stories, emerges here as a pivotal theme.

In 2005 Mason goes back to the novel, publishing *An Atomic Romance*. The main protagonist, Reed Futrell, works in a nuclear power station, and takes care of his old mother, who embodies his ties to his background and roots. His girlfriend asks him to quit his job out of concern for his health due to uranium exposure. Their romance is pitted against environmental concerns, which are prominent in this work<sup>5</sup>. The characters' fears directly portray Mason's own worry about uranium contamination, about which she wrote in a *New York Times's* article, "Pick your Poison", published in 2006.

Her latest novel, *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, which received the Kentucky Book Award (2012), was inspired by her father-in-law's experience as a WWII Allied pilot, shot down over Belgium in January 1944. The novel, however, is fiction, and relates the story of Marshall Stone. Mason says about it: "It was a challenge, and no book I've written has involved me so deeply" (Mason, 2012, Online source). It

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<sup>5</sup> The previous year, 2005, she had already been the coeditor of the volume *Missing Mountains: We Went to the Mountaintops but it Wasn't There*, a book with a strong ecological message concerning strip mining in Kentucky, which entails the devastation of precious landscapes. She will again deal with this topic in her article "Kentucky's Underground Economy", published a year later in the *New York Times*. A few months later, in the same newspaper, she wrote an article, entitled "Bluegrass Blues", where Mason further developed her facet as an environmentalist writer, denouncing the destruction of the horse farms of the region due to massive urban construction.

represents as well a challenge for the reader as, for the first time, her characters leave the South, which is only visited through Marshall's brief memories of his deceased wife and his grownup children, who worry about his father's adventure. Unavoidably, the change of setting transforms the style, inasmuch as the southern references are secondary and rare. Language, memories and metaphors, however, remain the quintessential source of creativity for Mason; these are literary traits that are favored by a story that evolves through traumatic recollections too painful to articulate. As well as that, remaining constants perceivable in her last novel are her sincere descriptions of settings, her fidelity to the unrefined complexities of human nature, her insightful and yet uncritical characterization of resilient personalities, and her bleak humor<sup>6</sup>. This consistency in style and themes that has characterized Bobbie Ann Mason's literary career so far coexists with a creative matrix that is intricate and reveals evolution.

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<sup>6</sup> Since the publication of this novel (*The Girl in the Blue Beret*), Mason has brought out a number of short stories in different magazines and journals, which evoke similar stylistic traits to her previous works, but including current topical affairs and cultural remarks, and showing a general approach to shorter stories: "Dance with Me" (July, 2013) in *Good Housekeeping Magazine*, "Clubbing" (December, 2013) and "The Face Lady" (February, 2013) in *New World Writing*, "The Horsehair Ball Gown" (Spring, 2013) in *VQR*, as well two collaborative pieces with flash-fiction writer Meg Pokrass, "Tweeting *War and Peace*" (October, 2012) in *Flash Fiction*, and "Whale Love" (August, 2013) in the online magazine *The Nervous Breakdown*. Mason's most recent publications are the story "Rendering" (April, 2014) in *The Green Mountains Review*, "Four Short Pieces" in *New World Writing* (August 2014), where she has also published the short piece "The Girl in Purple" in December of the same year. She published an essay entitled "Reading Between the Lines" again in *VQR* (Spring 2014), and a piece entitled "Ready" in the aforementioned *The Nervous Breakdown* (November 2014), which, as with much of her latest creations, was written with humorous intent. In 2015, Mason has collaborated in the latest issue (Winter, 2015) of the Georgia literary journal *Five Points* again with her "collaborateur" Meg Pokrass, writing five pieces: "Five Silly Pieces Pink Is Hot", "Talking through Hats", "Novel Unwound", "Joy Toes" and "Art Hurts".

The ensuing dissertation is divided into six chapters. Three of them have a predominantly introductory character. Chapter 1 defines the kernel of Mason's fiction: the South, whose past is briefly surveyed with the objective of finding traces of how silence has articulated such history. This history of disruption, violence, repression and rebellion has determined a prominence of silence, attached to the representations of southerners and their rhetoric. The bare depictions of Mason's Kentucky are a symptom of her interest in an honest portrayal of a past that has been frequently manipulated by means of flattering nostalgia. Hence, she employs memorialization as a device to explore history, trying to make sense out of the confusion of the postmodern South, which will be referred to as postsouthern, where borders are blurrier than ever. Silence stems from unresolved shame and regret, but it equally provides an inlet in which the characters can reduce the speed of modernization to question their possibilities, and to process the constant feed of new realities they are subjected to in this postsouthern context.

The demands of my project steer back the discussion to literature in chapter 2, which attempts to illustrate the stylistic justification for silence in contemporary literature. This chapter will show how writers have been able to make silences visible and loud in contemporary fiction, employing spaces of lull as fruitful resources for lyricism and discernment of subtleties in characters, themes and plots. After clarifying that silence is understood as moments of speech discontinuation that coexist with a wide range of sounds, I define the concept of "soundscapes" in comparison to landscapes. Soundscapes are the compounds of sonorous surroundings that, on the one hand, physically exist, and, on the other, are conceptualized by the characters, depending on their background, current moods and emotional influences. Furthermore, I provide an introduction to the possibilities of grasping silence, in

contrast with normative definitions of silence as emptiness. Conversely, I aim at demonstrating that silence is a fertile space, constructor of meaning and singularity. This power of silence becomes pertinent in postmodernity, and inherent to Mason's settings, where unconscious and mechanized behaviors can eclipse originality and intricacies.

Once I have culturally and historically framed the object of my study and provided some theoretical considerations, chapter 3 specifically questions Mason's literary filiations. I concluded that attaching a sole literary label to her stories would result in an oversimplifying categorization. This is due to the way in which she merges meticulous realism, grotesque images, lyrical reveries, irony, popular culture and landscape contemplation, among many other of the traits that shape her style; all of which relate in different ways to silence. The latter remains the main space and strategy that Mason's characters find to investigate deeper meanings under the superficial layers of their ordinary lives, routines and postmodern consumerism. Right afterwards, having identified the frequency with which silence correlates to female characters and the southern context, both urban and rural, these two elements are separately analyzed. Silence reveals the relevance of the scenery in identity construction and also provides, quietly, visibility to women. The chapter concludes with a consideration on the postsouthern condition of isolation, which is eventually soothed through silence.

Chapter 4 defines the physicality of silence in Mason's short stories; that is, if silence affects the characters and the style, it ought to be perceptible; hence, I have analyzed the figures of speech and poetic strategies employed to make silence noticeable for the reader. As if silence were an actor's prop on a stage, characters utilize silence to articulate their identity. That is, instead of verbalizing their

personalities and emotions, they find symbolic alternatives to express their innermost concerns. Two elements were mainly identified and studied accordingly as being allegorical instruments to convey the characters' individualities: their bodies and objects. Therefore, images describing limbs or organs, for instance, evince a relevant message in a parable that cannot be shared through the spoken word. Additionally, taking into consideration material culture studies, artifacts and commodities traditionally understood as mundane and unimportant were identified within aesthetic portrayals that equally helped Mason's laconic characters voice in silence their thoughts and feelings. The general background of these stories showed a prevailing materialism and consumption of products of popular culture, the study of which complement the previous sections on the study of the metaphors contained in the material world. I concluded that in these mediated messages and usage of manufactured articles, Mason's characters are not passive and uncritical consumers; they may remain silent, but the reader can rest assured that the relationship between objects, lowbrow culture and characters unveils in silence the idiosyncrasies of their personalities.

Correspondingly, chapter 5 explains the importance of the perceptibility of silence due to the sensitive attunement of narrators and characters to the physical qualities of the South. Their awareness guides the reader along the plot and through the language of Mason before and after the characters speak, during their silent contemplative moments. Firstly, I define the concept of beauty in Mason's stories. When the writer describes the landscape, the natural elements presented include both canonical scenes as well as grotesque items. Characters indulge in close observation of fauna and flora, either graceful or distorted. I could then move forward in the analysis, in order to analyze the way in which characters quietly behave and interact



with the natural space, attempting to prove the significance of their perceptive skills. These are sharpened specifically when three components are fused with silence: nostalgia for a southern topography that is fast disappearing; female characters that struggle to achieve self-reliance and independence; and, finally, solitude –the moments when the characters are left alone, free to scrutinize the natural surroundings that may either mirror or personalize their worries and desires. The chapter concludes with a brief recognition of literary traits in Mason that can be related either to American Transcendentalists or to the romantic tradition. In both cases, the combination silence-landscape justifies the need for a complex interpretation of Mason’s apparent simplicity and regularity.

Finally, in chapter 6, as a consequence of the consistency of silence in Mason’s short fiction, I have examined the subject matters and scenarios that elicit dialogue, in order to demonstrate that even when verbal action dominates the page, silence prevails as intrinsic component of Mason’s deployment of conversation. Before entering a process of categorization of discourses, I focused on the existence of a contradiction in Mason’s fiction as representative of the southern literary tradition. The paradox lies in the fact that southern personae have been equally defined as chatty storytellers who act as leading characters in scenes, with attentive listeners gathering around them; and, contrastingly, as people with reticent attitudes that would rather measure their words and dedicate their attention to the immediate. I try to explain how these opposites can be compatible within the same characters. Subsequently, I identified five main conditions and locations that motivate conversation even for Mason’s introspective characters, which are: moments of domestic chores; situations where someone tells a story, sharing ideas, memories, a joke or an anecdote; women in dialogue; men and women talking to each other; and,

ultimately, scenes where the main characters engage in conversation with strangers. To illustrate this categorization, I have studied through close readings three stories per section.

Each chapter and its organization creates a comprehensive ladder to interpret Bobbie Ann Mason's short fiction beyond the frequent labels attached to the author, which often obviate the elaborate creative process behind the seeming straightforwardness of her language and the general pattern of characters and plots. The South as historical and musical foundation needed to be presented initially, in order to understand, afterwards, how in the regional specificities of Mason her literature contains universals, influenced by international writers who have also employed silence as a stylistic resource. Thereafter, I could proceed to define silence for the purpose of my investigation. Defining the introductory remarks that shape her stories allowed me to detail the triggers, interactions and usefulness of silence in Mason's short stories for the narrators, characters and readers; all of which appear entangled with the relevance of the material world, the aesthetic portrayals of southern landscapes, and the peculiar dialogues in these stories.

While this dissertation is a stylistic study and a textual analysis of Mason's short fiction, it is not a research into theoretical foundations. However, I have utilized the ideas of critics from different areas of expertise who have concisely articulated conceptualizations of silence that resonated with my readings of Bobbie Ann Mason's stories. These readings are rather reflections upon the idea of silence and its aesthetic/literary repercussions<sup>7</sup>, but they do not add up to a consistent, thorough,

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<sup>7</sup> I have been inspired by the works of philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Francoise Lyotard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, just to name a few; by the ideas of feminist critics such as Tillie Olsen, Luce Irigaray, Susan Sontag, or Julia Kristeva; by linguists such as Denis Kurzon, Deborah Tannen, and Adam Jaworski; and literary critics like Ihab Hassan, George Steiner, or Terry

systematic handling of the topic. Many of them<sup>8</sup> were just approaches to the use of silence by one, or several, specific authors. A conclusive method to evaluate silence in literary texts would prove invaluable to projects such as mine, and it is to be hoped that we can have it soon.

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Eagleton, as an illustration. Many writers had already been associated to silence as a stylistic resource, in literary studies; for instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Henry David Thoreau, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller, Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Raymond Carver, and Maxine Hong Kingston. I included some of these and other essential readings as part of my background research, but limited quotations to moments when they illuminated passages of my own reading of Bobbie Ann Mason's silence.

<sup>8</sup> For further explanations of the aforementioned authors and their relation to theories of silence, see the following volumes and articles: Zijlstra, Onno. *Language, Image and Silence: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Ethics and Aesthetics* (2006); Lyotard, Jean-Francoise. *The Inhuman* (1992); Hanna, Robert. "Kant, Wittgenstein, and Transcendental Philosophy" (2011); Labastida, Jaime. "Martin Heidegger: la poesía y el silencio" (1997); Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1969); Olsen, Tillie. *Silences* (1980); Irigaray, Luce. "Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order" (1991); Sontag, Susan. "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1969); Smith, Anne-Marie. *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable* (1998); Kurzon, Dennis. *Discourse of Silence* (1998); Tannen, Deborah. "Silence: Anything but" (1985); Jaworski, Adam. "'White and White: Metacommunicative and Metaphorical Silences.'" (1998); Hassan, Ihab. *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (1967); Steiner, George. *Language & Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (1977); Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996); Lentricchia, Frank. "Coleridge and Emerson: Prophets of Silence, Prophets of Language" (1973); Thoreau, Henry David. *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (1906); Singer, Thomas C.. "Riddles, Silence, and Wonder: Joyce and Wittgenstein Encountering the Limits of Language" (1990); Laurence, Patricia Ondek. *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in The English Tradition* (1991); Huxley, Aldous. *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945); Savolainen, Matti. *The Element of Stasis in William Faulkner: An Approach in Phenomenological Criticism* (1987); Lilly Jr., Paul R. "Caddy and Addie: Speakers of Faulkner's Impeccable Language" (1973); Ross, Ciaran. *Becketts's Art of Absence: Rethinking the Void* (2011); Hollis, James R. *Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence* (1970); Clarke, Graham. "Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence" (1990); Cheung, King-kok. *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993).

Lisa A. Mazzei published in 2007 a study of silence, and I concur with her conclusion:

Thinking of the limits of silence means that more work must be done to trouble the limits and assumptions that constrain the ways in which we encounter data, ask questions, and hear answers. One way to attempt this limit is to develop strategies in our struggle to make our own silences audible as researchers. [...] to develop reflexivities of silence. Such practices seek to purposefully inject moments of strategic surprise in order that we might catch ourselves and our participants just off balance enough that the guard is dropped and the silences spilled. (117)

In accordance with the interpretive fecundity of silence, instead of categorizing introvert characters as inarticulate, I decided to make their “silences audible” in Mason’s short fiction. In that manner, I have attempted to provide unexpected readings of her writing to demonstrate that the understanding of her minimalistic stories can only be achieved through the internalization of the communicative force of silence.

1. Bobbie Ann Mason and the Southern Heritage: Silence in the Literature from the South.

At the creek, a jumble of memories rushes out, memories of a period of my own lifetime which links straight back to a century ago, and even further. [...] What happened to me and my generation? What made us leave home and abandon the old ways? Why did we lose our knowledge of nature? Why wasn't it satisfying? Why would only rock-and-roll music do? What did we want? (Mason, "The Chicken Tower", 93-94)

1.1. Why considering History in a Literary Study:

Attempting a historical framework for the South allows me to establish the traces of past events that may function as plausible justifications for the presence of silence in the literature of the southern states, both urban and rural. In any approach to the literature of a southern writer, the legacy of his or her regional identity tends to protrude conspicuously, pointing to an attachment to cultural, social and historical roots. As Bobbie Ann Mason mentions in the preface to her memoirs, *Clear Springs*: "There's a sense of loss in America today, a feeling of disconnectedness [...] More and more of us are rummaging in the attic, trying to retrieve our history [...] we seem to hope that if we can find out our family stories and trace our roots [...] we just might rescue ourselves and be made whole" (ix). But delving inside southern history entails a sense of disjunction as it is articulated around a controversial narrative. Mason, in the quotation from her memoirs cited above, refers to a search for the cultural sources that could have built southern identity in particular, but the need to

“rummage” might be due to the constant presence of separation and rupture in the past of the South.

Barack Obama’s 2012 victory speech included the following statement: “Tonight, more than 200 years after a former colony won the right to determine its own destiny, the task of perfecting our union moves forward”<sup>9</sup>. It is an undeniable truth that nevertheless requires an added emphasis on the fact that the bond North/South is far from being seamless, and this residue will not be beneficial for either side because “[a]n estrangement between the South and the rest of the country would bring out the worst in both—dangerous insularity in the first, smug self-deception in the second” (Packer, Online source). In this region the days of yore involve havoc, but lifeless symbols of the destroyed mores and folklore remain as evidence of the alleged grandeur and accomplishments of that society; but if the South does not embrace the gradual changes by stubbornly or unconsciously clinging to what journalist Garry Wills calls “a nostalgic lunacy” (Online source), the worst aspects of the South will reappear yet again today under a label of mistaken dignity. Bobbie Ann Mason provides an alternative for blinded sentimentality in the South, exemplified in the previous quote: she invites her readers to examine the storage rooms, looking for the representation of past as embodied by inanimate objects, filled with meaning; this could be interpreted as cultural archeology: Mason’s task is equated to that of excavating a site in the search for the remains of identity amid the enduring chaos following devastation.

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<sup>9</sup> Online source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/nov/07/barack-obama-speech-full-text>.

## 1.2. The Colonial and Nineteenth-Century South:

Jamestown, what is now southern Virginia, was the first southern settlement, and it established certain economical and social structures that would later be perpetuated by most of the colonies around it. Resources came, mainly, since 1612, from the productive tobacco plantations bought and owned by wealthy merchants and worked by indentured servants and later by slave labor. Consequently, the mainstays of the Old South productivity integrated the transaction of human lives, derided and abused, including people from Africa, Native Americans and poor Europeans.

Nevertheless, there was, from the early beginnings, a romanticized view of the region, trying to either excuse or evade its severe, cruel and harmful aspects. J. William Harris states: “It was the marriage of African slavery to a plantation economy that set the stage for the creation of a ‘South’” (23). Such an unpleasant reality may have led future generations towards endeavors to frame themselves outside this story of creation. This required the use of artful rhetoric to manipulate and silence past events that were recognized as shameful, or merely inconvenient for the image southerners wanted to portray or export.

Obviously, the South was also analyzed from Northern and foreign eyes that were not oblivious to harsh realities such as racial inequality. In a much later account by Maryland lawyer William Wirt, a fictional British spy portrays Virginia as the land that “plumes herself most highly on the democratic spirit of her principles” (100) but one where “property is unequally distributed” (101); and, as an illustration, he describes the following landscape: “here and there a stately aristocratic palace, with all its appurtenances, strikes the view; while all around, for many miles, no other buildings are to be seen but the little smoky huts and log cabins of poor, laborious,

ignorant tenants” (101-102). The invisibility of certain races and social classes, of whom only weak traces can be perceived, is gleaned from the smoke of the crude and rough construction behind the white palaces, which clearly stand for the power of the white people.

The gradual change in agriculture, trade and population ratio did nothing but induce further inequalities in power dynamics. The expanding economy of cotton required more workers as well as land expansion, and Jenkins mentions that “[s]lavery grew alongside cotton production” (87). When freemen realized that they were outnumbered, preventive measures were taken in order to be prepared in case of rebellions or revolts. Strict and constant surveillance was essential in plantations where African slaves could barely form their families, develop emotional ties or communicate among themselves. Even freed slaves enjoyed limited rights, and that enhanced the white sense of ascendancy<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, even though, as J. William Harris mentions, “[a]mong white farmers, about half owned no slaves” (98), the South could not divert the popular perception of the violence exerted on the different generations of slaves, and this has irrefutably marked southern society. Winthrop D. Jordan explains that “there is very little evidence of the commercial breeding of slaves, but what we certainly see [...] is that rape and coerced sex were intrinsic to slavery” (112). Slave women were not only worked to exhaustion but they also became pleasure providers at the masters’ wills. Women slaves were deprived of any

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<sup>10</sup> The movie *12 Years a Slave*, directed by Steve McQueen, won the Oscar for best picture in 2014. This success is of extreme importance as it proves the prevailing preoccupation in the United States with the atrocities of slavery. This film is based on the first person narration of African American violinist Solomon Northrup, who, having been a free man, was kidnapped from Washington in 1841 and sold as a slave, suffering inhuman conditions until he was freed in 1853. His account was published and sold more than 30,000 copies, and the *New York Times* covered his case in January of 1853. Journalist Manohla Dargis says in a review of the movie that the story of Solomon may “represent an entire subjugated people, and, by extension, as well as the American past and present” (Online source).



sort of control over their own bodies, which fostered the stereotype of the female slave as a dumb object of pleasure and exploitation for the white master, without the slightest consideration for their suffering, and prevented them from using their own voices both in the private and public spheres<sup>11</sup>. Slaves, male and female, were devoid of the right to speak, and, thus, silence was embedded in the plaits of southern society. Meanwhile, in the North, slaves had access to different trades and skills. Thus, the “system encouraged qualities of independence that distinguished Northern slaves from their plantation counterparts in the South” (McManus, 40). Conversely, the South institutionalized a very complex slavery status that reified the slave’s dependency.

The accumulation of wealth in the colonies inevitably favored a sense of supremacy and autonomy that clashed with Britain’s control of the Empire. Harris explains that in the middle of the seventeenth century certain wealthy and influential social groups started to demand in the South a greater authority and representation in the administration of the colonies, eventually leading to revolts in Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland and South Carolina (21). Towards the end of the seventeenth century different charters were drawn up and addressed to the Crown, initially requesting, later adjuring, economic and political equality. To further such aims, the concept of liberty, and the rights of the colonial citizens, were often invoked. Yet, the soon-to-be independent nation was being constructed upon the opposite concept: restraint. This is reflected in the inconsistencies found in *The Declaration of Independence* (1776). Its second paragraph claims: “All men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights”, which is also

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<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in the seventeenth century, this abuse would be officially extended to the offspring as any child born out of a white patriarch and an unfree woman kept the status of the mother; thus, “[l]egal regulation of sexual relations and childbirth further contributed to the sharpening of racial difference” (Jordan, 72).

paradoxical as full egalitarianism had to be denied to many in order to preserve the institution of slavery.

In these formative years of southern culture, some domestic values were consolidated. The Southern Belle, for instance, became the representation of womanhood in this region. A culture sculpted by the hands of men prescribed the prevalence of certain modes of behavior in women. This ideal of femininity became a stereotype in popular imagination and fiction about the South. For a woman to fit this model she had to have an aristocratic background, even if it had been faked through economic power; she also had to be pure, pious, spiritual rather than intellectual, submissive, beautiful, elegant, with a developed taste for fashion, delicate and graceful in her manners, tempered, and devoted to her home responsibilities and educated towards marriage. Placed in this pedestal, this young woman, as Kathryn L. Seidel carefully explains in her portrayal of the Southern Belle, was “taught by her society to repress instincts and displace emotions” (xiv). A woman subjected to this instructive process became a very efficient banner of the image the South wanted to project to the rest of the nation: a pure and noble region. Consequently, even if women were mere objects for political and ideological propaganda, they became the epicenter of southern identity. Within this female stereotype, motherhood and domesticity complemented the regional ideal:

The realities of slavery, plantation life, and higher fertility all shaped southerners’ understanding of the essential principles of childbearing and motherhood in a way they believed distinguished them from northerners [...] They understood that from birth each person possessed an identity that tied them first to their families and then to a larger community of friends and neighbors. (Kennedy, 16)

All in all, this female ideal was convenient for the South in defining themselves in opposition to a progressive North that, according to the southern ethos, was forsaking core spiritual dicta. Thus, discrepancies between North and South soon appeared and were based on primal and identity traits.

After Independence was attained, this precarious union of the former colonies was instituted by means of the Articles of the Confederation, a legal agreement among the thirteen colonies, which lasted briefly. The protruding diversities between North and South escalated towards more significant conflicts that proved that Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense* (1776), was too optimistic in playing down such differences: “I have heard some men say, many of whom I believe spoke without thinking, that they dreaded an independence, fearing that it would produce civil wars” (39). At the base of sectional differences lay racial conflicts, and different attitudes towards slavery. W. J. Cash explains that this period of time required a constant justification of the employment of slavery as the basis of much of what southern identity was about: “The community and uniformity of origins, the nearness in time of the frontier, the failure of immigration and the growth of important towns –all these co-operated to cut men to a single pattern, and, [...] the total effect of the plantation world was to bind them to a single focus which was held with peculiar intensity” (91). It should be borne in mind that any speech delivered with extreme intensity will, most definitely, hide dissenting messages trying to be simultaneously delivered. Thus, the building of an apparent agreement in the surface of the South should not blind us to the fact that even then there did not exist a single and unified ideology. But silencing these other narratives became essential to survive, or so some thought.

In 1861, at the outset of the war resulting from the clash between North and South, Harriet Jacobs, an abolitionist speaker who escaped from slavery, wrote the

novel *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*. She brought up the essential question regarding the oppressive slave system:

I admit the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. [For the masters] [n]ot is it enough to be silent. [...] [They] are not pleased, unless they obtain a greater subservience than that. (375-376)

The opening sentence catches the attention of the reader by upholding the racist view of the black man as inferior only to deconstruct it, subsequently, by the numeration of a series of facts. Humanity is taken away, stolen by the white men out of the slave by means of violence and mistreatment. Dignity is crashed through the infliction of continuous battering, since the “silencing” of their voices is not considered subordination enough. Above all, this fragment adds an infrequent depiction of the North, which is here unveiled not as the ideal destination awaiting to provide freedom to the slave, but as an ally of the South, equal to it in savagery and cruelty.

Genovese explains that regardless of the 1850-1860 southern plantation prosperity, the northern states were on the eve of the Civil War economically ahead in terms of population, wealth and development due to the fact that slavery had by then proven its deficiencies with regards to crop efficiency, soil stable exploitation and slave-master relations (44). Nevertheless, the South would not abandon what they considered to be the trademark of their economy. And yet, even though this awareness of the negative economic factors of slavery did not make them reconsider it, let alone its cruelty and inhumanity, they, southern aristocrat society members, articulated their agony as well as the poorer strata of workers and farmers as if they were victims and

not agents in the conflict. Mary Boykin Chesnut, wife to a Confederate officer, describes in her diary the ending of the war while they took shelter in Camden, South Carolina: “We are shut in here, turned with our faces to a dead wall. No mails. A letter is sometimes brought by a man on horseback, traveling through the wilderness made by Sherman. All railroads have been destroyed and the bridges are gone. We are cut off from the world, here to eat out our hearts” (542). Chesnut blames the Union for the destruction of their territory, for having created “wilderness” within their civilized world, and the sentences delineating the surrounding devastation include no identifiable agent to be blamed, avoiding at all times the obvious truth of the existence of two fighting sides equally capable of annihilating the other. It is interesting that the oppressor is during the War portrayed as finding no one to speak to, forced to remain silent, only to communicate through the written word in the form of letters.

The peace movement towards the end of the war was widespread as it globally expressed a “heartsick nation; [obviously] sincere Northern patriots [equally] yearned for an end to the fratricidal slaughter” (Donald and Randall, 470)<sup>12</sup>. But it was the antebellum South that was nearly exterminated, and not the North. For the South,

the war completely destroyed the myth of invincibility and made it increasingly difficult to retain the corollary myth of superiority, for failure to meet the test of endurance inevitably raised doubts about the quality of the defeated society. To many Southerners, then, sober second thoughts came in

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<sup>12</sup> In 1864, Union Army generals engaged all their available resources to annihilate the southern sources of power and sustainability, both economic and of primal supplies, such as farms and homes. The Confederate Army was consistently defeated in different locations and battles and by April of the following year it surrendered. Regardless of the desperation caused by war weariness, the southern region found it hard to accept the defeat. In fact, President Lincoln was shot by a southern sympathizer later that month, and Andrew Johnson, the Union’s vice president, had to replace him.

1865; the result was dissipation of the antebellum unity of mind that had unquestioningly accepted the social, economic, and intellectual structure of Southern civilization (Gaston, 21).

Consequently, the condition of the states that had been in rebellion was extremely precarious and the South had to face that a reconstruction of the region was needed.

The role of women as projectors of southern virtue and backbones of the home was altered as men went to war to save the Old South and women were left in charge of chores and responsibilities that had never been at their reach<sup>13</sup>. In this manner, being in charge of business, land and laborers, “women learned that there was far more substance to their roles –and that they were far more capable as decision makers and workers –than the images of elite womanhood had suggested” (Hayes Turner, 5). However, there was no radical transformation in gender roles. Tara McPherson explains how the South became after the Civil War a “nostalgia industry” in her book about the “imagined Dixie”. Notwithstanding the advance in the activities women could perform in southern society, part of the romance created around the memories of a region destroyed by the war was built upon pre-bellum definitions of womanhood. These women had to suffer the trappings of femininity, that is, those social limitations of paternalistic and conservative discourses still resonating in the South, and that some thought were the glue that bound these states together.

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<sup>13</sup> The prevailing resilience in women during the Civil War brings about another Hollywood production; in this case, *Cold Mountain* (2003), directed by Anthony Minghella and based on the 1997 novel by American writer Charles Frazier. The movie illustrates the story of two women in the rough conditions of farms in the mountains of North Carolina, isolated and overcoming the difficulties of embracing tasks, previously ignored by Southern Belles, which is the case of one of the characters. The male character leaves with the Confederate Army and the focus becomes the female body, which is juxtaposed with the equivalent beauty and violence of the weather, wild landscape and arduous work. Women survive, bond and succeed in a rather nostalgic historic revision that, nevertheless, portrays the hardly ever noticed role of women during the conflict.

Accordingly, in the evolution of women's rights, as in all social fields in the Reconstruction South, improvements were achieved, yet not massively recognized. Professor and historian Valeria Gennaro Lerda has conducted extensive research on women's literary clubs as platforms where the condition of voicelessness imposed on them could be challenged. She states that these groups allowed women to listen to each other's voices and to talk in front of an audience that, although restricted, was willing to pay careful attention to their words (Gennaro Lerda, 88). The opposing forces of women's struggle to gain visibility in education and culture, on the one hand, and the restrictive domestic duties imposed by society on them, on the other, would complicate organic and strong constructions of femininity during the years after the War.

### 1.3. From Reconstruction to the New South.

Additionally, Reconstruction of the South was largely improvised. Ex-Confederates expressed discontent as institutional and governmental alterations resulted in a significant reduction of their independence and honor. But the measures taken were both before and after the War perceived as even radical by the most conservative political representatives. In fact, Lincoln, as a moderate Republican, received harsh criticism from the more radical wing of his party. An ex-Confederate, John Wilkes Booth, assassinated the President during a theatrical representation after having attended a presidential discourse where Lincoln supported the enfranchisement of African-American people.

Differences existed not only between the North and the South but also among different southern states, which did not operate in agreement during Reconstruction,

accepting the renovations brought by Reconstruction at dissimilar moments and up to unequal degrees. Some may have welcomed change, while others would cling to the ideals of pre-bellum South. William Faulkner, in his novel *The Unvanquished*, confronts a series of characters in support and against change after the Civil War. A girl who fought with the Confederates, Drusilla, states the following about a state of equality: “A dream is not a very safe thing to be near [...]. It’s like a loaded pistol with a hair trigger” (471). She is here referring specifically to the dreams of her father to change the community, even if that requires violence during peacetime. Any alteration of the old status quo was perceived as perilous. Equity was indeed a dream, an illusion, in a land of racism and segregation, and the radical changes brought by Reconstruction “sent many across the nation backward into imaginary pasts for the regrounding of authority” (43), clarifies Grace Elizabeth Hale in her book (1999).

However, with their agency in the federal government having been eliminated, the power of the South resided on words or, as Perman explains, on “omission”: “Quite consciously, they calculated that noncompliance and ‘masterly inactivity’ gave them short-term security” (328). The South was being silenced by the governmental power, located in the North, but they perceived quiet dissent as the only option left to assert their lasting strength. By not conforming to the rules, they refrained from articulating them, trying to empower their identity by means of opposition to the mainstream. Silence became then a provider of puissance.

Notwithstanding the reluctance of the South to accept radical Reconstruction, it unavoidably entailed modifications for the states that wanted to be freed from Federal control and readmitted in the Union<sup>14</sup>. A new fiscal system was implemented,

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<sup>14</sup> Civilians felt the pressure of the military districts established in the Southern states, where Union army personnel administered and supervised the political and social adaptation to the Reconstruction principles that mainly required from the South an



African Americans were appointed as political representatives, and a new agricultural arrangement was attempted. Those in favor of integration demanded industrialization and the economic independence of the South. In a humoristic tone, the southern editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* journal, Henry Grady, depicts in the following way the funeral of a southern farmer during Reconstruction:

They buried him in the midst of a marble quarry; yet a little tombstone they put above him was from Vermont. They buried him in the heart of a pine forest, yet the pine coffin was imported from Cincinnati. They buried him within touch of an iron mine, yet the nails in his coffin and the iron in the shovel that dug his grave were imported from Pittsburgh. They buried him in a New York coat and a Boston pair of shoes [...] breeches from Chicago and shirt from Cincinnati (Carter, 49).

A figurative interpretation of this ironic criticism of Northern colonization would unveil a subtler demand in Grady's words. The journalist expresses the oppressive presence of Northern economic and industrial hegemony.

Nevertheless, Reconstruction did not dismantle the reality of racial and economic inequality in the South. In fact, writer and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du

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oath to commit to the confirmation of citizenship and suffrage rights for the black population, promising loyalty to the Union and the abolition of slavery. Strongly opposing Reconstruction policies, Confederate veterans and supporters designed a strategy to diminish the effect of these social alterations. The press embodied the ideal platform to project strong symbols of pro-independence identity. Two of the elements of the manipulated imagery were the so-called "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags". The first included different northern professionals who either travelled to the South in order to improve the deteriorated economy, education and social services, or businessmen who spotted in southern recession a potential source of profit. The latter was, obviously, beneficial for the intended propaganda. Scalawags, on the other hand, were even more greatly despised for being white southerners that remained loyal to the Union. So successful was the solidification of the connotative meanings of these terms that, for over a hundred years after Reconstruction, "few white southerners – few white Americans, in fact- could hear the word carpetbagger without conjuring up melodramatic images of villainy and oppression" (Tunnell, 792).

Bois claimed the following when referring to this period: “The attempt to make black men American citizens was in a certain sense all a failure, but a splendid failure” (708). Du Bois centers the foundering of the aspirations of Reconstruction on the race conflict, as it triggered most of the complications. Once the passion of the war had weakened, the supporters of an egalitarian society became less vocal and proactive, allowing the national sentiment of former Confederates to reemerge. Race supremacy was still ingrained not only in the white population, strengthening their resentment, but also in black citizens who, for obvious reasons, could not suddenly erase their distrust of white southerners. On top of that, the anger and frustration for the lost war created a significant presence of violent veterans, hindering a successful normalization<sup>15</sup>. In a documentary reader, Stanley Harrold quotes Albion W. Tourgee’s novel *A Fool’s Errand* (1879), where an idealistic Union veteran expresses with the following words, contained in a friendly dialogue, that he does not consider the struggle between North and South to have ended:

It was like a stream with here and there an angry rapid, before the war; then, for a time, it was like a foaming cascade; and since then it has been the sullen, dark, but deep and quiet whirlpool, which lies below the fall, full of driftwood and shadows, and angry mutterings, and unseen currents, and hidden forces, whose farther course no one can foretell, only that it must go on... (211).

The simile describes, through natural images, the historical course of the South. The pre-Civil War South was occasionally responsible for turbulent episodes of violence, injustice and discrimination. The agitation of the war brought with it a copious chain of deaths, crimes and destruction, rapidly succeeded by a series of rocky political years, leaving an aftermath of corrupted and resentful civilians.

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed study of the unsuccessful projects of Reconstruction, see Michael W. Fitzgerald’s *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South*.

Certain biased laws proved that the racial conflict was ongoing. These were called Jim Crow Laws. Already in the 1830s, the representation in popular culture of African Americans entailed a humiliating, simplistic, submissive and ridiculous character named Jim Crow<sup>16</sup>. With the increasing popularization of this image, the name became a general reference for the apartheid laws issued across the ex-Confederate states, framing a reactionary era of violence and extreme injustice inflicted upon African-Americans. In 1896, for instance, a Louisiana law was declared constitutional, ruling that segregated facilities were legal as long as they were offered equally to both races (Clark, 154). These horrid restrictions continued until the Civil Rights Movements in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The growing “maladjustments which resulted from the lag between material development and mental attitudes” (Doherty, 45) in the region marked the early formative stages of the so-called New South. The term was already used in 1886 in a speech delivered by journalist Henry. W. Grady (1850-1889). The term acknowledged the fact that the South was a sick agrarian system that felt the pressure to conform to the growing industrialization of America. However, the social and economic cost of the process was unanimously welcomed. Many of the powerful industries were owned by wealthy northerners, and labor conditions were poor. Hence, the apparently more progressive policies towards African Americans, hid the actual agenda of exploitation with lucrative interests. Edward King, in the journal of his travels around the South between 1873 and 1874, working for *Scribner's Monthly*, already noticed the changes and described them in the following manner:

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<sup>16</sup> “The term Jim Crow originated in a song performed by Daddy Rice, a white minstrel show entertainer in the 1830s. Rice covered his face with charcoal paste or burnt cork to resemble a black man, and then sang and danced a routine in caricature of a silly black person. By the 1850s, this Jim Crow character, one of several stereotypical images of black inferiority in the nation's popular culture, was a standard act in the minstrel shows of the day” (Davis, Ronald L. F. , Online source).

The railroads which now penetrate the South in every direction, and the prosaic yet cosmopolitan "through routes" which, to Southern eyes, dash with such irreverent lack of compunction across State boundaries, and annihilate so recklessly all local sentiment, are doubtless doing much to annul the devotion to State rights. Curious travelers in the South have remarked that, as fast as a railroad penetrates a section, sentiment with regard to matters in the outside world becomes liberalized along the line. [...] However much the hundred railroads covering the South with an iron network may do to destroy the old and too earnest attachment of each individual to his particular State and neighborhood, that attachment will still remain for many years one of the salient points of Southern character. (772)

The "prosaic" nature of this invasion of the original landscape of the South partly rooted out the primal stimulus for those defining themselves as southerners. The association of the new transport infrastructure with the attribute "cosmopolitan" may have actually freed them from national, or local, limitations and attachments. But in this historical moment, the urgency, in fact, was to accentuate distinction. Industrialization is depicted in the quote above from a northern perspective and yet perceived through southern eyes, as seen in the implication that it disrespected the sacred institutions of the prewar South. Industrialization is interpreted as an offence that contaminated the unadulterated state of the South that started to be claimed by the ex-confederate ideological and political representatives under the name of the Lost Cause<sup>17</sup>. The historical renderings affected by the illusion of the Lost Cause confined

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<sup>17</sup> It is defined in the following way by Anne E. Marshal:

"[It] combined ideas about an idyllic agrarian past and the Confederacy's righteousness and valor in defending it. [...] [It was] an emotional and historical antidote to Confederate defeat. Surrounded by the crumbled vestiges of their former civilization, southerners could revel in its former glory, replete with faithful slaves,

to silence the realistic depiction of the origins and aftermath of the Civil War, but were nonetheless essential for the creation of the southern myth, as it is known today. It is, however, a myth silencing a very significant amount of undeniable realities.

Overall, this brief retrospective of the South from its colonial period to the twentieth century has attempted to prove that, notwithstanding the de facto social and political transformations undergone, the omissions and silences that characterized these states from their infancy, centered around the conflict of race, had, nevertheless, not vanished in the New South. Southern society matured between a yearning to recover the pre-bellum *status quo* and the shame provoked by an awareness of the atrocities of that past. Wanting to bury their history while feeling nostalgic at the same time created a tension in the formation of the South's identity, which manifested in a series of silences ingrained in the narratives of their culture. The South necessitated the eradication of voices of dissent, and only allowed confrontation and protest to emerge quietly. Meanwhile, power institutions kept silent about injustices in order to maintain their supporters. To articulate the southern self a set of communicative strategies, and manners of spatial distribution, and social visibility and interaction, had to be inscribed with silence.

#### 1.4. The Twentieth Century South.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it would be imprecise to depict

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gracious and submissive women, and beneficent and chivalrous patriarchs. The Lost Cause version of Civil War history contended that southerners waged a war to preserve their way of life and to protect states' rights, and though that valiant and heroic effort failed, it was their duty to vindicate heroes of the conflict, both dead and alive [...] Infused with an assortment of conservative racial, gender, and class values, the Lost Cause worked [...] not only as vindication for the past, but as a blueprint for the future" (83-84).

southern culture as completely disconnected from the rest of the nation; there was already a scanty flow of information that fed southern collective imagery and creativity. Nonetheless, it was not static:

a part of the rural population was in constant motion –sharecroppers moved nearly every year, young people set out on their own, and musicians, tent shows, and carnivals visited small towns and crossroads [...] Crossroads stores and barbershops not only disseminated weather information, which all farmers sought, but also news of state and nation, providing a forum of analysis to boot. (Daniel, 94)

The limited and yet existing arrival and discussion of current news through both popular and media culture slightly ameliorated the illiterate stigma of the South. Yet, the segregation of African Americans continued until the 1960s, at the very least. But the effect that segregation had in whites was also an impoverished culture caused by a lack of fluid communication between the different sectors, races and genders forming that society.

Early twentieth-century administrations such as Theodore Roosevelt's or Woodrow Wilson's did not interfere with Jim Crow or lynching in a significant way, nor were they very keen to provide a voice to silenced groups in the South. On the other hand, the creation of a culture of consumption in the 1920s, and the arrival of advertising, did nothing but fasten the nationalization of concepts such as Hill-Billie<sup>18</sup>. The South would go from being home to the callous slave masters of yore to that of backward, unsophisticated, almost second-rate citizens of the U.S.. The cultural artifacts originated in Hill-Billy areas were despised by high culture. Archie

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<sup>18</sup> This term appeared for the first time in the *The New York Journal* in 1900: an uncultured, backward citizen of isolated southern hill areas with a tendency towards an uncontrollable consumption of alcohol.

Green cites the number of terms used to classify southerners: “at one time or another southern local colorists used these analogs for *poor whites*: *lubber* [awkward, lacking social skills, unreasonable or causing embarrassment], *peckerwood*, *cracker*, *conch*, *sandhillier*, *redneck*, *cajun*, *woolhat*, *squatter* [a settler with no legal title to the land occupied], *clay eater*, *sharecropper*, *linthead*, *swamprat*, *tarhead*, *hillbilly*” (206). In the creation of these labels, the compound names deprived the poor white southerner of his or her intellect by means of an identification with the land, as if these people had had their humanity reduced to its basics through their long and close relation to the countryside.

Paradoxically, in spite of stereotypes such as the above, the South forced the population to detach themselves from their agrarianism in order to advance, and so, as the southern writer Andrew Lytle claimed, for his fellow countrymen, “[e]nvironment was what heredity inherited” (62). In the South, the central valuable bequest was an appreciation for the land. But then, those unable to have access to mechanical, educational or commercial development remained behind and so disregarded; as a matter of fact, Wayne Flynt calls them “Dixie’s forgotten people”. In his analysis, he points at the incongruity of the constant negative depictions the poor whites received as “culturally sterile [lacking the imagination or creative capacity to produce or communicate] and degenerate [having lost a complex human essence that renders them undesirable]” (2), while, at the same time, agrarianism was widely recognized as central to southern identity. Anyway, many of these southerners stubbornly clung to their lifestyle, regardless of the rejection of the growingly urban south, moving towards northernization.

Violence and repression have been a constant in the history of the South, from the creation of the colonies and the first repression against indentured workers,

against the first African slaves in the seventeenth century, and the initial conflicts and later extermination of Native Americans. When that violence was allegedly deployed against them, during Reconstruction, the South reacted violently by means of the racist crimes of the KKK, public lynching and segregation. All of them would continue well into the twentieth-century. This dark past of helotry, either literal or ideological, added up to the slower industrial and economic growth in the South, which, consequently, increased the southern dependency on the North.

World War I brought indeed some progress to the South, but President Warren G. Harding's endeavor to achieve "normalcy", to bring the country back to its previous state before the Great War during the roaring twenties, entailed curtailing such timid progress as the South had undergone, up to the point of experiencing a revival of the KKK. The region was again incapable of disentangling itself from the dreaded, shameful echoes of the past. As Richard Gray explains (1977),

[t]hey [the southern population] had had little preparation for thinking about progress along accepted national lines; certainly the sluggishness of previous economic development in their region had not prepared them for it. So while the future might be as attractive for them as it was for other Americans, they also tended to find it much more bewildering and frightening than anyone else did. (37)

The stock market crash in Wall Street in 1929 triggered a series of economic events that would make matters even worse in the South. Consequently, "[w]hen the Depression became a national phenomenon, an already dire situation in the South became worse [...] 'when it was already prostrate and sadly crippled'" (Bindas, 17). The South became even less visible.



Surprisingly, it was during the Depression when the revival of Southern literature occurred and major southern authors proliferated. They are, obviously, Mason's literary forerunners. This period was dubbed the Southern Renaissance, and a brief consideration of the term seems called for. "Renaissance" implies rebirth. However, there is no previous literary production in the region that can be compared to the one starting in the 1920s and 1930s. Hence, the term leads to wrong connotations; it is a misnomer<sup>19</sup>. Early southern literature consisted of romances dealing with the concepts of the Lost Cause, Civil War memories and slavery, primarily; the improvement during this Renaissance came through a broadening of the scope of themes and styles employed. Up to this point, themes in southern literature had clung to the past, but the 1930s was a very peculiar time bracketed between the two World Wars. The Great War had forced the nation to implement relevant changes, mainly regarding industrialization. The 1920s was, in most states, a decade of materialism and a prosperous economy. This became obvious in the selection of topics in fiction and journalism, as they now targeted mass culture. There was also a new, freer code of morality. There was, as well, and this became more obvious in the South, disenchantment with myths, as hopes and ideals had been, if not destroyed, at least darkened after the carnage of the War.

Two opposite forces generated a tension in the creative minds of southern writers; the painful and, simultaneously, utopian past, and, on the other hand, the wish for better times to come; both brought about what Allen Tate<sup>20</sup> called a "double focus"; that is, the author felt that in his writing he should incorporate both

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<sup>19</sup> For further reference, see: *Faulkner and the Southern Renaissance* edited by D. Fowler and A. J. Abadie; C. Vann Woodward's "Why the Southern Renaissance"; and Richard H. King's *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1950*.

<sup>20</sup> This term is mentioned by Fred Hobson in his article "Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1954".

reassessments of the past to avoid blinding nostalgia and, also, hopefulness for the future, tenuous as the latter often was in some of the writers. Main representatives were, among others, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Penn Warren, Thomas Wolfe, Lillian Smith, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, and James Agee.

Rebecca Bridges Watts refers back to a group of relevant figures during the Southern Renaissance, the “Twelve Southerners”<sup>21</sup>, explaining that they “argue that what made the South not only distinctive but also superior was its agrarian lifestyle and economy, which contrasts favorably with the urban, industrial lifestyle and economy of other regions” (7); consequently, their reversion to farming principles bestowed on them a sense of greater purity, owing to a valuable ethos free from consumption, selfishness or the dehumanization of urban society. Their implicit parallel was that a more developed North suffered more greatly from these moral maladies. One of the Fugitive Poets, John Crowe Ransom, states the following in a comment on one of his own poems, “Prelude to an Evening”: “[man] has created commodities exactly suited to his physical need, [...]; and [...] a foolish clutter of little machines and mechanisms which by saving his strength impoverish it, leaving his body soft and his mind aimless as to its proper objects” (155). In the

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<sup>21</sup> A group of twelve southern writers and intellectuals, who wrote a pro-agrarian manifesto entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The center of the group were four poets: Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson. They all came together at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee, and most of them are part of a prolific literary body, named the Nashville Fugitives, who published a literary magazine, *The Fugitive*. In April 1922, the collective published its best output in *The Fugitive*; Allen Tate justifies the title: “a Fugitive was quite simply a Poet: the Wanderer ... the Outcast, the man who carries the secret wisdom around the world” (Furlong, Online Source). Initially they perceived southern heritage as a hindrance for their creative identity; however, they evolved towards a proud regionalism, perceiving the benefits of having been isolated from the North. The magazine was successful both in the South and beyond its boundaries.

aforementioned manifesto, Donald Davidson stated: “the making of an industrialized society will extinguish the meaning of the arts, as humanity has known them in the past, by changing the conditions of life that have given art a meaning” (29).

When choosing representative products of visual artists of the time, one can observe little resemblance between the crowding skyscrapers of the documentary film *Manhatta* (1921) by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, and the South. Their snapshots of the eerie, tumultuous city staged the panic of the Depression against a very different background, wardrobe, props and faces than the ones captured by Eudora Welty during the years of the starving South. Welty recorded the harsh conditions around the Mississippi landscape, where ragged clothes covered tired working bodies in the middle of vast spaces of land, cut by dusty roads and dotted by wooden, shattered houses.

The policies activated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal from 1933 to 1938 improved the impoverished southern agriculture slightly, and the increasing implementation of modern mechanized farming promoted a highly significant urban growth in the early 1940s called the Bulldozer Revolution: “the federal government played a significant role in that development during and after World War II by the location of military installations, shipbuilding yards, and other defense-related concerns in the region's moderate climate” (Biles, 100). Obviously, the change in both human and physical geography brought about other changes. Farmers left their lands and moved to nearby towns to work in secondary or tertiary industries, the percentage of suburban non-farm population rising. T. Stanton Dietrich expounds that the limit between rural and urban would be severely blurred during these decades (183), mingling the conventions of both lifestyles. And even though the participation in urban life of former agrarians could free them from the dependence on

the inclemencies of the weather, and their inveterate detachment, it also confronted them with the alienating nature of industrial jobs. The ruling southern elite also perceived the New Deal as negative as it involved greater Federal control, a fact they did not feel reassured by.

On the other hand, the New Deal received the support of what Morton Sosna called “The Silent South”, southern Liberals supporting greater integration in the nation and an increase in racial equality, which obviously gained them the support of African Americans and those fighting against hate crimes such as lynching. The notion of a South hitherto muted comes from writer George Washington Cable’s *The Silent South*, published in 1885, where “[he] emphasized that a segment of white Southern society genuinely sought just treatment for blacks but pointed out that this element was usually drowned out by more Negrophobic voices” (Sosna, 2).

The involvement of the South in the Second World War did nothing but intensify their ties with violence. Nevertheless, it was an ideological and political war that could not be ignored in the South as it was a fight against totalitarianism: “It encouraged expressions of solidarity and unanimity of purpose, [...] it [...] contributed to renewed pressure to bring the South into the American mainstream” (Cobb, 1991, 685-686). However, this apparent integration into a national discourse was a mere reflection of the economic developments that manifested as a consequence of the military conflict. Defense industries grew in the South due to the favorable weather conditions, cheaper labor and available soil. A vast number of the rural workforce was absorbed by these industries. This provoked a labor shortage that gave the remaining farmers the incentive to mechanize their work. The soaring prices of cotton and farming products in general allowed them to risk the investment. Conversely, the negative effect emerging from these modifications affected all-year-

round tenants of planters' lands as the owners could more greatly benefit from occasional laborers for the harvest, working for lower wages. Additionally, the former African American immigrants had the opportunity to return to southern industrialized cities, where they could hope for a higher degree of economic independence and an improvement of their living conditions (Badger Reader, 43).

These conditions did not guarantee, in every case, the expected betterment of the social status and representation of the returning African Americans. When the white war veterans came back to their southern lands, they expected to be rewarded for their sacrifice with a secured supremacy (Badger Reader, 106) that overlooked the equal suffering experienced by their African-American comrades. This demand for the recovery of the past South "often enshrine[d] traditions that supported deeply inequitable social orders" (Dubey, 99). Some of those coming back from fighting racism and dictatorial policies claimed the values they had rejected and despised overseas. Nostalgia blinded their rationality, and the knowledge acquired through the traumatic experiences of the battlefield did not seem to lead to a re-defined agenda.

Notwithstanding the stagnating effect of the southern attachment to the past, it should be borne in mind that the dramatic changes brought to the region by the New Deal and World War II did not all entail an improvement or elimination of the voicelessness in the history of the South up to that moment. The solitude experienced by the southerner in the agrarian profession was replaced by the estranging involved by the Fordist mass-production mentality of individual work in assembly lines, where communication is not only unnecessary for efficiency but rather considered counteractive. The farmer turned into a factory worker "learned that work differed radically from the seasonal imperatives of farming. They became in some respects, the slaves of machines" (Daniel-1986, 43). It is paradoxical that the very same fact

that had delayed the entrance of industrialization in the South, the economy of slavery, was reemerging metaphorically from subjugation to technology.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the general resistance to change, the South is different now. Professor Richard J. Gray, in his plenary lecture at the Annual British Association of American Studies Conference in 2004, claimed: “Over the past few decades, the South has changed dramatically in terms of its day-to-day social and economic life and, at the same time, its mental and moral habits have been challenged. And the nature of the material alterations is, perhaps, clearer now than it was twenty or even ten years ago” (3). The complexity of the matter comes to the surface when reading opinions such as that of Arkansas Civil Rights journalist Marshall Frady, who published a collection of articles in 1980: “for the last few decades the South has been mightily laboring to mutate itself into a tinfoil-twinkly simulation of southern California, and in the process has unwittingly worked on itself a spiritual impoverishment” (281). Hence, although the southerner was more open to the world, and southern writers were travelling ever so often, reactionary attitudes persisted in the South. Katherine Anne Porter thought that “[a] human being carries his ‘roots’ in his blood, his nervous system [,] the brain cells. Even his attempts to disguise them will betray his origins and true nature” (Brinkmeyer, 203). Regardless of the connections with Europe and the rest of the world, the South displayed a considerable reluctance to let go of the past.

The major social and ideological revolution in the South arrived with the salience of the Civil Rights Movements, especially under the national rule of John F. Kennedy, who supported the cause as well. Both in the history of the South and the United States, the attainment of greater equality is not only explained by political and

legal breakthroughs<sup>22</sup>. The consequent modifications in the mentality and in the social functioning and structure of society were similarly relevant. The South was not only transformed from outside, (bearing in mind that when such a strategy was attempted, during Reconstruction, it failed utterly) but also, and more importantly, from inside, at least up to a relative extent.

### 1.5. The Postmodern South and the Contemporary South.

Emerging in the 60s, what I will refer to as the postmodern South was defined by a sense of schizophrenia, and a split cultural, social and political identity. This region of the United States had undergone by then the most profound change, and was yet still attached to extremely conservative attitudes, which it had to disclaim, at least publicly, in order to complete national integration but which, at the same time, many perceived still conferred southerners a distinctive identity.

In Flannery O'Connor's short story "Everything that Rises Must Converge", the author depicts the misunderstandings between a mother and son, Julian, who is easily exasperated by his mother's concern about race, appearances and class. He believes that she represents the racist Old South, while he believes he embodies equality among races and social classes. The story clearly presents two generations, who, respectively, symbolize the Old and the New South. They struggle in their attempts to establish a conversation, because, as Browning explains, "everything about the South which affronts his sense of decency and decorum is symbolized by his mother, [thus,] Julian wants especially to be different from his mother" (101). But

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<sup>22</sup> Most notably, the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (banning segregation in schools), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, outlawing discrimination, disfranchisement and apartheid.

O'Connor's portrayal is not at all manichean because Julian's sense of superiority regarding his mother is ridiculed when his actual attempt to demonstrate he is not a segregationist becomes forced and fake, involuntarily pointing to his racist attitudes. This becomes apparent when the reader knows of the longing he feels towards the slave plantation his family used to own. If he had had the chance to live there:

He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then wander through the high-ceilinged hall into the parlor that opened onto it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies. It occurred to him that it was he, not she, who could have appreciated it. He preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him - whereas she had hardly known the difference. She called her insensitivity "being adjustable." (7-8)

He starts his daydreaming about the mansion with a brief reference to the appreciation of the natural surroundings, but his attention is rapidly drawn to the luxury, elegance and material presence of legacy and heritage in the decoration and architecture of the house. He criticizes the superficiality of his mother, and yet he admires the elegance of this place, that is, he cares about appearances. He wishes to teach his mother a lesson regarding the racial changes she has not internalized; however, he is the one despising the community when he admits that he cannot bear the proximity of his neighbors; hence, his mother is the only one that has actually adapted to the new social situation. The coming together of such contrasting periods, represented here by two generations and their corresponding ideologies, seems to embody much of what this postmodern South is all about, entailing as it does grotesque and violent confrontation, as well as hypocrisy and dislocations.

In a sense, the southerner suffers from the double consciousness set forth by



W. E. B. Du Bois at the beginning of the century, although he referred to the struggle in the black population to unify their African-American and American selves without sacrificing any of the components of both. The southerner needed to be included within the general political and social discourse articulated by the dominating North, whilst he simultaneously clung to his roots: “The people living in the region, particularly the native-born whites and blacks, struggle with coming to terms with their region and ponder what part of their heritage should be discarded and what should be held on to” (Boles, 542).

The South seemed fated to get rid of certain cultural features in order to approach mainstream national discourse and faster development. However, this proved a hard quest for a culture where history is an unavoidable companion. Their awareness of strong roots and certain nostalgia for the past haunts many southern citizens, including not a few writers. Binx Bolling, the main character in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961), describes southern “haunted places”, where you can sense the “ghosts of heroes” around. At the same time he depicts the North as “a perilous place from which the spirit winds come pouring forth all roused up and crying out alarm”, and Chicago, as an illustration, is a city where “everything is silenced in the uproar of the wind that comes ransacking down out of the North” (203). All in all, the Southerner in the novel feels safer when surrounded by the poignant and evocative presence of the “haunting” past at home, around familiar ghosts, than in the North, whose strength seems to steal from the visitor the capacity to express himself. The southerner, then, would rather cling onto the ever-present load of history than face the powerful nature of a rootless, cold, faceless North.

From 1968, historians have discussed the beginning of a so-called second

Redemption<sup>23</sup>, equal to the one following the Reconstruction Era, a reactionary period when the activist upheaval was stalled. In fact, Binx, Percy's character, created in the 60s, already pointed at this social and ideological passivity. Binx embarks in a journey for an undefined quest. The character ponders on transcendental questions on identity, religion and life, but he knows that the main obstacle is his "own invincible apathy" (146), his and that of humankind, which prevent them from taking action towards change. Since the 50s the affluence of the country created a sense of domestic security that worked as the hiding place for people's anxieties, due to political instability (for instance, J. F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King's assassinations in 1963 and 1968, respectively). As a consequence, the following decade was represented by a society suspended between the conservative legacy of the 50s and the beginning of a counter-culture, emerging intellectually and in the arts. From social gatherings like Woodstock<sup>24</sup> (1969) to the publication of novels like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), satirical attitudes questioned the establishment, and dared to display challenging alternatives, which reignited the possibility of social intervention –against previous intellectual conservatism and social apathy.

Along the same lines, the 70s ended with a sense of civil abdication because

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<sup>23</sup> The term was integrated in politics to be used in propaganda, with the Christian connotations of saving the white southerner from sin and evil. During the Civil War, the fight for the cause guaranteed a cleansing of the soul, compensating from previous moral fault. During Reconstruction, the concept was perpetuated in order to employ all means possible (political discourse, economic power and businesses, popular culture or, even, science) to re-establish white supremacy, virtually ignoring any development towards racial equality. The white discourse of redemption made continuous references to the past as a state of purity and order, paradoxically attempting to present an alternative to the new social, legal and political reality by means of memory. Furthermore, the employment of the Christian concept turns even more ironic when propaganda encouraged the maintenance of the old racial divisions as the road to redemption from evil, even if this implied extremely violent and criminal acts, such as lynching, among many others.

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed analysis of the effects of Woodstock in America see the volume of graphic material, interviews and accounts *Woodstock: Three Days That Rocked the World*, edited by Mike Evans and Paul Kingsbury.

even though laws were drawn and made effective to achieve racial equality in schools, the reaction in society showed an anti-progressive ideology when in states like Kentucky white families in the suburbs protested against forced “busing”<sup>25</sup>. The well-to-do suburbia did not welcome the intrusion of the federal government into their local affairs, which proves that, in the last decades of the twentieth century, inequality still remained. Marshall Frady calls this period one of “cultural lobotomy” in the South, when it was “etherized, subtly rendered pastless, memoryless and vague of identity” (1975, 142). Partly this process began with the creation of the concept “Sun Belt”<sup>26</sup>, a new idea of the South pivoting around the rising importance of tourism in the region.

The aforementioned cultural projections broadcasted during the twentieth century attempted to remold the image of the South, approximating it to the West and fashioning it like a perpetually sunny and thriving modern California, a commercial commodity and national holiday destination. This remapping of the South, integrating the West and also sunny California in the general imagery, resulted from its mediatization, based on tokenisms and blurring of regional diversities; that is, the

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<sup>25</sup> This measure enforced federal control of racial distribution in schools, transferring students to different institutions to improve and speed up desegregation. The *de facto* segregation, existing both in the North and South, was caused by residential separation, unmistakably related to class and economic status.

<sup>26</sup> The term was coined by American writer, political strategist and commentator Kevin Phillips in 1969. The area stretches “from Virginia through Arizona to the Pacific” (Ayers, 439). However, it is not a geographical concept as much as a cultural invention. The features that hold this region together as a coherent unit were based on a Republican preference in politics and conservative economic ethos, supporting free-market policies and capitalistic entrepreneurs, and an underlying resentment over the African-American socio-economic revolution. The booming economy was mainly based on tourism, and leisure businesses, real estates, the construction sector, oil and natural gas exploitation, and defense industries. These flourishing industries and related ideologies had an impact on the social distribution of cities, with a concentrated growth in the suburbs. For a detailed reflection on the beginnings and current state of this southern construct, see the volume edited by Darren Dochuk and Michelle Nicherson: *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region*.

media took advantage of the fact that “the South ha[d] been America’s most fecund seedbed for regional social types” (Reed-1986, 5). The South had been a prolific source of standardized mental images that had simplified the culture and identity of its citizens. This can be explained due to the tragic past, extreme ideologies and strong folklore attached to its history. A region with an unstable and stigmatized narrative can be easily portrayed by means of unfair cliché, used to represent the South as a unified whole without complexities and peculiarities<sup>27</sup>.

In this process of creating cultural templates to be broadcasted, both the South and the rest of the nation were manipulative in order to serve specific agendas. Hence, the images portrayed by the southern media or industries investing in the South were carefully selected by the advertising companies, targeting a stereotyped portrayal of the South to make it an appealing dream-like destination. The simplified regional descriptions would help people in the North and South sort out and pigeonhole each other (Reed-1986, 6) without the complications of diversity, diasporas or individual traits. The South as a commodity needed to be presented as an attractive, unified, flat character. The consumer could then normalize the stories told by the media about the South, without critical filters; in this manner, the South was successfully marketed. Karen L. Cox provides an example in the flourishing of railroads in the South. The Norfolk and Western Railway Company sold the south as “the land of romance” (138), subtly inviting the tourist to be reconciled to Dixie<sup>28</sup>.

Basically what they were doing was to rewrite the past of the South, turning it into an appealing trigger of nostalgia both for people who had lived that history and

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<sup>27</sup> Amber J. Narro and Alison Slade list a long series of shows that have been extremely successful over the years perpetuating southern stereotypes such as: *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *The Real McCoy*, *Petticoat Junction*, and later ones such as *The Dukes of Hazzard* (10).

<sup>28</sup> Jack Temple Kirby develops the marketing of the South in his book *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination*.

for those who fell in love with narratives that had always been but stories from afar. An instance of these strategies of commodification of southern history into tourism and souvenirs is narrated by Jessica Adams, who has researched the representations of the Old South in popular culture. She explains that in the late 30s, on the first day of shooting of the film adaptation on Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind*, a romanticized portrayal of the Civil War South, "Selznick International Studios flew the Confederate flag over Hollywood; though obviously a publicity stunt, this convergence of symbols belies an important function of the film –to connect a nostalgic myth of plantation heydays with a dream of America's future" (166-167). Marketing was trying to define the South as a remake of the American Dream, a place to restore the relations between North and South by stably combining the most positive images of both halves of the nation.

For northerners, these types made the southerner a more likable and familiar character. However, for southerners, these stereotyped depictions had more complex effects. For instance, Bobbie Ann Mason frequently mentions a desire in her characters to travel to Florida or the West but, most frequently, in her stories, as Scott Romine states, "[t]ourism and its permanent twin, relocation, fail to sustain desire because space, like history, evaporates as a ground of agency" (2008, 170). Romine addresses the frustrating attempts to reaffirm identity in a South that is constantly changing and being remapped. Mason's characters try to find comfort in the past, but, eventually, they must confront the present: they go on journeys, but expectations are not realized in their destinations; they revisit historical sites but feel detached from the scenery. Consequently, popular culture and the media have promoted either visiting the South, escaping the South, or, at least, moving to a more aseptic region within the southern rim, the southern West, that is, an area that carries less shame in their recent

past and memories of the Civil War, as, in general terms, the southern West was mainly Unionist, slavery was not a primal issue and no major cities were captured during the War. This statement does not imply the West carries no shames, as that would overlook the tragic history of Native Americans being deprived of their lands and rights through violence and injustice<sup>29</sup>.

But even shame was successfully commodified. In the 70s plantation tours became successful enterprises. The shameful was turned into an artificial space of cheerful associations, where visitors could either experience a purgation from a past that had been neglected, allowing it to be worth their nostalgia, in the case of the southerner, or, for people from the North, a chance to enjoy an embellished but partial representation of the past that was altered in such a degree that they would even long for what they had previously despised, even desiring to purchase that commodity. Fredric Jameson, the American literary critic and Marxist theorist, has largely explained how postmodernity has turned the past into a set of simulacra that can be commodified and consumed. His take on the commodification of culture becomes relevant at this point as he explains that due to the influence and spreading of media there is a gradual disappearance of the physical marketplace, as consumers, now, identify the object of value with its image, brand or logo. As a consequence, the boundaries between the thing and its concept are blurred; hence, the differentiation between products and their sphere of manipulation decreases (275). The South, in postmodern times, by being turned into an object that is publicized, represented by a label and becoming in itself a brand (made-in-Dixie, for instance), let alone being constantly broadcasted, distances itself from the actual facts of its past.

History thus becomes a product that can be purchased and utilized to satisfy

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<sup>29</sup> Relevant contributions to the topic are Alvin M. Josephine's *The West in the Civil War* and William R. Handley *True West: Authenticity and the American West*.

specific needs. For the South, this selective rewriting edulcorated infamous components of their identities, and the North was provided with just the perfect amount of grotesque imagery to find pleasure in, making it acceptable merchandise. This trade exchange made frontiers less visible, and the Americanization of the South and Southernization of the North began, especially since the 70s, when capital mobility and free trade agreements were a priority and corporate globalization started to provoke a cultural transaction that had an obvious impact on collective images and mutual perceptions. In order to achieve such aims, they had to “depoliticize that [past] death and drama, [...] [as] most Americans [...] [did not want] much politics and moral complexity on vacation” (Ownby, 244).

With the election of a Democratic southerner, in 1977, Jimmy Carter, who portrayed the image of the pleasant southern gentleman, new political campaigns furthered a positive and amiable image of the South. Carter publicly dismissed the social remains of racial segregation and pursued environmental policies aiming at the preservation of the southern landscapes, as was the case of the Appalachian Wetlands. In a national televised speech he admonished Americans not to “plunder [their] environment” (Montrie, 176). This appreciation of the natural value of the South would also increase the number of visitors, who were contributing to a redefinition of these states.

This process of permanent reinvention, culturally and even geographically speaking, can be embodied by the term coined by Lewis P. Simpson in 1980, *postsouthern*. *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (2008), edited by the American writer M. Thomas Inge, an authority on southern studies and popular culture, includes the term, establishing two criteria to consider a literary piece *postsouthern*: first, it should “describe a place and culture that is no longer

distinctively southern or that calls into question traditional assumptions about southern culture”, and/or, secondly, it should “exhibit a sensibility fundamentally different from the preceding literature of the Southern Literary Renaissance” (127).

If the southern land is now understood as a postmodern text, a more globalized intertextuality determines the reading of the person interacting with this reality. Extrapolating this definition to the realm of History, it would mean that the South could no longer survive on self-referential representations; it would also require, for a successful coexistence with the influential North, to incorporate elements from alien texts/lands that can be recognized by locals. Including cultural artifacts originated in the North was not a difficult imposition as it was part of the capitalist and globalizing evolution promoted by the media.

Actually, the postsouthern South is the one depicted by Bobbie Ann Mason: a South altered by modernity and postmodernity. The postsouthern anxiety is perceived in the characters’ sense of not owning a permanent place to belong to, which becomes apparent, for instance, in their dilemma whether or not to leave the rural south behind, and, with it, traditional southern lifestyles, carrying, simultaneously a sense of nostalgia and guilt. But this is also experienced by characters living in towns, whose construct of home has also been altered and needs to be reconfigured, creating a similar confusion. And, equally, when the characters venture out into foreign countries or alien landscapes, their homes haunt them constantly in the form of memories and dreams.

So, even though the South, as it was previously known, does not exist anymore for these characters, its memory survives (Kreyling, 194). What Professor Michael Kreyling, a specialist in southern literature, implied is that regardless of southern cities inevitably morphing, expanding, or, at times, being forgotten and



deteriorating, this only affects the economic and geographic identity of the South. Individuals do have to adapt to a postmodern pace of life (faster, individualistic, virtual, etc), but the unique flavor of the place remains through rooted traditions, behaviors and manners, but, most importantly, through stories and memory. This is due to the fact that a “sense of place” often seems to imply being located not merely in a distinctive region, but in a distinctive way” (Romine-2000, 5).

Regions might be altered, losing landmarks, buildings, flora and fauna, but their “distinctive ways” may endure, as they are transferrable, they can be taught, and unconsciously learnt by means of observation from older generations. The shape of an older South may only survive in written and visual records, but its stories are still being told. In fact, the postmodern manufacturing of cultural marketing and representations may ensure the endurance of memory, as these places, products and symbols that are sold become producers of nostalgia. Somehow, this new economy secures the legacy of southern memories. This is equally exemplified by Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters; surrounded by globalization and consumers of the media, they constantly refer to the emotions set in motion by memories, not only of a recent past in their lives, but of dreams triggered by objects belonging to previous generations or locations that have been inhabited by their kinfolks in the past. Consequently, their “sense of place” is created by sewing together fragments of a postmodernscape with threads of remembrance, history and old tales.

Regarding the postsouthern in Mason, Richard Gray, in his book *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature* (2007), explains: “in a world of commodities the connection with the past is made out of objects from the past and the senses triggered by them establishing a connection with the experience of ancestors” (47). Characters in Mason’s stories are oftentimes fascinated by objects, which

prompt recollections or fantasies. Characters are frequently fond of trinkets, antiques or discarded everyday items. But they are not drawn to them out of consumerist yearning; these characters read stories in the objects, which stand for stability in an otherwise transforming environment.

Matthew Guinn labels Richard Ford, who is stylistically and thematically close to Mason, a postmodern realist, that is, a writer that “conforms to the conventions of realism in its accurate depiction of everyday life”; nevertheless, the world represented “is fraught with the uncertainty characteristic of postmodernism”, and, for this reason, “the truths it conveys are of necessity small and particular –even minimalistic” (118). This implies that the writer’s concern for verisimilitude in the postsouthern context can be fulfilled by concentrating on the particular, the specific, the objects that follow the characters in their adjustment to the ever-changing South. These characters are still concerned about the configuration of the South, geographically, ideologically and economically. They have not fallen into an abyss of “no place”, lacking all sense of history; they have just changed their links to the past, “in tandem with technological and industrial advances that have altered the landscape” (Salter, 4).

Hence, the generation of writers to which Bobbie Ann Mason belongs were interacting with a postmodern South while listening to the recollections of people that had matured in a South not yet “Americanized”. As I have mentioned above, the postsouthern generation, as the writers that represent it, had to undertake an “active and hopeful [...] reconstruction of a spatialized ontology, a revised sense of place” (Bone, 51-52) that allowed them to build their identities in this postmodern southern world. But the “tandem” was difficult to ride as not only “advances” characterized the postsouthern. The complication resides on the remaining backwardness of the South,

which was most definitely changing in appearance but not equally in ethos: “The things that have most obviously changed in the modern South have been structural in nature. The degree to which southern culture ha[d] been nationalized-or vice versa-is a more debatable proposition” (Bartley-1995, 6). In fact, no discourse about the South should exclude the notion of the past, and an attempt to act differently may result in a harmful effect for the region, as it would then seem to erase its singularity. The problem is that the modern South was “eager to please” (Egerton-1974, 25) the dominant culture, the North, and, during the process of assimilation, substantial “breeds” from the South started to vanish.

This could be perceived in the economy, in the way agribusiness conglomerates started to displace the rural poor, with an obvious effect: overcrowded cities and deserted farms. Equally relevant were the demographic changes resulting from immigration. As industries found profitable locations in southern land, well-off residents from the North and West were welcomed as they created more white-collar jobs, helping in the elimination of backwardness as a southern stigma. On the other hand, the increasing Hispanic migration altered the rooted racial duality of the South, intruding a new culture struggling for economic and civil equality. New racist attitudes were then displayed towards the new immigrant groups.

With the creation of a new southern mystique that could be merchandised, altered and projected to the world through the media, the 80s and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 seemed to mark the apparent end of the old South. But that would only be true for televised representations; southerners were actually experimenting an identity crisis. Willie Morris wrote:

[I]s it not similarly true that the great Southern cities of the 1980s are like the artistic effect called pentimento? To quote Lillian Hellman, who wrote a

wonderful book by that name, "Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see original lines: A tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea." So beneath the palpable new "sophistication" of these contemporary Southern cities, can one not find the Conroes, Lake Villages, Belzonis, Mebanes, Humboldts, Valdostas, Eufalas, Guthries, Bastrops, and Farmvilles? Nostalgia is not what it used to be, it has been remarked, yet nostalgia is mere saccharin to the Southerner's power of memory — for memory is everything. (Online source)

The layers of painting covering the hardly visible trace of the South did not completely hide from view. Small towns were mostly inhabited by the older generations, while adults were struggling to build their careers in the expanding service industry, factories and power plants, as textile industries were disappearing too. Coal mining was devastating the mountain tops, suburbs were crowding formerly open spaces, cotton fields changed to pastures and marshes to soybean fields, and there was increased contamination of wetlands. This generated guilt in the southern conscience due to their complicity in deforestation by welcoming northern industries; all of the above severely affected the poor that had not yet been assimilated by the postmodern South, but, more broadly, it had an impact in the South in general as “[t]he changes in the metaphorical landscape of culture were mirrored in the physical landscape” (Cowdrey, 169). Every visible change in the South was a consequence of, or had effects in, the mentality and psychology of its inhabitants.

If land was previously treasured for its spiritual and metaphorical value, environmental policies took control over those folkloric interpretations of Nature. Taking the wetlands as an example, “[n]o longer sheltered from progress by

impenetrability and myth, the swamps [...] [were then] shielded by federal mandate. These swamps' physical survival [...] [was] somewhat secure; their contemporary signification, though, remain[ed] an intriguing and complex question" (Wilson, 174). In the same manner, most southern symbols were either being manipulated for business purposes or left behind by the Generation X<sup>30</sup> of the South, which had already "become 'Americanized' to a pace nearly as fast as yankees', to conspicuous consumption, and to the expansion of employment opportunities both clean and dirty" (Kirby, 171).

Kirby makes a very adequate use of the qualifier "dirty" in this context. With the arrival of new industries, the so-called Generation X simply and easily adapted to new labor roles. The experience was undergone in a much different way by the Southern people who were either third or second-generation farmers around the transforming towns and who were aware of the negative effects of their participation in these new industries<sup>31</sup>.

Summarizing, a reformulation of southern identity, in economic and industrial terms, from the 50s until the beginning of the 90s, originated from the need to change in order to become more influential and finally erase the widespread feeling of

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<sup>30</sup> Those born between the early 60s and early 80s.

<sup>31</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason published an article in 2000 in *The New Yorker*, entitled "The Fall Out: Paducah's Secret Nuclear Disaster", where she registers the effects of the uranium plant installed in that small Kentucky town in the 50s. She states that the people in Paducah were not afraid. During her research in the area, she drove around the wild lands surrounding the location. It was well known that these ponds, animals and plants had been contaminated but, still, she explains that "[p]eople have hunted and fished here [...]; no one wants to throw back a good catch. I was aware that this wildlife was virtually sacred. People feel so deeply about hunting here that they would be up in arms, so to speak, if the area were condemned because of mere toxic waste" (35). Southern identity is shaped so profoundly around the concept of landscape and human interaction with it that they would rather risk their health than accept that their treasured natural resources had been taken away from them by industrialization and progress.

insignificance and backwardness. From there, they moved on to a revelation that they were being evicted from their environment and feeling that, somehow, they had to buy it back, in the sense that to re-enter the South they had to learn a new code to interpret all the changes that had been either welcomed or imposed. In fact, Cobb, a southerner himself, explains that “[p]aradoxically enough, by threatening to take our national, regional or ethnic identities away from us, the global economy first stimulates our desire to preserve them, and then through a combination of commodification and clever marketing, it proceeds to sell them back to us” (2005, 12). If already during the Reconstruction the South felt a sense of invasion and reacted by vindicating themselves, it would be expected that with, firstly, the influence of the media, and, secondly, the menacing expansion of globalization, symbols would acquire greater relevance and cause a slight reversion to old values and traditions.

One of the traditions that seemed to have weakened with the appearance of television in southern homes was storytelling. Southern people are still widely known for their skillful capacity to share accounts of imaginary events, legends or myths, or real people’s lives. The porch and backyard were frequently the scenarios for such encounters. However, as discussed later, the prominence of storytelling, tattling or narrators sharing their skills to recount events either based on myth or neatly reflecting reality does not imply that, in that same culture, expressing intimate affairs publicly and sincerely is an expected type of behavior during social interaction. Privacy needs not be shared as a societal obligation in the culture of the traditional South. Besides, southerners can coexist with silence as an important element of conversation; their pace seems to emulate that of the life of the agrarian, depending on the rhythms of the weather and the earth: unpredictable and dilatory.

Republican George H. W. Bush, who was in office from 1989 to 1993, ruled over a South that had to accept that there was a wide section of the nation, mainly located in the North, for whom the debate about the distinctiveness down below the Mason-Dixon line was becoming rather tiresome. But, at the same time, a burgeoning tendency towards regional reassertion was taking place, once again, in the South, where, for example,

*Southern Living*, [...] a "sort of how-to-do-it manual, in living the Southern good life," boasted over two million subscribers by 1990, and even the short-lived *Southern*, whose motto was "the South, the whole South, and nothing but the South," had a circulation of approximately three hundred thousand when it folded in 1989. Meanwhile, the University of North Carolina Press published the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* [...] described by one scholar as "the intellectual equivalent of Southern Living." The Encyclopedia appeared in 1989 to great national and international fanfare, but its decidedly regional sales pattern indicated that it might serve primarily as [...] an ideal coffee-table tome for those desiring to reaffirm [...] their own southernness. (Cobb-1991, 716)

That coincided with major Republican success in southern elections, and a departure from the South's conventional ties to the Democratic Party<sup>32</sup>. There was simultaneously a racialization of the political parties as African-Americans were mainly voting for the Democratic Party, associated with policies that favor equality.

In the same manner, white southern conservatives defined themselves as Republicans.

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<sup>32</sup> And yet, from 1993 to 2001, the nation was again represented by southerners, under the presidency of Bill Clinton and his vice-president Albert Arnold "Al" Gore Jr., proving that by the end of the twentieth century a southern politician could still appeal to a greater majority of the nation, being his persona relatable to progress and closer to mainstream national ideals.

One of the most common cultural artifacts of the South are quilts, pieces of long-established memes sewn together to create “signifiers that helped [...] to remember particular places that were both geographical and ideological –*topoi* in the broadest sense” (Rohan, 373). This idea emphasizes the strong triangular association of identity-land-memory in the South. Bobbie Ann Mason, through her writing, seems to vindicate the truth and value of the diversity of the South, focusing on the southern working class. White-collar females or males do not tie in with the South the author desires to portray. The complication concerning her depiction of the South appears when noticing that in the process of selecting identity and personae she has silenced some kinds of southern voices. But every single selection entails a dismissal. In the case of Mason there is an apparent lack of African American characters. Bidinger explains this absence in the following way:

[T]he author [...] elides the subject of racism from the world of her childhood [In her memoirs *Clear Springs*, and also from her general fictional world]. It may or may not be that Mason conceals racist attitudes in her immediate family, but her failure to confront her own family’s attitude towards this foundational aspect of southern country life is in itself revealing [...] Mason’s suppression of any personal experience she has with racism allows her to frame her differences with the South as abstract and detached from her own life in the South [as well as on her characters’ lives]. (164)

Overall, silence, consequently, would not only be present in the development of the story lines of her writings but also in the topical selection.

During the campaign of Barack Obama, the 44<sup>th</sup> president of The United States, in 2008, his leaders and advisors were more than aware of the changing status of the South: “Obama and his well-financed campaign took advantage of parallel



developments: an erosion of the 'Southern Strategy' as initiated by Nixon and consolidated by Ronald Reagan, and the dramatic transformation of the South from an agrarian-tinged society into a metropolitan dominated region" (Guillary, 185). A black president was the ultimate symptom of the successful and long fight of the Civil Rights movement. Cobb (2012), commented on the election that Obama's "victories in Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida and apparent inroads in the metropolitan areas of the southern states may well be a glimpse into the future, although [he adds prudently] not necessarily the immediate one" (Online source).

Glenn T. Eskew, History Professor and specialist on the South, foregrounds the symbolic relevance of the vigils celebrated at Civil Rights memorials and relevant sites to the movement, greeting the election of Obama (Online source). The South took part in a national gesture of putting an end to a "remarkable silence" (West, Online source), that of the absence of African Americans in the rhetoric of the "founding fathers". Within the postsouthern context, this political and social advancement materializes, for instance, in the inclusion of Obama souvenirs in gift shops of Civil Rights touristic destinations (Wagner, Online source); media, marketing and capitalism, together with the social fight for human rights, provide signals of a changed South that welcomes gradually concrete tokens of progressivism.

## 2. Contemporary Fiction, Bobbie Ann Mason, and the Uses of Silence.

### 2.1. Definition of Silence.

“Silence can be a plan  
rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence  
It has a history            a form

Do not confuse it

With any kind of absence.” –Adrienne Rich. (qtd. in Glenn, 1)

For the purpose of this research, silence, as American poet Adrienne Rich states in the poem quoted above, should be read as a template of language and as provider of relevant information. The human brain makes sense of the physical and human environment through detailed linguistic patterns. However, recurrently, the spoken word, for reasons that will be analyzed in the ensuing paragraphs, may fail to fulfill a communicative function. In these situations, silence functions as a pattern to be interpreted, or as the blueprint of an existing message. Through a moment of muteness, the “speaker”, that is, the laconic raconteur, will, regardless of the wordlessness, perform the demonstrative and deictic enterprise, presenting information to the audience, in the case of literary writing either the readers or the fictional listeners.

In a grammatical analysis of silence as a communicative entity, it may be equated with a noun phrase, where sounds and noise would function as either deictic

determiners of the nucleus, silence, or attributive clauses that modify it. On a semantic level, the signifier would be the verbal void and the signified would be the muted message, which could be expressed through utterances in a dialogue in a given fictional moment, but that, here, will be transmitted to the reader through different, alternative communicative techniques. Silence would be then defined as a container for thoughts. The container will be shaped, delimited, by sounds; that is, sounds draw the silhouette of the silent message.

The silence to be studied in this project points also at the existence of a communicative necessity and, thus, it should never be dismissed as deficiency, either of the writer, or of the character, in their capacity to willingly share emotions or thoughts. Conversely, these spaces emptied of linguistic signifiers present a visible shape: the configuration of the literary arrangement and style. Silences qualify as a literary trait of a particular writer, belonging to his or her creative nature, artistic differentia, or, more simply, a distinguishing mark. Hence, as this project concentrates on the relation between silence and the literary text, I would like to clarify that, as Rosa Mateu Serra states in her doctoral dissertation on the communicative role of silence, a reading and analysis of silence in literature should consider its presence both as a stylistic resource and as a theme about which the author writes. During the actual process of decodification, the interpreter may encounter a graphic void on the page which is nevertheless pregnant with meaning, a description of a moment where noise and word become secondary in the scene and the perceived silence occupies the focus of attention. Attention is also to be paid to non-verbal communicative strategies (expressed through the body of the characters, noises produced by them, employment of cultural symbols that speak for them, etc.). In chapters 3 and 4, fragments of texts

will be read closely in order to provide evidence for these stylistic strategies and themes.

Should the interpreter identify the silence wrongly, it may then be perceived as a shortcoming. Instead, it should be, paradoxically, heard with care and attention, finding in it relevant instructions for a further understanding of this person's character, persona, current emotional state or specific idea. This decoding process can be gradually acquired: "There is a technique to communicate by means of silence, which can be learnt and, more importantly, which can be shared. And this technique will later compensate the time invested in its acquisition"<sup>33</sup> (Polla-Mattiot, 19). If humankind insists on being oblivious to these silent voices, their wholesome perception of reality will be harmed. In fact, "[n]oise pollution results when man does not listen carefully. Noises are the sounds we have learnt to ignore" (Schafer, 77). On the contrary, if the quiet excerpts in texts are carefully studied, the reader will be capable of "actualizing and concretizing the text, of filling its gaps, blank spots, and indeterminacies [...]; [...] [silences will then be seen as] puzzles to be pondered, mysteries to be investigated, and enigmas to be solved, in what Matei Calinescu has termed 'reading for the secret'" (Plate, 103).

Besides, silences provide the coordinates that the characters require in order to locate themselves within the noisy chaos around them. They function as their inner compass. Thus, it is in silence that the characters can activate their human faculties to receive the signals, audible or not, offered by their surrounding reality, as, in silence, all their senses are sharpened. They may be thus capable of drawing a path to navigate through this outer confusion. R. Murray Schafer, a Canadian composer and writer, reflected on how the aural features of a spatial framework affect human experience.

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<sup>33</sup> All the translations in this dissertation are mine, unless otherwise specified.

He used the musical term “keynotes” to denote the sounds that “become listening habits in spite of themselves” (9); that is, men may not consciously listen to them but they can neither ignore them and “the fact that they are ubiquitously there suggests the possibility of a deep and pervasive influence on our behaviour and moods” (9). I equate here sounds and silences. They are both “keynotes” of our environments and, thus, “they help to outline the character of men living among them” (9). Consequently, both key-sounds and key-silences will participate in the delineation of selfhood.

It is only through a careful perception of the inner rhythms of the world that men and women will be capable of comprehending their very existence within the surrounding landscape: “It is not in the heartbeat that the pulse of society is to be measured, but in the choreography of footsteps [...] To know the momentum of a society, measure the footsteps of its citizens” (Schafer, 164). And I would add that it is necessary to measure as well the throbbing of Nature and the vibrations of the human-made inanimate world. Then, and only then, in the observation of surrounding, wordless messages, men and women would truly record the voice of reality: “Sounds then serve as anchors to regions, as acoustic identifiers of community, and as a result, if those soundmarks are threatened by alien strains and rhythms, communities interpret those sounds as threats to their identities and ways of life” (Smith, Mark M., 267-8). Consequently, within these marks that both complete the identity of the individual, as well as organically and meaningfully place him within the community and landscape, silences should be integrated as unavoidable and essential components.

## 2.2. Soundscapes.

In correlation with the previous definition of silence, it would be relevant to introduce the concept of “soundscape”. Musician R. Murray Schafer coined this term in the 1970s. In a study of the aural culture of America, Emily Thompson defines this term, according to Schafer’s initial considerations:

Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world. The physical aspects of a soundscape consist not only of the sounds themselves, the waves of acoustical energy permeating the atmosphere in which people live, but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, these sounds. A soundscape’s cultural aspects include a scientific and aesthetic ways of listening, a listener’s relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what. A soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilization than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change. (1-2)

As in the interpretable natural and urban territories in a landscape, perceivable features are to be found, equivalently, in a soundscape, which render that situation distinctive. When the person connects with and relates to a soundscape, he or she gains awareness of the aesthetic value of that scene. In that process, the subject perceives the beauty, or, more broadly speaking, the qualities that caused him or her to wish to participate of this soundscape. The person may become an element of the soundscape by means of an enticing aural token, becoming, through this process of

inclusion, an added constituent to the actual soundscape; and, therefore, to the landscape – in other words, the prevailing character of a place; its *genius loci*.

Thanks to the interconnected elements of a landscape, silence would then cause communicative satisfaction, and would be, thus, perceived by the senses. It is perceptible and integrative of the surrounding, transmitting an attractive directive, petition, account, or further aesthetic propellant. In the attempt to gain a faithful picture of the soundscape, it should be clarified that “silence does not always have to be an absolute lack of audible sound, so the distinction between sound and silence can be one of degree” (Baofu, 191). As a matter of fact, it is not only a relation of degree but also of symbiosis; and this interaction will complicate the configurative apprehension of the soundscape.

To aid the individual in this discerning quest, a text can be understood as architecture, as it forms a semantic whole by bringing together various conceptual elements. Consequently, literary studies may be interpreted as a science that analyzes how sounds are transmitted in the space depicted, and how, in between those sounds, silence is created. In this peculiar human habitation created by the author, this building so to say, which functions as an ecosystem of its own, the soundscape will present an internal working. The internal processes that take place here will be ruled by certain principles of validity, that is, they will collocate with the characteristics of the scene represented, making sense according to the type of context delivered by the author. Part of these sounds and silences will interact with the characters with no control on their parts, that is, they will be mere receivers. However, and always from an acoustic perspective, by managing their bodies, their effect on the environment, and a conscious use of their voices and their spaces, the characters will also be able, at

times, to sculpt their own soundscape, reciprocally altering and even limiting the soundscape of other characters.

This matter is further complicated by the existence of two different soundscapes: one where silences and sounds are part of the realistic representation included in the text, and the second one where the writer reflects the silences and sounds of the code created in order to reconstruct the lack of unity and coherence in the reality presented. Stefan Haag has analyzed James Joyce's *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, regarding their aural coordinates, or how sounds provide them with coherence. He argues that "hearing the one [*soundscape I*] may lead, by default, into listening to the other [*soundscape II*]" (112-113). *Soundscape I* would be the "sound-events" and silences produced by and within the landscape, that is, the sounds and silences of the interaction between the fictional *I* and his surrounding sounds, silences and physical environment, and *soundscape II* would be the "sound-events" and silences that occur during the interaction with and representation of that landscape and *soundscape I*. Haag explains that both Joyce's short stories and novel have extensively been presented as illustrations of a postmodern world where "centred values" have been destroyed. This world, according to the critic, manifests a mutism signaling the meditative struggle (manifested in *soundscape II*) of both the character and the reader, suffered in the process of interpretation in the absence of core referential systems.

In order to unpack the aforementioned concepts a specific illustrative scenario may be considered. With this purpose the reader may picture now a local park during a summer afternoon. *Soundscape I* would here be the voices of the people, the singing of birds, the rustling of dried leaves on the grass, a flowing fountain, the kicking of a ball in play, and, obviously, any space of silence that may occur, brief as though it may be. In this specific case, there might be a moment when, by coincidence, the



voices cease, the birds are quiet, the games are over, feet are still, and there is no bubbly water in the fountain, even if all this happens in an instant. If the character is sitting on a bench in this park, his thoughts would be active to decode the components of the landscape and *soundscape I*. If a writer wants to depict, simultaneously, this landscape, *soundscape I* and also the character's mental efforts to decipher it, the words on the page will devote lines to the description of the character's fancy and flow of ideas while reading the complex surrounding. In these lines, there will be words, not articulated out loud in the fictional moment, but with reverberations on the page, the process of reading and, of course, on the reader. Equally, these lines may also convey silences that can coincide, for instance, with the character's fanciful constructs, imagination or ideas. Precisely, this elaborated system of sounds and silences that take place in the mind of the character and that also finds its space on the author's writing will be *soundscape II*. The intricacy of the structure to be portrayed in literature demonstrates the faulty definition of silence as emptiness.

### 2.3. Silence, the Environment, and the Individual.

It has, consequently, been established that silence is tightly related to space, both in the fictional areas depicted, as well as in the most immediate area of the physical object of the book. Within this organic performance of reality, captured on the page, silence, in the case of Bobbie Ann Mason, is utilized in a manner that emerges in an artistically pleasing form, thus showing the reader how language may speak of silence. Then, obviously, a literary piece that deals with silence does not necessarily include constant blanks on its pages, or any other graphic representation of mutism. It can actually consist of highly articulated paragraphs with a designated

style, describing moments in which the character remains in silence in that fictional soundscape that, through suspension of disbelief, the reader decides to internalize. As a consequence, reader and character share the experience of an absence of verbal expression, through a very intimate contact and close observation of the written word. This sense of intimacy will be very much related to isolation. In this case, however, isolation does not necessarily mean that the character stands alone in the inhabited space described in the corresponding fragment, but rather that there is a detachment from the conversational occurrence surrounding him or her.

Professor Will Slocombe clearly expounds the perceptive improvement achieved in a solitary communion with nature, using romantic philosophy. His study is useful for the present project as it connects this state of verbal and social disconnection, which is frequent in Mason's fiction, with silence. Slocombe explains how in a state of solitude the individual reaches a greater sense of awareness of himself and the surroundings. He mentions a double *I*: one that undergoes a noetic response to the environment, which is the half of the self that perceives; and, on the other, "halved contextualized being", there is an *I* that stands aside merely observing the perceptive agent. The combination of this simultaneous process of recognition of the surrounding context and of the actual mental skills taking place creates a "solitaire commune" (46-47) with the human being's place and interaction with place. This moment, Slocombe claims, represents "the ineffable present", that is, the individual's recognition of an immediate existence that cannot be articulated. Consequently, in terms of narrative style, if the author wishes to convey such processes in writing, they must be expressed in segments where no dialogue occurs. The characters keep quiet to reach this greater awareness and appreciation.

This stylistic feature augments the relevance of contemplation, an essential activity performed by the character, where the narrator, either third or first person narrator, describes the process of the person or object being observed by the *I*, as well as the emotions undergone by this same *I*. In this manner, there is a more complex portrayal of the consciousness of the character in the acute grasping of the current situation (i.e. “the ineffable present”) that may be experienced and articulated in a line of thoughts but not uttered in words to an interlocutor.

In writing concerned with the above-defined *isolation* and *contemplation*, the *immediate*, then, would be a third concept of extreme importance. Its presence would be constant in this kind of texts, and, as it happens, it cannot be talked about; thus, long and frequent periods of silence should not surprise the reader of a tale about the instant. When the present moment, conversely, evokes memory, this process of consciousness could equally demand silence because what has long been unspoken can hardly be articulated after the passing of time; thus, the memory may be mentally invoked but not verbally dealt with. In the following parley, Tennessee Williams sharply identifies these circumstances in his one-act play *Something Unspoken* (1958), where an elderly and socially respectable southern woman, Cornelia, celebrates with flowers the anniversary of her long relation with her secretary, Grace. This gallant gesture hides the love mutually felt that has never been vocalized, which is, however, addressed by means of tangent questions and responses:

Grace: You mustn't expect me to give bold answers to questions that make the house shake with silence! To speak out things that are fifteen years unspoken!? – That long a time can make a silence a wall that nothing less than dynamite could break through –[Picks up phone] I'm not strong enough, bold enough, I'm not. (Williams, 107)

The house, an emblem of social status and appearances, may fall if what has been so long concealed is shared. Picking up the phone or engaging in an act of conversation represent the physical equivalent to a hush strong enough to silence the truth about their past and current hostilities.

Literature should always include silences as part of the events taking place inside of it. The main reason for this assumption resides in the reflection that silence cannot be avoided because even a speech indicates a simultaneous message that has been gagged. In this manner, playwright Harold Pinter states that “[t]he speech we hear is an indication of that we don’t hear. [...] [and vice versa,] [w]hen true silence falls we are still left with echo” (Grimes, 217), which proves that total silence can never be achieved. As a consequence, no reality can be depicted if speechlessness is not incorporated as a structural element.

Paul Auster argues that “we will never manage to say what we want to say, and whatever is said will be said in the knowledge of this failure” (Gunnars, 78). In order to avoid this and achieve an effective narrative, the artist must find rhetoric and tropes that succeed both in the transmission of silence and in using the cracks of language as a tool for self-definition. Bakhtin defines the liminality of language, which adds on to the perpetual threshold where characters are positioned: “Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other” (Belanoff, 421). In the peculiar postmodern rite<sup>34</sup> of passage that never seems to be completed due to the constant throbbing of altered and innovative signifieds and signifiers, the character struggles to establish a connection with the Other. The challenge of connecting will, at times, be enabled through spoken messages built on literal, direct and simple words, containing facts, ideas or emotions, with different

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<sup>34</sup> Postmodern themes and literary features will be tackled in the following epigraph.

effects on the listener. However, repeatedly, it will require metaphorical and reflective language. In fact, those employing only words, Susan Sontag shows, “are inauthentic, they abuse language. Silence is a way to communicate that avoids the deception of words” (Kaplan, 118).

To ratify this statement through literary writing would imply the inclusion of passages where the characters do not speak, to make room in this manner for the dense nature of a more precise concept of articulation; superior even, as portrayed in the poem “Silence” by Marianne Moore:

Superior people [...] [are]  
[...]  
Self-reliant like the cat –  
that takes its prey to privacy,  
the mouse’s limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth –  
they sometimes enjoy solitude,  
and can be robbed of speech  
by speech which has delighted them.  
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;  
Not in silence, but restraint. [...] (91)

In this poem, Moore recalls the words of her father. Critics have analyzed her take on the excellence of silence as a strategic approach to achieve the perpetuation of masculine dominance over the female. However, the female voice conquers the father’s discourse and it becomes her material for artistic creation. She embraces the silence suggested by the male authority, but this process includes the transformation of silence into a consciously chosen literary component. Silence here is transferred to the female’s fancy and creativity. That is, she has “carried” silence from a space of

inhibition to one of empowerment but, as it is beautifully put in the book *One Square Inch of Silence: One Man's Quest to Preserve Quiet*, “silence cannot be imagined, although most people think so. To express the soul-swelling wonder of silence, you must hear it” (Hempton and Grossmann, 2). Hence, the interpreter of silence must work with silence so to say. The person hears the pregnant silence in his or her life and conquers it, owns it, to turn into a tool what was before a limitation.

If, in a literary text, the writer wishes to achieve an interaction with the readers, where they can capture this accurate expressiveness of the communicative and visible nature of a moment of silence, the narrative will convey gaps in the speeches of the characters that function as shelters for tacit information, data that will be understood by the reader without having to be written in the form of a dialogue or a direct spoken thought. This process will be demanding, but if readers acquire the needed abilities, they may be able to enjoy discovering the depth of the landscape, as much as Naturalist John Muir did in his travels to different American mountains. His team found pleasure finding “so much music in the stony silence, [...]; every particle visible or invisible in glorious motion, marching to the music of the spheres in a region regarded as the abode of eternal stillness” (Muir, 521). This “musicality”, here applied to a natural environment appreciated in silence, can be equally found in the quiescence of people described in fiction.

The multiple “particles” discerned above might be read as the multiplicity and complexity of the puzzling identity of characters, whose inner language *per se* is difficult to put into words. This inherent mystery baffles words themselves; it perplexes spoken language, the verbal skills and the articulatory system. American poet James Tate said that “[t]hat there is a prayerful, haunted silence between words, between phrases, between images, ideas and lines” (Gunnars, 71). I read this sentence

as tapping into the trace of a message left by silence where hope for communication lies, a space of orality privation where a prayer for communication, so to speak, finds shelter.

Thomas Wolfe writes about how the nature of the individual may be hidden in silence in his short story “The Sun and the Rain”, where an American tourist in France meets an old couple of French farmers on the train. The elders speak no English and yet the husband achieves a deeper understanding with the traveler than their young daughter, who seems to be proficient in this language. The connection is made by deictic uses of basic lexicon referring to Nature: “‘le soleil ... la pluie ... la terre’ (...) Then for a long time no one spoke, there was no sound except the uneven rickety-clack of the little train, and the girl continued to look sullenly out of the window” (145). Her insistence on language keeps her isolated from the group whilst the old French farmer and the American tourist are bound through observation rather than discourse. It is in silence where the complexities of the characters meet and come to an agreement.

Silence may also be seen as an instrument that records invisible relations between the individual and the context. The immediate function of the human senses is to perceive external entities. Obviously, this implies a lack of awareness of the individual’s place in the world, as the network of connections is not established in advance. Salome Voegelin develops a careful analysis of the decodification of sounds and silences. The introduction explains the following: “In the quiet sounds of *Silence*<sup>35</sup> the listener becomes audible to himself as a discreet member of the audience. *Silence* [...] embraces the body of the listener in its solitude, and invites him to listen to himself amidst the soundscape that he inhabits” (xv). The landscape,

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<sup>35</sup> The word “silence” appears in italics in the original because it is the title of a chapter in the book.

from this perspective, becomes legible through the primal perception of the self as a component of the soundscape, insight for which man must grant a moment of silence to himself. This will signify an improvement in apprehension because, firstly, relying only on what one sees will not suffice to create a global picture of the complex layout of the input being received, and, secondly, as composer and writer John Luther Adams<sup>36</sup> beautifully exposes, to listen to the “resonant stillness” one must stand “motionless”. That is, to be able to realize that the place a person stands on is determined by the sounds created by the existence of all surrounding elements, including the listening agent, i.e. the person perceiving the external world, he or she must keep quiet, and then silence will allow enhanced and prolonged perception.

But again, this path towards acute observation does not function only as an invisible mapping system of the outer world, but also of the inner features and movements of the character: “The dialectics of sound and silence creates an auditory space which moves in two directions: outward and inward. Outwardly, it creates distance, a sense of immensity, but inwardly, it locates itself within the scope of the perceiving consciousness” (Savolainen, 141). Furthermore, through the integration of the physicality of silence, the characters will create a picture of the world being constantly updated according to the individual’s searching needs. To better understand this statement, it is important to bear in mind that the materiality of silence refers to an entity that can be perceived. However, because the main characteristic of any acoustic entity is its constant movement, once a moment of silence, or the quality of silence in time, has been perceived, this would not be a permanent trait. However, even though silence and sound are by definition unstable, they are still tangible,

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<sup>36</sup> John L. Adams’s words have been taken from his poem “The Place Where You Go to Listen”, which can be read in the following link: <http://johnlutheradams.net/the-place-where-you-go-to-listen-essay/>



noticeable. But the process of perception of silence and sound will always be subjective as it depends on the particular senses of an individual. The auditory experience will never be the same for two people as the waves of energy will react differently against the ears and brain of the receptors; and, also, their imaginations, being fuelled with different experiential baggage, will immediately add diverse meanings to the perceived aural presence. It is then the triangle silence-environment-individual that provides moments of verbal absence with meaning.

#### 2.4. Silence, Postmodernity, and the Search for Alternative Avenues to Meaning.

Having targeted silence as the purpose of this project, its relation to geographical context, the process of its interpretation and its effects on identity formation, it should be borne in mind that this dissertation works with a revised concept of silence that contradicts the ritualized vision of it as a restricting imposition. The silences considered provide an option for the fictional identities to be intellectually and emotionally satisfied in the overwhelming soundscape of postmodernity. Silenced voices are transformed into silent voices, as the writer is capable of voicing silence: “Chosen silence can be creative and generate self-knowledge, integration and profound joy” (Maitland, 187). That is, they will find in silence the illuminating guidelines for them to know how to comport themselves among the more or less aggressive sounds of their environment. In the case of Mason, this temporal, cultural and ideological framework will be the postmodern South.

It is well beyond the scope of this dissertation to define the *postmodern*. My purpose is mainly to identify the features of such literary label that collocate with Bobbie Ann Mason’s writing, which, in turn, resonate with the temporal frame of the

stories and the writer's generation. I would like to cite eminent British literary theorist and critic Terry Eagleton regarding this topic: "The word *postmodernism* generally refers to a form of contemporary culture, whereas the term *postmodernity* alludes to a specific historical period". He goes on to define postmodernity as a *style of thought*, which is "suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, [...] of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation". From this perspective the world seems "unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures". For Eagleton, this abstract reflection materializes in "a historic shift in the West to a new form of capitalism –to the ephemeral, decentralized world of technology, consumerism and culture industry" (21). Perry Anderson, in his study of postmodernity, identifies the seventies as core to the universe of the postmodern (93). And, on the other hand, Eagleton defines postmodernism as a *style of culture* "which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture, as well as between art and every-day experience" (21).

One of the main features of postmodernism is nostalgia. The social portrayals found in the postmodern texts to be analyzed here inevitably contain reverberations of myths and beliefs that refer back to phenomena, beings and cultural artifacts that are no longer available. Edward J. Casey, in his studies on memory, explains how reminiscence is a bittersweet act. It makes us sad because we miss a place that is no longer available, but we find pleasure in revisiting a past place from a safe distance that protects us from the emotional load it carries (113). The effect postmodernity has had in the skill of remembering becomes visible when, due to technical and digital advances, the line separating past and present is severely blurred. Due to the strong

influence of media representations of fictionalized versions of the past, people find themselves missing a yesterday that did not take place; additionally, rapid changes actually alter reality in such a speed that nostalgia increases. The frontier between present and past collapses for a writer when memories reveal themselves so strongly that they become part of the current situation experienced by the character. This provokes a crisis of representation, increasing a sense of longing that contrasts with any positivist ideals where the thing that mattered was only what could be spoken. In a postmodernist text, the character will struggle to take cognizance of his identity and context, and no straightforward interpretation can be gleaned. Conversely, silences will be spaces for the oblique admissions of truths that will provide coherence, up to a certain extent, in the mind of the character, in contrast with the fragmented outer world.

In chapter 1, the concept of the “postsouthern” was introduced. Bearing it in mind, the literary expert and southern writer Noel Polk reflected upon regional identity in the following way:

I as a southerner stand between two mirrors so huge that they reflect nothing but each other [...]; before and behind me multiple simultaneous replications of my self speed away into infinity, and no matter how I strain to one side, trying to get even a fleeting glimpse of the original, singly-, simply-reflected *I*, I cannot ever see it. I am forever blocked by the image facing me from the mirror, no matter which mirror I face. (10)

In the fluid society of consumerism, advertising and globalization, where language is constantly deconstructed to produce effective neologisms, the radices of both the representational code, language, and the signifieds are severely damaged and blurred; thus, the correspondence between the landscape and the mental image cannot be

localized. Language has been deformed to such an extent that the interpreter cannot any longer identify originals, just mere resemblances. Wherefore, the writer and the reader are likely to expect alternative channels of synergy.

Even though the specific case of Bobbie Ann Mason and postmodernism will be later discussed, it can illustrate the process of character formation in a postmodern setting and the relevance of silence therein. First, it is interesting to notice that Mason belongs to what was called the Silent Generation, a group of American writers born between 1925 and 1942<sup>37</sup>. The term was coined in an article published in November of 1951 in *Time* magazine:

The Silent ha[d] taken great things for granted and looked beyond themselves –while worrying that, somehow, the larger challenges of life [were] passing them by. And so they ha[d] been keen on manufacturing points of lifecycle reference around personal (rather than historical) markers. Whatever phase of life they occupy is fraught with what various Silent authors have labeled “passages,” “seasons,” “turning points,” or the transactions bearing little or no relation to the larger flow of public events. (Howe and Strauss, 282)

The isolated state described above will in fact be reflected in Bobbie Ann Mason’s short fiction. She frequently creates characters who, belonging to this postsouthern reality, find no meaningful anchor for their interpretative, linguistic and psychological roles. This constant sense of transition would have a significant effect on their understanding and performance of language.

The unavoidable postmodern silence then is the consequence of a confusion that either comes from within the participant in the story and seizes the text, a

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<sup>37</sup> The writer was born in Mayfield, Kentucky, in an isolated farm, in 1940.

representation of the fictional reality, or the other way round, the confusion being in the surrounding narrative and taking gradual possession of the fictional self. Sandra Cisneros, in her novel *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, creates a family of Latino immigrants who struggle with the coexistence of their multiculturalism and plurilinguism. Crossing the border separating Mexico from the United States, the dead air of the frontier is described reaching a crescendo: “A silence in the car. A silence in the world. And then... The rising in the chest, in the heart, finally” (Cisneros, 25). The unspoken semantic layers of the frontier clinch first onto the moving home of this family, the car, where they transport their identities across nations. Then the silence becomes physical and takes over their bodies, their emotions, and, finally, themselves. Accordingly, all is turned into silence, all is gagged. The conquering growth of silence does not equate repression, however. It might seem contradictory but the fact that the border prevents them from speaking represents a space of enlightenment and insight, where the characters in the car will be faced with the threatening truth of their liminal identities as immigrants.

A laconic character may be labeled as lacking loquaciousness, or missing articulatory skills. My proposal is to read these postmodern characters as conscious, silent observers, who have decided to pay tribute to contemplation and the silence around them. They are self-reliant. Furthermore, their isolation is made up for by silence because the latter allows the perception of the environmental sounds, which provide a sense of inclusiveness. This is portrayed by Robert Creeley, the postmodern poet, in his piece “Silence”:

I can't speak so  
simply of whatever

was then  
the fashion

of silence  
everyone's-- Blue  
expansive morning  
and in

the lilac bush just  
under window  
farm house  
spaces all

the teeming chatter  
of innumerable birds--

I'd lie quiet  
trying

to go to sleep late  
evenings in summer  
such buzzes settling  
twitters

of birds--The relatives  
in rooms underneath

me murmuring--  
Listened hard to catch  
  
faint edges of sounds  
through blurs of fading  
  
spectrum now out  
there forever. (Creeley, 488)

The broken structure of the lines, oblivious of syntactic correctness, emulate the unpredictability and promptitude of the list of qualities being perceived in silence by the poet. Solitude, tranquility and stillness ameliorate his sensual interpretation of the world around him. He becomes aware of the light, the horizon expanding around him, the flora and its colors, the contact of the house with the flowers in mutual respect, the singing of the birds at different intensities, the presence of his human equals and their voices engaged in indistinct exchanges of words, and, as a whole, it all presents itself in an aural arrangement that helps him classify and distinguish the components of his environment, stating in silence his place in the landscape, both the natural and the artificial one.

This all happens because, as Wordsworth<sup>38</sup> explains,  
if [...] the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation,  
or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should  
suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or  
collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power  
not known under other circumstances. (Miles, 47)

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<sup>38</sup> I will shortly refer to the relation between romanticism and postmodernism.

This is what Annie Dillard, American author of both fiction and non-fiction, calls “innocence”, which is essential for artistic creation, “the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration” (Slovic, 64). This “innocence” characterizes postmodern writers’ inventiveness, when in their compositions perception conquers the page. The observant eye pays due regard to the circumstantial constituent, almost following a ceremonial process. This pleurably attentive state provides a postmodern breakaway for the writer as well as for the characters. The artist’s remarkable sensitivity for elements that are frequently regarded as imperceptible reappraises the qualities that define something or someone as worthy of aesthetic, respectful portrayals. If the creative product is driven by an activity of admiration, the narrative will include fractured narratives, where “objects are skewed into focus by the context of the story itself” (Feddersen, xxxi). The final effect might be a mosaic-like representation of reality that arranges together plot, characterization, renditions of thought and careful and paced down descriptions, which, to the distant perspective of the reader, projects a wholesome pattern of the inner and outer world of these fictional characters.

To represent as truthful a narrative of their lives as can possibly be, the characters in distorted contexts pertaining to the postmodern will need to resort to silence. In fact, the following quote has been borrowed from an article that reflects not only on the positive effects of silence in communication, but, more importantly, on silence’s constituent nature within speech and culture:

Silence (in-habited by meditation, reflection, contemplation, metacognition, and thoughtfulness) provides one lens through which to see the interlace of literacy [understood within my argument as the essential instrument to react within and interact with reality]; action (response, conversation) provides



another lens, but both lenses are pointed at exactly the same object, which continuously turns on itself with no discernible beginning or ending.

(Belanoff, 422)

The object, in the constant transformations of postmodernity, would only be fully perceived in a combination of words and silences that mark the beginning and end of the utterances, and which bestow the character the space to reflect upon all the constituent elements of his or her relation with the surrounding world: the object, the language that refers to it, the language that tries to make sense out of it, the silences surrounding the objects and contained or produced by them, and the silences brought about by the subject.

Another trait of the postmodern, or specifically, in the case of Mason exemplified earlier, postsouthern, landscape resides in the fact that, for the author, a use of words merely conditioned and justified by the social needs of the character in order to elicit attention but with no engagement with the character's, and, thus, the reader's imagination, would never suffice in order to achieve a greater development of the self in relation to its environment. M<sup>a</sup> Teresa Nandín claims the following when studying the use of symbolic figures of speech in the short stories of southern writer Flannery O'Connor: "Since the author attempts to express a type of reality which may be only perceived 'through the eyes, not with them' referential language becomes inadequate" (351). Especially in the texts that follow, with their constant alterations in landscape and unexpected vital changes, "the actual experience of the 'now' escapes articulation and explanation. The moment it is stated in words, or measured, it is lost. As such it might be defined as an experience of the non-symbolic" (Loevlie, 68-69). That is, the reader cannot merely rely on explicit implications in the reading process. But the lines devoted to silence will hardly ever equate mere representations. The

projections of the reader, in fact, become essential as the text offers an escape from the authoritative semantic dictations of the author. In this manner, silence will provide a wider integrative space, more appropriate to the intricacies of the postmodern reality.

Silence will equally represent the last shelter where men and women may contemplate their lives without being constantly affected by interferences of the fast tailoring of language that takes place around them. As well as that, using muteness as a dialectic technique in a text may allow language, representing thoughts, descriptions and reflections, to flow without restrictions; without being hindered by the strict rules of interactive communication, assuming “that the most precious feelings cannot be articulated and that if the attempt is made they turn `rotten’” (Hays, 50). With regards to this phenomenon of decay in authenticity, writer Edward Abbey strongly manifests the following opinion:

We in America are being systematically robbed. Robbed of the most elementary decencies of life –clean air, sunlight, pure unmedicated water, grass & woods to play in, silence solitude and space, even time, even death. Instead...?

Insanity. (Abbey, 147)

In the previously mentioned triangle silence-environment-individual, lines become blurry in postmodernity as the context is altered, and the individual is in permanent redefinition of the self in response to the surrounding chaos.

## 2.5. Silence as Shelter in the Postmodern World.

The *Genesis* myth of The Tower of Babel accords with the contemporary sensibility analyzed in this chapter. Originally, all men were thought to speak the same language –a faculty that rendered them more powerful. In the implementation of their higher comprehension and skills, achieved through mutual comprehension and the subsequent unity, they decided to build a tower up to Heaven that might allow them to live closer to the Divine and admired by all. God punished them for their irreverence and corrupted ambition by scattering them all around the earth and, most importantly, by turning them into speakers of different languages, preventing any further coalition that might empower them against the Almighty ever again.

A. S. Byatt wrote in 1996 the novel *Babel Tower*, where she writes about the disengagement of humankind and language. She interweaves the actual plot with intertextual quotes and metalinguistic digressions, portraying the postmodern disarray. The writer analyzes the teaching of grammar and the impossibilities of educating on language. On the students' rejection of formal English instruction a character explains: “the grammar of which they are complaining is hopelessly out of date [...] it has nothing to do with modern thinking” (180). This “modern thinking” does without an approximation to actual truth, and whatever learning and discerning of their surrounding world is possible can only be reached in silence; that is why

literature strives for silence by accepting chance and improvisation; its principle becomes indeterminacy. By refusing order, order imposed or discovered, this kind of literature refuses purpose. Its forms are therefore non-telic; its world is the eternal present. We are invited to regain our original

innocence, for error and revision, now irrelevant, are forever vanished.

(Hassan-1987, 13-14)

If the writer dismisses grammar due to its prescriptive nature, this artist would be then closer to achieving a literary depiction of his or her surroundings. This does not amount to Dadaist writing, lacking an interest in structure, aesthetic appearance and revision, but rather a re-defined concept of what a portrayal of reality should be like. If it has already been established that in an environment of indeterminacy, accurate diagnosis should be put aside, and, thus, error should be embraced; then, the imposition of rules would be alien to any artistic form with any claim to even tangential truthfulness.

This questioning of norms in the postmodern<sup>39</sup> is further aggravated by the fact that the links with one's experience are lost among the noise pollution produced by mediatized reality, whose components shift constantly. In a world where media is ever-present, the individual is ensnared in a system made of real elements, linguistic reference to those elements, and, increasingly, the representation of reality in the media. Stig Hjavard has studied the mediatization of culture and explains in detail how the traditional distinctions between the object and its created image have dissolved (15). The audience in front of a broadcasted television program, for instance, is consuming a set of simulacra<sup>40</sup>, representing elements of reality that these

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<sup>39</sup> For further analysis of the postmodern context and its literary manifestations, see Ramón Espejo's "Coping with the Postmodern: Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*" (2014), where even the terminology is put into question. Espejo proposes the following: "realism and postmodernism should coexist, and neither is negligible as contributing to what readers expect or identify with [when confronting fiction labeled as either]" (150). Espejo employs the French term *mise-en-abyme* in relation to the postmodern, so as to illustrate the failure of "narrow definitions" (150), that is, of norms.

<sup>40</sup> The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) wrote extensively on the theorization of the postmodern. In 1981 he published the book *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he explained that we live in a "society of simulacra" because

people may have not physically encountered yet. Therefore, the input and output of images, symbols, references, etc. has augmented, and the differentiation between what is global and what is local has blurred.

The perception of time alters rapidly as the character is given no space to reconsider or ponder on personal experiences amidst the permanent surges of information within postmodernity, which block a proper and fluid train of thoughts. Characters, then, need silence as it becomes the tool to achieve a “nonverbal, nonanthropomorphic mode of communication, neither bound to nor fragmented by time (...) the perfect medium for the multiplicity of human responses authentic to place, time and clarity” (Kane, 179). That is, if continuity undergoes fragmentation due to the rapid alterations occurring in postmodernity, on the one hand, as it has been explained, a moment of muteness on the part of the character aids to soothe the sense of being overwhelmed by input, and, as well as that, by remaining quiet, the present may be held and a conclusive moment of perception may be achieved. Silence, also, may function as a universal, effective instrument for these purposes, while the linguistic medium proves limiting.

Among this persistent noise, dialogues risk to deal with superfluous topics that attempt to veil deeper emotions and more complex thoughts. The reason behind the

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people are learning to socialize not by mere observation of the outer world but by mimicking the role playing performed around them. His study is relevant for the postmodern aspects considered here because he paid particular attention to mass-production and mass media. Regarding the complexities of postmodern reality, where nothing is permanent, Baudrillard explains: “What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce, is to restore the real that escapes it” (23). The process of interpretation of the world, then, is found confusing and the constant reproductions offered by television, radio or print media do nothing but detach people even more from experiencing the immediate: “There is no longer a medium in the literal sense; it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real” (30). Like light through a prism, the media spread out reports of the real, distilled into fragmented truths that are continuously interferential and difficult to unify into a comprehensible whole.

success of such unauthentic communicative exchanges is that silence cannot only be perceived as the shelter from aural pollution and overstimulation but also as alienation. The emotions culturally tied to silence relate to abandonment, ostracism, disapproval and estrangement (Sorensen, 15). Mary Oliver, in her poem “Praying”, invites the reader to “just pay attention”, creating “a silence in which another voice may speak” (37); this other voice may articulate truth and meaning, and thus the option of white noise, of a meaningless conversation, seems less daunting.

The paradox lies in the fact that no actual messages are being transferred during these moments of white noise. Conversely, an instant of silence, and the consciousness brought about by it, will establish a complex network of conversations as the different elements in a setting become mutually aware of the presence of the alien entities around them; and through this bidirectional recognition they talk in silence. As an example, Galway Kinnell writes nostalgic lines in his poem “That Silent Evening”, where he recalls the silence that ultimately brought a climactic instant of union; a multiple bond: the joint between two individuals, their human ties to Nature, and the chain created by the embracing links of flora, fauna and weather conditions. He remembers how they “talked in silent voices”. The wordless conversations serve as ground for mutual understanding:

[...]

a black branch, puffed up

but without arms and so to our eyes lonesome,

and yet also –how can we know this? –happy!

in shape of chickadee [...]

So many things that happened here are little more,

if even that, than a scratch. Words in our mouth

are almost ready, already, to bandage the one  
whom the *scritch scritch scritch*, meaning *if how when*  
we might lose each other, scratches scratches scratches  
from this moment to that. Then I will go back  
to that silent evening, when the past just managed  
to overlap the future, if only by a trace,  
and the light doubles and shines

through the dark the sparkling that heavens the earth. (195-196)

Primarily, the poet acknowledges the paradox that within insignificant, little details in a wintery wood, majesty and truth may be encountered. In the overwhelming wave of postmodern noise, grandiloquent speeches cannot lead to a configuration of the self because the individual is already surrounded by flows of words. Contemplation of nature here is partial, and that is why the *I* of the poem asks “how can we know this?”. Comprehension is insecure and constantly interrupted by noises (“*scritch*”). Then, silence, which is not passive, comes to be the strategy for enlightenment.

Silence, as a result, should immediately strike the postmodern reader as a sign of relevant content because

[s]o much of the sound which surrounds us today is the product of our existential anxieties and represents our refusal to accept the consequences of our finitude and our isolation. This is the silence which lies behind language and which always threatens to break into our conversations in embarrassing ways. This is the silence which is most evident when the world is at its noisiest. This is the *silence* which emerges when the most important things are left unsaid. (Hollis, 15)

Using this concept of “pregnant pause” as a starting point, the characters delineated by writers such as Mason, who places them amidst a confusing combination of unpleasant sounds, would most certainly experience the frustration triggered by the unrequited verbal requirements of mutual understanding. This dissatisfaction will often occur when the participants, attempting unsuccessfully to cooperate with each other, discover that they are launching their messages in different languages; that is, most probably, one of them will be speaking through words, while the other employs “pregnant pauses”, silences, as carriers of meaning.

American poet Robert Frost introduces the reader into the broken communication of a couple who have lost their baby child, through his dramatic narrative “Home Burial”. In these lines the poet masters the art of rendering “words that convey the failure of words” (Fagan, 158). The husband urges the woman to express what she feels when looking at the baby’s grave in their yard: “‘you must tell me, dear.’ She, in her place, refused him any help, With the least stiffening of her neck and silence” (51). She is employing both secrecy and body language while he is communicating through words. She feels threatened by his articulated questions and accuses him of not knowing “how to speak” (53); he ignores how to convey information in her code, and, consequently, his resonant sentences push his wife further away from him and their home. In this manner, Frost demonstrates how in silence his characters are able to convey meaning more successfully than in dialogue; a skill also shared by the author researched in this project, Bobbie Ann Mason.



### 3. Silence in Bobbie Ann Mason's Short Fiction: Introductory Remarks.

“I'm a writer because I rather write than talk”- Bobbie Ann Mason<sup>41</sup>.

#### 3.1. Labeling Mason: A Stylistic Crucible.

Bobbie Ann Mason has been broadly labeled as minimalist, a categorization that I initially revised in the introduction to the dissertation so that it could fit accordingly the idiosyncrasies of her style. This conventionally so-called realistic trend in contemporary literature, as Eberhard Alsen describes, “is marked by a sparse, laconic style, [...] [concerned] with sociological themes, [and focused] [...] on representative rather than extraordinary characters [with a clear absence of] [...] the fantastic or supernatural” (13). Such laconic style, in diverse forms and with different functions, spreads throughout postmodern fiction. Postmodernist characters have been widely described as struggling with feelings of isolation, emotional and ideological paralysis, and a general disappointment in their surrounding world. All of these existential experiences involve a broken linguistic production. If characters cannot relate to peers or the environment, if they do not know how to behave or interact, their language is to be inevitably filled with silences, representing this sense of confusion, where a defense of discourse as the main instrument of relation with the world becomes untenable<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> These were Mason's words when reflecting on her devotion to literature in Texas's second oldest newspaper *The Victoria Advocate*, in 1989, interviewed by Hillel Italie (an Associated Press writer). She added: “[W]hen you write you take time to observe” (10). The effect her observant attitude and her use of silence have in her short stories will be analyzed in this dissertation.

<sup>42</sup> It is because of these concomitances that I have chosen to view minimalism as part of a general postmodern sensibility, in spite of its preference for a largely realistic

This above does not imply that knowledge is unattainable or that silence and nothingness are the only possibilities. Yet, minimalist writers are weary of metanarratives that hold out the promise of truth, and, as sound incarnation of postmodernity, they pose questions in their writing without being able, or willing, to proffer solutions. They hesitate often, and that requires a pause, a silence where their characters<sup>43</sup> reflect on their surroundings and themselves. In fact, Charles Newman, in his study of the postmodern writer, says: “It is ruminative willfulness precisely which is both the catalyst and catalepsy of the Postmodern temper” (54). These characters deliberately meditate on their lives; they will muse, however, both on the abstract as well as on the more mundane components of their everyday existence.

Alsen, quoted above, defines as well a new trend in postmodernism that he names “Romantic Postmodernism”<sup>44</sup>, but he does not include Mason within this group

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aesthetics. Postmodernism, is not understood here as the literary style emerging mainly in the 1970s in the works of writers like John Barth or Thomas Pynchon, but the general umbrella under which most contemporary literature would fall, from that which exhibits a realistic surface to the more self-conscious, experimental one.

<sup>43</sup> The synergies between minimalism and postmodernism are too complex to expose in detail, given the scope of this project. However, I would like to briefly comment on the topic. The postmodern ontological problem of not being able to express in words a totalizing picture of reality is addressed by both kinds of texts; however, the way these literary styles approach this concern may differ. Postmodernism focuses on a language that permits the development of abstract thinking with an ideational purpose; whilst minimalist ellipsism is more concerned with the aesthetic effect of the chosen words and, somehow, resists the self-consciousness and complex depth of postmodernism, keeping the topics and ways of rendering them closer to everyday life; minimalist writings remain on the surface of reality, and do not go further into the metaphysical reflections of postmodernism or its characteristically playful excursions into metafiction, intertextuality, citation, etc. For further comparison of these two trends, see Zoltán Abádi-Nagy’s “Minimalism vs. Postmodernism in Contemporary American Fiction”.

<sup>44</sup> Eberhard Alsen edited in 2000 a collection of essays analyzing works of American fiction that could be labeled as romantic postmodern literature. In the introduction to this book he gives a series of traits to identify such style; “The new romantics espouse an organic view of art and a belief in inspiration” (26). Most of the distinguishing qualities listed resonate with Bobbie Ann Mason, such as unusual characters and locations, and a mixture of the plausible and the fantastic. Metaphysical concerns and supernatural events are not shared by Mason’s fiction; however, it is true that her

of artists. Conversely, I would argue that, even though Mason fits within the minimalist frame, and hence within postmodernism, certain traits in her narrative style equally set her apart from the most simplistic definitions of both. I then agree with Alsen in his belief that it was necessary to complicate the concept of the postmodern with this intricate characterization. Incidentally, Mason, in sharing stylistic features with romanticism, could be included in this group.

In general, Mason's characters do communicate, using few words, and she mainly includes middle aged or elderly working class white southerners of Kentucky, living in rather small and isolated underdeveloped urban centers. The subjects described tend to fall within the ordinary and even the vulgar. Her grammar is never elaborately ornamented and her lexicon hardly leaves the category of conversational. All of the aforementioned are widely accepted traits of minimalist writing. Nevertheless, equally relevant characteristics of her style are, among others, the constant employment of similes and the symbolic depiction of utensils, natural elements and animals. Mason's writing then feels closer to romanticism (in the postmodern variant elicited by Alsen) as her isolated characters devote their energy to imaginative reveries that are used as getaways to express unarticulated emotions. Additionally, Bobbie Ann Mason is not scared of presenting freakish characters whose rationality is present in their ruminations but does not rule their actions and attractions. Their responses to situations are frequently not normative, their passions peculiar and their stimulations unexpected. This freedom in action and characterizations approximates these individuals to the romantics.

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characters do wonder about morality, emotional matters, social alienation and their purpose in life. Also, their fanciful constructs are an essential part of their identity. So, even though romantic idealism and postmodern skepticism appear in her style and characters' trains of thoughts, they do not necessarily manifest in Mason's linguistic style and figures of speech.

The fact that their reactions are, at times, unpredictable, and that they communicate in bursts of speech fitted within silences collocates as well with the postmodern context where the overwhelming human insignificance in comparison with the surrounding reality gags any communicational attempt –and, if attempted, language is shaped in unconventional ways. As a consequence, even though the words of Mason’s characters are simple, they present themselves in unorthodox discourse patterns. Their language is a symptom of a loss of hope for an absolute representation, which becomes apparent in a corrupted context. Corrupted inasmuch as it is linguistically manipulated through symbols that try to achieve extra-linguistic aims, such as commercial or media purposes. This postmodern factor inevitably entails noise pollution and overloading, and affects the characters’ silences and speeches of unusual occurrence. At the same time, in minimalism, an explanation for silence is as simple as “a need for peace and quiet [...] [so that the character] can think through a situation” (57) as Cynthia Whitney Hallett explains in her study of minimalist writers.

Going back to Mason’s relation to romanticism, it is worth mentioning that she partakes of the so-called southern grotesque<sup>45</sup>, previously embraced by writers

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<sup>45</sup> Flannery O’Connor is one of the writers labeled as “southern gothic” and she expressed her own opinion regarding this categorization in a lecture in Georgia in October 1960. Her talk was entitled “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”. O’Connor condemns the tendency of most northern critics of the time to classify any literature originated in the South as grotesque, regardless of the intention of the author. However, she groups a series of stylistic and thematic traits in southern writers that may approach the grotesque. The author explains that this literature attempts to go beyond the mere specifics of southern experience, portraying what cannot fully be explained and what is not always encountered in southern everyday life. Hence, these writers use realism but with distorted angles. Because they experience normalcy in the parameters of the unexpected, they may not consider their characters freakish, but the writers know their audiences will. To avoid readers’ alienation from their fiction, they make sure there is an inner coherence in the personalities they create. Nevertheless, this coherence may not be such within the social context of the story. O’Connor explains that the grotesque is part of the southern way of life because the burden of ghosts and shame marks characters and writers: “it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement

such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. The romantic appeal for the gothic is manifest in their inclusion of bizarre and mystical elements, often supernatural ones. In Bobbie Ann Mason's literature topics do not tend to transcend human understanding, but the symbol as a trope is a constant, and so are unusual and unexpected descriptions that deviate from normative and harmonic contexts.

Female characters and silence will be later analyzed, but in relation to the grotesque, women and southern literature specifically, I would like to emphasize here that, frequently, women writers have tended to seek empowerment in twisting conventions and embracing grotesque styles. For that reason, "[s]outhern women's writing is filled with bizarre semantic images that seem unnecessarily cruel or out of control, and yet this cruelty has a function: it tears at the social fabric and tries to leave it in shreds" (Yaeger, 293). Grotesque imagery has indeed empowered minority writers through distorted styles and objects of praise and admiration out of any convention.

Scholar Susan Castillo, a southerner herself, has studied in depth the literature of this region. Her article on Flannery O'Connor and the use of the grotesque is of relevance at this point of the analysis as it proves how many female writers of the South have defended the balance between pastoral and crude descriptions in their works. Professor Castillo refers to the southern grotesque as that deploying "the distorted, freakish and absurd elements which seem to be woven into the texture of everyday life" (Castillo, 173). In fact, in Mason, romantic metaphors and raw realism interlace in the context and life of her characters. The mundane is often heavily

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that he attains some depth in literature" (45). In this manner, the eccentric, anomalous and incongruous come to be an integral part of the literary voices of the South.

altered by imagination. The resulting effect complicates the accrual of any absolute label to Bobbie Ann Mason's literature.

The late short story writer Raymond Carver, who was also labeled a minimalist, shares yet another stylistic nomenclature with Bobbie Ann Mason, dirty realism, predicated upon a "discourse on the ugliness of modern life, [and] poetry on the beauty of the human grotesque" (Hemmingson, 46). Dirty realism inhabits as well the postmodern umbrella and proves the complex idiosyncrasy of this denomination even further. In his tale "I Could See the Smallest Things", the female narrator wakes up in the middle of the night, and in the light of the moon realizes that every small detail of her surroundings is revealed to her. She is able to perceive every feature under that brightness. She sees her next-door neighbor and leaves the house to talk to him. He is killing worms in his garden. He points at them with his flashlight. The reader's gaze is forced to stare at worms on the dirty soil as they die. The image may arise revulsion, but Carver creates beauty by balancing the ugly with the deep vital considerations of the female first person narrator also present in the scene. She closes the story with the following lines: "I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and then I didn't have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep" (207). The writer swings the audience from laconic dialogues, which deal intermittingly with the mundane and the transcendental, to silent contemplation, which may focus indistinctly on an open garden gate, worms, the few hours left to rest during the night, or, conversely, the relativity of human existence and corresponding sense of vacuity. Both in banal descriptions as well as in sophisticated reflections the raw aspect of life is included, just as in the southern grotesque mentioned above.

Attuned to the demands of the so-called K-mart realism<sup>46</sup>, which equally shows the harshness of life in parallel structures with beauty, Mason as writer of a literary movement and a southern generation secures the presence of silence by introducing noise as an equally key element, accepting the polyphony to which her characters are subjected, within which silence is a polysemic signifier. As a matter of fact, a “genuine emptiness, a pure silence, is not feasible –either conceptually or in fact. If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence” (Sontag, 11). Sontag’s reflection on the impossibility of total silence is captured in Mason’s stories, where, even though silence is a means to comprehend reality, characters do speak, even if they are, generally, of terse speech. And the narrators, first or third person, regularly describe the noises and voices interfering with the quiet mouths of the characters. Sounds are a constant, within the characters and outside of them. They may not speak, but the air vibrates permanently around them because of notes of dins or whispers. Loud or gentle noises are produced around them, and, besides, even when not talking, the minds of the characters are active, and thoughts process in linguistic form; hence, if the narrator wants to provide an insight into the characters’ minds, they will put words to their fancies.

As a whole, the relevance of silence in literary trends such as postmodernism and minimalism, romanticism and the southern grotesque makes it ultimately irrelevant to establish Mason’s filiation; whether we find it more convincing to see her under one or another of these labels (or several), the powerful presence of silence

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<sup>46</sup> Another label used for Dirty Realism that makes reference to the characters usually shopping in these stores and their low economic and cultural background.

in them all renders it one of the most unmistakable and persistent, as well as inevitable, traits of the writer.

### 3.2. Finding Depth of Meaning in Mason's Silences.

The writers so far considered are concerned with a distorted reality where, furthermore, referential language does not suffice due to the impossibility of absolute interpretation. As Samuel Beckett, another author who has been labeled both postmodernist and minimalist at the same time<sup>47</sup>, claims, the discernment of this world becomes just unachievable unless through the acceptance of speechlessness and uncertainty:

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<sup>47</sup> Critics have amply debated whether Beckett can be labeled a minimalist. The playwright is not the object of my study; hence, I refer the reader to McColl's "Beckett, Minimalism, and the Question of Postmodernism" (2012) and Bell's "Between Ethics and Aesthetics: The Residual in Samuel Beckett's Minimalism" (2011). To me, however, Beckett's minimalist style can be gleaned from his tendency to sparsity in language, his interest in silence and the unsayable, and his reflections on the void and nothingness. Regarding the latter, Ciaran Ross comments on Beckett's emphasis on "solitude, detachment, dispossession and the negation of the self as indispensable to concentration and contemplation" (59). As with Mason, a laconic style, with moments when speech ceases, hints at a reality that cannot be put into words. Even Enoch Brater, who questions Beckett's minimalism, cannot fully neglect the evidences for the importance of the absent, the opposite of flowing words and elaborate speeches, and the vacant narrative spaces that procure Beckett's writing with moments of supreme creativity; that is, emptiness as source of literary fecundity. In fact, Brater states that Beckett's characters are reluctant to deploy words (116) and, again, this absence of loaded sentences, "overbearing decorations", so to say, as with minimalist visual art, is one of the main traits of his style. McColl in a previous article, entitled "Toward an Ethics of Silence: Michael K" (2007), claims that silence tends to draw attention to the deepest meanings of discourse; he says it is a "speech act of passivity" (308) with the illocutionary force of reconsidering the cultural, as well as personal, presuppositions carried in words. This explains why Beckett may be considered a minimalist writer even though his works can be obscure and complex. Barthelme explained, in his defense of this style of silence and reduction, that these empty spaces of minimalism allow the reader to "hear the whispers, catch the feints and shadows, gather the traces, sense the pressures, and all that meanwhile the prose tricks them into the drama, and the drama breaks their hearts" (27). That is, by allowing the readers emptiness within fiction, their creative and perceptive skills will be enhanced and the writer will achieve a more intricate narrative.



[H]ow many hours still until the next silence? Ah to know for sure, to know this thing has no end, this thing, this thing, this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence and barely murmured words. Or to know it's life still, a form of life, ordained to end, as others ended and will end, till life ends in all its forms. Words, mine was never more than that, than this pell-mell babel of silence and words. (1026)

Beckett perceives authenticity as a confused mixture of blatant, verbalized language, absolute lull and barely perceptible whispered articulations. All of them combine in a disorderly fashion, without taking into account the consequent bafflement upon men; that is, when facing this untidy and confusing pile of noises, produced by a multitude of voices, together with alternate silenced throats, men are bewildered and their capacity to produce sounds duly restrained.

Mason's stories are effective in making silences a ritual towards the questioning of the self, masqueraded as apparent passivity in the characters, parataxis in the wording, or a downshifting of the narrative pace by the introduction of a parenthetical reflection activated by a particular. The contemplation performed will establish a train of thought that will depart from this individual triggering item. The direction taken will lead the reader, not towards a lesson, but towards the realm of abstraction, dealing with ideas that eventually will allow the reader to glimpse details of his or her experience projected on the page or activated by it. Additionally, Mason displays an acute skepticism of systematic thought and avoids excessive abstraction. Experience and objective renderings are of course relevant in Bobbie Ann Mason's stories, but the author also allows fantasy to enter her lines, to free herself from representational qualities, considering the object independently from established

associations. Simultaneously, the reader will be engaged in the same experience of liberation.

As an illustration, Mason attributes characteristics to everyday items that escape their canonical definition. Starting from the simple and altering it, the postmodern meditation is elicited; but, again, to prompt this peculiar reverie, the character must experience speechlessness as the mind tends to deceive itself more easily when surrounded by a constant verbal flow, by persistent conversations that require its attention and articulated participation. As a matter of fact,

[t]he highest, purest reach of the contemplative act is that which has learned to leave language behind [...] by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding. Where such understanding is attained, the truth need no longer suffer the impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails.

(Steiner, 12)

Therefore, the outward simplicity of these texts and their subject matter should not be disregarded as resulting from their lacking depth. It is precisely the absence of adornment that brings characters and readers closer to innocence and truth. The concept of creative “honesty” regarding style and language was very important for imagist writers. The main figure within this literary movement was Ezra Pound (1885-1972), who believed in the intense effect of reverberating images constructed upon direct language, rather than impressing the reader with elaborate tropes, filled with superfluous words. With this intention, Ezra Pound wails the following in his poem “Night Litany”:

[...]

God of silence,  
Purifiez nos cœurs,  
Purifiez nos cœurs,  
For we have seen  
The glory of the shadow of the  
likeness of thine handmaid,  
  
Yea, the glory of the shadow  
of thy Beauty hath walked  
Upon the shadow of the waters  
In this thy Venice.

[...] (60)

The poet in these lines rambles on one of the Italian cities that inspired many of his creations. The materialization of the Platonic concept of ideal Beauty in the architecture of Venice entails the purification of his heart as a synecdoche of his identity. In order to remove the “contamination” provoked by prolonged exposure to redundant verbal production, presenting a lack of self-restraint, Pound cries for help from the Divinity of silence. In this manner, he expresses his belief in the power gained through an approach to muteness. These lines do not deal with events but are a fanciful recreation of one’s observations and the ideas set in motion by spying the material, in this case, the Italian bridges and canals.

Critic John Auchard analyzes silence in the works of American writer Henry James (1843-1916). The way in which he portrays the slow tempo of the perception of phenomena might be misinterpreted as stories lacking in events. But the nuances of the plot of James’s stories are found in the underlying ideas. He explained in his non-

fiction publication *Notebooks* (1947), published posthumously, that his writing may reach brightness if he manages to capture such overflow of observations, reflections and fancy (232) in “tremendously succinct” form, “with a very short pulse or rhythm –and the closest selection of details” (104). Bearing this in mind, Auchard suggests: “If James is read with something of the noetic [analysis] [...], the modalities of silence [are transformed] into the vibrant, the rich, the thunderous” (15). Perception, utilizing the senses to read or decode the text, becomes an enhancing technique in that literature which considers silence an essential component of reality. The conclusion that should have become obvious at this point is that the inarticulation exemplified by these writers would never be a passive state, regardless of the absence of incidents.

Conversely, the creativity of these contemporary writers is not verbally mutilated or, even, repressed due to the prominence of silence because this quiet space will give them respite from the constant noise enforced by mass media, the mainstream, and the powers-that-be in postmodern societies. David Foster Wallace said that “America [had] [...] some vested economic interest in keeping people overstimulated and unused to silence and single-point concentration” (Wallace, 295). Taking this into consideration, numbness will not be caused by silence but rather by a forced exposure to a high intensity of noise. Thus, in order to enhance thoughtfulness in this loud postmodern context, writers, characters and readers may take advantage of silence. Writers find in silence a productive stylistic tool. Readers develop deeper reading skills, interpreting the metaphors and multiple layers of meaning contained in moments of silence in these narratives. And, finally, characters, specifically in the texts of Bobbie Ann Mason, can use silence as resistance to comply with the postmodern speech requirements and constant interferences of mass media and popular culture.

Paradoxically, even though postmodernity is associated with overwhelming soundscapes, silence is, all the same, an unavoidable outcome, as Max Picard beautifully puts it: “Still like some old forgotten animal from the beginning of time, silence towers above all the puny world of noise; but as a living animal not an extinct species, it lies in wait and we can still see its broad back sinking ever deeper among the briars and bushes of the world of noise” (Maitland, 284). So, even if silence is still a minority presence in the sonic overpopulation of this world, its resilience is great, and, as an element of human interaction with the surrounding context, it is patient and yet powerful. It can be sensed; its presence cannot be ignored. Silence, in Picard’s metaphor, represents the purity and strength of the animal, and noise is an inferior and harmful, thorny entity.

The aforementioned paradox of the ever-present silence in a postmodern world of noise is clearly articulated in the following argument: “To a perceptive human being the universe is never silent –but there exists a universe of silence, and only perceptive human beings are aware of it” (Ettin, 6). This self-contradictory statement resonates with Mason’s literature because it will be by remaining quiet that her characters will be capable of discerning the richness of sounds occupying silence. If they function within the parameters of constant sonic and verbal production required by their environment, they will not discover the “depth of meaning” of this “universe of silence”, which in order to be accessed calls for perceptive attitudes.

Hungarian-American anthropologist Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) defined the “philosophy of tacit knowledge”, which is “the phenomenon of knowing without being able to articulate what we know” (Clair, 6). In the case of Mason’s characters, this “tacit knowledge” applies consistently because they often are unable to put into words the emotions felt and experiences undergone. However, in Mason’s short

stories, this does not happen because her characters do not have mastery of language and a rhetoric sensibility. If they remain quiet when feelings emerge, it is because certain thoughts and emotions have an inherent complexity that resists the control of language. But, again, this silence will lead to deeper understanding of the stories because the artistry of the writer will find alternative routes to transmit to her readers the unarticulated messages of her characters. That is why inner textures and weavings must be taken into consideration within Mason's silent spaces of wisdom that can be interpreted embracing the aforementioned attitude of "postmodern meditation". In correspondence with this stylistic assumption, Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Maxine Kumin (1925-2014), in her book of essays *The Roots of Things* (2010), reflects on country living, alluringly appreciating the most minute aspects of Nature and the home, entering a deeper comprehension through silent perception of the sonic communion of the wild and the domestic:

[L]eaves rain down with a muffled sideslipping sound. Dust motes spin in sunlight like flour sifting in puffs onto the beginnings of batter. For the horses this season is heavenly. We haven't had a killing frost yet. All of our fields are open to them, and they wander like sleepwalkers from one area to another, grazing intermittently, sometimes standing for long thoughtful moments silhouetted against the backdrop of forest or granite outcropping. (159)

This fragment contains no speech; the character is not engaged in dialogue; and yet, the information received by the reader creates a vivid mental image of the surrounding. This is due to the attentiveness of the narrator, which extrapolates the role of protagonist to the tiny components of the farm landscape. These elements of the landscape are all granted agency, but their activities do not perturb the "thoughtful" state of the surroundings. Leaves, dust and animal behavior are

integrated in the narrator's knowledge thanks to her silent admiration. And, in this manner, a more nuanced version of the world is perceived.

These areas liberated from speech will construct a text out of the nonverbal so that this period of oral restriction actually turns into one of mental and emotional fertility, sampled above by the list of action verbs employed by Kumin. Obviously, this nonverbal landscape, for the reader, is in fact portrayed through the written word, but the audience has to learn to decode the silent fragments. In this manner, he or she is transformed from a mere consumer of literature to a prosumer of the text, a decoding entity that is also contributing to the process of the text coming alive. Hence, Mason challenges the traditional association of silence to literary obscurity because the clarity of her images, the intense symbols and the general semantic coherence of the stories guarantee silent passages that, with the committed interpretative action of readers, convey both the qualities of the story's content and form.

The richer textures mentioned before that are granted by silence in these stories are represented by the characters' thoughts, feelings, fears, memories or fanciful projections of potential events, and these will be knotted together to create a strong textual canvas during the interior explorations. Silence here is "an incubation period, a period of contemplation leading to productivity, it is an enabling ally in the development of voice" (Chelle, 24); that is, that "postmodern meditation" again, where gradually awareness is sharpened, "incubated". The alliance of voices in Mason's stories is formed by the character's, the narrator's and the author's ones, with the contributions of the top-down interpretative activity of the reader.

Reading the code of lull has been shown to involve a complex task of intellectual interpretation. Henry David Thoreau declared: "Silence is of various depth

and fertility, like soil” (472). In order to “hear the unspeakable”, as he mentions in the same passage, the reader and the characters would have to adapt their senses and noetic discerning to the diverse kinds of silence that may, potentially, be encountered. In the case study of this project, the short fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason, the different nature, causes and effects of silence will be analyzed in due time.

For now, it is useful to take into account that Bobbie Ann Mason wrote her doctoral dissertation on Nabokov’s *Ada*, and in her study we read: “Nabokov’s interpretation of the Garden of Eden story emphasizes [...] the results of human solipsism –the loss of nature, the alienation from our world, the despairing from imprisonment in our minds [discovering the way out] [...] through the imagination of the artist” (Mason, 156). Later in this chapter, silence will be defined as remedy for postmodern isolation, but, for now, I am interested in Mason’s awareness of the relevance of writers’ artistry to avoid an ontological isolation; that is, the writer will employ fanciful constructs to lead characters and readers towards a network of connections that may cement their existence on a vivid and acute perception of the world. In the case of Mason’s own fiction, deeper knowledge is found in the beauty of layers of meaning found in tropes of silence. Consequently, it will only be through an acknowledgement of silence as a vital component of their world that characters will acquire actual linguistic proficiency, and, hence, strategies of interaction with their world. Rainer Maria Rilke has put it thus:

Being-silent. Who keeps innerly  
silent, touches the roots of speech.  
Once for him becomes then each  
growing syllable victory:  
over what in silence keeps not silent,



over the insulting evil;  
to dissolve itself to nil,  
was the word to him made evident.

(71)

### 3.3. Silence, Women and the South.

The interpretative complexity derived from the variety of silences is intensified by the impotence felt by the characters, as well as by the readers, when they fail to comprehend the surrounding reality (fictional or outside the book). This intricacy is greater in female characters, which are a majority in Mason's stories, bearing in mind that women have an ambivalent rapport with silence. Silence for female characters is frequently the result of an imposition. A physical, emotional or dialectical power mutes the female voice. Here, obviously, there is no positive connotation attached to silence. However, Maureen Mahoney states, in a study of the feminist problematization of silence, from the perspective of women's advocacy for equity: "Creative disruption of given identities suggested by the postmodern agenda requires the transformation of contradiction from a shameful experience to an empowering one. This process, in turn, requires silence as an important psychological space of resistance and negotiation" (Mahoney, 605). The process, it should not be forgotten, originates in a context where a woman is not being granted the right to vocalize her identity. Hence, the female character reconquers silence, employs the quiet space to reconsider her existence, and makes use of the right to refuse to conform to speech as the single device to establish social connection as well as to gain insight into herself. By being silent, the identity of the characters becomes louder.

All in all, silence as a sign of repression has been amply dealt with from feminist perspectives. However, this project will study silence independently from its gender causation or constraints. Nevertheless, it should be interesting to briefly consider that in relation to the relevance of silence in the history of women, the object of my study

is a *topos* in women's writing. It is a motive for writing and for rewriting. A central theme of feminist criticism, it is also a key issue for cultural memory. Because remembrance is predicated upon communication, silence and forgetting are linked: silencing is a tool of forgetting, and amnesia, Rich writes, "is the silence of the unconscious" [...] Women's rewriting, on the contrary, aims to remember: by voicing the silent and the silenced, it seeks to propel them into the space of representation that is also the space of remembrance. Seeking to "know the past" differently, women's rewriting "writes back" to silence in an effort to generate usable pasts. (Plate, 97-98)

And it even becomes more relevant in southern literature where "[t]he woman 'will not speak' of the hard times she has endured because [...] the dust of labor and fear constitutes her own voice; so the poet speaks for her, gives testimony to her endurance in the verses of [...] [his] poem" (Taylor, 180). However, the reader will not hear male voices lamenting their harsh realities either, as the southern female agrarian has also been displaced in history from the pedestal of visibility, and, thus, has been forced to coexist with silence for a wide variety of reasons, as discussed in chapter 1.

Having acknowledged the strong connection between womanhood and silence, I consider, however, that Mason's portrayal of female characters does not constitute a feminist expostulation against tyrannical male characters, who mute the female voices

by force. Silence may apply to both genders in Mason's stories; broadly, she draws characters that reconfigure traditional gender roles. Consequently, even though a reflection on femininity is part of this writer's concerns, silence does not seem to be deployed differently or more insistently in her female characters. I concur, conversely, with Harriet Pollack's analysis of Mason's problematization of postmodern female identity as she explains that Mason's women are "on the verge of being able to say what will make them happy. What they want is not what they thought. The old certainties and sexual roles they were led to believe they wanted have vanished, and the alternative that will satisfy is not easy to name" (97). Rather than being oppressed by men, these women are beset with a changing environment, where they need to recycle nomenclatures for the elements that constitute their identities in order to fit a new linguistic and representational plexus. Hence, ultimately, the South as repressing entity prevails over gender in the explanation for the constant presence of silence in Mason's stories.

Like most postmodern writers, Mason composes from the modesty of accepting the limitations of art when it comes to discerning absolute truths or permanent representations of societies and individuals. In the postsouthern reality, this awareness of the limits of representation is essential. For this reason, in the reality she frames in her stories and the characters within it, she includes between the lines the silences resulting from the interpretative and ontological reproduction of the postsouthern reality, where there is always insecurity, possibility, choices and open questions. Nevertheless, and regardless of the complexities of the postmodern landscape and lives to be portrayed, in order to prevent a resulting literary creation which cannot be understood, the following should be contemplated: "Everyone interprets in accordance with his own 'horizon of expectations', therefore, it is

necessary that silence be presented as an event, with a horizon; otherwise the necessary linking will not occur, and no interpretation can take place” (Block de Behar, 7). To be sure, Mason does not write in obscure terms. She writes about the South she knows, including its complexities, but employing direct language that helps the reader navigate her images of silence, meeting, thus, certain expectations in the process of reader’s response. Mason uses silence within this “horizon”, which, in fiction, involves the reader’s awareness of certain social norms and historical context to which the text refers (Jauss, 23). Thus, he or she will start the reading process with certain expectations. In this process the reader establishes three connections: text to the self (where the text reminds him or her of previous vital experiences), text to the world (establishing associations with phenomena previously perceived) and text to the text (referring to the basic notion of intertextuality and former reading episodes) (Furr, Online source). Consequently, if the reader has previously encountered texts that play with silence, is aware of the presence of silences in social interaction and its implications, and is capable of introspection, the process of interpreting Mason’s southern characters will be attainable.

When reading Bobbie Ann Mason, in particular, the connections and expectations will be related to the following context:

[Mason’s characters] are inhibited in their relationships and they don’t want to call on verbal ways of communicating [...] Their reticence is deep-rooted and it goes back to generations and grows out of their class and their culture. They often don’t know what to say, but that doesn’t mean they don’t know words [...] Manners are embarrassing. Verbal communication is very sophisticated and often empty. (Lyons & Oliver, 116)

Mason’s background is one that has embraced the southern agrarian resignation and

stoicism caused by a life dependent on the land and the weather. People were oppressed by the authority of the land. As well as that, the toil demanded by everyday life in the farm left the members of the family with no remaining energy to be invested in conversation; and, outside this circle, they were isolated from the community, which implies that silence was both geographically imposed as well as part of their dialectic routines and attitudes towards the environment.

To decode these silences, the reader will be aided by the ability of the writer to “call attention to these omissions, limitations, or outward pointings” (Stout, 2) as useful aid to read southern silences. Thus, the reader will come to understand that, at times, the character uses “the silence that has been imposed [...] as a tool” to undermine the power of the muting repressions experienced (Stout, 18). A repression that in the case of Mason can be related either to the limited opportunities of these postsouthern rural or small urban environments, or to the literal spatial isolation of the settings where the characters live. In the case of Mason, and in order to turn silence into a space of agency and choice, both male and female characters will adopt the southern manner of “invisibility” that Noel Polk defines as the regional need of not calling attention to themselves (iii). After embracing what Polk calls “self-effacement” (iii), they will retreat to observe the surrounding environment without being observed.

Patricia Oudek Laurence in her study of Virginia Woolf, explains that the English writer “structure[d] many solitary scenes to create a narrative space for the exploration of psychological silences or interiority, and, consequently, the development of this discourse of silence [...] The solitary scenes capture the solitary activity or meditation of a character [...] silently watching the behaviour of others” (Laurence, 44). This is the same position that allows Mason to break through

language in order to create a richer depiction of her inspirational world: the South of laconic characters.

However, even though they have this tendency to terse speech, total silence would not be convenient for Mason's characters, regardless of its positive effects on awareness and knowledge, because they need the combination of verbal interaction, sensuous perception and quiet contemplation to achieve a better sense of stability and certainty in their relation with their socio-cultural context. For this reason, the last chapter of my dissertation will discuss dialogues, framed within the meaningfulness and prevalence of silence. Additionally, the importance of the sensuous recognition of the world through silent contemplation to complement those verbal interactions is explained when identifying Mason's fixation with minute descriptions of the southern landscape. This is because, for her characters, a simple linguistic investigation of their world would "lead to a debilitation of meaning-making capabilities" (Kalamaras, 2), and, so, analyzing the physical world in silent attention will be of great importance for the characters' development.

I have hence concluded that the writer will generate a greater ability of understanding in her characters through the balanced combination of natural silences, oppressive gagging, speeches, and audible interferences of the surrounding, which can all affect the plot and the metaphorical interpretation of the text. Raymond Carver, an author who has been discussed before as he shares stylistic labeling and features with Bobbie Ann Mason,

gives precedence to the silent over the spoken and inevitably lays stress on the seen rather than the heard. And yet it is the play between these two worlds which makes them part (...) [of a portrait where] (...) while nothing can be said, everything might be glimpsed. (Clarke, 120)

The “seen”, that is, the geographical, historical and cultural context chosen as a setting for Mason’s stories influences the author, and infuses the characters with local knowledge and assumptions. Additionally, we have already established that sound and silence are components of a landscape. If both landscape and soundscape affect the perceptive skills of the characters in their interaction with the world, they have to be equally perceptible for the reader as well.

Bobbie Ann Mason’s memories shape her fiction in the same way her kinfolks and background have shaped her attitudes towards life and, by extension, her characters’. One of the main personalities in her memoirs is her grandmother, the mother of her father, the one to establish the manners of the Masons in their farm. This woman influenced everyone and everything in the household. Mason has drawn traits for her stories from her “granny”, from idiomatic expressions and accents, to behaviors around the household and approach to creativity. This is how Mason defines her grandmother in her memoirs *Clear Springs*: “She didn’t reveal or explain. Plain facts sufficed. She reserved her imagination and her sense of the world’s complexity for her creations [such as quilts]” (51). This is how Mason behaves as a writer and this is how her characters behave in their fictional world of western Kentucky; to survive everyday they do not need to unveil their secrets, they just need to be precise and concise. Most of Mason’s paragraphs are plain descriptions to give the stories shape, scents, colors, and sounds; to make them authentic. However, when these people approach their creative tasks, which they all have, from knitting to cooking, farming or painting and playing music, they do not fear yielding to their fancy, playing with random mental associations, both grotesque and beautiful. Bobbie Ann Mason balances imaginative passages with realistic sections to give the stories

and novels the authenticity of the South she knows, which lives on “plain facts” and artistry in equal degrees.

#### 3.4. Silence Solves Isolation in Mason’s Fiction.

Mason may depict an experience in a moment of solitude coinciding with introspection in a muted scene. However, it should be remembered that verb and lull are always coexisting in her case, and as a consequence, her silences are not blank pages; that is, they are not graphic vacuity but absence of audible articulation in the fictional present. In order to better understand this principle of literary silence, it is helpful to visualize the page of a book by Bobbie Ann Mason; she does not represent silence in the scene described by leaving large bare spaces between paragraphs and lines. The consequence is that while the characters remain quiet, Mason describes the location to the smallest feature, the demeanor of the characters and everything that could activate the senses –from smells to hues in light.

The reason for this is the characters’ fine attunement to their world, which saves them from the postmodern isolation. For instance, sound is rarely left out. Mason creates alluring passages by concentrating on evocative renditions of the noises, of any nature, that creep into the scene, coexisting with the verbal silence of the characters. Besides, the fact that the construction of the imagery centers on sounds seems coherent in a moment when the main character is not talking, singing or producing any other communicative notes. If we are quiet, we will be able to perceive more acutely the noises around us and initiate certain states of communion.

Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky (1893- 1984), Russian and Soviet literary theorist, wrote an essay entitled *Literature and Cinematography* (1923), where he



pondered on poetic form and content, and its representation of human perceptive skills. He lamented our obtuse sensitivity to the world around us, because in the never-ending humming of routinely repeated noises, people have taken for granted the impact they have on us, and their beauty. And for this same reason, he says that those of us “who live by the sea do not hear the waves [...] [and similarly] we do not ever hear the words we speak” (11). Mason creates words in response to phenomena; that is, her literature is reactive to her interaction with the world –comparably, her characters are still able to “hear the waves”, the words, thanks to their temporal silences. Sounds are an essential part of her sensuous research for creative sources. Consequently, neither she nor her characters fail to appreciate the combination of silence and noise in their interaction with the surroundings. In her novel *An Atomic Romance* (2005), Reed, the protagonist, is once and again drawn to the wilderness, in order to experience privacy, and reflection while camping:

Reed built a small fire, opened the still-warm lasagna, and ate, alone with the shrill, erratic sounds of the night. A line of a song from a distant radio was audible for a moment and then it faded. He studied a patch of sky above. [...] He heard coyotes. The sound of the yelps of a large pack of coyotes carried high. Some military planes flew overhead –heavy transports, growling loud with their load. (213)

The readers of this section of the novel read the silence maintained by Reed, and, at the same time, they read the sounds of nature and of man; wild and artificial noises. While Reed listens in silence, there is not an absence of sound in the scene. This fragment is followed by a memory brought back by the sounds of coyotes. Reed recalls all the dogs he has buried in his life, and he lists the names. He is not articulating out loud, but, because the narrator writes down the thoughts of the

character, Reed is, in fact, talking in silence. Bobbie Ann Mason is able to make the reader listen to the silence of a quiet person, to outer noises, to bodily sounds, to the words that form people's thoughts, all at the same time. Therefore, Reed embodies the difference between the solitude searched by Mason's characters, and the postmodern isolation. Mason also portrays loneliness as part of the postsouthern reality, but she is in general benevolent with her characters, as she grants silence as a source of comfort.

Reed, as a postsouthern character, is quiet, but in this silence there is reception and production of silent language (Labastida-2008, 54). In comprehending fiction, the individual, in sync with the character, will mentally interpret both the space of silence and the space of voice and sound as meaningful. And even though the reader in this multifaceted reading process, as well as the character in the fictional reality, might then be "seized by *amazement* bordering [...] terror [it would still be an] aestheticized fear, a way of tickling the imagination, for the spectator [knows] he [is] safe" (Papanikolas, 154). In the postmodern world, consequently, the complex process of interpreting spaces emptied of the formalities and stability of language, however unnerving, provides a way to escape a status of urban solitude, where no understanding could be achieved. The aesthetic recognition of the intricacies of postmodern soundscapes leads to a relief found in the possibility of communication in silence as an alternative to language. Hence, in quietness, Mason's characters feel safe, even if they experience amazement; this is because the latter will have a cathartic effect. In the provision of silence as an interacting device, Mason creates scenes where the characters are liberated from linguistic demands, and hence, feel more independent, and, simultaneously, they sense a connection with their quiet interlocutors and their environment as they enhance their sensitivity and empathy in contemplation.

However, popular culture publicizes an opposite connotation of silence, because “[w]e live in a loud and verbose society. Silence is banished from public spaces, [...] as if stopping to communicate would necessarily mean ceasing to exist” (Courtine, 128). Consequently, people, like Mason’s characters and readers, need to master the skill of existing side-by-side with silence, challenging the negative image of silence understood as seclusion. This learning can be acquired through literature, and this act demands the reader to listen and remain lulled; then, evasion from postmodern claustrophobia would be found in silence. As an illustration, minimalist writer Mary Robinson finishes her novel *Subtraction* with the following reflection on the narration, occurring with the protagonist in silent contemplation of her husband: “I studied him. [...] I thought: generic man, perfect man. I thought how even when Raf was dead-still, he had an intensity out of which someone could interpret a world” (216). It is in the ordinary, the imperfect, the individual, and motionless, and, more importantly, the silent that actual interconnection and grasping of the surroundings might be achieved. This can be interpreted as the purpose and effect of Bobbie Ann Mason’s fiction.

Being a postsouthern writer entails an idiosyncratic stylization. In the case of Bobbie Ann Mason, the core of her multiple literary influences materializes in the creation of plain spoken characters, who are consumers of popular culture and attached to the local landscape; they are pragmatic and resilient while able to playfully submerge in fanciful constructs and to interpret the world through metaphors. These intricate personalities mirror the evolving and disconcerting postsouthern reality, which Mason portrays as bright, fast-paced, loud and incongruous. However, Mason infuses hope in her stories, providing a haven from chaos in the mental fertility of her laconic characters. This shelter is particularly

necessary for Mason's female characters, who add to the postmodern relativity of sense-making their own struggle with social and cultural visibility. Silence binds together Mason's diverse poetic strategies and provides coherence. The space where silence empowers characters and Mason's lyricism is the surrounding landscape. The stimuli found in sensuous perception will free characters from isolation and repression, charging the stories with an ultimate conviction of the possibility of happiness and liberty.

#### 4. The Materiality of Silence in Bobbie Ann Mason's Stories.

As has been shown, Mason uses silence to achieve rhythm and pace, and to construct the musicality that makes the text come alive in a balanced structure of descriptive passages and dialogues. Her stories need the coexistence of both. In her latest novel *The Girl in the Blue Beret* (2011), the writer researched the background for her plot thoroughly. In the talk she delivered in the Polish city of Szczecin in September 2014, Mason narrated several moments of the interview she held with Michele, the real woman on which the girl in the blue beret was based. This woman was taken as a young girl, with her mother, to a labor camp in Chojna during WWII. Mason showed Michele a recent picture of the old camp. The writer described the picture as grass and wild little flowers emerging from the cracks on the floor. Michele quietly looked at the photograph for a while to merely add firmly: "I built that".

Later on, during her account, Mason explained how the French woman, who had helped American soldiers cross the Spanish border to safety as a member of the resistance, shared her precious scrapbooks of memories of the War. As she was turning the pages, a picture fell off from the book. It was the portrait of a French soldier. A handsome man. Mason had been in search of inspiration for the character of a French soldier, as she thought this was an elemental piece for the novel. As soon as she saw the picture and Michele told her about it, Mason knew she had found her French male character. These details of the creative process behind the book portray, in essence, Mason's approach to reality. She needs objects, small pieces of the world around her that may trigger her imagination. Sentences do not need to explicitly tackle emotions because the combination of a dry and laconic use of the spoken word and framing descriptive sentences will indirectly and symbolically provide the reader

with the required insight into the characters' inner worlds.

In a study of Katherine Anne Porter's stories, Rachel Lister explains how Porter's strong images work as a silent method "of silent reader-orientation" (132). Obviously, this requires readers willing to contribute with their creative responses and sympathetic reading to the complexity found beneath the simple language of Bobbie Ann Mason's minimalistic style in language. The descriptions in Mason's stories are accurate and, simultaneously, charged with emotion; as a consequence, she seems to follow Chekhov's advice on writing: he considered it essential "to seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that, in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture" (Lamb. 34). Mason has described her language as deriving from farm life, "very practical and non decorative" (Gholson, Online source). And a language that is born from a life supported by nature and dependent on whimsical weather would organically evolve to be descriptive and sharp in providing detail. A farmer spends hours observing small alterations in the soil or in the sky, in leaves or kernels, and a simple change in hue can bring about strong emotions as their lives depend on the success of their crops. This is the language that Bobbie Ann Mason is using; she respects the "little particulars" and portrays them with an intensity that is elsewhere saved for literary passages that capture life-changing events. The delicate metaphors employed for the descriptions of these observations influence the reader emotionally, regardless of their insignificance in plot development. The main tool to achieve this impressive effect is the oscillation between silence (creating tension and expectation in the reader in such a way that their sensitivity is increased) and the actual image that will remain with the reader along the story.

Her pragmatic and unromantic perception of what cannot be explained with words, such as love or the origin of life, can be compared to Bobbie Ann Mason's

portrayal of the South, where she uses her writing to give an objective context for her characters and believable reactions without showing this realism necessarily through dialogue or pompous expressions; her characters learn to be quiet to understand their world, waiting patiently for a moment where “they can orbit face to face”, as the narrator of *In Country* puts it (229), that is, when they organically can talk because they find each other in a mutual place of understanding. Until that moment comes, Mason presents her characters studying their world, which never ceases to surprise, distract, entertain and mesmerize them. The reader will perceive the emotions by interpreting the symbol of two celestial objects meeting along their spatial path. The objectification of feelings will have a more enduring impact on the reader than a verbal declaration on the part of the characters. Thus, a simple sentence with plain vocabulary can still generate lyrical beauty.

#### 4.1. Articulating Identity Through Objects.

People conventionally project their identities through language. Conversely, Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters provide the silhouette of their selves without verbal articulation, in their silent study of the world. So they can shape their identities in silence but they still require alternative instruments to present personal aspects to be perceived by both their observant fictional peers, and also their readers; that is, not for introspection, where silence suffices, but for outward expression of the self. In order to explain this point, I will employ the metaphor of a theatrical performance. On the postmodern southern stage, the script is filled with silences but the roles still have to be played. One such way is through props found on the set. The portable materials

function symbolically as prostheses or phantom limbs as they act out the characters' performative identities away from their bodies, as an extension of their personalities.

In the story "Old Things", Cleo Watkins has thrown away most of the things she collected over the years after her husband's death. However, her attachment to the material representation of memories is unquestionable. The story ends with a visit on trade day to the local stockyard. In one of the stalls a whatnot turns into a symbol of her desires. She finds this picture frame in the shape of a train. Regardless of her previous rejection of materiality, the little boxes that form it and the pictures attached to them bewilder her for their similarity to one her family used to own: "The boxes are a simple picture puzzle to put in order [...] Two of the pictures are out of order and she rearranges them" (91). Later that night Cleo has a dream, which is activated by the contemplation of an old train of boxes found in the market. In the dream the train runs silently "as quietly as someone dreaming" (91). The silence is what makes the scene pleasurable and what allows her fancy to articulate a strong emotional need: a perfect image of her dismembered family, where "they all wave at the future and smile perfect smiles" (91). She has lost members of her household and the ones that have returned feel, yet, disconnected. Her divorced daughter has come back with her children to live with Cleo. She finds it difficult to understand her daughter, a southern woman from a different generation. The children make a mess in the house, a consequence of the chaotic household in which they live with their mother. But in the stall Cleo reorganizes the pictures. The reordered whatnot provides coherence to the confusion she experiences in her own home.

Characters often narrate their lives as stories, creating a logical plot out of the events they experience externally and internally, in order to understand the rapid pace of life and its changes. The characters of *Bobbie Ann Mason* are men and women of



few words, and they do not act as storytellers of their emotions. The performance of sharing a narrative of your life is substituted by an equivalent creative action: handcrafting and art; or carpentry and mosaic making. In the failure of language, coherence is achieved manually. The concept of the puzzle reoccurs in the collections. In the story “The Rookers”, Mary Lou’s husband has built a table for her to play cards on it. She “had never seen a table like it. Automatically, she counted the oddly shaped pieces Mack had fit together for the top. Twenty-one. It seemed that Mack was trying to put together the years of their marriage into a convincing whole and this was as far as he got” (19). The history of the couple is metaphorically ordered into a story with a logical plot, which they cannot otherwise articulate. The fact that the mosaic is made out of pieces from old discarded objects reinforces the nostalgic tone of the table. Mary Lou perceives her husband’s attempt to praise their long-lasting love story and, simultaneously, his nostalgia for better times when they were closer to each other, linked together, like the colorful fragments of the mosaic. Sandra Alfoldy, in her study of craftsmanship, explains that the singularity of an object that has been hand-made, in opposition to mass-produced ones, establishes an analogy with the unique personality of the recipient of that object (142). By owning a one-of-a-kind table, Mary Lou proudly perceives the individual character of her marriage and her husband. Hence, the tale gains physicality through the mosaic tabletop that Mary Lou attentively reads in silence.

Crafts function as props that become stories in themselves, embedded in the main narration. But when and if the actual performers, the characters, allow the objects to speak, they need to remain silent, leaving verbal voids to be filled by their props. Mason thus grants her characters the chance to craft a silent text with their hands. They recycle material culture, like the mosaic above, in order to organize

symbolic elements that can be read by the silent interlocutor as a meaningful whole. That is why Mary Lou understands the purpose of the tabletop: her husband has created a message that is hidden in the mosaic and speaks to Mary Lou the words he cannot express. This is what Nicole Boivin calls the “emotional resonancy” of objects (111), the perpetuating impact of the material on humans. The distance felt by the couple is shortened by the ability of the tabletop to bring to the conscious mind the abstract concept represented by this craft. The language of the interaction with the object invites the protagonist to follow a new storyline, a storyline where Mary Lou and her husband reunite emotionally.

The fact that the artistic creation is a piece of furniture that will be used as part of their daily lives, a table, reinforces the fact that Mary Lou’s husband is attempting to achieve a change in their matrimony at a deeper level through routine and common objects; he wants to posit their love as a central piece of the household, because, as Ian Hodder explains in his research on the relationship between people and the material world, “[f]amiliar things are absorbed into our sense of identity” (38). Mason’s characters frequently show a strong connection with the things that shape their homes: cheap decorative items, a framed picture, a chair, a drawing or a quilt. In daily interaction with objects, people assimilate the domestic items into their identities. The emotional associations established with this material world are caused by previous experiences retained through memories and prompted back into the conscious by these objects.

This phenomenon has an effect on Mason’s style. Southern writer Robert Morgan said that “[w]e do not want to think anything is merely what it is. Everything may be taken as a sign. Everything is speaking to us” (Online source). On the one hand, the character needs to read more into the object than its mere function; and, on

the other hand, Mason turns objects such as the table above into a symbol, knowing that readers will tend to attach meaning to these objects. In this manner, the inanimate items become part of the conversation between characters, narrator and reader. They perform important roles within the narrative. Writers like Mason do want their readers to be aware of the presence of such items, as Raymond Carver said in an interview with Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery: he wants the objects in his stories to be “palpable”, they “shouldn’t be inert” (72).

Marita, the protagonist of Mason’s eponym story, recollects her distressing experience at school when students were forced to take care of dolls in order to make them aware of the responsibilities of parenthood. Mason thus recalls the ever-present, conservative attitudes lived by her in her childhood and youth, growing up in rural Kentucky. Marita’s recollection finishes in a chaotic scene where the kids run outside and throw around these dolls; filled with flour, they end up dirtying the rooms and destroying the baby models. The woman gives an account of the moment: “I ran away from the gym, tracking flour down the sidewalk, out into the soccer field where I run free –like a young dog after a flying Frisbee, like someone in love” (67). In the hunt for liberty and boundless pleasure, the girl embodies the adult agony of enclosure. Because she is unable to articulate this feeling out loud, she performs an action instead: she spills the flour widely and races down the field. The run integrates Marita into the landscape, that is, she sees herself as a dog, and she imagines she can move through the land without limits.

Again, in the short novel *Spence + Lila*, the narrator explains the following about the character of the wife as she does a puzzle: she has “always loved the satisfying snap of two pieces going together. It was like knowing something for sure” (57). The pleasure found in certainty does not come from verbal exchange; instead,

the character interprets the world by turning it into a meaningful text. This text is not a linguistic narrative but a visual one. It is made out of images. Consequently, in Mason's quest for a faithful portrayal of her characters' relation with the world, she employs intense and effective pictures, which it is then up to the reader's to interpret adequately. The visual effect of pieces of a puzzle clicking together and forming an image would have had the same effect on the maker of the puzzle as the one it actually has on the reader of the scene. The image reverberates out of the page and into the reader's mind; the reader will see the puzzle, and the image will stay, while the symbol unfolds and the reader understands the psychology of the character better.

Different forms of art will be included as channels and modes of expression. In the story "With Jazz", a detached mother observes her son's drawings: "Seeing his efforts suddenly mature was like running into a person I recognized but couldn't place [...] I stared at the catfish [the animal her son drew], almost as if I expected it to speak" (15-16). A graphic representation of the most intimate feelings of her son is the only signal by means of which to interpret and establish a mother-son connection. They are complete strangers; they are bodies, personae and identities that no longer recognize each other. The sketches of fish contain no words but they have been drawn by her son's hands, following the instructions of his brain and his unconscious emotions; that is, they are the material representation replacing the written word, a potential letter, a message, and, ultimately, a silent conversation. Besides, this moment of silence facilitates a union that would not take place otherwise between mother and son because "[s]ilence is about listening, listening to small sounds, quiet and loud sounds out of any context, musical, visual or otherwise. Silent sounds can be loud, as much as noisy sounds can be quiet, but they do not deafen my body to anything but themselves, and instead include me in their production" (Voegelin, 81-

82). Through the quiet contemplation of the drawing, the mother enters a communicative space outside of any verbal matrix that still provides her with relevant information about her son's inner world.

A similar strategy is the inclusion of quilts<sup>48</sup>. In the case of the story "Love Life", the stitched union of the rags in a chaotic display functions as a symbol for the diverse generations of women that are bonded together, interwoven, in the story: "The haphazard shapes make Jenny imagine odd, twisted lives represented in these quilts" (10). This image stands in turn for the impossibility of completely disentangling oneself from roots; it does not matter where your piece of material is placed within the quilt because it is, nevertheless, dependent on the others by means of the interlacing thread; that is, the familiar and even the historical memory to which every southerner belongs and from which there is no chance of escaping, because "[t]he quilt is knotted with yarn, and the edging is open, for more blocks to be added" (15). It is not accidental that Bobbie Ann Mason mentions that the quilt is knotted with "yarn", the silent thread that "tells a story", which is a different meaning of the term. In the same way that on this page the characters are reading in silence a story that is also told in silence through the quilt, the reader of the book will have to decode the story told by silences in the fragments of narrative that describe material elements functioning as meaningful symbols.

The understanding of the symbol takes place in the scene above because Jenny, the younger character, is moved as she "feels tears start to drip down her face" (15). The postsouthern mood embodied by Jenny is affected by fears of losing all contact with a past the younger generation has not known, a fabricated nostalgia

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<sup>48</sup> Quilts were already mentioned in chapter 1 as frequent symbols in southern fiction due to the compound and diverse identity of this region, which has, throughout history, attempted to achieve a unified identity.

closely related to a sense of rootlessness. Opal, her aunt and owner of the quilts Jenny admires, closer in generation to the South of quilts, the South of backward traditions and oppressive gender configurations, despises the object. The quilt is a symbol of the harsh conditions in which these women were left, with no other space in discourse to express themselves but through these quilts. Regardless of the contrasting reactions to the artifact (Opal is sick of them while Jenny praises them), the presence is unavoidable, it is demanding, and it forces communication between these two generations of southern women, which makes Opal feel “uncomfortable” (15), “caught up” (16) in a story without verbal intercourse –the stories contained in the quilts and the story of her life that will be part of the quilts as well.

Material culture studies<sup>49</sup> often analyze the role of objects in people’s lives, and the emotional ties established with them. In this manner, objects, frequently, provide visibility to forgotten or disregarded characters, past or present. That is, for instance, the case of quilts, which, without the employment of written or spoken words, narrate identities “silently”. There is a burial quilt mentioned in the story “Love Life”. These quilts were the ones where new squares were stitched to the quilt as people of the family passed away, with their names embroidered on them. The quilt “recognizes” the names of forefathers, acknowledging their validity in silence. These “desperate” women (14) that created the quilt, as Opal categorizes them, have, nonetheless, completed a very important task within their community, making use of

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<sup>49</sup> Further readings may include: Geraldine Chouard’s article establishing a parallelism between the act of writing fiction and the art of quilting, “Sew to Speak: Text and Textile in Eudora Welty” (2014); and the volume *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women & Domestic Material Culture* (1988), edited by Pat Browne and Marilyn Ferris, which deals with objects as narrating sources. Additionally, the article by Heather Pristash et al. “The Needle as the Pen: Intentionality, Needlework, and the Production of Alternate Discourses of Power” (2009) defines the reaffirmation of identity executed through crafts and arts.

an alternative discourse: instead of words, they have systematically arranged meaningful but muted elements of communication: recycled old rags, placed together with a purpose, with an artistic conception of syntax. In the same way, a sentence is never finite as new elements can be added by means of coordinate conjunctions, subordinate ones or relative pronouns, establishing and signifying different familiar relations.

Eventually, Opal's desire is unveiled, as always in silence, in an auction, paradoxically, a place where in the need to present the winning bid, desires are shouted out in a curt, unrestricted way. However, even though she bids for a place of land she desires to purchase, her actual wish is revealed in silence: she wishes to own "her block on the quilt" (13). The piece of land is explicitly compared to the sewed rag in the communal blanket with its little capital letter embroidered. Land would be a space for identity but surrounded by the marked frontier of community, society, the lines of thread, carefully inserted by the hands of past generations: a southern heritage.

The bonds between heritage and individual identity are frequently explored through the symbol of the household. To continue with the same story, the home, again, as the objects did before, speaks for the characters: "Opal's house has a veranda. Jenny thinks that verandas seem to imply a history of some sort –people in rocking chairs telling stories. But Opal doesn't tell any stories [...]. They sit on the veranda and observe each other" (8). The silent porch and the quilts, which, actually, Opal keeps hidden away until Jenny asks to see them, delineate a household without any historical association. But this is proved not to be the case by means of a symbolic description of the old layers of wallpaper "peeling back" (9) in Opal's room. Jenny scrutinizes her aunt's room furtively in search of secrets. In silence, trying to

avoid attention, she makes an effort to unveil, paradoxically, stories behind Opal's silence. They may not exchange stories in the porch, but it is clear that, in silence, Jenny accesses past experiences, namely the tiredness of these women, including Opal's, and attempts to reconstruct them herself, metaphorically speaking. The decadence of the house is an obvious symbol of Opal's aging. The wallpaper is falling off and juxtaposed in the same sentence with Opal's muumuu, which is a brightly colored dress of Hawaiian origins. The aged wallpaper spills "crumbs of gaudy ancient flower prints" (9) on the dress. Opal wears clothing full of life in the form of dazzling prints; yet, unstoppable, the weight of time covers her, and the scraps of damaged decoration stain her happy overall; and all this occurs without the employment of words, only through material elements that can be interpreted as symbols in the story. The southerner in postmodernity evolves in direct contact with the current American social tale of

possession –of being possessed by possessions –[which] is something stranger than the history of a culture of consumption. It is a tale not just of accumulating bric-a-brac, but also of fashioning an object-based historiography and anthropology, and a tale not just thinking with things but also of trying to render thought thing-like. (Brown, 5)<sup>50</sup>

Mason's fiction will indeed narrate through silent objects, creating silent stories.

There is a strong presence of material culture in American fiction. Artifacts narrate memory in silence; and through it they silently phrase identity. Given the fact that objects –the characters' silent "spokespeople" –contain information about characters and their past, as Jay Winter explains in an essay on silence in the

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<sup>50</sup> The fragment is part of the volume *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, where critic Bill Brown studies how American fiction has portrayed human relationship with objects.



twentieth century, “we cannot accept the commonplace view that silence is the space of forgetting and speech the realm of remembrance” (Winter, 5). As an illustration, I have considered the story “The Heirs”, where the main character, Nancy, handles and studies the objects of her ancestors kept all together in a box as a treasure. There are letters and photographs, i.e. conventional representations of memory. However, an unexpected item is noticed: dynamite. The narrator explains: “Nancy saw herself in this group of people, lives that had passed from the earth as hers would too. She felt comforted by the thought of continuity, even if a stick of dynamite could be called an heirloom” (202). The box is all she has left as heritage. She is not told a story of family history by older generations; it is the objects that narrate, while she observes in silence. Mason presents a very respectful perception of what makes an event or item worthy of becoming a story; a tale of the accounts caged in objects, that is, the materiality of memories.

The fact that Nancy as a character respects the absurdity of a stick of dynamite as an heirloom exemplifies how Mason maps family history through objects, which leave a trace as they are moved through space and time. These artifacts become narrating items whose resonance, from the perspective of material culture theories, represent social agency and cultural relevance. They can be interpreted transgenerationally, as “[objects] commemorate a past relationship, bringing the precariousness of consciousness into the solidity of things” (Walklate, 15). Mason’s characters do indeed devote moments of silent reveries to the apparently dull, transforming their cultural value.

Within the household, the container and source of many of these silences,

cooking, becomes of extreme importance when the characters are mute<sup>51</sup>. The reader is provided with the following description in *Spence + Lila*: “Their house was dark and filled with silences. Rosie even shelled beans with great concentration, as if chatter would be inefficient” (89). The character performs the culinary activity with attentive and respectful devotion. The representation of the house filled with shaded spaces provides a general image of secrets, unshared emotions and experiences, pervading the entire household.

Considering this representation of the spatial context of the story, the cooking performance becomes relevant as Rosie is depriving the vegetable, the individual seeds, of their protective outer case. They will be afterwards naked, exposed. In case meaningless speech could nevertheless have the same effect on her, Rosie chooses to be quiet. Families built around the world of farming did not engage in purposeless, idle activities; any energy invested on activities lacking worth in terms of productivity was wasted in their view. Hence, conversation was secondary if the products of the crop or if the earth required attention. The result is that silence, in these contexts, becomes an inherent element of their routines and of the structures of their households.

In the short story “Midnight Magic”, an unimportant building, a working space, unveils relevant information: “The factory is long and low and windowless, and bales of fiberfill hug the wall” (23). The character of Steve’s relationship to his professional space, this factory, mirrors somehow his emotional state with regards to his relation with his partner Karen. The apparently wide space of the industrial building is nonetheless claustrophobic as the distance from end to end provides capacity but no real room to breathe due to the limited area from the ground to the

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<sup>51</sup> In the last chapter of this dissertation, the kitchen will be analyzed, as well, as the stage where the laconic characters may, at times, engage in conversation.

ceiling, probably restricting movement as well. Besides, the overwhelming amount of filling material that surrounds the workers of the factory insulate them from the outer world, in the same way that Steve lets his fears of emotional disappointment come in between him and his companion. The contradiction lies in the fact that the same objects that seem to numb the workers from a connection with the exterior are portrayed animistically as affectionate, as they “hug” the narrow walls. This personification may suggest additionally Steve’s struggle to improve his relationship, and find a way to express his love to Karen. Buildings, cautiously selected and depicted, talk when the character appears to be inarticulate.

At times, characters are unable to articulate distress. Coinciding with such moments, their perceptivity sharpens. They become exhaustive detectives of the surroundings, and by devoting their attention to this sensorial analysis, touching, hearing, tasting, smelling or listening, they allow themselves to stop thinking about the source of pain. Hence, in contemplation they also find a distraction, which is paradoxical because, on the one hand, their meditative musing on the physical world brings them close to revealing their emotions, without fully grasping them, while providing the reader with the actual conclusion of the story. However, on the other hand, it diverts the character’s focus from a hurtful reality that they may not want or may not be ready to confront. Regardless of their emotional maturity, at that point, the contemplative ability displayed will unveil relevant information to the reader. The protagonist of “Blue Country” confesses when she sees her reaction after being told that her grandmother has passed away:

“Look at me. I’m not even crying.” In the shower, Nancy realized that everything in the Blue Lantern Inn was blue. The wallpaper was blue. The rugs were blue. In the lobby downstairs, seashells on blue tiles were mounted

on the wall. [...] She tried to picture her grandmother's face –the gentle woman she loved –but all she could see was a silhouette of an old woman hunched over her dishpan set on the gas stove to heat. [...] Nancy pushed open the clouded-glass window in the shower and saw the ocean beating, gray in the rain. (22)

The surroundings activate a remote connection to the past that eliminates, or displaces temporarily, the subject from the loop of sorrowful thoughts, which her revision of memories has triggered. She does not want to face the pain of the loss so she starts to observe the repeated color around her; but then the distress pops up again when she remembers the sacrifices her grandmother made as a southern matriarch. To escape the mourning, she connects the blue decoration to the blue in the ocean and its gray hue in a rainy day. The cycle is: painful news, sensorial distraction, painful memory, and sensorial distraction.

#### 4.2. Articulating Identity Through Bodies.

Mason's characters often put their interlocutors through silent treatments: they are asked questions, or are addressed, and no answer or acknowledgement is given in return. In the same manner that objects speak for silent characters, providing information to the reader, the bodies of the characters become communicative symbols as well. Corporeal representations frequently signal the presence of a metaphorical interpretation added to the literal description of the physical attributes of characters. Far from the frequent literary motifs related to the human body in literature, as femininity linked to breasts, Mason tends to dwell on challenging

significations of body parts that break conventional assumptions, such as finding beauty in jewelry made of human bones.

The story “The Retreat” illustrates the relevance of physicality as an element that can mimic effectively the expressiveness of the spoken word. Georgeann, the protagonist, does not feel fulfilled within her role as mother and wife of a preacher. She loathes the idea of going to yet another spiritual retreat with her husband. She is repressing her real complaints, but right from the beginning the reader can perceive her unarticulated dissatisfaction: “Georgeann is basting facings on a child’s choir robe, and she looks at him [her husband] testily as she bites off a thread” (128). Her identity has been built through female chores, shadowed by the agency of a respected and influential speaker, that is, a preacher. Sewing the robe is accompanied by the aggressive description of her cutting the thread with her teeth, challenging with her gaze the authority of her husband. Lips are often stereotyped emblems of sensual women, or objectified female identities. Conversely, Georgeann illustrates her anger through her mouth; her lips are ignored and her strong teeth become the focus to symbolize how she removes herself from the institution of the Church and the role she has been given. Through the silent action of the cut, the woman presents herself ending her ties to the male figure and her own motherly role. The relevance of this example lies on how it is simultaneous with her action of joining pieces together through the performance of the stitches. She severs and binds together at the same time. The organs that verbalize the self (throat, tongue and lips) do not talk here but equally provide strength and define decision-making.

Mason, hence, employs the body as another symbol. The process becomes highly noticeable when the character is sick, or an illness affects the plot. In these cases, the character perceives the affected area of the body to be completely detached

from the rest. Characters get frustrated with their bodies, angry at the part that is ailing, as if it were an intruder that interferes with their lives. Their bodies malfunction and do not cooperate with the continuation of their productivity – efficiency and self-reliance are key for Mason’s independent and sturdy personalities. As a consequence, the disease limits, strangles or silences the character. However, these sick organs or limbs, paradoxically, verbalize the deepest emotions that the character will not openly share.

For example, in the short story “Third Monday”, Ruby has not told her lover Buddy about her mastectomy, and it seems that she perceives the intervention in terms of possession vs. privacy. The narrator explains: “She wonders whether he will be disgusted and treat her as though she has been raped, his property violated” (227). Later she adds that Buddy does not have a possessive attitude in their relationship and that she is aware she is not his property. But it seems that she is neither the owner of her body: “Her body made her angry, interfering that way, like a nosy neighbor” (233). The intervention remains a secret because she is both scared of Buddy’s reaction and upset at the intrusion of her body in her life; she is not in command of silence; her body, her sickness, has a voice of its own and speaks loudly, unveiling her frailty. The knot becomes an independent identity: “she felt that the knot in her breast had a presence of its own. Her awareness of it made it seem like a little energy source, like the radium dial of a watch glowing in the dark. Lying close to Buddy, she had the crazy feeling that it would burn a hole through him” (233-34). The constant presence of her illness is both a sign of her fear as well as a reminder of the secret. Like the light of the watch in the dark, a secret in silence lights up to emphasize its existence. Her apprehension is a consequence of her dread but also a significant symbol of how the knot may consume their relationship: she wants to hide it from him

but it will still pierce through him because, in their intimacy, her body will be exposed and her breasts are a symbol of her sexual identity. The diseased organ will become an unwelcomed and unauthorized spokesperson for her vulnerability, diminishing her gender features and her right to privacy.

Cancer conquering the female body occupies the plot of *Spence + Lila* as well. Lila “can’t say what she feels –that the last thing she would have expected was to be attacked by disease in the very place she felt strongest. It seemed to suggest some basic failing” (24). This paragraph specifically illustrates the actual inarticulacy undergone by Mason’s characters. In their minds they can give shape to their emotions, but they are unable to communicate them publicly in words, through oral statements. In this scene, Lila, after having had her mastectomy, ponders on the concept of womanhood, establishing a direct connection between the psychological factors defining femininity and the reproductive organs of the female body.

As mentioned in the introduction, human beings tend to create their identity through language. When they cannot function through it in order to project their uniqueness, they utilize their most immediate tether to the world, the body. If language resides in the center of identity and the mind uses the body to make sense of abstract concepts, it is not surprising that Lila feels that her instrument of connection with the world has been stolen from her. Hirsch explains the relation between the female body and language in the following way, quoting Chodorow:

For Chodorow, the basis of female identity, then, lies not in the oedipal but in the pre-oedipal period; here mother-daughter bonding, not phallic lack, connection, not castration, characterize female identity; here closeness to the mother and not shift of allegiance to the father defines the process of women's development in culture ... Adult personality, embedded in connectedness,

offers a picture of continued mother-daughter entanglement. The result is a theory of language founded not on lack but on a form of plenitude, a myth of a mother-tongue which affirms, or at least suggests, the existence or the possibility of constructing something outside the name-of-the-father. (132)

If the reproductive organs of a woman are seen as directly tied to her completeness as a female human being, the fact that her mamma has been removed will unavoidably affect her communicative skills. Siri Carpenter states “our brains do not really differentiate between our physical interface with the environment and high-level, abstract thought” (39), which would explain why Lila confesses she is failing and muted.

Julia Kristeva explains how in a male-defined linguistic system the faculty entitled to women is merely receptive, regardless of her productive nature, as manifest in pregnancy. The female difficulty for defining herself both as sexual subject and moral referent of purity is embodied in Lila, who is the mother and lover bound to play with and within the symbolic system imposed by men. This imposition will diminish the relevance of the female voice as a fanciful creative force; instead, women would be identified with interpretation and repetition. According to Kristeva:

Of the virginal body we are entitled only to the ear [divine conception], the tears [sorrow of mother and wife], and the breast [she is always life while Eve is death caused by sin, the recognition of desire]. That the female sexual organ has been transformed into an innocent shell which serves only to receive sound may ultimately contribute to an eroticization of hearing and voice, not to say of understanding. But by the same token sexuality is reduced to a mere implication. [...] A woman has only two choices: [...] to make herself worthy



of divine grace and assimilation to the symbolic order, or else to experience herself as different, other, fallen. (108)

Even though I would not define my project as a feminist reading of Bobbie Ann Mason's characters, I do, nevertheless, consider her identification of the female body as a passive rhetoric of rebellion against the limited space left to women in a sexist South. Silence, thus, can be interpreted here as a case of "silenced voices". Hence, the writer, as a woman, breaks the silence imposed on women first by being a writer and then through alternative modes of communication, which she grants her characters through her stylistic devices.

In the short story "Tunica", the concept of silence is built upon the process of objectification of the main female character, Liz. Ergo, the tale revolves around both the comprehension of identity through material culture and the dehumanization of women's bodies. This woman represses her demands completely. Her scarce speeches are ineffective and she is gradually silenced through a series of violent acts to which she is a victim. Right from the beginning, her body is altered, treated as an object as she undergoes minor surgery in her scalp. Liz constantly refers to the stitches using grotesque and explicit descriptions; she says her head has been "slit" (42), which emphasizes the violence of the removal of some sebaceous cysts. To regain ownership over her scalp, she confesses finding something erotic in the cutting sensation in her head over the anesthesia (44). A wound becomes a source of sexual pleasure, without needing a companion, owning her own femininity with independence –and all is described objectively, without the use of romantic language. The story, in general, deploys the radical, grotesque descriptions of the body, a style that very much resonates with dirty realism; for instance, through the violence implicit in Liz's

mother's idea of crafting a bracelet out of human gallstones, which contributes to the objectification of the body as an alien element that can be turned into a commodity.

Peyton, Liz's husband, has a tendency to act violently. He enjoys projecting it in his language, actions and manners; even the final act, when he masturbates her, is performed with brutal intensity, whilst Liz remains passive, yielding to a state of oblivion in silence. Finally, in a casino in Tunica, she stumbles upon a drunken gambler who forces a hug on her and she needs to "jerk free" (59). In general, her body is manipulated and her emotions disregarded. She is an object among agents. She describes her situation with her ex-husband as being placed on a Tilt-A-Whirl ride, where they both "spun around separately, sometimes facing each other momentarily before spinning away again" (58), subdued to violent movements that prevent a constant, tranquil contemplation of the surrounding reality. The turning images, in fact, become a recurrent metaphor in the story as Mason decides to conclude with the following words: "For the time being, she was waiting for the spinning images of her life to line up in a perfect row" (62). Her life is portrayed as a slot-machine, unpredictable and addictive, a symbol of the hunger for apprehending a full meaning, while she just stands passive and silent in front of the moving symbols.

Mason's characters thus become either metaphor projectors or tropes in themselves. In her latest novel, *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, Mason abandons the context of the South of the United States for France and, still, her original style haunts the protagonist, Marshall, previously mentioned, a retired and widowed American WWII veteran. He is described highly symbolically in the following line: "His breathing was like the labored gasping of a rickety antique machine" (291). The distress of being a war veteran deforms his identity. As a child being affected by rickets, he is reduced to a symbol of his past, a mere dysfunctional record of history.

Taking this excerpt as a starting point, the following explanation of minimalism by Günter Leypoldt helps understand Mason's strategy:

The generic minimalist text toys with the reality-claims that we associate with representationalist narrative surfaces; its reportorial voice invites us into a familiar world based on ordinary experience seemingly so similar to everyday life that we feel comfortably at home in it and expect the semantic depth and sustained argument typical of the neorealist tradition; yet upon a closer look, the apparently smooth surfaces of minimalist fiction give way to a silence that surprises in the hyperrealist fictional world the text describes. The minimalist text jumbles the rules of the traditional aesthetic games. (320)

By comparing the damaged soul of the elderly soldier to the mundane, i.e. an outdated machine, the canon of beauty is decomposed. M<sup>a</sup> Teresa Nandín explains the use of metaphor in Flannery O'Connor in a way that perfectly illustrates Mason's intention: "Since the author attempts to express a type of reality which may be only perceived 'through the eyes, not with them,' referential language becomes inadequate" (351). In the absence of quiescence, amid a constant flux of transforming sources, imagination and figures of speech are the only effective codes of interaction with the postmodern world.

The grotesque description of bodies and human actions define these selves as deformed: "In Bakhtin's account, the body is a body of excess, and so it queries borders and neat categories. Perhaps most importantly, it is a body in flux, in a constant process of reformation and reemergence: it is becoming" (Gleeson-White, 110). These grotesque bodies may even become unpleasant to behold, suffering constant alterations. These particularities would do nothing but provide a further explanation for the omnipresence of silence in the characters' lives: they search order

and they wish to change towards a pleasing shape, in order to fit mainstream distributional categories; however, their bodies find no support in a normative linguistic code that supplies no signifiers for the symbolic outside of it.

Delimitation, definition and clarity (at least, to a certain extent) would only be then found in silence as the alternative space for the symbolic existence of Mason's characters. The southern stage performs a script of silence interpreted through props, found in bodies and objects.

#### 4.3. Postsouthern Commodification of the Self in Constant Change.

Bobbie Ann Mason confines the setting of most of her short fiction to the southern state of Kentucky. This location feeds the writer's stylistic choices, characters' conception and plots, functioning as an active source of inspiration. However, her characters constantly acknowledge the crumbling state of any rooted imagery inherited, amid the fabricated identity of postsouthern reality. Due to the strong influence of the setting on characterization, the disintegration of the surroundings translates into the personalities growing in it. Mason's fictional people embrace the transformations around them as a side current that is parallel to their emotional development. In the clash of tradition, counterfeit modernization and the invasion of popular culture, characters become aware of how the anxieties and feelings they do not verbally share are gradually integrated in their existence. As they resign to the postmodern impossibility of absolute happiness, they see postsouthern landscapes destroying blissful spaces and stillness.

The term "Postsouthern" was already introduced in chapter 1. It points to the self-awareness undergone by the southern individual submerged among cultural and

social artifacts in an ever-changing postmodern reality. The transience of referents becomes apparent in the disassociation between the characters' imaginative production and their verbal paralysis. In their enduring contemplative states, characters perceive their existence encapsulated in the southern landscape, both urban and rural.

The postsouthern landscape painted in Mason's stories balances itself on the top of a fence that divides the encroaching urban sprawl, and the shrinking remainders of an old, rural South. As the present renders itself uninterpretable, the character needs to withdraw from the routine signifiers, which only increase the uneasiness related to a sense of rootlessness. A reflective attitude will provide the character with a memory that, when compared to the present situation, will assist him or her in applying logic among signifieds that dispel any feeling of familiarity or belonging: the south of postmodernity.

In that manner, Joann, in the story "Hunktown", remembers the cheerfulness and wonder of hot autumns in her father's farm and compares them to the farm's current status. Careful harvesting has turned into neglect, and root vegetables into wild prickled plants; nostalgically, "she remembered many times when nothing had seemed important except picking turnip greens" (37). The parallelism opposes the land worker from an older generation, her father, to a postsouthern man, her husband Cody, desperately attempting to become famous as a country singer, and who has left his wife and home behind. The farm has now been abandoned: "The field where her father used to grow turnips was wild now, spotted with burdock and thistles" (37). In her conversations with her daughter, Joann excuses Cody's behavior, but, in silent contemplation of the land, she lets the reader know about her disappointment. Emotions are simply not shared in words, but the intrusion of popular culture, here in

the form of country music mainly, are related to the disintegration of the old farm, a symbol of stability.

Peggy Jo, the nine-year old first person narrator of “Detroit Skyline, 1949”, explains after her first trip North away from home: “The skyscrapers were still as remote to me as the castles in fairy tales, but these houses [the neat rows of houses in the suburbs of Detroit] were real, and they were nestled next to each other in a thrilling intimacy. I knew at once where I wanted to live when I grew up –in a place like this, with neighbors” (37). The young girl already wishes away the sheltering sheath provided by the isolated farm. She desires a close connection. The mere thought of human closeness, of mutual acquaintance, excites her. But it is only through an imaginative observation of the city that the girl expresses this emotion. While the adults chat around her, she remains silent, stares and observes. The girl becomes the quiet readers’ informant. But she is afraid to ask questions to the adults. And it seems that when kids are educated in an environment in which giving opinions, asking and suggesting are feared, this fear might perpetuate in adulthood. When instead of asking for information, Peggy, for the first time, talks about “the reds”, the Communists, she is asked to be quiet and reprimanded lest her comment may arise terrible consequences.

The girl is confused: visiting the North for the first time, seeing her mother in a hospital and witnessing, yet without understanding, the dread caused by the Red Scare and Senator Joseph McCarthy<sup>52</sup>, she becomes traumatized, and the feeling

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<sup>52</sup> The term “Red Scare” and the public and political image of the senator for Wisconsin (in office from 1947 to 1957) are related to anti-communist practices and social apprehension, as experienced in the United States with the beginning of the Cold War. The general fear of subversive reforms materialized in paranoia before alleged conspiracies and the rejection of anything perceived as “different” or “alien” in ideology or behavior. Critic Ty Hawkins analyses how Mason is representing the bafflement felt by the population through the innocent eyes of this little southern girl

cannot be organized on a linguistic level and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares and flashbacks [...] The fragmentation of language signifies the survivor's fragmented sense of identity and is a characteristic narrative strategy in literatures of trauma. (B. A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart qtd in Caver,115)

From this perspective, the frequently discussed minimalism in Bobbie Ann Mason, or the apparent inarticulacy of her characters, gain a different meaning. The writer's employment of tropes will complement the laconic dialogues and speeches, providing the reader with carefully crafted images, many of them coming from popular culture. Consequently, Mason uses the forms of culture that are usually discarded as uninspiring, and integrates them into her stories not only as context providers to give the reader a sense of the social reality of the characters, but also as sources to create wonder: wonder from the point of view of the imagination of the characters, whose fancy is activated by it; but wonder as well for the reader, who can enjoy stylistic beauty created with images using items from popular culture.

Mason herself perceives her southern background through these same metaphors, including highbrow and lowbrow culture, and in the "Introduction" to *Midnight Magic: Selected Stories of Bobbie Ann Mason*, she states the following about her creative process: "Like me, these characters are emerging from a rural way of life that is fast disappearing, and they are plunging into the future at a rapid saunter, wondering where they are going to end up ... I am excited to meet them at a

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in Detroit and the fearful adults around her. The conversations include "wild assertions about 'reds' and communist infiltrations [...] [In this manner] Mason highlights the pathos that drives the Cold War by way of irony, inviting the reader [...] to struggle alongside Peggy Jo to make sense of this rhetoric" (Hawkins, 160).

major intersection” (xii). The suddenness entailed by the verb “to plunge” and the paradox inherent in that “rapid saunter” effectively embody the pace of the existential flow portrayed in these stories. This is the general attitude of her characters: they silently muse on the scenes moving fast around them, altered by progress, but they do not hasten to make sense of them all at once.

Mason often describes decadence in the early symbols of modernization of the South. Emptied factories, broken neon signs, or antiquated shopping malls, for instance, strike a discordant note in the postsouthern unstoppable progress; and yet the new coexists with decay. In the story “Piano Fingers”, the main character, Dean, works at a drugstore in town and sometimes he delivers products to regular customers’ homes. He is a man with a dreamy attitude, but he married and had children while still young, losing a good job in a tire plant. He would like to write a television show about a detective who drives his van solving mysteries and crimes. The closest he gets to this ambition is during his delivery hours when he looks at his town through the windows, “noticing all the changes” (85). His impression of what he sees is that there is no innovation or novelty in his hometown; changes are merely apparent and superficial: new layers of paint, additions to buildings, or simply the same businesses that have been relocated (85); none of these have been brought about by any development originating in the South. The only brand new commodity mentioned is not local, an out-of-state car, signaling the lack of support to the area’s economy, annoying local residents. Furthermore, when Dean pictures his ideal business project he fantasizes with an old-fashioned ice-cream parlor, with design and music from the 60s.

Bobbie Ann Mason constantly reflects on the topic of the ever-changing southern landscape and the nostalgia for the natural elements that have been



substituted by subdivisions in the name of modernization. As an illustration, in the story “Piano Fingers”, Dean delivers to one of his clients in a new development on the edge of town that used to be just cornfields. The name of this residential area is “The Birch Hills” (86), where, paradoxically, there are “no birches, no hills”. This cynical comment on these houses is motivated by Dean’s actual take on the modernization of the South, one that destroys the landscape. He and his wife Nancy once considered buying property there during an open house visit. Nancy dreamt of the perfect home, but “Dean could see only the harvested cornfield, so bare and clean it would be a shame to disturb it” (86). The two adjectives attributed to this land carry very strong connotations that clearly portray the characters’ dislike of how nature is destroyed in the name of progress. The soil and crops represent the South without a disguise; that is, a western Kentucky that values history, regardless of the need for land use. This unaltered terrain is portrayed as innocent, which can be read as having committed no crime against the beauty of the South. Dean does not wish for an ideal house if that entails subjecting the land to contaminating changes.

On a similar note, in the tale “The Secret of the Pyramids”, through descriptions of the background, Mason again grants visibility to the South that is being silenced by modernization. As part of the label K-Mart realism, her stories take place among decaying old farms squeezed between new developments. In this story, Bobbie Ann Mason concentrates on the symbol of the mall –a token of progress and success. Mason unveils the corruption within this system of consumption, lies and secrets. The characters’ alienated lives evolve in the mall, working in houseware, childrenware and shoe stores. The protagonist is Barbara, who has an affair with the married owner of the shoe store, Bob. Just after ending the affair, Bob dies in a car accident. She learns from it on a television bulletin and cannot participate on public

mourning. Because they met in a place of consumption, Bob's death is articulated through products. Glenda, Barbara's friend, who knows of their secret relationship, looks at the shoes she is wearing as soon as she learns of the accident; and Barbara, clandestine lover, only has one relic of their love: the ridiculously looking Elvis Presley clock that Bob gave her. To further reinforce the decay that modernization has brought to the landscape of the South, she complements the descriptions of desolation that take place inside the building –in the form of unfaithful husbands, lonely women and materialistic values –with the decadent appearance of the building from outside, which is valued now as “price-down” (70). The mall is also compared to “a movie set”, that is, a synthetic scale scenery with the purpose of representing a place that does not pertain to that landscape. To reinforce this image, Mason includes in the display a noisy, old pick-up, another symbol of southern decadence, foregrounded even more by the connotation of shabbiness and squalidness associated to a fluorescent sign above a bar. Barbara sees all this as she drives past in her car, looking at the literal ramshackle state of southern urbanization, which mirrors the decline of happiness and morality.

#### 4.4. Mass Media and Popular Culture Break the Silence.

The constant presence of the mass media in Bobbie Ann Mason function as a distraction that counteracts the characters' silence, and help them ignore pain. These interfering noises in the background mainly come from television. The opening of the story “Love Life” depicts the character in front of her favorite television show, which is a music program on the MTV channel. The narrator explicitly mentions that Opal has never been interested in soap operas, and compares these shows with “stories” (1).

The peculiarity of this show is the speed with which the colors and sounds flash on the screen, in an unpredictable way, “erratically” (1), as the thoughts in her mind have been behaving lately. They are compared to a rock, considering the geographical sense of “erratic”, i.e. something brought from a distance by glacial action, thus not belonging among the surrounding rocks. The character is similarly a wanderer from a psychological perspective that is, nevertheless, physically stuck. That is, at least, how Opal feels.

Opal’s thoughts engage with the meaning of her existence, with her current situation and her future. She thinks about solitude, marriage and motherhood. However, as most Mason’s characters do, she does not indulge in self-pity or endless worrying. The characters in these stories endure pain and tragedy, using humor and facts from the lives of those they observe around. The other trait that enables these people to cope with distress is the fact that they are easily distracted by their surroundings, and, as a key part of it, by popular culture. Mason creates settings that contain alluring elements, helplessly engrossing the characters’ minds. Opal finds the music show fascinating, and the latter gives the story authenticity as it portrays the kind of popular culture consumed in such a milieu as the text depicts. Even if Bobbie Ann Mason only includes television programs as context builders, the reader can find symbolic meaning in these shows, emphasizing the feelings of the characters that are briefly mentioned by the narrator and seldom articulated in the characters’ speeches.

In “Love Life”, the MTV broadcasting reminds Opal of her past students, before retiring from her teaching career. She says she is happy, but old age scares her, and this realization comes as music from the screen: it “surges through her” (2). The story closes with a scene on TV where Opal hears the wishful thinking of the teacher character. The students on the set do not know that what their teacher wants “when

the bell rings” is to “hit the road to Nashville” (18). In the first scene, music precipitates a wave of emotions, related to her aging process. In the second scene, the reader is led to focus on the ringing of a bell that will free the woman from any limitations, as she runs away from them towards the capital of Tennessee, noted for its music industry. Opal’s silence contrasts with the bell, the tunes, the dancing, and the image of the capital of country music. Her fears are underlined by the musical tokens of popular culture coming from the television screen.

Television has a very similar role in the story “Midnight Magic”, where the protagonist Steve seems to be stagnated in life. He wants to move his relationship with Karen, his girlfriend, forward, but their dissimilarities prevent them from feeling in sync. He constantly compares his love story to that of his best friend’s, who act like a couple out of a TV show, in this case “The New Newlywed Game” (21). Steve’s friends enjoy answering the questions asked in the actual program to test their intimacy and compatibility. While watching this perfect couple Steve feels “doomed” (21). The religious connotation of this “final judgment” is repeated with different expressions throughout the story, and always in a scene where a television show is also featured. At some point, Steve watched a preacher on the screen talking about salvation, giving a phone number for viewers to call and get spiritual advice. Right afterwards, Steve attempts to call Karen, but drops the phone once more (22). He also recalls how evangelists on TV say that the salvation is God (26), but Karen’s mystical Guru, who Steve deeply dislikes, says the answer can only be found in yourself. Towards the end of the story, Steve admits that he “wants something miraculous, but he can’t believe in it” (29). Instead, he just watches a football game on TV. The semantic field of destiny and faith clashes with popular culture, depicting Steve’s attempts to engage emotionally with his life, while being constantly distracted by the

mindless consumption of entertainment.

On the contrary, in the story “Airwaves”, the noise coming from television programs does not give that pleasurable distraction. Jane is overcoming her separation from Coy, who was extremely sensitive to sound. In her solitude she is rediscovering their differences and similitudes; the breakup is helping her to come to terms with the frustration raised by Coy’s behavior, which seemed incomprehensible to her when they were together. This story is full of sensory perceptions. Jane rediscovers her world by reactivating her physical senses now that she leads a quieter life alone, for instance, in the peace left without arguments with Coy. That does not mean that she lives in total silence; in fact, it will be rock music, and its blasting songs, that will lullaby her in the morning (180). Single and unemployed, after having been fired short after the split up, she is in control of the soundscape around her now, which sharpens her senses:

Coy used to go to Kentucky Lake alone sometimes, for the whole weekend, to meditate and restore himself. She once thought his desire to be alone was peculiar, but now she appreciates it. Being alone is incredibly easy. Her mind sails off into unexpected trances. Sometimes she pretends she is an invalid recovering from a coma, and she rediscovers everything around her –simple things, like the noise the rotary antenna makes, a sound she never heard when TV volume was loud. [...] She likes to see things suddenly, from new angles. (182)

The wandering eyes of the character are filled with curiosity, finding truths through perception, consciously but effortlessly, proceeding without resistance on the part of her rational side or the environment, towards a place where the senses collect information. The television is muted and the character takes a step further from media

absorption, not yet completely achieving it. From the actual TV set, she gains a wider perspective, but this is still attached to the media, as now the moving antenna is heard in contact with the wind.

Jane is still part of the South influenced by media and popular culture, but the peculiarity of Mason's deployment of the noise produced by mass communication is how the writer combines it with silence. Mason counterpoises these semantic fields of sound and silence to express the complexity of communication in her characters: they are laconic people but with rich imaginations that produce vivid images described by narrators. The descriptive passages of fancy and contemplation will talk for the characters. Jane wakes up in the morning and turns on the radio to find the rock music that she enjoys: "The sounds are numbing. Jane figures if she can listen to hard rock in her sleep, she won't care that Coy has gone" (180). The music and the words of the songs provide a contradictory and unexpected effect: they produce silence, they are "numbing". Obviously, this lack of feelings or insensibility does not mean that she becomes numbed to the outer world; it refers to a mental silence. If her body and mind are in sync to the music she will silence the pain of the breakup from Coy. She has found a way to silence her mind: rock music; that is, one of the sounds of popular culture. In this passage, Mason shows that her characters do not only avoid explicitly commenting on their own feelings in dialogue with other people but also when they are alone and their thoughts become unbearable. Through hard rock, Jane's mind becomes impervious to her emotions and memories of her ex-boyfriend and her lost job.

Similarly, this is how music is employed in the tale "The Funeral Side", when Sandra McCain comes back to her father's home in the South, after having been away for a long time. Her father owns a funeral home that is part of the same building

where they live. Sandra is divorced but has a new life with her boyfriend Tom, mentioned before in the chapter, who keeps sled dogs, whose howls at night comfort her in the long darkness of winter in Alaska, where they live. Back in Kentucky she has to face the guilt for leaving his father behind, alone as a widower and feeling frail after a stroke, in a decadent town that cannot support his business. Sandra feels she is “testing herself, revisiting old memories and fears –the creepiness of living above a funeral home” (126). But the past becomes a heavy burden, and the criticism from her family and the feeling that she is failing her dad lead her to a moment of crisis, triggered by a funeral organized at the McCain’s side. When the ceremony commences she cannot bear the laughter and voices of the attendants. And she hides away in the house, wearing her earphones, listening to New Age music. She needs a haven and finds it curling up in a “nest of musty old cushions” (134). Her mom died when she was still very young. Sandra feels overwhelmed by emotions and finds a safe, warm and isolated womb, charged with the past of her family, in the form of that smell of damp condensed throughout the years in the house: “She forced herself to concentrate on the meaningless sounds [of the music] until her head vibrated with the yelps of excited sled dogs racing in the bright snow, and she fell asleep” (134). The music the character is listening to does not communicate anything to her, which is the reason why the sound turns into a soothing and anesthetic piece. Sandra focuses her mental effort on musical messages without a purpose, which save her from the anxiety caused by the meaningful and emotionally charged conversations around her. Regardless of the empty songs, she trembles with emotion, as if she were a membrane herself, receiving the sound waves. This occurs because the resonance of the noise evokes memories repeated as an echo in her head. The cries of the dogs embody her life and love in Alaska, and the emotion connected to the image calms her down to

sleep.

In the story “Rolling into Atlanta”, the character, Annie, who moves to Atlanta as a spy for a company, is surrounded by popular culture and actively integrating it in her routines. Every night she watches television and drinks a Coca-Cola (79). She is obsessed with the opportunity of attending a Rolling Stones concert, and while she listens to them on the radio she looks out from her sun deck. This is what she sees: a shopping center and a T.G.I Friday’s, an American restaurant franchise. In this case, foregrounding the presence of rock music, consumption, brands and, in general, popular culture, Mason provides texture to a character that is not talkative in the story. Hence, as Annie opens the doors, the following sentence expresses her emotions without her speaking out loud: “The sound of the radio spilled out like light into the dim parking lot” (80). The silence within Annie’s house is overwhelmed by sound, and so the music flows over the privacy of the walls surrounding her, and conquers the muffled (another word for “dim”) parking lot. In this case, the expansion of the musical notes over the environment portrays her need for liberation, novelty and excitement to come to her life.

From postmodernity to basic sensual perception, the whole context of Mason’s stories is connected through sounds. This metaphorical chain that keeps together all the elements that create the fictional world of the writer’s stories can be read in her piece “Bumblebees”, where three women live together in a farm after having undergone existential changes: “It is past midnight when Allison’s [she is the youngest of the three] car drives up. The dog barks, and Ruth’s [who has just lost her own daughter, who was Allison’s age] light switches off, as if this were all some musical sequence” (112). Within this “all”, the narrator is creating a unit formed by the three women, the farm, landscape, and, worth noticing, the appearance of the



young girls' car, a symbol of modernity and popular culture that will be analyzed in detail shortly. The story is filled with aural perceptions. The sounds heard and felt link them together, as if they were an unstoppable flow of energy. Once the characters become part of this synergy, words become secondary as a source of human communication and emotional connection. Leaving aside the use of speech, they are going to be capable of reaching a stage of awareness of each other's existence and presence by unspoken, sensorial appreciation. Their senses would prove useful as a tool not only to decode their natural surroundings and rural home, but also each other's fears and needs. Words will be simultaneously portrayed as a rather inappropriate instrument, as their brief dialogues, which avoid tackling their real preoccupations, illustrate.

The ineffectiveness of mainstream tools for communication is indirectly addressed in Bobbie Ann Mason's stories. Her characters read newspapers, some approach academic writing, life-skills or spiritual books, watch movies, pay attention to speakers in television and radio shows, are passionate about music and learn song lyrics, and recognize the messages of advertising. They are readers of popular culture, which is not to say they are inarticulate or illiterate. It would be a very simplistic description of Mason's creations, who can be often critical and show sharp media literacy. However, all the words they consume are being assimilated as the means to express their identity when emotions reach their peak and they feel overwhelmed. Language is not their natural weapon. And the narrator will show how characters employ symbolic alternatives to talk without words, when language frustrates them. The story "The Funeral Side" illustrates how characters feel dissatisfied with language: "Sandra was getting an M.A in communications. One night, in the middle of a chapter called 'The Dysfunction of the Mass Communicated,' she suddenly threw

the book across the room. She never went back to class” (116). Bearing in mind the lack of meaningful conversations between Sandra and her father when they meet again after a long period of being apart, the character can be depicted as laconic in words. She may well be reserved, but also someone who struggles in the articulation and sharing of emotions. Consequently, it is surprising to see her irritated after reading a book that, judging by the title, analyses the faults of our prevalent means of social contact: mass communication. Elisabeth Marie Loevlie completed a careful study of literary silence and in the following extract she analyses the consequences of the overwhelming flow of information “The Mass Communicated” are subjected to:

The broadcasted word, the televised word, and the electronic word literally permeate the atmosphere. But rather than make language richer, this proliferation of words points towards an impoverished and simplified language. Politics, advertisement, media, Internet –all seem to gravitate towards an increasing simplification and devaluation of language accompanied by an increasing valuation of image and the screen. (Loevlie, 12)

Sandra probably identifies herself as part of “The Mass Communicated”, the generation influenced by the information passed on to the population after having been carefully tailored to suit marketing purposes. The action of throwing the book in desperation is an empowering gesture of agency as she rejects this way of using language and embraces her own quiet one.

The potential negative effect of having a passive audience who consumes information without critical filters is that their minds may enter a state of stand-by, seeking in this submissive ingestion of broadcasted popular culture the silencing of upsetting thoughts. This is the concept of audioanalgesia, “[t]he use of sound as a

painkiller, a distraction to dispel distractions” (Schafer, 96). In this process, the viewer does not have to overcome the difficulties of conversation, but he does not apply the tools to achieve successful message exchanging either.

Consequently, even though they may seem paralyzed in front of TV sets, store windows or music, the apparent inability to verbally communicate emotions or describe logically the experiences undergone is, as sufficiently demonstrated, an inaccurate way to define the articulating capacity of Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters, as through metaphors they establish relations with their world, employing available facts and objects to deduce valid arguments. Their cogency is created through metaphor, because it should be borne in mind “that so long as the human mind exists, it will not escape its deep-seated instinct to personify its intellectual conceptions” (Huxley<sup>53</sup>, 45). Because Mason is inclusive in her renderings of the South, metaphors are found in unexpected sources of inspiration, frequently related to materialistic values. Continuing with the same story, “Rolling into Atlanta”, the character, the undercover agent in a restaurant chain, proves that the clothes of urbanites, businessmen and women who run from and to their office buildings, are mediated constructions. Movies and advertising have created these symbols of adaptation to modernity and success; but, for Mason, they can also be sources of aesthetic appreciation. Because Annie’s job is now to find irregularities among the staff, she becomes extremely observant:

Annie stared at Wes [a head waiter she has become emotionally involved with and who is ignorant of her real identity]. Enthusiasm was running out of him like the bubbly fountain outside, with its atmospheric lights that operated even

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) was an English Darwinian biologist, whose atheist approach to the comprehension of reality resonates with the pragmatic attitude of Mason’s southern characters.

in the daylight. [...] Wes was giving some answer, an effusive description that she half heard, intending to store it and savor it later. People were getting off work, and the sidewalks were a blur of similarly dressed business people – shadowy, layered images interweaving like a flock of birds swirling together. Her eyes zeroed in on the only spot of brilliant color in the scene – a woman’s yellow basketball shoes, the color rising and falling, boats chopping at the gray waves. (100)

She establishes a priority in the processing of information: immediacy and the senses are placed first. Orally transmitted information will be “savored” in silence later, but now her attention is unavoidably drawn to suits and sneakers. The attraction is such she cannot concentrate on Wes’s words. To “savor” is to be able to taste or smell while finding pleasure in the action. So, even though she rejects to partake of the action of speaking, stubbornly deciding to remain silent, she is actually not ignoring the message she is told. Annie is listening to Wes but parks in the information temporarily to appreciate it later; now she is distracted by the immediate flow of material stimulants taking place around her in the scene. However, Annie does not desire flashy clothes that may camouflage her amid this flow of successful people that belong to the system (while she is an intruder, an impostor). Dark jackets become birds flying in groups, and shiny shoes turn into boats braving tides. The symbol sources from consumption, but it transcends it to represent her eagerness to both be free and to feel that she belongs.

Mason’s characters become especially active from an intellectual and sensorial point of view while they are driving. The vehicle cruising the road represents an extrapolation of the home; that is, a secure shelter that permits mobility while not having to interact with the unknown. And the car has previously been mentioned as a

symbol of modernity and, I will add now, a symbol of popular culture in the United States. Cars become not only essential commodities but also tokens of status, talking about the identity of the driver. The constant presence of cars in popular culture, from songs to movies and advertising, becomes haunting.

The moving pictures along the windows of the car obviously augment the exposure to landscape loaded with symbolic connotations that will trigger reveries. In “Rolling into Atlanta”, the road activates awareness for the main character Annie: “As she drove, she was aware of [some] [...] lights in the rearview mirror, as if they were spotlights exposing her life” (92-93). Previously the character had admitted that her current strategy of interaction with the surrounding elements, using metaphors, makes sense in this moment of her life when she is working as a spy for a company, creating an artificial story to introduce herself to the people she encounters and works with. Her job requires her to observe the lives of others while maintaining her own on hold. As a spy of the company she has to survey misbehavior and lack of efficiency in the staff. She pretends everyday to be a regular employee. Consequently, the lights of the vehicle are bizarrely attributed the capacity to unveil her lies. The metaphor functions as a deictic, signaling to the reader a chain of words containing information about the character and her relation with reality, which is otherwise unarticulated.

The female character in “Three Wheeler” recalls road trips with her old ex-boyfriend: “She remembered seeing, in the bikes swooping light, an owl the size of a small child standing by the side of the road. It revolved its head and rose –with marvelous, slow grace –into the blank night” (113). The freedom of youth includes memories of her affair with a risk-taker and adventurer. During their trips, blended with the scenery, the poetry of Nature became visible to her as she drove past it. But to access this communion, she needed the vehicle. Later the relationship became

consuming, and she felt that he was taking Nature away from her –“She couldn’t keep loving someone who would squander the sky itself” (111)– and she took the road in speed again to walk away from him. The road is the symbol of her repressed past failures and fears, as well as risk, freedom and adventure. To recover the positive feelings she rides the three-wheeler, but she feels she is still on her old Harley, a classic symbol of American adventurers and of rebellious attitudes in popular culture.

The elderly couple in the story “The Ocean” drive equally in search of memories, but in the van they are “no longer talking, meandered throughout Georgia” (152). They are driving aimlessly because they are avoiding confrontation with the actual purpose of the trip. Bill, the husband, is actually selfish; the trip for him is an individual quest to face his memories of the war, his past and youth. Imogene wants to be a tourist but the small space of the camper prevents her from escaping themes that make her feel sad: becoming old, loss of purpose in life, distance with her husband, solitude, etc (152). In the quiet, limited space of the vehicle recollections become extremely loud; they cannot avoid them. It is interesting to notice that the road sign Mason decides to include in the text also makes reference to silence because “[t]here was a word missing” on it. Even on an advertising billboard, which are created with the main purpose of communicating, words disappear. On the road “signs were faded and rotting” (152) and so are their dreams, and their relation. But an old sign abandoned in the road is necessary for the reader to access that information about the married couple; that is, the reader accesses the characters’ emotions through popular culture, in this case two icons of American road trips: vans and billboards.

Mason’s techniques for word collocation are accurate and sharp. She tends to implement oxymoron, associating words belonging to the semantic fields of sound

and silence. Another example can be found in the story “Nancy Culpepper”. Nancy is helping her parents move out of their western Kentucky farm where Nancy’s grandmother has always lived. The moving digs out objects that are part of Nancy’s southern heritage, in which she has been increasingly interested, as she grew older. In her last visit to the farm, before driving her parents to the new place, memories become an obsession for Nancy. She wants to know everything about her family’s past. Consequently, the objects that she finds, pictures for instance, turn into a connection to the former southern life that she did not get to know: “The truck’s muffler sounds like thunder, and they drive without speaking” (182). The fact that a vehicle that transports all the family’s goods speaks louder than its members underlines their incapacity to communicate very conspicuously.

All in all, the fact is that when Mason’s characters drive, they look thoughtfully at the passing landscape from within a symbol of popular culture. During this unproductive action they do not reach a religious revelation, or approach a solution to their preoccupations. However, detached from the verbal demands of social interaction, elements of their common and familiar scenery become apparent. The aspects the characters reflect on do not state principles, or are loaded with any didactic message. Nevertheless, the reader can find information about the characters that, again, is not provided in the dialogues. Insight is found in the narrator’s description of the character’s thoughts. Fancy may seem to be randomly creating mental associations and images inspired by the landscape they are driving through, but there is more to these moments than just meaningless whim.

The act of driving gives them the chance to stay true to their natural laconic nature because the constant movement prevents them from having to respond to communicative demands. The characters feel revitalized in this freedom. The

landscape they drive through is independent from their past but reminiscent of it, prompting reflection. They will succumb to timely verbal interactions if they are driving with company and the quiet revelations of the companion end up manifesting in questions or emotional declarations. However, the main effect of driving is an unpretentious act of rebellion, refusing to yield to the demands of the postmodern South, where there is an overflow of input, through all forms of mass communication, and an everyday life increasingly fast-paced. When subjected to a constant feed of data and messages, people may react by balancing this out with an excessive and needless production of verbal communication. Mason's characters do not enjoy saying more than what they like saying, and privacy is of great importance to them. They reject any waste of words and driving empowers them as the movement and isolation of the vehicle black out external pressures to utter words. But for the reader the silent drivers and passengers in these stories are not obscure. On the contrary, they unveil intimacy indirectly but audibly.

Popular culture creates products that turn into communicative props for the southern character Mason is interested in. The writer finds inspiration in the normalcy around her in western Kentucky, and every inch of this context is infused with popular culture. Mason accepts it and embraces it. The value of these cultural products is not given by their mass production and success but by the use the characters make of them. For these people, popular culture means comfort and familiarity: most importantly, they can take possession of it and express themselves through symbolic comparisons.

The attachment to the physical world is constant in Bobbie Ann Mason's stories. She writes acutely about the South through minute studies of the actual façades, demeanors and movements of this region. In this chapter, the South has



become the stage where silent characters employ their bodies, objects and artistry to convey the messages their terse language resists to communicate. Hence, the reader will identify the parallel study of detailed narratives that zoom into the most insignificant details, from household utensils to limbs, for instance, together with the creation of symbolism, developing an insightful layer of representation of both the South and characters' psychologies. Due to postsouthern consumerist tendencies, the characters constantly handle objects that, in accordance to material culture studies, activate reveries, memories and epiphanies that contrast with the persistent interference of popular culture in the stories. However, by associating emotions to the physical world and mediated representations, Mason creates a respectful and encompassing depiction of the current southern reality, injecting beauty in every allegory constructed upon the ordinary, the broadcasted or the handcrafted products that decorate and articulate her postsouthern identities.

## 5. Landscape Contemplation and Silence in Bobbie Ann Mason's Characters.

### 5.1. The Unconventional Beauty of Nature in Mason's Fiction.

Elements from Nature that may be aesthetically appreciated tend to be observed by Mason's characters through what could be called "secular mystic", that is, a non-religious contemplative episode of introspection, projected on any element from the surrounding, either natural or manufactured. This concept can be associated with the original Romantic concept of the sublime, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) explains, which requires refraining from the "urge to re-imagine or anthropomorphise the 'awful scene'", which can "teach the adverting mind" (Duffy, 26). In postmodern romantic texts, such as Mason's, by attuning the imagination to the perceptive skills of the subject, the primary reaction when confronting an unsettling element would not be the need to categorize it according to preexisting labels but to accept the aesthetic value of it, surpassing the limitation of a canonical definition of beauty.

Lutterbie quotes the German playwright Bertolt Brecht's term "A-effect", which "consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware [...] from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected" (474). In this manner, the culturally or artistically irrelevant is brought into visibility in Brecht, and to the pedestal of beauty in others, but always without the need for grandiloquent celebrations. For minimalist writers with austere styles, "[a]bstract words [...] were obscene" (McDermott, 3), and that is why in descriptions of landscapes the elements perceived are not mystified, although the

respect and admiration for the surroundings tend to be also present. In Bobbie Ann Mason's literature this tendency shows because she integrates the complexities of the human interaction with the landscape in the postsouthern reality, where the rough and the delicate, the clean and the dirty, overlap, and merit an aesthetic approach.

Characters are highly attuned to their senses, and their perceptive skills seem at times to work in synesthesia (for example, when the hearing of a word activates a memory of food taste). However, their attachment to physical perception does not prevent them from coupling with their emotions, reaching moments of reverie, when they get lost in their thoughts and detach themselves from the corporeal. As a matter of fact, giving in to the senses in quiet contemplation can bring up "visionary silences", gradually being "refreshed", as American novelist and short story writer Frederick Barthelme<sup>54</sup> explains, when seeing how beautiful "the byproduct of our reputedly disgusting culture" can be (Online source). The imaginative skills of the characters and clarity in understanding their world and lives is enhanced if they acknowledge that aesthetic pleasure can also be found in a quiet contemplation of what can normally be depicted as irrelevant and not worthy of admiration.

Hence, the point that makes Mason's literature different in this respect is the way in which she deals with Nature. Within southern landscapes, half way between the rural and the urban, the wild sprouts ultimately in her literature within the circumscribed landscape of the farm, which represents cultivated and domesticated Nature. However, the writer portrays the beauty and pleasure encountered in the perceptible elements that remain uncontrolled around her characters: among others, the weather, fauna, weeds, or, frequently, the imprint left in the household, bodies and

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<sup>54</sup> He has been the editor of the online magazine *New World Writing* (formerly *Blip Magazine*, and *Mississippi Review Online*) since 1995, where Bobbie Ann Mason has published several pieces.

the landscape itself by the aforementioned remnants of the wild in the South of her stories. It will be through Mason's artistic alterations, employing silence and fancy as main devices, that the rampant will emerge.

Mason writes about space and links it with particular reveries as "[i]n our time, writing about space has most often meant an exploration of the imagination's ties to place" (Rebein, 84). But the healing powers of the pure landscape are not easily accessible to the silent beholder. Mason's characters may melt into the landscape to cleanse themselves from mental distresses, and such a process is similarly accomplished in contemplation of the untouched flora and fauna, as well as through the admiration of the inherited southern reality of farms, small towns, surrounding factories and power plants; in the unadulterated as well as in the dirt. The ecological complaint may prevail or lurk in the lines, but Mason's stylistic devotion is to these mixed views, where silence will emerge in accordance with thoughtful reflection, improving the character's perception and wellbeing. Silence will aid the character in the achievement of the "postsouthern relief"; that is, the effacement of the sense of complete loss in the altered South, because, even if the object and the self are only imperfectly identified, the individual can still be reassured by the gradual reification of bonds that connect him or her to the world around.

However, acquiring the skills to achieve these "postmodern relief" does not entail an easy process, regardless of the simplicity of its trigger. In fact, there would be certain uneasiness, the so-called postmodern anxiety, which French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) traces back "to the aesthetic discourse of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, which evinces [...] an overwhelming concern with an ontological crisis through its engagement with the sublime" (Chaplin, 109). The sublime does not equal beauty but a more complex experience of

interaction with the reality being noticed, which for Bobbie Ann Mason can include both natural landscapes from the South, wild fauna and flora, as well as road kills, garbage mountains or construction sites.

Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) expounded that the process of comprehension entails concentrating not on obscure thoughts or ideas, but, by allowing the reverie to focus on the engagement with the scene, on the physical and the concrete, eliminating any initial perplexity by gradually adapting the eye and the perceptive abilities to focus on the particular (Carlyle, 473). Carlyle<sup>55</sup> saw the poet as an observer of nature in charge of transmitting the romantic poetics to the reader. As in the distant case of the romantic poets, here, as well, the “use of *ekphrasis* takes a step forwards removing language as a medium between man and the world, allowing the human spirit to grasp more sensually (and truly) the material world” (Mason, Scott, 75).

Mason’s characters, however, develop this connection with the phenomenal without adhering to panpsychism<sup>56</sup>. In a state of receptive awareness, they simply stop to contemplate, and the sounds and movements of Nature become in this manner amplified and perceptible, pacifying the external and internal stressors, quenched in a sense of accordance, which puts an end to the postmodern anxiety of solipsism<sup>57</sup>. In the same manner, in the following lines by Walt Whitman, the human being assimilates comprehensively and kindly the sounds coming from the urban and the rural environments, both inert and alive components of both contexts, facing the loud

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<sup>55</sup> For further analysis of Carlyle’s relation to Romancism see: *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods*, edited by C. C. Barfoot (1999).

<sup>56</sup> Panpsychism is a philosophy centered on the idea that every material element contains a consciousness that defines it as individual; that is, every element has the quality of being “enminded” (Skrbina, 4).

<sup>57</sup> I already discussed how silence soothes the postsouthern feeling of isolation in chapter 3.

existences that have been previously ignored, regardless of their categorization within the canon of beauty:

Encompass worlds but never try to encompass me,  
I crowd your noisiest talk by looking toward you.

Writing and talk do not prove me,  
I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,  
With the hush of my lips I confound the topmost skeptic.

I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,  
And accrue what I hear into myself .... and let sounds contribute toward me.

I hear the bravuras of birds .... the bustle of growing wheat .... gossip of flames ....  
clack of sticks cooking my meals.

I hear the sound of the human voice .... a sound I love,  
I hear all sounds as they are tuned to their uses .... sounds of the city and sounds out of  
the city .... sounds of the day and night; [...]. (Whitman, 32)

The writer most clearly feels his innermost strengths and identity in silence and observation, when the voices of those having been previously silenced become part of his self, enriching his perceptive skills, his conception of reality and his satisfaction. Mason employs this sensitive attunement to create an encompassing poetic perception of her characters' surroundings. In this manner, her aesthetic descriptions comprise conventional and alternative sources of sensuous enjoyment.

## 5.2. Interpreting Silence in the Natural Space: Characters and Readers.

The silences and sounds perceived in the natural landscape not only activate sensorial discernment, but also loudly request a change in behavior: to become a listener in order to be part of the adjacent silence of Nature:

The silence of nature is not a silence of individual creatures but the silence of the natural world as such. It is utterly compatible with sound. It is simply that the sounds of nature are contained within its silence. [...] This silence of nature is more than an absence of human language. [...] Nature's silence is felt not as an absence, a lack of communication, but as a powerful summons on the part of the natural world, a demand for attention to be paid. Obeying this demand means shifting to a different kind of attention. This shift is what we call "falling silent." We descend –really, we deepen –into a profound attention from which something can come to meet us. (Nicholsen, 20)

In these situations of epiphany, individuals are accompanied by the invisible presence of the non-human and non-material, however previously ignored: "The mind, it seems, can create silence where actual silence is least present [...], the switch to silence, [...] meant the changeover from listening to seeing" (Prochnik, 63). There is a conscious step from the outer noise to a created silence in the mind that will project awareness back to the exterior surroundings, perceiving, thanks to having zoned out of the aural pollution of urban postmodernity human features and characteristics of the material world around them that, before that silence was created in the mind, were not visible.

Bobbie Ann Mason's characters do not comply with language as the sole technique to obtain mutual understanding. Fellowship is accomplished, in fact, mainly

in quiet moments, while conversation frequently brings to the surface the latent detachment between characters. Contemplation of landscape activates an empathetic instinct in the characters that will eventually help them appreciate each other. Therefore, when they encounter their encircling world with careful attention, they see elements and processes to which they were before oblivious. German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) explains that the instinct of language in human beings emerges in a sympathetic connection with the natural elements around them. People cannot but establish a linguistic link with the world around them. Sentient humans react to their surroundings, and the emotions are represented in utterances, these remaining unspoken or shared out loud; Herder sees these linguistic bonds as invisible strings that “communicate sparks to distant hearts, by which they feel for an unseen being. [...] [This communication can be understood as] a language of feeling, an evident law of nature” (2-3). The characters in the stories by Mason are often portrayed feeling connected to their surroundings.

This same process or re-learning to interpret silence in space will be undergone by Mason’s readers because in accordance to minimalist style and postmodern settings, the voice performing the role of storyteller, the main narrator, will never offer the reader a conventional and direct explanation of the character’s concerns. The narrator will instead scatter along the story symbolic scenes that must be noticed and remembered by the reader so that they can function as narrative ties, providing the plot with structure and coherence. Once the reader learns to decode the information contained in the material and physical details the narrator describes, his or her eyes will also have to realize that in the depths of the story, its background, there is also essential information. The setting, both natural and also that formed by men-created things, will equally reflect the emotions of the characters. The landscape



can be read as an interlocutor that speaks for the characters when they do not want to articulate segments of their identities.

For this reason, symbols drawn from the material world will provide information about the unsaid. Thus, Mason frequently uses personification of elements of the landscape to draw an added dimension to her characters' inner world that if spoken out loud would reduce, on the one hand, the lyricism of her stories, and, on the other hand, the intriguing aspects about Mason's southern personalities. When the couple formed by Joann and Cody in the story "Hunktown" are described as being "curled together, like sweet potatoes" (39), the reader should recall the sentence on page 37: "Sweet potatoes are hard to keep. They mold on you". Love, like sweet potatoes, will corrupt easily if neglected. Cody wants to be a country singer. He desires fame and success, which seems to conflict with a stable relationship. Joann perceives his selfish ambition as a threat to their future in common. The precarious state of their relationship is portrayed in this manner, but the narrator voices silence through similes and cohesive ties.

The root vegetable, which appears twice, is mentioned in a simile, which is Mason's favored trope to provide intimate access to her characters. She would rather use such oblique references. The indirectness adds to the flavor of the story by expressing emotional moments in the terms characters speak on a daily basis. The conversations of the characters, even if few in number, do not usually surprise by digressing into abstract topics, which have little to do with their reality. These characters are close to nature for different reasons. They appreciate their landscape and what comes from it, like a sweet potato. They are faithful to their background and origins. Memories and tradition are of extreme importance. These potatoes bring the story back to the context while creating a beautiful and simple image that is

immediately registered by the reader, activating feelings close to what the characters could be experiencing at that precise moment.

The stagnant people portrayed by Mason overcome a sense of confinement, and of being muffled, through the achievement of a transcendental communion with the natural surrounding. Hence, similes such as the above will be exceptionally common. The characters expand their limited existence and identity development through them, by means of “[t]he sensory South, the world of sight and smell and sound, the efflorescence of the landscape” (Wilson, 124). As an illustration, a reading of the closure of the tale “Offerings” suffices: “The night is peaceful, and Sandra thinks of the thousands of large golden garden spiders hidden in the field. In the early morning the dew shines on their trampolines, and she can imagine bouncing with an excited spring from web to web, all the way up the hill to the woods” (59). Sandra is divorced and repressed by previous generations of women in her family, in particular by her mother and grandmother, who pay her a visit. The quiet close-up gives her the sense of freedom that she lacks in the current situation. As Karen Fern Wilkes Gainey affirms: “release[s] of semiotic impulses –by encourag[ed] fantasy, [and] foster[ed] emotional expression ... satisfy the longing for escape the characters feel” (136). Mason’s southern settings, whether small and provincial or urban are oppressive for the characters, offering few chances of emotional, educational, cultural or intellectual growth. The resources are limited in these Kentuckian towns. However, when the characters and narrators describe what they have in front of their eyes, the landscapes that surround them, and they enjoy reflecting upon the view, their imagination is inspired and details of the vision are depicted metaphorically. The tropes and comparisons, and, sometimes, as well, simple language providing objective descriptions, can be easily accessed by the reader as symbols that represent the

emotions characters are not able to speak about out loud. Interestingly, the landscape both represses and liberates Mason's characters.

Finally, I would like to add that, as with any meaning in Mason's fiction, interpretations of the landscape are not absolute. Therefore, she does not only associate fanciful freedom and aesthetic pleasure to the southern land; Mason is a postsouthern writer that includes a multisided appreciation of her background through her distinct perceptiveness. In her memoirs, Mason herself looks back upon her father's return to the family's farm after his service in the Navy: "He and his father planted corn. He set out a small patch of tobacco, which he had never done before. I can imagine his state of mind then. There was nothing as comfortable and secure as the fields he knew. I can see how he sank back into the soil" (45). The positive connotations of familiarity are enhanced but also complicated by the image of her father rooting deep into the soil, almost like a tuber, buried by the layers of the southern past. The brooding landscape of the South may breed fancy, but also cripple the skills to disentangle the self from the region's heaviness. Silence, space and awareness are entangled in complicated associations that provoke multiple reactions in Mason's characters.

### 5.3. Nostalgia and Silence.

Mason's stories can be read as memory narratives depicting the South in silence through the geographical recollections of the characters. By "voicing" the past of these people without including dialogues in the memories, the aesthetic value of the landscape that functioned as stage is foregrounded. In this way, the setting becomes a character in itself in terms of importance and meaningfulness for the story.

This is because the descriptions of these recollections carry unstated assumptions that the reader can decode. In Bobbie Ann Mason's stories silence, landscape and memory form a triangle that supports the base for her southernscapes. She can perfectly encompass the intimacies of her characters without resorting to trite verbalizations of emotions, by means of a combination of descriptive sentences, brief speeches and, most importantly, passages of silence.

In his analysis of southern literature, J. William Berry emphasizes loyalty as a fundamental trait of the southerner (80). Mason in "Spence + Lila" is somehow commemorating her parents' love story. She could have remembered their first romantic encounters delivering a sentimental speech about their harsh youth in the farms of Kentucky and their devotion to this soil and their families. But that is not Mason's style. Her characters are complex, contradictory and fluctuating, and so are their relations to their roots. To transmit these intricate identities, scarce dialect and simple style function more effectively. Direct descriptive prose creates more reliable reminiscences, as it cannot be tarnished with the words of the character that is revisiting the past. Mason describes Lila meeting Spence during their courtship in a tobacco patch, where she used to work. Tobacco is one of the most significant harvests in Kentucky, and hence, the fact that, their first secret encounters are associated with tobacco, as they meet at the edge of the field (116), reinforces Mason's need to understand the South that saw her and her forefathers become adults. She takes the images further as Lila, learning to work with crops, hides any tobacco plant she broke by accident so that her uncle would not find out; in the same way Lila and Spence hide their flirting dates from the family (116). Somehow, they forge their intertwined identities through a physical reconnection with nature, as the following image of their meetings suggests: "They chewed gum from the black gum tree [a

common tree in the South]. It made their teeth black and their breath fresh, and when they kissed, it was like a cool, sweet breeze” (116-117).

However, as it was aforementioned, Mason’s southerners do not perceive this region of the United States in terms of absolutes. That is why, in the same short-story collection, *Nancy Culpepper*, tobacco is associated in another tale to a repulsive image, very different from the loving secrets of Spence and Lila in the fields. One of the characters of “The Heirs” goes back to work at the tobacco patch: “She smoothed her gummy apron. The tobacco made a stain like a thousand squashed roach bugs” (187). This woman longs for a life of comfort and luxury. Mason, as a child, also perceived the life of a farmer as a sacrifice; similarly, the unpleasant image of the stain reinforces the other side of bucolic rural lives: the arduous tasks. In fact, this same character of “The Heirs”, Artemisia, “had never demanded anything” out loud, but she longs for books, a piano and changes (200) –she just does not share it in speech. Thus, Mason’s characters never completely, or at least openly, reject their cultural roots, and so nostalgia is subtly integrated. The narrator that looks at the story-within-a-story in “The Heirs” investigates the past of Artemisia, a relative, but always within the frame of the land: “The farm had shaped the family for generations, as if each individual had been carved by the wash of the creek and the breeze of the heavy oaks” (177). In Eudora Welty’s words, “[a] place that ever was lived in is like a fire that never goes out” (Welty, 7). This strong attachment is created due to Mason’s characters’ extraordinary ability to perceive the surrounding agents, which not only evoke the functioning of the senses but also allow them to connect with each other in depth without having to articulate a word.

In their estrangement from language, characters become closer to true knowledge by accepting the vulnerability, inadequacy and frugality of interacting

with the world only through verbal interaction. Therefore, they will cling onto the land to comprehend their lives from past to present. Spence reaches the upcoming conclusion in the short novel *Spence + Lila*:

From the rise, he looks out over his place. This is it. This is all there is in the world –it contains everything there is to know or possess, yet everywhere people are knocking their brains out trying to find something different, something better. His kids all scattered, looking for it. Everyone always wants a way out of something like this, but what he has here is the main thing there is –just the way things grow and die, the way the sun comes up and goes down every day. These are the facts of life. They are so simple they are almost impossible to grasp. (131)

Mason's characters comprehend life through the southern landscape in the full cycle of Nature and in contemplative silence. Dialogues would just distract them from the truth about their backgrounds. In an interview with Albert E. Wilhelm in 1988, Bobbie Ann Mason explains that she started writing the story "Bumblebees" with descriptions of the farm and details from nature" (84). The physicality and sensuousness of this story, and of Mason's fiction in general, work as the stepping-stones to build the characters' personalities around, which explain why the countryside and the farm utter at times the ideas and emotions the characters cannot discuss openly. Hence, even though Mason rejects sentimentality, understated nostalgia features in her stories about the South.

#### 5.4. Women and Landscape in Mason.

Bobbie Ann Mason often depicts women's identities in parallel to Nature. We find this idea, for example, in the pure love for the land experienced by Barbara and Ruth in the short story "Bumblebees": "With the three of them cooped up, trying to stay out of each other's way, Barbara feels that the strings holding them together are taut and fragile, like the tiny tendrils on English-pea vines, which grasp at the first thing handy" (109). The use of the verb "coop up" collocates with the semantic role of the farm, and also emphasizes the claustrophobic feeling of three women shut up within the narrow limits of the house, creating a sense of tension and annoyance. However, the simile of the vines portrays unavoidable dependence and affectionate attachment. This is caused by the farm itself, which forces a close coexistence in space and, simultaneously, an emotional distance that is consciously kept by the three female characters; through the metaphoric comparison of these women with elements of the natural landscape they are characterized as neighboring bodies that reach out to the others but never by explicitly declaring it. They are linked by means of a speechless, intricate connection.

The setting of this little southern farm in western Kentucky exemplifies a motif of Bobbie Ann Mason's literature. The landscape provides access to characters' emotions through non-verbal messages. The words used by the narrator offer partial portrayals of such characters, the reader having to infer the rest. It is not surprising that these three characters find themselves in a quiescent moment as the two mature women and the girl in "Bumblebees" are experiencing three different types of mourning and learning curves. Ruth's daughter and husband have been recently killed in an accident, and she needs to rebuild her prospects and daily routines, coping with

their absence. Barbara has just got a divorce and is fulfilling her dream of living in the countryside, but, at the same time, facing the difficulties of her choice, as this rural life proves to be hard. Allison, the young girl, Barbara's daughter, has never had a close relationship with Nature and is discovering the beauty and idiosyncrasies of the landscape as if she were a baby encountering reality for the first time. As well as that, she is considering dropping out of college and gradually welcoming womanhood. During processes where something or someone dear is lost, a quiet and inward period is required, in order to process the change; and that is why silent contemplation collocates with the vital moment depicted by Mason in this story.

In women's literature, rites of passage have not traditionally been performed through long travelling quests, due to the scarce freedom women have traditionally enjoyed, and their restricted independence and opportunities for mobility. Female characters experience the process rather through inward journeys of psychological maturation. The reader may employ any access granted to the characters' thoughts and observe closely their behavior and physical reactions, since the journey is framed within the women's inner world and bounded area of experience, and therefore hidden from public view. Those remarks are echoed in the broader literary production of the region. Professor González Groba reflects on what the quest motif means for women, extending the question to other female voices of the South. The quest is territorially limited for these women as their possibilities to trespass frontiers are fewer. Thus, women writers depicting daily life frequently limit their fiction to intimate spaces where they were allowed to develop their identities, surrounded by familiar elements with which they could interact. "Housekeeping thus has a dual value. It is not only the silent, unvalued routine which constitutes the vehicle by which patriarchy maintains its controlling grip, but is also the core and the vehicle of a culture invented by



women, 'a complex and continuing process of female, domestic art'" (González Groba, 37). That is because these women have traditionally felt their voices to go unheard, or rendered as of secondary importance. But they have become accustomed to expressing themselves quietly through deviant canals of communication among strangling dominant discourses.

The ideal scenario for processes of revelation and personal growth to take place will be Nature, as it pries like no other agent into the characters' intimacies and reacts mirroring their existence. Jane, in "Airwaves", after deciding to join the Army, realizes that "[e]verything in her life is converging, narrowing, like a multitude of tiny lines trying to get through one pinhole. She imagines straightening out a rainbow and rolling it up a tube" (194). Apart from the clear reference to O'Connor's story "Everything that Rises Must Converge", this quotation evokes a multitude of options and an overwhelming range of tempting bridges to be crossed, in order to make sense out of Jane's life. It is a complicated process to build the identity as a character, and no less to decode it as a reader, but it is worth the effort. At the end of the memoir, Mason concludes: "Maybe we'll never find what we're looking for, but we have to look" (281). It is through quiet observation that the characters will gather information about themselves, and the reader seems expected to proceed exactly in the same way.

The protagonist of "Still Life with Watermelon", Louise, has enjoyed independence after her husband left for the West in an impulsive quest to become a cowboy. When he comes back, Louise convinces herself that her own fear of open spaces was the main reason for not having followed her husband to the West. But just after this thought, she enjoys the view of the landscape while her husband approaches their home's door:

Louise [...] turns to see Tom coming up the walk. His face is in shadow against the afternoon sun. [...] Beyond him is a vacant lot –a field of weeds and low bushes shaped like cupcakes. Now, for the first time, Louise sees the subtle colors –amber, yellow, and deep shades of purple –leaping out of that landscape. The empty field is broad and hazy and dancing with light, but it fades away for a moment when Tom reaches the doorway and his face thrusts out from the shadow. (73)

Tom's figure blocks or hampers her contemplation, and the colors of the landscape are substituted by the movement of his sideburns as he grins. The landscape disappears, and the dialogue she had established with the scene is interrupted. The land was talking to her and, in the interaction, the reader perceives her desire for the continuity of her freedom. However, Tom's physique eclipses the beauty of Nature and she is forced again to concentrate just on him; meanwhile, the frustration remains unshared.

Anger is similarly kept in secret in the unhappy marriage of the story "The Retreat", whose female protagonist has previously been described as a woman struggling to break free from restrictions. Like Georgeann's relationship with Shelby, the preacher also mentioned before, everything on the landscape as she "walks by the lake" seems to be fading away: the seagulls fly away from her, the clouds thin out "into threads [...] like something melting"; but she feels "stronger", and the strength shows in the form of tension; as when the "sun pops up", she is "tightening up" (139-40). Shelby, her husband, is confused by her determination, but it will not be weakened even if he "draws the blind on the window so the sun doesn't glare in" (142). She was empowered before as the sun appeared; now, she will not be

debilitated even if those rays are kept from her. Georgeann does not explain her desires but the elements of the landscape articulate them for her.

An essential function of silence for Mason is therefore to grant her characters, female and male, a space of natural contemplation in order to achieve a revelation that has not been linguistically or publicly articulated but that will be the reader's tool to reach the characters' dramatic disclosure about their existence and needs. Opal, in the story "Love Life", waits for the man she is dating, Randy, and looks passively, but, at the same time, attentively and in reflection at the landscape: "She notices a windfall leaning on a maple, like a lover dying in its arms. Maples are strong, she thinks, but she feels like getting an ax and chopping that windfall down, to save the maple. In the distance, the whining of a speedboat cuts into the day" (13). The surge experienced to cut the windfall in order to liberate the maple tree from the weight of the dead log clearly represents her rejection to commitment to Randy at the moment.

I would argue that Opal, who has previously defined herself in opposition to traditional concepts of femininity, sees men as the log, an unwanted, limiting load, and women as the strong and resilient maple tree. Nevertheless, it should fall upon the reader to establish this parallel, as the characters will never do such a thing. The simile is interrupted with yet another contemplative description of the landscape that has, conversely, no relation to the previous thought. In this case it is a "whining" speedboat that "cuts into the day" (13). It is a highly vibrating sound that will most probably interrupt the silent reflection; at the same time, the calm surface of the lake is made an incision in by the speed of the intrusive vehicle, and, in unison, Opal's path towards acceptance and recognition of her needs is equally stopped from progressing. Hence, this woman stuck between two souths, past and present, needs to reconcile her needs and emotions: she is learning a lesson. Mason, however, believes

in impartial disclosures, laconic personalities and narrators that are only intermittently omniscient and never judgmental or controlling. Consequently, in her deployment of women's desires she also attempts to find the balance that critic Paul R. Lilly Jr. identified in Faulkner's stylistic use of silence: the writer "must strike the compromise between the temptation of pure silence and the need to risk words" (174). In the case of Bobbie Ann Mason, such compromise results from the rhythm of the landscape speaking intertwined with the character's brief utterances.

In such moments of identity redefinition, the impressive appearance of Nature alleviates any distress caused both by current misfortunes as well as by memories. In fact,

[t]he verbalization of observations and reactions makes one much more acutely aware than would a more passive assimilation of experience. As Annie Dillard bluntly puts it in describing one of her two principal modes of awareness, "Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it (*Pilgrim*, 30)". (Slovic, 4)<sup>58</sup>

For those reasons, the eyes, in Mason's literature, become more effective storytellers than the mouth. Jackie Holmes, in "Tobrah", has only travelled by plane twice, and in both occasions it has been to the Southwest. Throughout history, the West has been a vast and mysterious land, alien and overwhelming for the senses of the travelers, as they lacked a reference with which they could establish comparisons that might enable them to activate a process of decoding and familiarization. In Jackie's description of both journeys she describes herself as bewildered by the unrecognizable elements encountered. In her first trip that element is the landscape

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<sup>58</sup> This book studies how, often, in American fiction, knowledge is gained through the observation of Nature.

itself, “the majestic palm trees” (20). The intensity of the image positions her in an attitude of humbleness in front of the awe-inspiring trees. And, in fact, the third person narrator explains that Jackie felt she had never been granted the opportunity of standing in front of an object of importance.

When her father passes away, Jackie is left to take care of her half-sister, of whom she knew nothing until that moment. Through the presence of the child, Jackie seems

to dwell on things she hadn't noticed before –small things at a child's eye level, [...]. She said, “It makes me think about Jack Frost. Remember those beautiful designs in the windows? Is that something only kids see? I used to see them at my grandmother's.” “Jack Frost doesn't come around anymore.” “How come? Pollution?” “No. Double-glazed windows and central heating. You saw Jack Frost in old, uninsulated houses where the windows were a single layer of glass. The frost was moisture condensed inside.” “I'm amazed. Is that supposed to be progress?” (27)

Lore and symbolic intrusions of Nature within a human household (the crystallized condensation on the windows) remind us of a seasonal change, activated thanks to the presence of Tobrah, the little girl. This implies that, somehow, the younger female generation brings back tradition in the mid of the modernization that is disintegrating the fanciful constructions of southern traditional stories, and the quiet wisdom of a little girl allows the woman to rediscover her surroundings and be playful with details of Nature.

With the intention of bonding with her sister, Jackie takes Tobrah to a lake. The lake “used to seem peaceful and vacant, without variety or possibility. It had soothed her because it made no demands on her. But now it seemed charged with life,

confusing and complicated. A coal-filled barge headed toward the locks. A flock of birds flew over noisily, like a cheering section. Pleasure boats were already shooting through the water” (41). Regardless of the difference in time period and setting, this paragraph is an unmistakable literary reverberation of the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau’s reflections on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts.

In between her marriages, Jackie had retreated to this lake in search of tranquility and unpolluted (both sonorous and urban) scenes. The lake is emptied of peremptory requests, where pure reverie can be achieved; up to that point, Jackie had visited this place because she desired to be left alone; that is why the emptiness and solitude found in the lake carried no negative connotations for her. Also, the landscape presented itself as enduring, which immediately conjures up a sense of comfort as well as stability. This last aspect is associated with wellbeing, liberating Jackie from the fear of a future change and from having to become something different; there was no expectation for development because in the lake she could just be, exist. Very similarly, Thoreau, during his stay in the lake, deploys the following metaphor to express the pleasure found in inhabiting an unfrequented and remote location: “I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part, so far as my needs were concerned, only the finest sediment was deposited around me” (154). He had departed to Walden in search of quiet and privacy. The residues that are poured to the landscape of Walden are not the unwanted remains, but, as he says, “the finest sediment” (154), the best companions he could desire, as he only received the company of those with whom he truly wanted to share his idiosyncratic experience of solitude.

Similarly, from a female perspective, Jackie brings Tobrah, with whom she has established a “kinship” (33), to the lake as the sole person with whom she could

enjoy the benefits of the place. These two southern generations slowly and in silence observe and learn through nature: they pick berries (27), and later look at deer and owls in a nature center. Together they follow the trails in the maps of the center's brochure (39) and perceive without talking their unique connection, "zigzagging down a wild trail", title of the collection, towards female bonding.

#### 5.5. Transcendentalism and Romanticism in Mason's Silent Landscapes.

Solitude and quietness mark the writing pace in Mason. Both elements emerge as sources of artistry for both romantic and transcendental thinkers. I have previously analyzed the literary influences in Mason, but here I want to focus on the combination "simple language, silence and Nature", in relation to these two aesthetic and ideological inspirations. In the story "Thunder Snow", the reader encounters the following description:

On Sunday evening rain began falling. It turned to sleet. Later, during the night, Boogie could sense the silence of snow over the house and yard. In the morning he lay still in bed for a few moments. He heard no traffic, no planes, no dogs or birds. He got up and pulled the drapers apart. The snow was coming in thick blobs fat as cotton balls. Already it had covered the barbeque grill on the porch, and the bushes out back appeared to be a row of snow soldiers. (64)

In this short story, regardless of the preoccupation felt by Boogie over his wife, who is away, driving in a snowstorm, the pace is dawdling. Actions linger along the paragraphs, meandering around close observations of the surroundings and fanciful moments of distracted contemplation as this man waits alone in his house for his wife,

while he suddenly activates his sensitive recognition of Nature, up to the point where he can perceive “the silence of the snow” –the ultimate symbolic canvas that may either eliminate meaning or reflect multiple interpretation on the landscape. In the beginning of the previous paragraph, the short sentences used to describe the change of water from rain into snow infect the reader with the feeling of dilatory actions. Snow then covers all activity and leaves the landscape in a total state of tranquility. Furthermore, Nature invades the human household, represented by the barbeque, and expands this mood into their rooms, making it available for Boogie to sense it.

However, silence and snow are not described as dreadful and suffocating presences; they are pure, soft and aesthetically pleasing, as “cotton balls”. Boogie’s voice might have been gagged in communion with the landscape, but, as was mentioned before, a situation of silence is the ideal platform for symbolism and reveries. The reader is presented with a clear picture of what surrounds the character and the reader’s ears are filled with the sound of silence. Faulkner said: “I prefer silence to sound and the image produced by words occurs in silence. That is, the thunder and the music of prose takes place in silence” (Kenny, 93). That thunder is also created in Bobbie Ann Mason’s prose with strong images that arise in moments where people remain silent and tune in with landscape.

In the following quotation, Stewart Gabel<sup>59</sup> writes on symbols in Jack London, whose novel *The Call of the Wild* (1903), which explores the meanings of Nature with a transcendental influence, regardless of its naturalistic style, resonates with Mason in the relevance of this communion with Nature: “If white may represent an absence of colors [...], silence reflects an absence of sound. It is a perception, a lack of perception, in which it appears as if there is no activity, or at least no activity that can

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<sup>59</sup> The essay uses as a background the theories of the Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung (1875-1961), who significantly contributed to studies of symbolization.



be heard [...] Silence sometimes precedes the onset of what is important or of what is a revelation” (Gabel, 27). In silence the perception of being surrounded by nothing to be perceived becomes sharply accurate, and it is the trigger of a deeper acknowledgement. Here, man embraces silence in order to discover the polluting effects of human creations in nature, earth and air (traffic and planes), but also in the natural inhabitants that normally complement the landscape with their vocal sounds, again from the earth and the air. The white silences have covered both commodities and tamed nature (barbeque and bushes); no component of the picture is left with a voice. In this romantic and transcendental moment, Mason’s language remains silent.

Even though plot and style severely detach these two writers, Faulkner still stands as a major influence over almost any southern writer, including Mason. The musicality found in silence that he claims for resonates with her naked style, i.e. her dry chains of words, which, nevertheless, create beautiful images. In the story “Three-Wheeler”, the character of Mary has undergone this process of uncomplicating her existence, getting rid of unnecessary accessories. She is single, has no family and has moved to an inherited farm that is still filled with the bric-a-brac of her deceased relatives. She comes from Santa Fe, a big city. In rural Kentucky, surrounded by nature, she feels the need to clear out the unnecessary. Bobbie Ann Mason writes with the same purpose, namely creating literature that is not overloaded with literary embellishments, keeping the language simple. Similarly, Mary disposes of overcrowding ornaments in the rooms of the farm and lives frugally: “She had abandoned everything else, on the advice of Henry Thoreau, who said, ‘Simplify, simplify, ’ and Henry Ford, who said, ‘Simplicate, then add lightness.’ Ford was speaking about his formula for airplanes, but it would apply to anything, she thought” (140). The connection between landscape contemplation and simple language is

constant in Mason's stories, because in moments when the characters decide not to talk in order to become attentive to details around them, the spoken word would be another distraction, standing in the way to aesthetic enjoyment and the soothing effect of getting lost in their own thoughts. It is perhaps a paradox in style, but for Mason's writing to be musical and penetrating silence is indeed required. The effort to understand reality will be minimized once the character is, as Mason confesses herself to be in her memoirs *Clear Springs*, "immersed in the strange particulars of nature" (Champion, 51).

The latter quote comes from Laurie Champion's critical comparison of *Clear Springs* and Henry David Thoreau's<sup>60</sup> *Walden* (1854). Champion explains: "For Thoreau, experience is the best teacher –we learn by observing our natural environment through our natural eye" (50). This affirmation is relevant when studying Mason's depiction of human interaction with the physical world, the use of language and the acquisition of knowledge. First of all, her tales also give great importance to the natural elements and their observation, but, in correspondence with the postmodern South being portrayed, the landscape is never solely made of bucolic scenes. It is equally made up of everyday objects, which will be enjoyed in the same manner, as they will also be sources of symbols. In addition to this, Transcendentalists<sup>61</sup> also advocated for an analytical attitude when observing reality;

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<sup>60</sup> Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American writer and social critic, living most of his life in Concord, Massachusetts, who developed his philosophical and literary interests under the mentorship of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Both men of letters were leaders of the Transcendentalist movement. In 1845, Thoreau moved to Emerson's piece of land on the shore of Walden Pond and he proceeded to build himself a small cabin. He stayed there for two years, exploring the possibility of a frugal and contemplative life of economic independence and contact with nature.

<sup>61</sup> Transcendentalism was a philosophical movement developed by a community of intellectuals from Massachusetts in the late 1820s and 1830s. Even though the group was diverse, they shared characteristics: many were based around Boston and associated to Harvard University; they protested against the strictures of Calvinism

and this activity would be best performed independently in quietness, a belief that links Bobbie Ann Mason to this philosophy. In fact, Mason, as Champion says, “realizes how important solitude is for contemplating truth. ‘Maybe I’ll just sit still and grow quiet and contemplate what is close to home. It would be a good time to let the colored-glass bits and floating feathers and song snatches in my head settle, so that some clear light can shine through’” (51-52). To attain that clarity, privacy is required, and that can only be reached in a silence where ideas will be put in order. As Wittgenstein<sup>62</sup> explains, “all thinking, whether or not accompanied by utterance, occurs in a private language of thought. Thinking is inner propositional activity” (Hanna, 22).

The grammar and syntax employed in this language of silence will empower the individual to approach the mystic. In the case of Mason, this will be a secular mystic, where the contemplative character will enter a higher level of comprehension, a Platonic enrichment through symbols. These symbols make signification possible, through a referential system, which will become apparent for the subject experiencing what Julia Kristeva calls “a semiotic disposition”, which facilitates the emergence of semiotics in the symbolic; that is, in the symbol the subject will find and apply the semantics, syntax and pragmatics of his or her language and environment. However, two components are essential: the environment, i.e. Nature, and the human capacity to

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and believed in mankind’s boundless goodness, and favored skepticism when approaching religion. They emphasized the relevance of personal autonomy, finding anything outside the self restrictive and limiting, yet accepting the benefits of genuine kinship and collaboration. Freedom and knowledge, for the Transcendentalists, were closely related to the imagination and creative skills, as well as an active contemplation of Nature and conscience. They did not think the senses were the only means to achieve experience and personal growth. Transcendentalism was, and still is, an essential philosophy for American society, as they fought for educational reform, women’s rights, and abolitionism.

<sup>62</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein was an Austrian-British philosopher (1889-1951) that I have found useful because of his philosophy of language.

project symbolical meanings onto matter. The latter is necessary to find the symbols as, bringing up Coleridge once again, “[n]o object of Sense is sublime in itself; but only so far as I make it a symbol of some idea. The circle is a beautiful figure in itself; it becomes sublime, when I contemplate eternity under that figure” (Trott, 84). The Romantic closeness to Nature equally resonates with Mason, regardless of the historical distance and obvious differences.

Physicality is equally compulsory to accomplish this secular mystic, because, as Christopher Collins explains, man uses matter as a language to explore the self (37); it is an idea that refers back to Emerson. The Transcendentalist thinker maintained that all words

have their origin in concrete objects. Even the most abstract and humanized concepts stem from natural facts. Thus ‘wrong’ originally meant “twisted”, and “spirit” meant “wind”. “Words”, he says, “are signs of natural facts”, by merely reversing the equation, natural facts become words. For: “It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things that are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind and that state of mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture”. (Collins, 36)

In fact, Mason herself has admitted her “affection for Emerson and Thoreau and their remarkable community in Concord” (Grava, Online Source), which is obviously reflected in her fiction and the close relationship between her characters and the land in their process of inner development.

Again, as Mason could be connected to a sort of postmodern romanticism/transcendentalism, but always including elements of dirty realism, the encroachment upon the natural landscape of products of modernity and popular

culture are constant, highlighting the relevance of the material. The deeper understanding of emotion and the surrounding environment is always achieved in a moment of silence. The reader, in order to understand the development of a round character and the complexity of his or her reactions, should not look for relevant information in speech acts but during those silent contemplations of both natural elements and prosaic objects. The latent claustrophobia undergone by the southern characters caused by the cultural, vital, interpersonal and intellectual limitations of the rural towns and small cities functioning as settings for the tales is overcome through an acknowledged possibility of expanding their “consciousness as a way to transform the world” (Gainey, ii-iii). Remaining silent, resisting the usual demand for conversation, allows characters to escape from these restrictions.

These moments of silent observation provide a experience of communion with the environment, not with the religious or transcendental world but with that which is immanent, apparent to the eye and pertaining to the physical world: “Although Mason delineates with great clarity the problems and restrictions placed on characters by culture, she also suggests that there are ways around, through, or over those restrictions –by tapping into the ‘inner resources’ inherent in each character’s unconscious, each individual’s semiotic potential” (Gainey, 163). “Semiotic potential” is a term defined by Julia Kristeva, which alludes to the existing, yet not unveiled, meaning of objects. Symbols enable signification. As Gainey explains, they also create free zones for the characters within the existing environment, which eliminates and solves the existential crisis of Mason’s characters of needing to leave behind their cultural roots and hometowns. This entails that within the bounds of the symbolic elements that the character is capable to interpret, due to familiarity and enduring interaction and confrontation, they find a psychological landscape within

themselves. And this psychological landscape favors independence and recognition of the validity of the individual, again relevant for romantics and transcendentalists. This self-reliant observation procures a semiotic realm that grants the characters the impetus for a more loosely structured recomposition of identity and environment. This energy finds then its origin in the analysis of the natural element and the projection of a symbolic meaning onto it. This will “trigger momentary semiosis” (Gainey, 160), both in the character and in the reader. Mason’s characters read symbols in objects and decode meaning, commencing, in this manner, a train of thought that will lead them even “beyond [...] the symbolic” (Gainey, 165), getting access to repressed emotions and revelations that come from the subconscious. Hence, by being independent, they comprehend beyond the specifics of language, reaching a self of communion –granted by the silent awareness of a linking rhythm between people and landscape.

Mary, in the story “Three-Wheeler”, lives a lonely life, and she is portrayed as highly impulsive, receptive and sensitive to her environment. She admits that she has not let herself fall in love again after her relationship with David McAllister. However, her attempt to establish a connection with the boys playing in her backyard fails to be fulfilling, and hence she suddenly escapes on the three-wheeler into solitude. The boys help her fill in a hole with dirt in her garden. They want to use an old three-wheeler found in Mary’s garage. But when they are having fun driving it around, Mary stops them to madly drive it herself, feeling free and enjoying her independence.

The silence gained by solitude would be a mental silence, since the natural surroundings will always be in constant production of sounds; consequently, there will never be a mental state in absolute synchrony with the circumambient

soundscape. But the sounds of nature are compatible with Mason's inherent silence and her employment of silence as an integrative stylistic tool; the absolute equilibrium maintained provides a space for characters to contemplate themselves and move towards an enhanced awareness:

The silence of nature is not a silence of individual creatures but the silence of the natural world as such. It is utterly compatible with sound. It is simply that the sounds of nature are contained within its silence. [...] This silence of nature is more than the absence of human language. It is an overarching sense of both containment and potential, of vitality ever emerging and not yet grasped. [...] We descend –really, we deepen –into a profound attention from which something can come to meet us. In this state we can be touched by the aliveness and presence of the nature and its creatures, among which are we ourselves. (Nicholsen, 20)

Shierry W. Nicholsen, in her study of environmental concerns, later adds: “To enter the silence of nature is to abstain from the confirmation of human contact and speech. One sinks into the abyss of the nonhuman. What one finds in nature's silence, however, is a sense of pure presence in the intangible present moment” (Nicholsen, 22). And “To enter this space, we must have the capacity to be alone. And this capacity depends in turn on the experience of being both separate and merged with another” (Nicholsen, 23). This union is necessary in order to “hear” the silence of nature. If the silence of nature is perceived, the calmness of the surrounding will transfer to the mind; it will provide peace of mind, silence of thoughts. Even when Mary and David, in the story “Three-Wheeler”, are recalled riding when they were young, the road is embedded in the Grand Canyon, and they cross it “undulating with the road” (112). In this way they shape their beings in conjunction with their setting;

they exist without altering nature, merely adapting their existence to it. To feel free in that moment the couple had to remain speechless in order to “hearken” the silence of nature. That verb is etymologically related to “hark”, which means “to mention or remember something from the past”. Correspondingly, Mary is evoking her youthful memories. Another meaning of “hark” is “to be aware of and pay attention to”. In a combination of both definitions, the skill to reminisce and the skill to approach vivid awareness, Mary acquires a sharp perception of the silence of nature, which leads her to a greater understanding of her vital situation and needs, as well as to a detailed perception of the most minute component of the landscape and soundscape simultaneously within and without.

In the story “The Funeral Side”, the vast and alien scenery of Alaska is described:

On the balcony, as they sat together in the evenings, she tried to tell her father about her life in Alaska, nervously straining for words to describe the height of the mountains, the glaring brightness of the snow, the brilliant colors of the wildflowers, the size of the mosquitoes. [...]

One night she tried to describe the northern lights to her father. The night was humid and sheet lightning flared in the distance. ‘The aurora is like neon signs, and it works on the same principle,’ she said. Words failed. She thought of the pulsating colors and showers of brilliant light. (124-125)

The paragraphs do not only prove the linguistic shortcomings when describing a natural landscape, but also exemplify Bobbie Ann Mason’s constant use of similes. These are frequently open similes, which do not make explicit the correlation between the elements compared. These similes are employed by the characters to interpret their surroundings. Often, the pair contained in the trope is formed by a prosaic,



utilitarian object belonging to everyday life and an element from the natural scenery. The frequency of this composition indicates how the characters try to search for meanings and semantically-charged sources for their construction of nature, but the postsouthern objects permeate their language and thinking, signaling the significance of the immediate cultural symbols and the author's awareness of the need for the inclusion of pragmatic, realistic and banal artifacts and details. This is what Pascal (1623-1662) called "the superior language of reality":

Pascal was astonished by the silence of the universe and this made him speechless [...]. In such situation of perplexed contemplation, there is no need for an explanation or another verbal supplement, because it can only be very poor in comparison with the spectacle itself [...]. There is no relation at all between the words of an insignificant being on a speckle of dust in space and the silent infinity of the universe. (Verhoeven, 40)

This respect for the voice of the scene explains the dialectic muteness in Mason. Beauty could only be referred to in words by means of similes. Mason makes this stylistic decision because these similes are very handy when her characters try to compare their deepest emotions and any striking element from the scenery. The sources of strong feelings, either mental or physical, would expectedly be difficult to articulate for characters that feel self-conscious when using big words and elaborated sentences. Because of this, they find a way around the language of emotions to transmit their most intimate experiences; they do so by comparing a very basic and generic attribute of the feeling undergone with another natural process; that is, instead of resorting to poetic language, the writer uses comparative structures (i.e. "to be like") to bring the emotion down from the abstract and into the earthly. In the story "The Funeral Side", when Sandra struggles to find words to describe what she feels

when contemplating the landscape of Alaska, she compares it to what her senses experience, a bodily reaction: in her case, it is no other than sexual pleasure:

She thought that sometimes sights and sounds were so unreal –like the news of someone’s death –they could not be remembered or believed. [...] She recalled what she said to Tom when they saw the lights together the first time. She said they were like an orgasm. Later, during an orgasm, the curtains of color rippled through her mind. When she told Tom this the next day, he said, “It’s like looking up a word in a dictionary and it gives you another word you don’t know, and when you look up that one, it refers you back to the first word”. (124)

Both a physical and a spiritual climax, excitement is sensually perceived as waves of energy that move on the character’s body, connecting personal intimacy with the minute contemplation of the landscape. Her boyfriend reacts to her comparison by making a reference to the paradox of language, where speakers rarely grasp the complete meaning of their mother tongue because every term they attempt to understand leads to a loop of further definitions. The character is defining language as a system that crisscrosses itself inconclusively. This metaphor can be read as a warning for the characters themselves and the readers: if one relies only on the literal definitions of words and a linear employment of language, the complex meanings of life would not be successfully explained. Language cannot be distanced from the object, from the physical. If our use of language becomes too detached and excessively abstract, emotions cannot be successfully communicated. People can convey their inner selves by establishing comparisons with nature. But, in order to have access to these comparisons, people have to stop, be quiet and contemplate. This sensorial experience of the characters will materialize in the form of simple tropes of

comparison, which are one of Mason's stylistic traits. Transcendentalists believed that the physical eye perceived in order to reach an inward sense of recognition of the world. Similarly, Mason's characters respect contemplation of the physical world to make sense out of confusion.

The constant use of metaphors is very much related to the objective and uncompromisingly realistic style of Mason. The secular transcendentalism of her landscape contemplations creates her poetic prose. And Guy Rotella states that, according to Robert Frost<sup>63</sup>, "metaphor is identical with thinking" (62). So in order to reason about the environment and the character's existence therein, Mason employs metaphor. In fact, Joyce Carol Oates says the following about the writer: "The idiomatic yet poetic naturalism of Bobbie Ann Mason's prose voice is an art, [...], so quietly forged as to seem at times artless; but it is precisely rendered, moving in the subterranean ways to the final luminous detail, the powerful revelation of synecdoche" (655). This is achieved because her similes –visual metaphors that convey a romantic trait –deal with the ideas found in Nature, and are processed through the humble reasoning of characters that do not abandon their southern pragmatism even in instants of reveries.

The following stanza of the poem "The Bird" (1650-1655) by the Welsh Metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan resonates, though distant in time and geography, with Mason's perception of Nature. The empathic feeling ignited by a close observation of the landscape sharpens all receptive skills, and the individual becomes highly attuned to nature. In this manner, the poet assigns value to this humble ecosystem. The vivid description contains words pertaining to a semantic field of sounds and melody, which attribute human abilities such as speaking and admiring to,

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<sup>63</sup> American poet (1874-1963), close to Mason in terms of Nature appreciation.

for example, stones and winds. Hence, silence becomes a pleasurable action that helps the writer, or the “I” of the composition, reach awareness of the multiple languages to be interpreted in Nature. Hence, silence is the access to a wider soundscape than that created by speech. This soundscape will be found in the contemplation of nature, exemplified in Vaughan’s lines:

‘So hills and valleys into singing brake,  
And though poor stones have neither speech nor tong,  
While active winds and streams both run and speak,  
Yet stones are deep in admiration’

(qtd. in McFarland, 125).

Nevertheless, for silence to speak to the reader, the relevance of the symbol has to be embraced. In the tale “Rolling into Atlanta”, the third person narrator describes the way both the writer and the character perceive reality. Annie’s life changes when she is asked to work as the company’s spy in a restaurant. Everything becomes an invented reality, a cover story, from a fictional boyfriend to her motives for leaving Texas for Atlanta. She is adapting to the new place: “She had been drifting off to sleep between one and two, and at five o’clock a loud noise somewhere in the building always woke her briefly and made her visualize a door slamming on her past. That she translated every sensation into metaphor nowadays was perfectly appropriate, she thought” (79). Plunged into their solitary silences, characters are awakened by an alien sound that forces them to acknowledge a fact, either from their past, current life, or plans, that they have been voluntarily forgetting, that is, ignoring, up to that moment. The choice of the verb “drifting off” is relevant as it describes the general attitude embraced by Mason’s characters just before that instant of cognizance: they move through their existential experiences passively and without a

specific aim, lacking any agency. The reader, together with the characters, converts the emotions provoked by sounds and silences into powerful mental images. It is, yet again, the influence of imagism in Bobbie Ann Mason. The scene projected in the readers' and characters' minds is symbolic, illuminating the immediate interpreter, the character, and the secondary interpreter, the reader, leading them towards a previously hidden, or at least partially veiled, fact of their lives, personalities or feelings. Besides, the noise sets off another loud disturbance: the forceful crashing of a door. Annie, the character in this case, visualizes a door violently closing access to her past. It embodies an impediment to reach her memories, which, however, due to the sound, functions as a reminder of the same experience being blocked.

There is no paralysis of plot in Bobbie Ann Mason's short stories even if there is never a frantic chain of events taking place. She is definitely neither a transcendentalist nor a romantic poet, but the internal world of the characters is swirling in tune to almost imperceptible outer alterations that bring to her writing powerful images. Mason's characters, in order to acknowledge their maturing process, have to connect with the surroundings through their senses. Once the connection is made, their memories and imagination are activated to make them aware of the emotions they have, until then, frozen, unready to confront them. Hence, personal improvement is achieved through silent contemplation of the landscape, which triggers knowledge and action, even if only internally.

Bobbie Ann Mason sticks to realism when describing the landscape where her characters interact. Therefore, she does not distill Nature, but rather includes all its components, even if they are distorted, disturbing or bizarre. The scenery is scrutinized without forcing into the narrative any canonical southern nostalgia that attempts to embellish the land through restrictive representations. The passion Mason

feels for the South is displayed in her honest homage to the rural and urban, grotesque or exquisite. This capacity to discover aesthetic pleasure in both the disturbing and the desirable is transmitted to her characters, who gradually learn to read the landscape in silence towards thoughtfulness and communion. Mason's readers will undergo the same process of discovering the symbolic implications that can only be noticed by tuning in to the rhythm of the stories. The musicality of Mason's narratives emerges from the southern sounds, noises and voices, intercalating silences and unexpected, unconventional speeches. The language to portray Nature will be truthful and simple but with tropes capable of transmitting the unarticulated feelings of these contemplative characters.

## 6. The Laconic Dialogues of Bobbie Ann Mason's Southern Characters.

### 6.1. The Conversational Analysis of Bobbie Ann Mason's Short Stories.

The South is a space of both silence and loud cries. The western Kentucky towns Bobbie Ann Mason writes about do not discuss the racial struggle that shaped these states; however, the past and present of African-American southerners illustrates the power of this land to muffle voices and empower certain kinds of speech. Rosa Parks (1923-2005), an African-American Civil Rights activist from Alabama, was arrested on a bus in 1955 when she refused to stand up, after a white man demanded her to give him her seat<sup>64</sup>. This leader from a movement that fought for freedom and ended up defining a nation was an introvert, which does not mean one who feared communication. Someone like Rosa Parks faced racism, but then defined herself as a timid woman. She “held her silence” (Hull, 7) as the police officer interrogated her, but she acted upon injustice, quietly, measuring carefully when to intervene with words.

African American writer Toni Morrison linked the emergence of the United States with the process its fiction has undergone: “Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so did the literature, [...] –one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows” (6). Such tragic and heroic past cannot disappear from a nation's artistic identity. Bobbie Ann Mason is a regionalist and focuses on a realistic

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<sup>64</sup> The episode is narrated in greater detail in the monograph written by Mary Hull in 2007.

yet proud portrayal of southern introverts; and by means of the actions and selected dialogues of these particular characters, she signifies a holistic southern experience. As critic Peter J. Rabinowitz explains in his study of the fictional depiction of the physical world: “it is often more useful to look not at the assertions about the issues at hand but rather at those places where the novel is silent” (409). Hence, Mason silences part of the past and current social reality of the South, but in these gaps the reader can find the traits of the region as well. When entering her fictional world, one must be aware of the specificity of her inspiration, regarding themes, characters and contexts, but these are still only pieces of the southern totality. In these stories, the South will be given a voice and also muted. Both the spoken words and the silences, however, will speak of the truths of this region of the United States. This is the reason why the complex identities of Mason’s characters with their vacillations between dialectic outbursts and introspective silences enrich her oxymoronic stylistic strategy from which this project stems: Bobbie Ann Mason’s quiet loquaciousness.

Amanda’s daughter, Laura, in Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), is also a shy and contemplative southern character, overwhelmed by the loudness of the intruding personalities around her. This context is close to Mason’s reality as the scenes in the play evolve around the silences and conversations of the three main characters: Amanda, her son Tom, and Laura. Laura builds her world under the commands of her mother, and the protective presence of Tom, while carefully tending to her glass figurines. Regardless of her mental instability, this girl is far from being a simpleton. She perceives beauty and can speak eloquently when describing the parts of the world that interest her: like a hothouse, or some penguins in the zoo. Amanda constantly shouts, gives orders and interrogates Laura, but within her reserved and tranquil movements, the young lady “actively resists both the role



that society prescribes for women as well as Amanda's insistence that she conforms to it" (Crandell, 9). This resistance permeates the literature of Mason, whose characters experience as well the pressures caused by social demands, calling for candid and forthcoming personalities. Conversely, introverts feel empowered by low stimulation environments, and they are most creative when undisturbed. They are often strong and inspiring souls.

In the lyrical combination of silence and speech that Bobbie Ann Mason employs in her stories, this dissertation needs to focus now on the dialogues of characters in her short fiction, which she writes with realistic symbolism built upon the nuances of her regional dialect, with referential language that constantly pays homage to the land. She explains in her article "The Chicken Tower" that the language of her ancestors is for her a relic; it carries great sentimental and historical value (95). She finds inspiration in sounds, natural or human, and hence inspiration for her originates from words.

This chapter will offer close readings of a selection of illustrative dialogues from Mason's collections of stories and tales published individually in journals. Five points have been identified as framing themes and situations for the conversations her characters most frequently engage in: housekeeping matters, storytelling, women talking to women, men and women's verbal exchanges, and spontaneous conversation with strangers. In order to understand the relevance of word choice, pauses and accents in these dialogues, it is useful to read Bobbie Ann Mason's description of the language she portrays through her characters, which is no other than the one of the South she very well knows. In the aforementioned article, she puts it in the following way:

My mother uses idioms that are dying out with her generation, right along with the small family farms of America. Her way of talking is the most familiar thing I know, except maybe for the contours and textures of this land. Mama's language comes from the borderlands of England and Scotland and from Northern Ireland, with some other English dialects thrown in, and it is mingled with African-American speech patterns acquired along the way. It's spoken, with variations, in a band of the upper South stretching from the mid-Atlantic states across the Appalachians to the Ozarks. In the Jackson Purchase, this old dialect rested in the farmlands and changed with the weather and the crops and the vicissitudes of history as news filtered in from other places. (92)

No society and culture evolves independently from the language that shapes them both. Consequently, in Mason's reflection of the way her mother used to speak, there is a parallel vision of the South she writes about. This is a land and heritage that is "dying out". The familiar metaphorical and literal terrain that supports these fictional personalities has expired. Their language is failing them in their struggle to relate to a South in permanent transition. This is the core of their communication, as they try to comprehend distressing alterations with the same words they have been bequeathed.

## 6.2. The Southern Speech Paradox: Introspective Storytellers.

The present analysis of Bobbie Ann Mason's dialogues is rooted in a combined interest in Speech Act Theory, Discourse Analysis, and Discourse Stylistics<sup>65</sup>; however, the purpose is to identify the emotional and social issues and

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<sup>65</sup> Speech Act Theory originated in the 60s mainly with the contributions of philosophers and linguists John Searle, American, and John L. Austin, British. This theory studies the performative action of speech in conversation. The limitations of

situational contexts that prompt these pithy characters to get involved in conversation. Additionally, it will be established that the underlying influence in the communication of Mason's characters is a tendency towards silence, which remains a defining trait even when they speak. For this reason, in this last chapter, the initial argumentative line of speechlessness being the backbone of Mason's stylistic strategies, far from receding from view, must be constantly invoked as the ultimate motivation.

Studying the contemporary southern persona described by Bobbie Ann Mason entails a paradox: the two contrasting traditional tropes of the southerner, i.e. the porch storyteller and the laconic agrarian. In Mason's stories these two opposite roles merge meaningfully. Individuals employ articulated language to interact with the world, recognizing themselves in the objects, people and landscape contemplated, constantly establishing emotional links through metaphorical thinking. However, in a context where identity and its surroundings seem to be a constant performance, which is the case of the postsouthern life stage, the southern persona is often found pretending.

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this approach within literary studies come from the assumption that fictional dialogues do not always attempt to result in actions. In the stories considered, the mental state of the characters when they speak is taken into account as a testament of identity. Because the priority here is to find the particularity of selfhood and the aesthetics of language in these alternative worlds and communicative strategies, Discourse Analysis proved also useful. These theories account for the relation between speech in written form and as it naturally occurs. Hence, through these principles it was easier to explain the emotional expressions and innuendo hidden in the words of the characters –even if these speeches do not mirror any consequent action on the part of the interlocutors. An aesthetic criticism contributed to the analysis of metaphors, where no discernable set of patterns can be found. Meaning in those cases is unique to the text, to the author and to the personae being portrayed through verbal strategies. In order to complement the limited definitions here provided, several relevant works on speech, discourse and stylistic criticism follow, listed chronologically: Deidre Burton. *Dialogue and Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Modern Drama Dialogue and Naturally Occurring Conversation* (1980); Deidre Burton and Ronald Carter. *Literary Text and Language Study* (1982); Jean Jacques Weber. *Critical Analysis of Fiction: Essays in Discursive Stylistics* (1992); Raymond W. Jr. Gibbs. *The Poetics of the Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding* (1994).

On the one hand, the southerner enjoys the act of storytelling. The frequently fictionalized image of a family in the porch telling stories portrays scenes of agile communicators and good listeners. The narrator of real stories, as opposed to those consumed in the mass media, is empowered through the performance of voice. A canonical example can be found in one of William Faulkner's masterpieces, the story "That Evening Sun", published in 1931. Nancy, an African American cook, is taking care of the white children of the family in her cabin one evening. She is asked to tell a story, and it is at that precise moment that her identity is enlarged, extending beyond the limitations of her poverty, fear of her husband, and the racism around her. Sitting in a chair in front of the fire, she talked like "she was living somewhere else. She was outside the cabin. Her voice was inside and the shape of her, [...]. But that was all" (250). Southern characters who are described as storytellers are able to drill through the restrictions of the region –whether racial, economic, educational or sexual, to name some.

The innate presence of the past in the maturing process of a southerner may create an urgency to narrate (hi)stories. In those attempts, veracity is relevant because, in order to be heard, the eloquent speaker needs to differentiate himself or herself from a charlatan. On this matter, Flannery O'Connor stated the following in an interview with C. Ross Mullins in 1963: "the Southerner knows he can do more justice to reality by telling a story than he can by discussing problems or proposing abstractions" (103). The peculiarities of the past and present of the South require conversations, and multiple perspectives, to approach a faithful representation. If a southerner wants to belong in a community, the fastest access to trust is storytelling.

Due to the fact that southern characters are often prompted to tell stories by memories and revelations about their own past and present, the language employed

will be characterized by a labyrinthine discourse structure, bewildering images –in general, a more indirect style than the one employed in storytelling that evolves around myths or past incidents. This is because if a storyteller inherits a tale, even though this person may create a different version, the main structure is given and followed; however, storytellers that integrate emotional events in their performances will find it more complicated to never divert, and rephrase as the tale comes closer to their own life. Critic J. B. Berry studied the autobiographical impulse of the southerner and its relation to the storytelling tradition; the effect of this desire to account for heritage in tales translates in the “meandering, [and] anecdotal style of southern conversation” (7). As a consequence, the southern narrator will talk, will get a message across, but the path followed to the climax or conclusion is characterized by undirected speeches. Allen Tate described this verbal trait in different terms: “The typical Southern conversation is not going anywhere, it is not about anything. *It is about the people who are talking*” (584, author’s italics). Thus, the chatty southerner who shares gripping yarns creates an environment with his audience in which the actual content of the story becomes the background to the ultimate treasure of this oral legacy: the sounds of language. So even though Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters are not constantly swinging in porches telling tales, they do talk; but the plot, the event or the description gets blurred compared to the effect the musicality of the message has in the recipient’s interpretative skills.

On the other hand, and bearing in mind southern writers’ sensitivity to sound and discourse, their characters frequently hold a close relation to the land, which is attained by means of fine attunement to the surrounding soundscape. To fully perceive the ultimate composition of the sounds of their culture, these characters have to appreciate silence as well. A character in the southern novella *Cry Lonesome*

(1990), written by anthropologist Miles Richardson, says that speaking wastes, degenerates or weakens a man, and that the South he knew was “[s]ilent, but not quiet, and not slow” (106). I agree with the description and use it as a basis to reject the labeling of Mason’s characters as inarticulate. They are in control of their language, they can and know how to enjoy it, but they equally find pleasure in stillness. For Tom, a scientist-physician that studies a change in his community’s behavior, in Walker Percy’s last novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1999), a southern dystopia, not every aspect of the southern experience needs to be turned into a story; in fact, “if there is such a thing as a Southern way of life, part of it has to do with not speaking of it” (159-160). Mason’s are introspective personalities, such as the ones created by Percy, who find meaning in the detailed analysis of the landscape and people around them.

Within the postsouthern, Kentucky referents have been distorted due to the constant geographical and ideological permutation, and to the linguistic additions of modernity. The persona and the stage, or, in other words, the individual’s projected identity and his or her social context become equally affected by rapid alterations, and, then, the normative practice to interpret reality, that is, verbal exchange, becomes inefficient. Consequently, the characters resort to silence, where a contemplative state may soothe uncertainty, and the quiet sensual apprehension of the world may provide meaningfulness, independently from any selfhood-determining utterances. The resilient rural southerners, who shape their performance according to the changes in the landscape, disregard discourse as a practical device for identity formation. These characters observe and act accordingly in silence.

Consequently, Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters are laconic storytellers, who understand their culture and share their wisdom unpretentiously and thanks to their

brooding tendencies. I asked the writer about this oxymoron in an interview for the American Studies journal *Transatlantica*. This is Mason's take on the matter:

I'm not a natural storyteller, I didn't grow up with a traditional storytelling Southern background, and my characters are probably mostly introverts. What affected me was the *sound* of talking, perhaps because it was not a constant. The sounds came out of silence, so they were surprises—noticeable, memorable. At any rate, most of my characters are restrained in their speech and often reveal more by saying less. In many situations it is difficult for them to speak, and that is a tension that is more interesting to me than listening to the storyteller who never shuts up.

The relevance and aesthetic value of the dialogues that are going to be analyzed in this chapter comes from their combination with silence. Now that the wordless moments of her stories have been discussed, it is time to see how Mason's stories portray the struggle to converse.

### 6.3. Housekeeping and Dialogue.

This section analyzes the conversations of three sets of characters: a young couple and their in-laws, a mature husband with his wife and son, and three elderly siblings. In all these scenes, the dialogues spring in the midst of domestic chores. The individual and the home represent a strong bond in Bobbie Ann Mason's stories, because, within those walls, they approach reveries that interrupt the looping structure of their routines. The previously discussed introspective nature of Mason's characters justify their intimate relation with the objects that correspond to the household, up to a point in which the material world of the home and the body and soul of these people

converge into one element. The identification process between the person and his or her properties is silent; but the quiet moments of crafting, cleaning, or food handling, among others, spark conversation. Hence, even though housekeeping is a set where conversation occurs, it still springs from silence. The concentration required for manual work, plus the automatic disposition of these performances, guarantee a silence that will not shock those around the housekeepers. By remaining speechless, both men and women find the time to take stock of how they feel –in this manner, they come closer to empathy and identification, inviting interpersonal communication.

Nevertheless, the rhythm of the domestic act needs to be either modified or interrupted for the characters to be prodded in their thoughtfulness and step towards conversation. That may prove difficult because even in a moment of realization and reverie Mason's characters may cling onto the safety of housekeeping. This is because, as Ann Romines explains in a discussion of the home in fiction, the sense of control and power provided by the reenactment of chores is very attractive (119), and, thus, hard to abandon. In the upcoming analyses, the interference that makes the characters speak out will be taken into consideration.

The relevance of these scenes, nonetheless, is not only the fact that Bobbie Ann Mason's characters break their Spartan language, but also that in the combination of silence and words, the characters, simultaneously, integrate the home within their self-conception, and, also, disentangle themselves from the household in an attempt to achieve autonomy. These contrasting techniques to build self-reliance are justified by Mason's realistic depiction of the complex and fluctuating essence of nostalgia. The author is interested in writing about the reciprocal influence of individual and the home, together with the silences and dialogues that fill in the space; however, Mason alters the normative definition of home admiration and cultural heritage by including



in her stories both the affection and disgust felt for domesticity. Consequently, the love for their haven makes characters identify with the houses, while their sense of entrapment makes them expel the home from their sense of individuality. The contradictory feelings towards their home towns, farms, jobs, families, and any other constituent of roots, make up the postsouthern version of nostalgia.

Kentucky writer Elizabeth Madox Roberts (1881-1941) published a novel in 1930 about the early history of the state (late 18<sup>th</sup> century), entitled *The Great Meadow*. The story centers on the life of Diony Hall, starting from her childhood. The opening depicts the intensity of the southern home, which can overwhelm an individual with a desire for liberty, being language the only escape route. The girl tries to locate herself in the world by calling “mentally her name [...] ‘I, Diony Hall,’ her thought said, [...] subtracting herself from the diffused life of the house that closed about her. ‘I, Diony Hall,’ her hands said back to her thought, her fingers knitting wool” (13). The main character here tunes in with her youthful sense of identity, connecting assertive language with her craft. She does not speak out loud but she is articulating a well-structured statement to herself in order to glow as an independent unit, gathering the bits of herself she has seen dispersed around the household. As she puts together the threads of wool into knots with the needles, she invokes her distinctiveness by means of a vocative. The strong syntax of the pronoun and the proper noun, linked by a comma, create a dialogue between her body and her soul, between her hands, workers for the demanding home, and her young womanhood, wishing for independence.

It is not only women who see their selfhood integrated in the domestic acts, as it will be illustrated later in the chapter. However, Bobbie Ann Mason frequently writes in her fiction and biographical pieces about how exhausting a job housekeeping

is for women. In her novel set in the 1900s *Feather Crowns*, the main character, Christie, emphasizes the role of food in southern families as language that links generations together: “She could see a string of pies –pies at funerals and pies at weddings and pies at birthings. The rhythm of eating something special carried people in and out of life. She saw the women waiting on the men and the sick and the old and the young. The women were constantly in motion” (426). Obviously, the modern southern women of most of Mason’s stories have created homes where duties are somehow shared and equity is a known and demanded right. However, the symbol of food as a “carrier” of life and identity remains, and the bond between female characters and their houses is frequently the core of the plot.

The home, housekeeping chores, farming, cooking and eating are important words in the language of the South, and they define these people even after death; this is because the home is part of their heritage; it is the lingering scent they leave behind for their offspring to trace. Consequently, it is not surprising to find narrators and characters talking in such scenarios, using poetic expression and creating inspiring images, which not only articulate the home but also their personalities. The Georgia writer Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987) wrote in his novels, essays and stories about the confinement of domesticity in the South, mainly from a racial point of view. In the story “The Empty Room” (1931), a man, the narrator, visits his brother’s widow, who sits on the couple’s empty bed, mourning in silence. When she decides to speak, overcome by sadness, she talks about the only thing that remains stable: chores:

Suddenly she whispered, turning in the darkness towards me:

“Did you feed Finleys’s [her husband’s] rabbits tonight?”

“Yes, I fed them,” I told her. “I gave them all they can eat. They have everything they want for the night.”

[...] Her hair was citrus color, and it strangely matched the darkness of the room and the blackness of her clothes. [...] When I stared at the inky blackness of the walls not within sight, I could somehow see the quickness of her citrus hair tousled on my brother's chest while he kissed the smoothness of her profile and caressed the softness of her limbs. (71)

The narrator is not trying to cater for the animals in the farm; he wants to feed life back into the heartbroken widow. By satiating the rabbits, he provides her the sense of management and control that death has taken away. Her femininity, her identity as a wife and a woman, is being sucked in by the darkness of the room; she is part of the walls of the house and melts into it. But in this same dimness, the legacy of the couple's love shines, as the narrator can picture the lovers in their intimate bodily pleasures. This fragment connects all the main themes of this section: how food, domestic activities and home help characters articulate their identity.

The shocking element in the chosen scenario, a home, is the permanent agony felt by the brother, who stands by the door of the room, in agony, looking at the suffering of this widow, knowing that no words can sooth her sorrow. He is paralyzed by the horror of the empty room. Towards the end of the story, he says "goodnight" to the widow and she screams out a pain compared to having one's heart cut out with a knife (73). The grotesque and unsettling image contrasts with the lack of disturbance in the surface. The slow and silent behavior of Thomasine, the widow, and the black pitch surrounding them emphasize the environment of death and sadness. But the peak of the emotion is reached when words encounter silence. The unexpected descent of sound onto stillness will be the cause of the distorted peculiarities of Mason's dialogues.

The southern grotesque has been previously highlighted as a linking stylistic trait between Bobbie Ann Mason and some of her literary forerunners, such as Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. In a study of women and language in these two writers, critic Jeanne Campbell Reesman considers the appearance of exaggerated and distorted images in conversations, especially when it comes to female characters, a desperate attempt to reveal sections of their identities that they feel cannot be articulated. This happens either because they might be considered inappropriate by established behavioral codes, or because they have been hampered due to traumatic past experiences. The sense of repression provokes the need to expose themselves, but these women end up disguising the actual issue. Instead of addressing it directly, they veil pain or desire with speeches that provide disjointed topics and disturbing pictures, breaking the logic of the conversation that would have been expected in that specific social context. Reesman says that the "grotesque in their language tells us of such urgencies" (45). When this takes place over a meal, in the dinner table, the fact that the characters start narrating a grotesque story, showing fascination towards something that may disgust others, particularly while enjoying delicious food, emphasizes that this character seems to be numbed to certain emotions.

Lynnette, in Mason's story "Coyotes", is an untraditional girl from the South. Her boyfriend, Cobb, is infatuated by her partly because she breaks female expectations: she wears loud colors, does not require a fancy wedding, is misunderstood by more typical southern housewives, enjoys nature, is attracted to wild animals and not afraid of them, likes her independence and speaks out her mind. Moreover, her job is the source of a peculiar, grotesque tendency –she works developing photos in a studio and cannot help but pry into negatives portraying scenes of intimacy, mostly containing sex, death or violence.

Despite the importance of her obsession with these pictures, the story is ultimately about the concept of family and home. Using humor and absurd dialogues, together with shocking and painful memories and descriptions, Mason questions the validity of a unique classification of stable households. The first time the reader is given a description of the pictures that haunt the girl once she finishes work and meets Cobb, the scene includes a couple in bed with their dog; and it seems difficult to determine if they are wearing any clothes. Lynnette wants to see something twisted about this family; Cobb sees “a happy family scene [...]. It was probably Sunday morning. [...]. And they were fooling around before the baby woke up” (162). But she insists on the odd character of the images. Cobb likes this about her because she “made him see that anything conventional [...] was funny and absurd” (164). When both are faced with convention, the irony of the senseless nature of traditions will unavoidably be exposed through photos again. The developed film is silent, these people in the images cannot talk back to their audience, and so Cobb and Lynnette force words into the silent portraits. By imagining what were their actions and words, that is, talking about someone else’s domestic scenes, they end up articulating their fears about their own.

Cobb takes Lynnette to meet his mother, Gloria, and his mother’s new husband, and they both know the encounter will force them into verbal interaction and, consequently, into potential face-threatening acts. When they arrive, his mother is frying chicken still in her church clothes, and her husband is smoking a pipe in the living room; they are welcomed into a house filled with decorative glass figurines. Gloria does not address Lynnette directly, and her husband interrogates the girl as if it were an interview. However, when they sit down to eat, Lynnette takes charge of the conversation, talking excessively about the grotesque images she has to work with. As

a consequence, instead of reaching integration in the family unit, she is alienated from them all; even Cobb is confused by her gruesome talk. He may have enjoyed putting words to the silent pictures as a game, but now Lynnette's speech is too close to reality. However, this is not an act of insecurity or hysterical, immature speech on her part. Lynnette is reacting to the oppressive atmosphere of this traditional home and the domestic life embodied by Gloria. The gap between the devoted housewife and the modern girl manifests in Lynnette's and Gloria's opposite views. Professor Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis has closely studied gender, food ways and housekeeping in the South, and points out that these chores imposed on women can be a "mind-deadening routine [...] even if veiled" (72). This collocates with the case of Gloria, who seems happy in her housework. But such chores not only oppress Lynnette, Gloria seems to have led an oppressive life herself: she had four children and worked full time, never used to have time to read and no one in her family ever did "anything particularly outrageous or strange" (165-66). It is no surprise then that when, during their meal, Lynnette starts giving details of the crime scenes she sometimes develops, Gloria adds:

"I sure would hate that," [...]

Lynnette, spearing a carrot slice, said, "We get amazing pictures –gunshots wounds and drownings, all mixed in vacations and children. And the thing is they're not unusual at all. They're everywhere, all the time. It's life."

Jim [Gloria's husband] and Gloria nodded doubtfully, and Lynnette went on, "I couldn't sleep last night, thinking about some pictures that came in Friday – a whole roll of film of a murder victim on a metal table. [...] I couldn't keep from looking."

“I saw that in the paper!” said Cobb’s stepfather. “[...]. That’s the way it is with some of these people –scum.”

Lynnette dabbed her mouth with a mustard-yellow napkin and said, “It was weird to see somebody’s picture in the newspaper and then see the person all strung out on a table with bullet holes in his head, and still be able to recognize the person. The picture they ran in the paper was a school picture. That was really sad. School pictures are always embarrassing.”

“Would you like some more chicken?” Gloria asked her.

“Cobb, do you mean you’re eating squash? I thought I’d never see the day.”  
(173-74).

Gloria and Lynnette could not have less in common. Their concepts of womanhood have been shaped by two different generations and two different Souths. While the young lady pierces through tradition with her grotesque thoughts, the way she “spears” the vegetables on her plate, Gloria is concerned about feeding the family and asks about chicken and squash. Lynnette shakes the solidity of absolutes among which Gloria and Jim live. While the girl portrays the complexities of morality and privacy, defining the repulsive images of violence as “amazing” or “weird”, implying wonder and mystery, Gloria expresses passionate dislike (“hate”) for them. Jim holds equally strong opinions; he is not perturbed by these images, because judgment and entitlement protect him from these despicable people (“scum”). Basically, Lynnette is bringing this “scum” to the table; the South Jim and Gloria do not want to see in the security of tradition, represented by the meal and perfect decoration, is forced into their home. Unaware, the young girl cleans away conventions from her female identity, as she “dabs” her lips, symbols of her sexual self, with the yellow napkin of Gloria. Symbolically, the mustard paper signals risk, which is the risk of change

brought by Lynnette's visit. The girl takes the napkin, a token of Gloria's perfect housekeeping, and conquers it, grabs it, to later despise it, as she wipes off traces of the meal from her face.

Around one table, Bobbie Ann Mason organizes a conversation that integrates the collision of two generations of southerners, two versions of womanhood and two concepts of housekeeping. The characters' interventions are not long or elaborate, but the shifting interest of their remarks and the contrasting connotations the different participants attach to the same issue of these violent and intimate bodily portraits make up for the absence of emotional and highly eloquent declarations. They talk, but as they do so, they silence each other. The constant diversion from emotional topics resonates with Mason's conception of silence as a key component of social behavior.

The three stories selected to delineate Bobbie Ann Mason's portrayal of dialogue within southern homes and domestic routines evolve around the core concept of family. The allure of the second story, "Wish", lies in the age of the characters. Sam and his two sisters Damson and Hortense are over their seventies. However, they are all still independent and meeting regularly for family gatherings, like Sunday lunch, maintaining the past traditions they have followed since childhood. These strong elderly characters relate in the scenes of the story through food again. Meals work as bonding rituals. In 1997, Bobbie Ann Mason published an article in the *New Yorker* entitled "The Burden of the Feast", where she described the sacrifices of living and working in a farm, especially for women. At the time, she explained, everyone would gather around the feast her mother, then 78, would prepare for Christmas. She lists the dishes that would be consumed and declares: "When I was growing up on our 53-acre dairy farm, we were obsessed with food; it was the center of our lives. We planted it, grew it, harvested it, peeled it, cooked it, served it, consumed it—endlessly,



day after day, season after season” (66). None of these actions rely on conversation; quite the opposite, these are activities performed individually and in silence. The Mason family depended on whimsical and cruel weather changes to be able to feast, and even as her parents grew old and they had other means of income within a changed western Kentucky, food was still the topic to discuss that would never fail to spark conversation. In the past, working in the fields, although they were a team, the endeavors of farming kept them isolated in silence while they related to the land and its products.

In the story, when Sam and Damson arrive to the house of Hortense and her husband Cecil, after Sunday mass, the men sit in the kitchen table to talk. It is their “habit” to choose that as the place to chat about their main concerns: “the week’s weather, then their health, then the local news –in that order” (234). The table defines the internalized gender roles, as the men sit, acknowledging the work of women, sharing the room, the kitchen, but not participating of it –women cook, men have a conversation about the matters defining their lives. Once they sit down to eat, Sam’s kinfolk do not tell stories; they “discuss character” (235), and so they focus this time on Sam’s last wife, Nova. His memories of her are not particularly loving, yet respectful. However, he regrets having left the family’s farm behind to move to the modern house closer to town that Nova desired:

“Didn’t make no sense, did it?” Sam said, reflecting a moment on Nova. He could see her plainly, holding up a piece of fried chicken like a signal of attention. The impression was so vivid he almost asked her to pass the peas.  
[...]

“She told me if she had to get to hospital the ambulance would get there quicker,” said Damson, taking a second biscuit. “Hort, these biscuits ain’t as good as you usually make.”

“I didn’t use self-rising,” said Hort.

“It wouldn’t make much difference, with that new highway,” said Cecil, speaking of the ambulance. (243-35)

They are together criticizing a deceased member of their family, but the immediacy of the senses and the flavor of the food continuously interrupt the conversation, reducing the sober tone it may have otherwise reached. The relevance of food even impregnates Sam’s memories of Nova. She had determination and imposed her will, and her instrument of command was a leg of fried chicken –the symbol of the female control in the household gained through cooking skills.

John Egerton, an eminent southern historian, food expert and author (1935-2013), explained that the most characteristic southern recipes have travelled “through generations of reality and imagination” (1993, 235). Mason, as it has been previously discussed, writes fiction about the real South she knows; consequently, the parallelism between her family’s Christmas dinner and the family’s Sunday dinner in the story “Wish” portrays how food, as Egerton stated, has been established as a backbone linking the history and the literature of the South, enhancing the realism of Mason’s dialogues. Characters’ relation to food highlights their pragmatic attitude towards the tragedies of life, as they are able to combine both topics, without having to include a coherent bridge in the dialogues. The story ends with Sam and Damson back at his place, where she openly addresses the traumatic experience that has caused her agony up to that moment: her young boyfriend killed himself after Damson’s father forbade the couple to see each other. Sam is shocked by the confession. He throws a joke at

his teary sister to lift her spirits, and the emotional moment flips into another conversation about food:

She rose to go. He thought he'd said the right thing, because she seemed lighter on her feet now. "You've got enough eggs and bacon to last you all week," she said. "And I'm going to bring you some of that popcorn cake my neighbor makes. You'd never guess it had popcorn in it." [...]

"I know why you've lived so long, Sam. You just see what you want to see. You're like Pap, just as hard and plain."

"That ain't the whole truth," he said, feeling a mist of tears come. (240)

The endurance of southern recipes guarantees the mingling of memories, and references to the immediacy of cooking in the dialogues around the kitchen abound. Lynette, in the previous story, unveiled grotesque secrets through her photographs, but the siblings of "Wish" discover disturbing recollections. In both cases, two dimensions of reality are folded together on the dinner table. In the first case, they discuss representation and reality, that is, the pictures and the portrayed subject/s. In the second case, the dialogue brings together present and past, in other words, current actions and versions of family history, which again are a version of the duo representation-reality. In both scenarios, the harmony of routine is broken, because images of murder and suicide do not collocate with the innocence of the fridge and the stove. Discussing these hidden emotions makes them feel shaken. To regain a feeling of influence and restraint, characters resort to food, enacting towards the closure of their dialogues a southern adamantine will of resilience and honesty.

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, Bobbie Ann Mason's preferred setting is the home and the land surrounding it –this being gardens, orchards, back yards, planted gardens or the larger fields of farms. Her stories are not

reduced to the context of the household, as Mason also describes characters in their work place, bars, cars or markets, among others. However, frequently, the climactic<sup>66</sup> scenes develop within the spaces owned by the characters. Mason specializes in finding beauty in the unremarkable and even grotesque scenes of the everyday lives of ordinary men and women of the small and underdeveloped towns and rural areas of western Kentucky. That is why Lynnette, in “Coyotes”, admires the pictures of dead people, and a chicken leg is a remarkable and honorable symbol to link a widower to the memory of his deceased life companion in “Wish”. Regardless of the mundane context, these ordinary settings help the characters become aware of an issue, feeling or current change that turns out to be vital.

In the story “Lying Doggo” most of the action takes place in the protagonist’s house. Nancy lives with her husband, Jack, their nine-year old son, Robert, and the very old family dog, Grover. The couple has been together for fifteen years, and, although they show acts of love and mutual respect, routine seems to have overpowered any spontaneous action. Silence is still another member of the family,

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<sup>66</sup> I would like to include a brief note on the use of the term “climax” when defining the evolvement of Mason’s narrative arc in her short stories. Mason’s approach to Minimalism has been analyzed before, explaining that even though she employs minimalist stylistic strategies, because of the unexpected turns in her language, mainly in the form of tropes, attaching a single literary label to her fiction would be unfair. Nevertheless, one of the minimalistic traits found consistently in these short stories are the rhythmic patterns. The combination of sharp dialogues and contemplative and fanciful passages was highlighted as a key component of Mason’s access to rhythm. The concept of climax in Mason’s stories has to be framed within minimalistic rhythmic parameters. The reader will find a moment where the larger implications of the story are unveiled. However, it may not coincide with a transcendental realization. Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters act little and think a lot. If this tendency were considered in terms of music, the listener would hear extended melodic sections, interrupted by abrupt notes that almost seem not to collocate with the composition. In the text, the speech acts seem, at times, inopportune, uncooperative and disconnected. Those are the jarring notes among the peaceful paragraphs where characters passively observe and indulge in their imagination, creating moving similes; that would be the mesmeric melody. In this manner, Bobbie Ann Mason creates the rhythm of her stories, placing a moment of palpable, built-up tension in either of these sequences: speech or description.

and their communication fails at times; in fact, Jack calls Nancy “weird” (201) because he cannot understand her perception of the world and her needs, for instance when it comes to taking care of the dog. Grover is frail and close to passing away. The whole family cares about him and dreads Grover’s death. Nancy, at some point of the story, thinks that this episode may very well be “a milestone in their marriage” (193). In the following scene, Jack and Nancy are in the kitchen, preparing a big dinner for some guests:

Jack is sipping whiskey. The woodstove has been burning all day, and the house is comfortably warm now. In the next room, Robert is lying on the rug in front of the stove with Grover. [...]

Jack says, “I think the only thing to do is just feed Grover pork chops and steaks and pet him a lot, and then when we can stand it, take him to the vet and get it over with.”

“When can we stand it?”

“If I were in Grover’s shape, I’d just want to be put out of my misery.”

“Even if you were still conscious and could use your mind?”

“I guess so.”

“I couldn’t pull the plug on you,” says Nancy, pointing a carrot at Jack.

“You’d have to be screaming in agony.”

“Would you want me to do it to you?”

“No. I can see right now that I’d be the type to hang on. I’d be just like my Granny. I think she just clung to life, long after her body was ready to die.”

“Would you really like that?”

“You said once I was just like her –repressed, uptight.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“You’ve been right about me before,” Nancy says, reaching across Jack for a paring knife. “Look, all I mean is that it shouldn’t a matter of *our* convenience. If Grover needs assistance, then it’s our problem. We’re responsible.”

“I’d want to be put out of my misery,” Jack says. (197)

The normality of the process of preparing dinner to entertain friends and family is not interrupted when the topic of death enters the conversation. Moreover, the characters entertain the idea of their own passing, comparing themselves to the dog. Mason understates tragedy by imposing the grounding effect of housekeeping on to the dramatic discussion. The chores of domestic life are repetitive, creating a spiraling structure mirroring the passing of time. This reenactment of habits can be comforting; and that is why the warming nature of whiskey, the slow and pleasurable movement of sipping spirits, the fireplace, the smooth rug protecting them from the cold, and the heat coming out of the stove portray safety and heartfelt hospitality. Nonetheless, routine can be perceived as enclosure, and reiteration of automated behaviors can carry an attached meaning additional to the one intended. In this story, husband and wife act as caregivers and parents, and that is why they are not meant to discuss their right to put an end to their lives, but that of Grover. Conversely, they approach a “milestone” in their marriage when the dialogue diverts into a confrontation of their insurmountable personal differences. She would like to survive, regardless of her body and mental conditions; he would prefer to be euthanized. As the topic shifts, their manners are not soft and welcoming anymore. She holds a carrot up, as a warning, and then looks for a knife, both symbols of violence. The kitchen becomes a boxing ring to discuss their bravery and love. That being so, food becomes the prop with which they perform power in their marriage.

Once again, facing an event that cannot be controlled, as in the other two stories, the family takes refuge in the act of feeding, which is all they can govern. They cannot avoid the death of their old dog, but they can feed him red meat, providing luxury and pleasure in the form of nourishment. In the story “Coyotes”, crime is covered by chicken, and in “Wish” suicide is eclipsed by popcorn. The strong contrast of meals and pain explains the frequency with which both elements concur in conversation, establishing the following structure: chaos followed by order.

#### 6.4. Telling Stories.

The earthiness of Bobbie Ann Mason’s language may mislead the reader into picturing the characters as postmodern skeptics. Silence and introspection are partly caused by a disengagement from the mainstream southern narrative of loss, shame, and nostalgia; however, the fact that these characters express themselves using the language of ordinary life and self-deprecating humor, irony and understatement does not signal a simple inner world. It has been previously mentioned that Mason treats her characters with respect and admiration –she does not humiliate or judge them. In order to demonstrate the multifaceted personalities of her fiction, she combines the laconic moments of information gathering with impulsively talkative sections where characters are prompted to share yarns.

Their storytelling moments are the antidote for the unavoidable cynicism created in an age of information. To counteract the knowledge they receive unwillingly, they find refuge in fantasies. The fanciful narrations may be based on memories, old jokes or pure spontaneous inventions. But these always have two

effects: they liberate the characters from a painful thought, and they manage to share it without an openly articulated confession and without lecturing.

Because their tales are impulsive and most needed, they come into the general plot with a feeling of sudden explosion. Josephine Humphreys, a Charleston, South Carolina, writer published in 2000 a novel rooted in the history of a Native American people, the Lumbee, in the last years of the Civil War, entitled *Nowhere Else On Earth*. The main character is Rhoda, a teenager who finds herself enclosed in a small cabin with her parents, interpreting that protection as being banned from the exciting lives her brothers and the men around her were dangerously living. But her wonder and imagination cannot be refrained by the limitations of the context. She is eager to receive the newspaper, and although she enjoys reading the stories, she yearns even more for the unprinted corners of paper to put down and liberate “the little rhymes and stories that came like bouts of hiccups” that she could not stop (84). The greater the restrictions and the more intense the pressure of distress, the more avid these southern characters are to tell stories. Without the dramatic precariousness of war, the stories written by Mason partake of this emotional process.

Beneath the crude exterior of the lives portrayed by Bobbie Ann Mason, there is a strong sense of dignity. It is postsouthern dignity, which is loaded with doubts and nowhere near the innocence of Rhoda in Humphreys’s novel; still, they are a set of proud southerners. The climax of their empowerment is reached frequently by storytelling. The anguish of haunting pasts is released by the act of becoming a narrator, embracing, in this manner, the cathartic effect of putting events together in a logic disposition, which proves impossible for their own traumas. In the stories selected for these sections, the spoken word, the musicality of speech and the images created through storytelling soothe the anxiety of post-traumatic disorder in a soldier,



the guilt of an unfaithful wife, and the fear of the patriarch of an estranged family. They are all looking for connection and relief. They can be storytellers, though, because they have previously been quiet observers, collectors of details, sounds and textures that can now be put together into engaging tales.

The contextualization of Bobbie Ann Mason's stories within the postsouthern reality has been previously discussed, but it regains relevance in this chapter due to the presence of storytelling in the lives of characters that are predominantly quiet. This is because the characters' impulses to share stories reflect their existence as mass-media consumers. The postsouthern self is constantly "wounded" by feeds of information, and its stability, psychological, social or physical integrity can be altered by new knowledge acquired on the radio, television, music, advertising, etc. The vivid nature of mass-mediated images and sounds may shock their audience, breaking their concept of who they are, have been or want to become. The postsouthern self can be traumatized, and, hence, the process of reality-checking and sense-making might be temporarily petrified. The southerners of the past, who, in, social and geographical isolation, interpreted their world using permanent signifiers and signifieds they had inherited, do not exist in Bobbie Ann Mason's western Kentucky of the 70s up to the early twenty-first century. Her characters have traveled, within the United States and, sometimes, abroad, they read books and watch television, they buy and sell mass-produced products –in other words, they are connected with the world. If provincial attitudes and backward thinking appear in the stories, they are not caused by a lack of available information. These are the result of the unfair distribution of wealth in the South of the working classes, where a pragmatic attitude to attend firstly to immediate needs, as low-income employees or unemployed, mingles with daydreaming moments motivated by the limited, yet existing, progress, both industrial and economic, and by,

most importantly, the window to different lifestyles opened up by the media. The proximity of mediated productions makes these other routines and possibilities seem more attainable, incentivizing desires and, simultaneously, frustrations.

Bobbie Ann Mason illustrated beautifully the South that inspires her fiction in the piece “Big Bertha Stories”, generating complex characters from one of the main collective traumas in the history of the United States: the Vietnam War. The failure and disappointment felt by the American population has recurrently been portrayed in art forms. Literary portrayals of the Vietnam War have focused on the physical and mental wounds left in veterans, the cruelty of the battlefield in the wild landscape of Vietnam, the environmental disasters left behind, and the war crimes committed<sup>67</sup>. Donald, the veteran in the story, suffers from PTSD but is not being treated for it. He does not comply with his responsibilities as father and husband. Donald’s wife, Jeannette, is the one that takes care of the house, the household expenses, and their young child, Rodney. However, Donald has not disappeared from their lives. He returns sporadically, bringing food, beer, fantastic stories and unpredictable moods. He works in Central City, Kentucky, driving an excavating machine in the areas of strip mining. But, mainly, he behaves as an idle observant of the works taking place in

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<sup>67</sup> As an instance, I have selected *Meditations in Green* (1983) by American novelist and Vietnam veteran Stephen Wright. Events are arranged from the chaotic perspective of James Griffin, who, in order to cope with the horror experienced, takes refuge in drugs. The novel resonates with “Big Bertha Stories” in the combination of silence and stories as survival devices. The veteran in Mason’s stories is attracted to places where strident noises occur, and, at the same time, his nightmares and traumatic memories involve overwhelming sounds. Wright’s Spec. 4 is hypersensitive to both sounds and silences; not to any silence, but “the total haunted silence only possible in a place once destroyed by noise” (146). In the scenes of war depicted by Wright, stories flow to recompose the broken selves of the soldiers, to recover a sense of normality among the inhumanity and derangement of the combats. The soldiers often talk and share tales in the novel, “letting the silence grow naturally in the pauses between those stories anyone who ever wore a uniform anywhere could exhale easily as breath until finally they were simply together in silence” (195). The universality of this need to bond through stories, while appreciating the unifying silent experience, links Mason’s reflection on Vietnam and Wright’s.

the mountain tops. Donald's most conspicuous trait is his ability to tell made-up stories to Rodney about Big Bertha. Big Bertha, a living gigantic strip-mining machine, is sexualized in Donald's narratives of destruction. The boy enjoys the stories but shows symptoms of trauma caused by the grotesque character. Donald's distress, Rodney's confusion and Jeannette's concern frame a disintegrating family, suffering the legacy of Vietnam.

PTSD has often been treated with storytelling therapies to counteract the gagging effects of trauma, which make veterans unable to articulate their distress. The veterans' desire for coherence and order is satisfied in the logical structure of a narrative. Besides, their vivid recollections make them sensational storytellers as they can easily transmit the momentum attached to the images they can still see in their heads. Critic and playwright David M. Boje uses in his study of the psychology of narratives (2014) the term "unstoryable" for those traumatic experiences that humans fail to communicate; but he adds that, thanks to storytelling techniques, there might be "little wow moments" (179) when the "unstoryable" finds a place in discourse and can be eventually shared in words, activating a healing process. This is what Donald is attempting to achieve through Big Bertha.

Having found in Big Bertha a vehicle to articulate the trauma, even when sleeping, Bertha continues to manifest in the heads of the family. Consequently, the shocking experience of the war re-enacts in loops in this household, leaking everywhere in their speech, either awake or unconscious: "Rodney has dreams [...] echoes of his father's nightmare, like TV cartoon versions of Donald's memories of the war. But Rodney loves the stories, even though they are confusing" (119). In the same manner that when a character tells a story the reader can perceive the aesthetics of the discourse, the narrator's description of a dream, pleasant or terrifying, can be

stylistically enjoyed<sup>68</sup>. In this story, the dreams and the stories about Bertha fuse, because Donald's psychological wounds and Rodney's innocent fantasy create similar images of irrational juxtapositions and boundless fancy. The last story Donald tells is entitled "Big Bertha and the Neutron Bomb", where the monstrous creature goes surfing in California, and the setting includes free snacks, friendly animals and happy people. But death comes with the bomb, which obviously resembles the disasters in Vietnam. Somehow, Donald interprets the world through these stories. He is creating an "analogical map" (Freeman, 255) of the reality within which he cannot longer exist. A writer owns the reality of the stories written, and similarly Donald recovers, at least temporarily, his life through his poetic comparisons between the adventures of Big Bertha and his distressing memories of the war. The physicality of the story, the body language that accompanies his stories and his drawings to illustrate them enhance the sense of order and ease he finds when he turns into a storyteller:

Rodney loves the part where everyone keels over dead. Donald acts it out, collapsing on the rug. [...]

"Those stories aren't true," Jeannette tells Rodney.

Rodney staggers and falls down on the rug, his arms and his legs akimbo. [...], he says, "I told Scottie Bidwell about Big Bertha and he didn't believe me."

[...] "You tell Scottie Bidwell if he saw Big Bertha he would pee in his pants on the spot, he would be so impressed."

"Are you scared of Big Bertha?"

"No, I'm not. Big Bertha is just like a wonderful woman, a big fat woman who can sing the blues. Have you ever heard Big Mama Thornton?"

"No."

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<sup>68</sup> Bert O. States wrote a careful study of the tales that occur in dreams: *Dreams and Storytelling*.

“Well, Big Bertha’s like her, only she’s the size of a tall building. She’s slow as a turtle and when she crosses the road they have to reroute traffic. [...]. She’s so tall she can see all the way to Tennessee, and when she belches there’s a tornado. She’s really something. She can even fly.” (120)

The madness of the terrifying images that attack Donald in his perturbed creativity come from a concoction of the unpolished brutality of war memories and the raw language of the southern social strata he represents. He works in coal mining; he is a Vietnam veteran; he consumes popular culture. All of them together give him the material he needs to create a story where nature, machinery and bloodshed come together in an unpretentious and unrehearsed performance. The lack of elaborate terms and adorned metaphors do not prevent the story from being expressive and musical. The combination of the tandems turtle-rerouting and belch-tornado have an impact on the reader similar to that which the story has on Rodney and Jeannette. They are mesmerized in disbelief. They are aware of the lies and the absurdity of the story, but the language of contrasts, the terror and the nonchalant delivery cannot but trigger their curiosity. Besides, the estrangement of the family is temporarily improved by the words on Bertha, which break their routines of silences and absences. Similarly, Bobbie Ann Mason does not fear unexpected combinations of aesthetic and grotesque tokens to shape images of intensity, discomfort and inspiration, especially in portraying a family linked both by love and pain. The images spring in their terse communication, creating a greater impact due to the antithesis silence vs. storytelling.

For her own act of storytelling, the main type of voice Bobbie Ann Mason employs is a detached third person narrator. But the narrative objectivity<sup>69</sup> of the descriptive voice is combined with its ability to create metaphors. Hence, Mason's third person narrator is objective but, at the same time, partial. This complexity occurs because even though the narrator has access to the emotions of the characters, he or she is omniscient and pragmatic in equal measure. That is, the narrator may refer to a feeling being experienced by a character using simple and brief descriptions; but, as a raconteur, he or she does not stay inside the mind of the characters throughout the length of the story. Conversely, he would rapidly move from omniscient perception on to a report of a past event, a behavior or an action that illustrate the emotion indirectly, as though he was now a mere observer who lacked access to the character's feelings.

The employment of symbolic language, found in the descriptions of anecdotes, body language or maneuvers, allows the narrator to combine denotation and connotation without being explicit or passing judgment. That is, within an objective rendition of a movement, there may lie an allegory, standing for the character's sensitivity. The way this underlying meaning can be identified by readers is through the shared connotations of words. In this way, the narrator will provide accurate portrayals of characters and contexts, adding dramatic tension and aesthetic value to the stories through the inclusion of tropes –and if there is figurative language, there is denotation and value judgment that guide the reader into a deeper understanding of the psyche of the characters. Mason's strategy to use metaphors effectively, evoking strong feelings in the reader through images, is rendered in the

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<sup>69</sup> For an extensive analysis of the impartiality of narrators and their effects on stories see the following collection of essays studying the works of the Russian thinker and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1893-1975): *The Novelness of Bakhtin: Perspectives and Possibilities*.

assignation of positive or negative connotations to her characters and their behaviors, as well as to the settings and their components. As a consequence, she creates round characters, and the reader will oscillate in favoring or empathizing with one or another of them.

Because dialogues are scarce in Mason's short stories –as silence still delineates behavior and interaction– and, if included, they tend to be short and based on superficial matters, the reader cannot expect the character to voluntarily disclose personal information. As a result, the learning process in Mason's short fiction cannot develop from within to without –that is, from the intimate world of the characters to their surroundings. Conversely, the reader will learn about the external details through the exhaustive descriptions the narrator is going to present; and thanks to these, the reader will advance to an interpretation of the figurative language that symbolizes emotions that neither characters nor the narrator will explicitly address. Hence, the disclosure of the depth of the story takes place from without to within.

This narrative strategy is complicated further in the exceptions where Bobbie Ann Mason presents the story through the eyes of a first-person narrator that is not omniscient. The reader's understanding of the story is affected by the assumptions of the character. However, Mason's first-person narrators share many characteristics with her third-person narrators because they are both detached from overemotional descriptions –their analysis of the material world and the physical appearance of people and of the landscape are meticulous, yet their descriptions of personal moods are brief. Another similarity is that both types of characters point at the misbehaviors and faults of every personality taking part in the story. In the case of the first-person narrators, they confess their sins without self-pitying. In that way, Bobbie Ann Mason presents a more believable set of characters and a more complex employment of

language as the denotative and connotative meanings attached to terms vary throughout the story.

This is the case of “Residents and Transients”. Mary narrates her own story. Her husband has moved for work to Louisville, the largest city in Kentucky, but she has stayed in their small town waiting for Stephen to find them a new home there. Mary is an unusual protagonist for Mason, not only because she is in charge of her own narrative, but also because she has been away for a long time, travelling and pursuing a higher education, and now she has returned to her hometown, moved to her parents’ old farmhouse, and embraced this rural life that she once left behind. She does not want to live in a city street with rows of houses. She needs the open space of the farm and her close relation with her pets. She is part of the landscape: “One day I was counting the cats and I absentmindedly counted myself” (124). Additionally, Mary does not appear to be the victim of a selfish man who runs away and abandons her, as is the case in other Mason’s stories. Mary has taken a lover, a local dentist. She declares: “I have two men, eight cats, no cavities” (124). She does not confess to feeling guilty, but her actions and random comments speak the truth, unveiling her confusion and remorse. In the following scene, her lover, Larry, pays her a visit. They drink glasses of Bloody Mary and play Monopoly, a game consisting on buying as many properties as possible in a city, using fake money. The irony behind the meaning of the drink and the game cannot escape the reader:

“When my grandmother was alive, my father used to bury her savings in the yard, in order to avoid inheritance taxes,” I say as Larry hands me the drink.

He laughs. He always laughs, whatever I say. His lips are like parentheses, enclosing compliments.



“In the last ten years of her life she saved ten thousand dollars from her social security checks.”

“That’s incredible.” He looks doubtful, as though I have made up a story to amuse him. “Maybe there’s still money buried in your yard.”

“Maybe. My grandmother was very frugal. She wouldn’t let go of *anything*.”

“Some people are like that.”

[...]

“This place is full of junk that no one could throw away,” I say distractedly. I have just been sent to jail [a hazard of the game, which results in the player losing a turn]. I’m thinking of the boxes in the attic, the rusted tools in the barn. [...] The vodka is making me plunge into something I know I cannot explain. “I don’t want you to think I’m this crazy cat freak with a mattress full of money.”

“Of course I don’t.” Larry lands on Virginia Avenue and proceeds to negotiate a complicated transaction.

“In the wild, there are two kinds of cat population,” I tell him when he finishes his move. “Residents and transients. Some stay put, in their fixed home ranges, and others are on the move. [...]

I continue bravely. “The thing is –this is what the scientists are wondering about now –it may be that the transients are the superior ones after all, with the greatest curiosity and most intelligence. They can’t decide.” (124-125)

Mary’s lover, who is paying attention to their Monopoly game, functions as an audience to the tale in the same way the readers will be experiencing the story she is going to tell. Her blasé conduct is part of the performative technique of a storyteller, who rejects a predictive morale or anticlimactic ending. As has been mentioned

before, Mason's characters structure their messages in serpentine silhouettes. There is no direct route to the core message, which is partially veiled by the anecdotes in the story. That is why Mary chains three different accounts into one: family lore; the story of her grandma; and the hidden money. Then, she jumps from past to present, expressing the load the heritage of the farm signifies. Like the yard being mined with her forefathers' coins and notes, the valuables in the house and the land are both treasures and burdens. However, she does not complain openly about the mixed feelings she is experiencing over the farm. Instead, she connects the first story about her grandmother's money with her curiosity about cats. The reader will link Mary to the transient and resident felines, seeing how she also doubts herself. She does not know if she is becoming stagnant by appreciating the rural South, because it may very well be change what eventually leads to wisdom. There is no disclosure of emotions on her part, but the story's structure works as a deictic symbol that points to her private fears. In Bobbie Ann Mason's stories, tales are embedded, and thus they enhance one another's interpretation. The story about the cat and the story about the buried savings would not build an eloquent and nuanced personality if they were told separately. Together, they delineate the complex relation of the character with the South, while her emotions remain silent, using storytelling and allegories as a safe place for indirect confession.

The setting of the last story analyzed for this section, "Drawing Names", is a family reunion on Christmas Day. Sixteen people are expected to visit the family's farm. Like in the case of Mary, in "Drawing Names" as well, different secrets are kept from the different members of the family: one of the four sisters is getting a divorce, and Carolyn's, who is the main character, new boyfriend, Kent, fails to show up to be introduced to the family for the first time after having promised to do so. With all

their peculiarities, they sit on the table for a homemade feast and the father starts telling a long joke, which will be analyzed shortly. But, first, the reading can be enriched by a consideration of the setting. In this section, it was explained how food is a meaningful symbol in Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction. The writer was brought up by adults whose jobs were collecting crops, gathering fruits, preserving and cooking. Their humble background made them appreciate the abundance at the table, and their hard work guaranteed great appetites. In this story, "Drawing Names", the dinner table becomes a stage for family relations. The joke carries more meaning than it might seem. The people at this gathering lie to each other in fear of disappointment, concern and judgment. They are all aware of the gaps, silences, that separate them, and the joke, interacting with food, builds a bridge that, even if momentarily, brings them closer.

Four generations listen to the joke, but the storyteller is the representative of masculinity, Carolyn's father. He is not the eldest, but their grandfather, though present, shows some symptoms of dementia that turn him into one of the protégées, i.e. the kids, his great-grandchildren. To cover the loud presence of silences and secrets, the father tells the joke in order to be in control of the flow of information. As well as that, through the combination of feast solidarity behavior, sharing or passing food around, and the joint narrative created by the animated interruptions, they engage in communication without actually having to start a conversation. This function of storytelling is frequently repeated in Mason's tales, and that is why this particular scene and joke can be taken as an illustration of the compensating effect of storytelling in the lives of Mason's reserved characters. The pun is about monks taking a vow of silence and breaking it only annually, while eating, to make a trivial remark. The parallelism clearly flourishes as the story pictures the family's annual

meal, where they are cornered into breaking their general silence by Christmas and dinner table etiquette. Forced into a communicative disposition, they choose to cover the privacy they do not wish or do not know how to share, by filling the gaps with shallow comments and stories.

The act of storytelling exhausts the father, who is left without an appetite. He wanted to satisfy himself with the consumption of food, but the intensity of being a speaker has killed any desires. The performance of the comic scene is brought to an end with a strong gesture of closure: he pushes his plate away from him, leaves the table and sits in front of the television screen. The symbolism is clear: he rejects communion with the family by literally distancing himself from the feast, and faces the principal symbol of popular culture to establish now a conversation with it, as a passive consumer of information. As a spectator, he will not be demanded any participation in the form of language. It is safe. Nevertheless, he leaves satisfied, as his legacy has been laid on the table. The humorous narrative will remain in the memories of that Christmas meal. His words and the interaction with the table, the laughter and questions prompted by the story, will reverberate in the recollections of these different generations.

The storyteller empties himself through the words of the narrative, leaving behind a trace of sounds and meaning. Alabama writer Gail Godwin published recently the novel *Flora* (2013), where she tells the story of a teenager, Helen, in Tennessee in 1945. She is traumatized by the death of her grandmother, who, as an orphan, brought her up. Without her, Helen feels left without a context, as her grandmother's voice was the main point of reference for the girl. Hence, even after her grandmother's death she feels her influence: "How could she be here and not here? [...]. And yet her way of saying things was all around me, they were inside of

me” (12). Similarly, the offspring in Mason’s “Drawing Names” are fed by the oral patrimony laid on the table. The father is linking through his joke the whole household, that is, the people sitting at the table, their food, and their land, which he can see through the picture window. Once he is dead, and only silence is the place he once occupied in the house, the story will forever speak for him. The content of the joke mimics the action in their own Christmas feast, and works as an atonement for what is not being shared verbally about their emotions.

Dad began telling a joke about some monks who had taken a vow of silence.

At each Christmas dinner, he said, one monk was allowed to speak.

“Looks like your vocal cords would rust out,” said Cheryl [Peggy’s daughter].

“Shut up, Cheryl. Granddaddy’s trying to tell something,” said Cecil [Peggy’s husband].

“So the first year it was the first monk’s turn to talk, and you know what he said? He said, ‘These taters is lumpy.’”

When several people laughed, Stevie [Peggy’s son] asked, “Is that the joke?”

Carolyn was baffled. Her father had never told a joke at the table in his life. He sat at the head of the table, looking out past the family at the cornfield through the picture window.

“Pay attention now,” he said. “The second year Christmas rolled around again and it was the second monk’s turn to say something. He said, “You know, I think you’re right. The taters *is* lumpy.”

Laura Jean [younger sister] and Jim [Laura Jean’s boyfriend] laughed loudly.

“Reach me some light-bread,” said Pappy [Carolyn’s grandfather]. Mom passed the dish around the table to him.

“And so the third year, “ Dad continued, “the third monk got to say something. What he said” –Dad was suddenly overcome with mirth –“what he said was, ‘If y’all don’t shut up arguing about them taters; I’m going to leave this place!’”

After the laughter died, Mom said, “Can you imagine anybody not a-talking all year long?”

“That’s the way monks are, Mom”, said Laura Jean, “Monks are economical with everything. They’re not wasteful, not even with words.”

“The Trappist Monks are really an outstanding group,” said Jim. “And they make excellent bread. No preservatives.”

Cecil and Peggy [older sister] stared at Jim.

“You’re not eating, Dad,” said Carolyn. She was sitting between him and the place set for Kent. The effort of telling the joke seemed to have taken her father’s appetite.

[...]

Abruptly, Dad left the table, pushing back his plate. He sat down in the recliner chair in front of the TV. (100-101)

Apart from the value of the joke as a memento of family reunions, the relevance of this scene is its humor, which links the three stories selected for this section. From the large breast of blues singing Big Bertha, to the young cat-lady playing Monopoly, to the Monks and their taters. Bobbie Ann Mason’s humor is satirical, quick-witted and insubordinate. It is based on uncanny comparisons or couplings of aesthetic renderings and crude descriptions: poetics and popular culture; suffering and derision. Mason is not afraid of finding the ridiculous nature of human reaction to adversity; she finds aesthetic pleasure in trivial things in their raw states. These clever

contrasting structures are phrased using unpretentious language, with genuine innocence and spontaneity, emanating from the predominant silence. The comic effect of Mason's dialogues is equally created by the interruptions of interlocutors, which interfere with the topical flow, diverting into unexpected questions that add to the general incongruity, causing a smile.

Neal R. Norrick analyzes the language of storytelling in everyday conversation, explaining that if the allusion of a joke is missed by the audience, no accumulative summaries and side notes will recreate the intended effect of amusement, simultaneously creating a sense of alienation and preventing any rapport from happening (182). This is exactly what happens when the northerner on the table, Jim, misses the preposterousness of the story of the monks, volunteering an intellectual remark on monks. This comment is not understood nor welcomed. Characters perceive it as a conceited demonstration of knowledge; that is why he is blankly and silently observed.

The other section of the audience who do not understand the joke are the children. They are also foreigners, somehow, like Jim. They were born in the South but they belong to a different generation. As John Shelton Reed states, "we can only be tourists in the past" and one of the things we would not understand in the overseas of a different generation is humor, because in the past "they laugh at different things" (180-181). The insurmountable communicative gap between people that belong to different contexts becomes apparent in jokes; for this reason, the children in "Drawing Names" are confused by the laughter caused by the pun based on the word "taters". This is the effective simplicity of Mason's irreverent storytellers, who, like Mason herself, dare to play with cultural symbols even if the entertainment requires

disregarding social conceptualizations that are usually taken very seriously; for instance, a religious vow of silence.

In 1994, Bobbie Ann Mason published a humorous piece in *The New Yorker* (14 March), entitled “All Shook Up”, where she imagines the conversation that would be maintained between an inflatable replica of the terrified figure of Edvard Munch’s *Scream* and a ceramic collectible of Elvis. Part of the far-fetched dialogue follows:

“You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog,” Elvis cajoles, trying to shush the Scream.

“Cryin’ all the time.” He croons, “Are you lonesome tonight?”

“EEEEEE,” says the Scream.

“Hey, baby,” Elvis says. “I ain’t asking much of you. No no no no no no no. Don’t be a stingy little mama. You ‘bout to starve me half to death. Just a big-a big-a big-a hunk o’ love will do.” (96)

Mason laughs at herself, at her peculiar “laconic chatters”, at southern icons, sexist music, the intellectualism of Art, and the unbearable pain of life; she mocks them all but never overtly. The plain beauty of the last rhyming sentence of this piece summarizes her unassuming comic attitude: “I am smiling. If rock and roll will never die, can spring be far behind?” (96). The hope of nature’s renewal, and the uncomplicated enjoyment of pop songs, can create a scene worth contemplating, and yet ridiculous. More importantly, the closing sentence combines sound and silence, i.e. music and the contemplation of nature, which form the tandem that not only provides Mason’s stories with rhythm and a unique style, but also seem to be the combination sourcing beauty in the writer’s perspective of the world.



## 6.5. Dialogue between Genders.

Bobbie Ann Mason rarely writes about sex openly. Lovemaking and passionate intimacy do not seem to inspire the writer. However, the absence of paragraphs that describe lovemaking does not mean that her female characters do not have a strong sexual identity, but it is articulated by means of two indirect strategies: humor and the imaginary. By referring to erotic curiosity through purposeful misinterpretation and caustic mockery, the women in Mason's stories find a way to release privacy without having to resort to elaborate and artificial language.

Later in the chapter, there will be a consideration on feminist attitudes in the collections of Mason and the inversion of gender roles; however, as an introductory analysis, it is relevant to notice now that the three stories selected for this section evolve around three mature women. They are the main voices and purpose of the stories, while men are either absent or distant. The body, sensuality and femininity concern the characters but do not define their full identities. And, finally, the three women experience a traumatic loss that makes them doubt their functionality. There is a widow, an orphan and a mastectomy survivor. In the working-class, small-city atmosphere, impregnated by popular culture, where these women are approaching their elderly age, challenging the feminine mystique is not an intuitive process. These women have not been raised on feminism or in a South of liberal ideologies. But they have not been repressed or abused either. Hence, they possess enough tools to reframe womanhood without a husband, without a mother, or without one of the main organs that define reproduction.

Consequently, without drawing inspiration from feminism, Bobbie Ann Mason manages to portray honest and believable female characters that fit within the

postsouthern context. They all acknowledge a sense of incompleteness, but they are sensing, feeling and testing the components of the setting, finding reaffirmation in ordinary and unheroic events. As Paula Gallant Eckard establishes in her reflection on the fictional representation of the maternal body, Bobbie Ann Mason's female characters can use imagery from the natural world in order to solve the complexities of their imperfect femininity. That is, they draw elements from the immediate reality to cope with traumatic situations. Female bodies are compared to fish swimming in circles in the story "Clubbing", to a washtub in a river floating away in "The Horse Hair Ball Gown", and to spaceships in "Drawing Names". The link between these imagined pictures is the drifting movement of the objects of the similes. Mature women, with failed love relations in their past, stop in retrospection in the stories. They become aware of the currents of energy that have carried them away from their expected or intended paths. Their current situations were not where they meant to be, but there is a sense of satisfaction nonetheless. The postmodern perspective does not allow for an inspirational reverie to take over the characters, but they acknowledge their limitations with a smiling consent. To achieve this status of contentment the natural imagery and word exchanges with other women are often necessary.

Civil Rights activist and writer Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995) spent part of her life in Atlanta, and frequently used the South as setting for her novels and short stories. In her well-known novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980), the reader can enjoy constant references to wild elements that affect the human bodies –rain and thunder, skin and hands are employed to create the earthly story of southern healers that base their treatments on traditional methods. The main character, Velma, is suffering pain and her body is stiff. Desperate, she comes to one of these healing sessions, and the conversations between the female physicality, the female voices and nature help the

character regain her identity. Velma also feels like she has been moving forward in life without a conscious, desired destination, like Mason's characters, and is labeled often as "Velma the swift" (4). She needs to be in control of her body and emotions again. The process begins with the touch and voice of the healer: "Velma caught up, caught up in the wave of the song Minnie [the healer] was humming, of the shawl [Minnie is wearing], of the threads, of the silvery tendrils that extended from the healer's neck and hands and disappeared into the sheen of sunlight" (4). The harmony of the scene comes from the rapport created by the sounds and textures that reach Velma's senses, connecting her to the sun, nature's light, and Minnie, who is the embodiment of the restorative power of relationships among women. Equally, the poetic yet unrefined speeches of Bobbie Ann Mason's fictional women will portray the healing effect found in conversational moments between women, never leaving aside the relevance of physicality, perception, and silent contemplation.

But even though Bobbie Ann Mason's female characters find strength in their relations with other women, they do not engage in conversations that demonstrate a total identification. This is mainly due to Mason's interest in writing about self-sufficient people. The independence that defines their personalities prevents them from showing suppliant gestures to those they love. Nevertheless, this self-reliance equally causes the appearance of gaps in communication, as an effect of limited empathic skills. Mason's characters are frequently found trying to reconcile with their hometowns. This process proves complicated because their geographic roots are also the source of the deficiencies they suffer; the home inspires and restricts equally. For this reason, in trying to heal this relation, they may fight for freedom, to break free from limitations, in detriment of the bondage with the people around them, who somehow embody the heavy burden of their heritage. Their fear of being vulnerable

manifests in fear of losing face in conversation, which very frequently has an interfering effect on mutual understanding.

In conversations that take place within female family members of different generations this reluctance before intimate declarations reaches a peak. The younger southern women in Mason's stories generally attempt to create knowledgeable personae by means of challenging moves that question the habits and language of the older generation. In turn, the more mature women show obvious suspicion and condescendence toward the apparently chaotic behavior of the girls that represent the current state of the South. In the verbal choreography of these dialogues, participants tend to constantly answer each other with problematized reactions, that is, speech acts that would not have been the preferred response, or, in other words, daring moves. As a consequence, these conversations do not have a long and unified semantic chain; the course of the discussion changes, with fluctuating topics and moods. These turns guarantee the avoidance of a point when the conversation could reach a point of consideration that touches sensitive matters.

When Bobbie Ann Mason creates a debate among just female participants, unavoidably, and yet indirectly, the social role of women is addressed. They talk about it without overtly mentioning it so the reader will have to identify the underlying defiant attitude of these women from different generations, facing one another and their diverse femininity. Again, Mason combines the silenced inner world of her characters with the sound of their spoken words; this is because these women will maintain a dialogue, exchange opinions, but, at the same time, keep the deepest emotions unshared, disguised by a constant flowing exchange of tangent topics. One of Mason's latest stories, "Clubbing", published in the fall of 2013 in the online magazine *New World Writing*, exemplifies these verbal exchanges where the South

that is disappearing and the morphing South that is yet shaping itself meet in a cultural and generational border. In this case, the women belong to the same family: Aunt Joyce, the first person narrator, and Cassandra, her niece. The power of storytelling is in the hands of the older generations, but this older woman is outnumbered by the voices of youth and daring innovative lifestyles (Cassandra is visiting her aunt in the company of her friend Miranda). The setting, Aunt Joyce's house, is symbolically relevant. The two girls are going clubbing, and this house is conveniently located so they are spending the night. Regardless of her reluctant acceptance of modernity and new gender roles, Aunt Joyce lives halfway between tradition and change, becoming a shelter for the transient girls.

As a matter of fact, the story is built around the concept of middle parting, of halves: the young and the adult, the old and the new, the rural and the urban, and, finally, the division that is crucial for this analysis: the spoken word and silence. The first half of this piece is a dialogue. After having analyzed it, it will be contrasted with the narrative ending of the story, where the first person narrator reflects on the usefulness of conversation and silence, voicing, in that way, the writer's approach to this duality in her fiction. However, even within the discursive section of the story, the three women already talk about communication, creating a meta-dialogue. The young girl explains to her aunt that at these clubs there is "no talking, just squealing and shouting". The image, loaded with physical and sensual pleasure in Aunt Joyce's imagination, is "too delicious to bear". However, she will not admit to having been seduced by clubbing in front of the girls. She is critical, and defends her life with a gritty spirit:

Before they go out, I warn them, "Don't you two come home shit-faced. I won't be surprised if the vice squad raids that place."

“Aren’t you afraid the vice squad will come after you?” Cassandra says, laughing. “Look at your vices, Aunt Joyce!”

Cassandra, going through my kitchen cabinets, is teasing me. “All these Mexican lard products—the tortilla chips, the tacos, the refried beans.”

“I don’t cook with lard. I use canola.”

Miranda finds this hilarious and laughs uncontrollably. I wonder if she will pee on the rug.

[...]

These two girls parade around my living room, bubbling over in their skimpy clubbing outfits.

I get to the point. “Why don’t you girls go to these club places with a boy—a date?”

“We meet guys there,” Miranda says, shrugging, her breasts lurching. “All kinds.”

She and Cassandra exchange looks and die laughing.

[...]

“It’s just wholesome fun,” Cassandra says. “Like you and Uncle Bob used to have.”

She assumes things so recklessly. She never knew my departed husband.

But she knows she struck a nerve, I can tell. (Online source)

Both parties hold preconceptions about the other generation. They have not taken the time to study it but they judge anyway by means of condescending remarks. So it is not only Cassandra the one that assumes things “recklessly”. The narrator is very critical of their revealing clothes, their immoral nights out and their spontaneous laughter. These characters do not reach mutual understanding through words, but

there is a moment of interpersonal recognition and empathy. Cassandra mentions Aunt Joyce's deceased husband and dares to talk about the past of the couple from a point of absolute ignorance. Her aunt is bothered by her reckless comment, and Cassandra perceives the damage done. However, this instant where both women are aware of the feelings of the interlocutor takes place in silence; they do not talk about this, and do not express either apologies or reproach.

The voice of the story can stand for most of Mason's mature female characters: women of courage and decision who are not afraid to use slang, swear out loud, be cynical or make ironic remarks. I have previously mentioned some of the labels that have been attached to Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction, such as "K-mart realism" or "dirty realism", which fail to perceive the complexities of this writer's style and characters. However, there is one literary denomination, "Grit Lit", under which Mason has been listed<sup>70</sup>, which, instead of enhancing the negative connotations associated with the contemporary South that Mason creates, emphasizes a trait of her writing that denotes her kind attitude toward her characters and her love for the land she was brought up in and later returned to. Southern writers such as Mason, Harry Crews, Barry Hannah, Larry Brown or Dorothy Allison create literature that rejects any faux nostalgia or embellished histories. They have the bravery to portray the South they have seen develop from a factual prism, but, nonetheless, they do so by embracing poetic language to convey the beauty, if unconventional, emerging from southern landscapes, plainspoken people and dark stories. Alabama writer Tom Franklin defines Grit Lit writers as those who have "lived the life and written about it with intelligence and honesty and aplomb and glee" (viii). This resonates with the

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<sup>70</sup> For instance, Mason appears under the category of "Grit Lit" in the following volume: *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, edited by Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. Mackethan (2002).

way Bobbie Ann Mason has reflected on her southern upbringing and her maturity as a returned exile, and, equally, it reflects how her characters interact with southern people, language and land.

Aunt Joyce illustrates the true grit that functions as a banner of the generation of southerners that reject artificiality when honoring their background. When the first person narrator of the story “Clubbing” thinks about the men in her life, these are the defining adjectives: stoic, real, “nothing electric, nothing disastrous”, and quiet. The latter gains importance as she starts to reflect upon the man for whom she is developing feelings. His name is Wilbur Knotts, and he never stops talking. Joyce wants him to stay in silence in order for her to be able to connect with him at a deeper level. The ending of the story is a consideration of silence: “If he would only stop talking... [...] somewhere in there might be a forbidden crevice, a moist niche I could swim into—fleet of foot, dancing, doing the Highland Fling”. She wants to reach intimacy, that part of Wilbur’s identity that no one else gets to see, or is allowed to see. It is “moist” because it has remained hidden for a long time, and it is a “niche” because it is a recess in his hard-rock manhood, where something grandiose and valuable is kept for admiration; that is, his emotions. But in order not to lose contact with her principles of practicality, she juxtaposes the lyricism of the previous image with the prosaic and humorous image of fast dancing feet following the steps of a Kentucky version of this Scottish dance.

The Highland Fling is part of Kentucky’s history, usually danced to the sound of a banjo, and the narrator associates it with Wilbur because he longs for the past, but they are both realistic about it, mixing distress with debates about Medicare or bank bailouts. Grit Lit shines in this story, as she compares Wilbur’s brief melancholy cry for old Kentucky with the speed with which a dog snaps “a gnat”. Nostalgia is put



into perspective in a simile with a scruffy dog getting rid of its flies; that is how easily one can slap away the insignificance of an idealized history.

However, for this story to truly reflect Grit Lit there has to be an element of southern pride, which is embodied by the rich southern feast Aunt Joyce prepares for Wilbur. She cooks buffalo steak, slaw, leather-britches style beans, potatoes au gratin, cranberry mold, and deep-dish cherry cobbler, all part of traditional southern cuisine. This list of recipes is not irrelevant, and it adds regionalism to the story, proving Mason's knowledge of Kentucky and activating a sensuous interpretation, where the reader adds flavors, colors and smells to the story. This is the proud voice of an experienced southerner. However, the choice of dishes aims at a humble and raw portrayal of the lives of poor southerners. These are not expensive ingredients, prepared with modern kitchen appliances. For example, leather-britches beans<sup>71</sup> could be frequently seen decorating the porches of houses in the Appalachian mountains because they were prepared by hanging a garland of threaded beans in the porch to let them dry in the warm air and also above the fire. They were kept during the winter to later be fried. The slow process, the humble cooking, and the storytelling that happened during the threading of the beans give an image of tradition and cultural heritage that Mason seem to celebrate.

Above all, Mason's women are self-reliant empathetic people who hold on to their past in search of valuable knowledge that would anchor them to a soil that provides dignity. Female friendship evolves both around the voice and the senses as the characters relate to each other in dialogue and through body language. Conversations are measured in words oscillating from functional considerations on

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<sup>71</sup> Source: Online food magazine *Food Republic*, founded in 2010. In an interview with award-winning southern chef Sean Brock, he explains how to make this dish: <http://www.foodrepublic.com/2014/10/21/beans-taste-beef-sean-brock-explains-wonderful-lea>

everydayness, to brief and incisive intimate declarations. Sensuous communication appears both in silent scenes and during speech because Mason's female characters accompany talk with interaction with the material, artificial or natural; that is, from cooking ingredients to handling fabrics. By talking and doing chores or crafting, for instance, these characters add depth to their conversations. Hence, the bodies, senses and voices of women interweave in these stories to portray a realistic, postmodern southern femininity.

The following story, "The Horsehair Ball Gown" represents a very different femininity that allows the reader to travel back in time to understand the changes undergone in the conceptualization of womanhood in the South throughout the last few generations. This story evolves again around family ties, but the closeness of the two sisters, Isabella and Maud, brings a unique reflection on identity and communication to Bobbie Ann Mason's previous pieces. This story was published online in the Spring of 2013, and illustrates the mature and wise approach to southern culture that Mason has been cultivating throughout her writing career. Her female characters have never been simplistic women, lacking in ambitions or inner complexities. However, writing within her regular stylistic and contextual parameters, Mason has ventured in this story further than usual into the collective guilt experienced before the shameful past of racism of the South. Critics have previously mentioned that Bobbie Ann Mason's portrayal of the South was partial<sup>72</sup>. It is indeed,

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<sup>72</sup> For instance, contemporary Appalachian writer Lee Smith is compared, in an interview by Virginia A. Smith, with Bobbie Ann Mason, and both are described as silencing key components of the South. Smith explains that as they were growing up, race was secondary, but class was defining, and as offspring of small farmers, their surrounding community seemed homogenous because "everybody was poor" (74). And Laura Fine clarifies that the reason for Mason's partiality is her focus on the American universals found in the South, even if it is a South mainly of "lower-middle class white heterosexuals" (88). Consequently, silence is not a symptom of the author's unawareness of the persistent troubled legacy of the South; the silence of

but this writer has never claimed otherwise. But in “The Horsehair Ball Gown”, she delves into racial conflict when Isabella and Maud, in their 70s and 90s respectively, visit their favorite Lexington restaurant and an African American preacher pays for their drinks, approaches their table and invites them to attend his church.

These old women are daughters of a South that does not exist anymore, and their conventional and secluded lives clash with the current southern reality. Isabella, a spinster, takes care of Maud, a widow. They live together in a very intimate environment. So much so that they seem to have reached a point in their old age where they exist as a single identity. When they chat to each other their voices run “together like a monologue” and they hold each other’s hands “as if they were riders on a Ferris wheel”. Their unity only underlines their restricted view of the world; in their world, a simple trip to the city was like “going to heaven in house shoes”. The metaphor points at the core of their lifestyles: their home.

They see the world through the prism of their youth, where they seem to be stuck, a past of the old southern farms of Kentucky, where the event in the restaurant would have given their mother “a fit”. They constantly refer to the proud memory of

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minorities (racial or sexual, among others) is due to her voicing of other sectors also frequently ignored: the uneventful stories of middle class struggling southerners. Nevertheless, just to emphasize Mason’s commitment to fair depictions of the South, one can look at her critical book on the popular detective girl Nancy Drew. By condemning the racist innuendo of this character, she implicitly establishes her rejection of such attitudes in literature. Talking about Nancy, Mason writes the following: “when minorities know their place, Nancy treats them graciously” (73). The reflection on the character denounces the discriminatory and ignorant impulses behind Nancy’s condescending behavior. Through popular culture, Mason dismisses as well privilege in any form. In Warren Zanes’s study of Southern pop culture he cites Mason’s connection with African American music, which indicates “her association with margins” (109). Mason says that for her this music “was alien and yet somehow closer to my experience than were the tea parties of more privileged little girls. I sensed that in encouraging me to love this music as he did, my father was teaching me something important” (109). Even in her youthful encounters with popular culture, Mason started to record the idiosyncrasy of inequality around her immediate southern life, but that she did not face in her everyday life.

their mother, a woman who “had always let the maid eat in the kitchen”. Both sisters are shocked by the preacher’s action, but their conservative and racist background particularly marks Maud. She is left “stupefied” and needing special care after their trip to Lexington. In fact, “Maud had refused to have the news on since Obama had been elected”, but Isabella needs to see and feel more than their “little teacup-and-doily world”, where she feels imprisoned. Isabella is also bounded by her past, but she dares to cross her limitations and watches the news at night while her sister sleeps; “with the sound barely a whisper”, she gets “goose bumps at the sight of the president”. She is tired of a life where there is such a thing as “Tiptoe Day”, as their niece calls the day where they get their hair done and move carefully around not to mess the renewed style.

These sisters do not really articulate their emotions, and when they finally have an honest conversation about their grudges and regrets, the confessions make them tremble. They both went through devastating episodes in their youth. Their older sister ran away, and they have never reconnected; also, Maud’s boyfriend, who was disapproved of by their father, committed suicide, and she was never able to truly love again or forgive their father. Their sister ran away because she disobeyed their parents. She was not allowed to wear a loud and provocative horsehair gown to a festival in town. But the young girl was determined and enjoyed the challenge. Maud snitched on their older sister and, because of their father’s reprimand, the girl ran away. But, conversely, Isabella tried to keep the secret. She has always secretly blamed Maud for their sister’s departure, but what she had ignored until they have this conversation is that Maud suffered equally for the loss of their sister. These are women who “remained little girls around their mothers”, have lived without male affection, and call a delicious pudding a “Better-than-sex cake” to later regret the

reference. However, their personalities are not as basic as their habits. Their suffering has made them resilient and forceful, which contrasts with their Southern Belle behavior. This is a type of lady that, as Aaron Duncan explains in his study of southern myths, “when a dramatic event occur, [...] fall[s] to pieces and act[s] irrationally” (77). But there is more to their feeble-lady appearance:

“The nerve, inviting us to his church,” said Maud, who still had her tattered paper napkin, which she had worried into the shape of a twist of tobacco.

“We don’t have to go, do we?”

“Did he think he could buy us a dinner and get us to come to his church?”

“Maybe he feels it’s his duty to feed widows and orphans,” Isabella said.

“You’re the widow and I’m the orphan.”

[...]

The next morning at breakfast, Maud said, “Little Bit, I can’t get my mind off of this. It carries me back to when Mother was alive, how she would get so distressed at any little thing. She could work something up in her mind and then it would take over.”

“You’re not that much like Mother.” Isabella realized she sounded snappy.

“All the same, Mother wouldn’t have stood for this.”

Although Maud argued against sending a note, Isabella wrote to the preacher, a simple, proper thank-you on one of her floral, sachet-scented notes. Too late, it occurred to Isabella that he might interpret the fragrance incorrectly.

To start analyzing Mason’s nuanced version of the postsouthern Belle, the first consideration would be to perceive the distress caused by the approach of the preacher as a punishment for their backward mentality. It seems like the present South forces itself into their overprotected existence. The isolation in which they have matured has

made them impervious to reality, but the “heavenly” trip to the city turns into a hell of truth. It takes them out of their comfort zone, in the same way their curls escape the hair net, and, as they get disheveled, their old-fashioned social structure crumbles. They are orphans, and no man is there to protect them. They fear sexual innuendo, but Isabelle breaks the code of restriction by planning to invite the preacher over: “She would select a different card, one bolder and more colorful. [...] *Brother Brewster, please come to visit and to pray over my ailing sister, who is troubled in mind and has a lot to answer for. There will be tea.*” The fact that she asks for forgiveness and defines Maud as mentally unstable can be read as a provocation against curtailment, trying to construct a more intricate female role.

Bobbie Ann Mason does not define herself as a feminist, but her female characters act out of the norm, while the men question their masculinity.<sup>73</sup> G. O. Morphew calls Mason’s attitude towards new female roles “down-home feminism” (74), where women challenge restrictions in general, rather than genderized problematizations. They do not go into symbolic or adventurous quests, but, still, they enact defiant acts that make them feel empowered, shattering the boundaries of everydayness. The women in these stories feel strangled by the monotony into which they have fallen; thus, they search for renewed excitement. But, again, this can also be said about Mason’s male characters. Even the preacher in the aforementioned story, “The Horsehair Ball Gown”, challenges himself in order to establish human contact. The waitress in the restaurant says that he is a lonely man and a regular customer. He has been observing these two sisters and extends an invitation for them to join his community. In an interview with Josh Getlin for *Los Angeles Times* in 1993, Mason explicitly addresses the all-inclusive nature of her themes: “I think the people I’m

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<sup>73</sup> For a detailed analysis of this topic, see Tina Butcher’s “Changing Roles and Finding Stability: Women in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *Shiloh and Other Stories*” (1991).

writing about represent a large strata of America. They're a group of people who are often ignored". And for this reason Mason presents their struggles without attempting to create a feminist portrayal. Nevertheless, it is true that the women she depicts are not submissive, weak or defeated, which proves the underlying gender perceptions the author may hold; as Joanna Price explains in her monograph of the writer, Mason shows an "internalization of feminist discourse" (14), which shows in her characters' demeanor and words. Hence, once again, Mason manages to convey a deeper, underlying meaning to the story that is not articulated by characters or narrators, but silent.

In order to configure these parallel plots or layers of meaning in her stories, Mason, as analyzed in a foregoing chapter, employs metaphors drawn from Nature that increase the intensity of the struggle the character is overcoming. If Mason composes a simile with a natural element, this is not a forced trope hard for the reader to visualize. She compares human actions, feelings and objects with natural elements because, in her mind, they actually resemble one another, either in appearance or behavior. The connotation added to the metaphor is loaded by the reader. However, this abstract meaning is not a forced interpretation, lacking textual proof. If the reader's response to the relation between the character's inner world and the landscape is based on comparative tropes, it is because Mason selects images that collocate with the unarticulated emotions of the scene. The symbols become legible because the natural representations have a clear suggestive power, which, once activated in the reader, unveil the semantic coherence of the story. Mason's stories contain a sequence of scenes interrupted by close up examinations of irrelevant details, which may seem to create a broken narrative. But the understanding of Mason's short fiction will remain superficial if the cohesive symbols are not detected.

The story “The Climber” exemplifies the unifying capacity of metaphors deriving from nature. Dolores and her husband Glenn are a mature couple, whose children have emancipated and created their own families away from home. The plot evolves around two critical events. One takes place outside of Dolores, outside of her body, yet within her household, which of course holds a sense of property close to one’s own physical identity. A big old tree in her garden is going to be cut down, after Glenn insists that he needs the space for his new workshop. Dolores is not delighted with this change. The other event takes place within Dolores’s body. The doctor has discovered a lump in her breast. It hurts. She is going to a specialist to get it checked. She was not going to, but her friend Dusty urges her to visit the clinic and feeds Dolores’s concern by sharing her knowledge of different diseases.

After discussing these news with Dusty, Dolores notices, “that whenever women get together, they talk about diseases. Men never do. This is probably why Dolores is hesitant to tell Glenn about seeing the doctor” (107). The same day before her appointment:

Dolores watches the men [Glenn and the climber] work until the tip of the trunk is denuded [...]. “I can’t stand it anymore,” says Dolores.

She telephones Dusty.

“Aren’t you scared?” Dusty asks when Dolores describes what is going on.

“Why don’t you come over here where it’s safe?”

“It’s not like you think. This guy’s slicing it off, a piece at a time.” Dolores hears the chain saw pause, then the swish of branches, the shouts of the men.

“He looks like a hippie,” she says.

“You don’t see many of them anymore.”

“He chews tobacco too.”



“Is he cute?”

“Not bad. You should come over *here*.”

“I don’t know if I could kiss somebody that chewed tobacco.”

Dusty laughs. “Did I tell you what that high-toe husband of mine says to me?”

“No, what?”

“He said he’ll take me back –on condition.”

“What?”

“If I quit beauty school.”

“You don’t want to do that.”

“He thinks he’s got it *over* me,” Dusty says. “He thinks I’m bound to come crawling back to him because I was so bad.” [She had an affair with a younger man] [...].

Dolores says, “Well, wish me luck. I see the doctor at eleven.”

“Girl, I don’t envy you.”

“I can’t eat a thing.”

“You better eat.”

“I ate half a Breakfast Bar.”

“I want you to call me the minute you get back.”

“I will.”

“I’m glad you’re going through with it,” Dusty says. “That specialist is new at the clinic, and this town has needed somebody like that for the longest time.”

Dolores hears the chain saw start and stop. She hears a tree trunk breaking. She says, her voice tightening, “If I die I want you to look in on Glenn. He won’t be able to take care of himself. He’ll be so helpless and – ”

“I’m not listening,” says Dusty. “I won’t let you talk like that.” (112-113, author’s italics)

Leslie W. Hepple studied the use of metaphors to understand landscapes in relation to our social identities: “The strategic silences of the metaphors we use are as important as the aspects that are thrust center-stage in the language and vision” (142). Hepple develops her topic from the notion of metaphors being subjective; they depend on the vision of the voice that creates them. Equally, the interpretation will be open, inconclusive –aspects that are favored by the structure of the short story and the employment of silences by Bobbie Ann Mason. The concise language and the fact that Mason’s narrators do not provide judgments, only descriptions, will benefit from the employment of tropes to compensate for the silenced feelings; especially when the topics dealt with are highly emotional and abstract.

This is the case in “The Climber”, where Dolores fears the lump to be cancer. The scene of the tree being cut mirrors Dolores’s anticipation of the diagnosis. The dread of having to undergo a mastectomy is equated to being cut of branches, that is, deprived of breasts, which are symbols of womanhood and motherhood. However, Dolores and her friend, like most of Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters, would not talk poetically or philosophize about the physicality of female social identity. Such a dialogue would clash with the reality constructed in her fiction.

The self-governed women of these stories are in sync with nature, both in behavior and language. They have been able to build a wholesome sense of gender through a balance between, on the one hand, tradition and simplicity, and, on the other hand, mainstream awareness and wishful imagination. They do not perform radical acts of feminism and they find pleasure in housekeeping, crafts and rural lifestyles. However, they also consume popular culture, are educated on current

affairs, even if distant, and cannot avoid being seized by fanciful recreations of what they feel is lacking in their routines or of the different scenarios where they desire to escape to. These courageous women do not feed on the fake glamour of southern belles; they experience the unabridged actuality of Kentucky and share their relish for life's ironies in plainspoken English, being sensitive to regional sounds and musicality.

Notwithstanding these positive connotations that Mason often attaches to home chores and rural life, domestic responsibilities in her stories very often signal captivity. Men and women share an enclosed space of drilled behaviors, and the layout of this home maps out their conversations. Little details are brought to the fore in Mason's descriptions of love life, and she uses them to create reverberating images that magnify the symbolism of ordinary objects. However, couples also engage in conversations that encapsulate the limited mutual understanding achieved through words. Due to the fact that dialogues are inconclusive, made up of confrontational questions and askew irony, even when men and women speak with their partners, the reader still relies on what is silenced in order to obtain a fuller comprehension of the story and these personalities.

Andre Dubus (1936-1999), a short story writer from Louisiana, frequently compared to Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver in style, employs minimalist and earthly language in dialogue, as well as precise images to portray the complicated process of communication between men and women in love. He was particularly inspired by the confinement of domestic life, and by the broken conversations that take place when the rehearsed roles of wife, husband, mother and father eclipse the identity of the characters, particularly in untraditional family structures. In the story "At St. Croix", published in 1979, two mature people, already divorced and with

children from their previous partners, begin a romance. Man and woman have not yet healed from the suffering of separation and attempt to free themselves from the past by going on holiday to the coast. With an instructor, they venture snorkeling. The man has great fear of the immensity of the ocean and panics while trying to swim on a reef. The woman loves the experience. Back on the boat, the woman and the instructor talk, but he does not participate:

For a while her voice sounded as it did on those nights when they fought and, the fight ended, they talked about other things, past their wounds and over the space between them. He did not watch her face. St. Croix was beyond her, and he looked at the sky touching the hills, and listened to Jo [the woman] and Don [the instructor] talking about the reef. [...]. Sometimes he looked over his shoulder at the horizon and the dark blue swelling sea. (59)

The man has had previous traumatic experiences swimming in the ocean, but he wanted now to share that experience with Jo. However, he is alienated from the scene and from the conversation. He cannot swim or talk. Hence, he becomes an observant, a member of the audience, and his fantasies and memories are fed by the voice of his lover, taking him back to their intimate moments. But he moves beyond, passing over her body on the boat, as he does when he overcomes the pain they cause to each other in arguments. His eyes travel farther to the horizon, which is an omen of the realization that will overcome him later that day. The ocean, the words of Jo and his past will join meaningfully that night, as he lies alone on the beach. Similarly, in the stories selected, conversations and actions cooperate to convey an insight achieved by the character. Both dialogue and silence are essential for the characters to be enlightened on an aspect of their existence they had so far ignored. By talking, both men and women activate an emotion that can no longer be suppressed. Later, in quiet

contemplation, the character gradually moves beyond the detail towards the line that marks the limit of their experience. They are then able to ignore the irregularities and particulars of any domestic pettiness; here, he looks over the line between the sea and the sky. The gaze of the character directed towards the horizon symbolizes the imminent awakening from the quotidian to step into ideas or fantasies, where words would fail. In the following stories, a windowpane, the sea, and heaps of fallen leaves on a graveyard will gain importance after an unsatisfactory conversation between couples. The reverberating sound of the words shared and their ruminating eyes lead them to a deeper understanding of their place in life.

The previously discussed label of minimalism that links authors like Andre Dubus, Raymond Carver and Bobbie Ann Mason fits particularly well the organization of dialogues between men and women. These writers avoid truth-seeking discussions because characters are products of their contexts and such concerns would not be plausible with their specific background. Additionally, in the narrators' meticulous observations of domestic everydayness, a topic diverting from these immediate matters would disturb the rhythm of the story. This rhythm could be classified as dull or monotonous if it was not stylized, and both Carver and Mason mastered this strategy right from their early stories. As was mentioned earlier in this analysis, the music of these stories results from the combination of the dry speeches of laconic characters and the pauses in-between. As critic Morris Dickstein put it in his study of Carver's realism, his paragraphs emerged as "fragments of dialogue separated by silence and vacancy" (201). And I would add that the revealing vacancies are not only found in the moments when the narrators take over the writing to walk into observational and fanciful passages, but also in conversations. Concentrating now again on Mason, though still parallel in style to Carver, the

dialogues of her stories contain gaps; that is, even when characters chat, they are silent. The secrets among spoken words become even more tangible when men and women converse.

The couples in Bobbie Ann Mason's tales are described experiencing periods of unhappiness. This dissatisfaction is related to the "gaps" aforementioned. On the one hand, the routines adopted overtime in the described households face a fracture in their continuity. A small event often distresses the flow of their daily habits. And, at the same time, the "gaps" are symptoms of the holes these characters feel in their lives; they are conscious of missing either a material aspect or an emotional one. The gap has become large and now it manifests in their discourse. That is why, when reading Bobbie Ann Mason, one would benefit from being able to find the implications of the characters' silences and of what the characters refuse to talk about when they discuss puzzling ideas that have little to do with the actual sources of the emotions being felt, either positive or negative.

A perfect example of this avoidance of sensitive topics in dialogues is the story "Private Lies", which evolves around infidelity and regrets that fill the conversations, alongside rewritings of the past and fabrications about the future. Mickey and Tina are married and have two kids. Their family routines are well rooted but neither of them shares signs of deep sentimental or passionate attachment. Husband and wife are clearly detached. Mickey had a kid with a previous wife, Donna, but she gave the baby up for adoption because they were young and influenced by the concerns of Donna's parents about her future being truncated and tainted by premature motherhood. Donna and Mickey have not been in touch for a long time, but now he feels the urge to find his lost daughter. He tells Tina, who does not like the idea and prefers to keep his previous fatherhood a secret from their two

children. Mickey contacts Donna, who is now a widow, and, in trying to convince her to join him in a quest to find their daughter, starts a flirtation that leads to an affair. They secretly meet and talk on the phone: “Mickey didn’t remember having conversations with Donna when they were married. Now he liked the way long silences on the telephone seemed so natural” (136). The organic and equally random structure of their conversations contrasts with the pragmatic and instrumental chats he has with Tina, where words are meant to solve problems and quiet moments are symptoms of distance and introspection. The silences he hears on the phone with Donna, conversely, show their thoughtful attitude towards their rekindled romance. Still, talking about having renounced their baby brings up silences of avoidance, as Donna tends to “hush” Mickey (156). They travel from their small town in Kentucky to Florida, where eighteen years ago Donna had the baby, and, even though “the sunshine felt like a warm glow of approval” (159), shame and guilt soon take over the mood of their trip:

Donna blew her nose and said, “I should have gotten an abortion back then, but I was too chicken. [...] Then the whole thing would have been over with.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say. You’d feel worse.”

“I think death is a whole lot easier to get over than the mess people make of their lives [...]” [...]

“But we could find her.”

“I don’t see how.”

“What if she wants to find us?” [...]

Donna didn’t answer. [...]

On the beach, Donna scooped up some sand and put it in Mickey’s hand.

“Feel,” she said. “Feel how scratchy it is.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s tiny bits of coral. It’s not smooth, the way other sand is. It’s hell on your feet.”

[...]

“I remember that from when we were in Florida before.” [she says]

Mickey found a little white shell and handed it to Donna, but she wouldn’t take it.

“I don’t want to collect shells, “ she said. “When you look inside them sometimes you find creepy little things living in there.”

Mickey left the shell fall. He did not remember the sand from before. Looking out at the bright ocean coming to meet it, in whispers, he felt, with a sense of relief, that nothing private was left here. (159-160)

This dialogue is made of challenging moves when the interlocutor responds with an unanticipated reaction; for instance, not answering questions, underlying the gaps in the conversation, the secret emotions. The rhythm, however, is a product of the hanging speeches and the detailed renditions of the setting. The eye of the reader constantly zooms in and out of the discussion as they move from verbal exchange to observation of the beach and interaction with it. Donna does not reveal her thoughts on their daughter’s desire to locate her lost parents. She responds with silence. The answer is physical because the language that accompanies the act does not address the issue. She grabs sand carefully in the palm of her hand and passes it to Mickey. She talks about the rough feeling of the grains on the skin, but they scoop the sand in the way they were not able to scoop the newborn. They handle the landscape that saw the abandonment of their daughter, in order to reenact what they regret having done: giving her in adoption. Her speech does not mention regret, but her hands do.



Similarly, Donna rejects the shell, on the grounds of the menacing creatures that creep out of them at times. However, she is talking about her refusal to negotiate the past, because, like a hermitage, an unwanted truth may come out of the investigation. They could find out that their daughter does not wish to meet them. Finally, Mickey observes in silence the waves clashing against the abandoned shell. The narrator articulates Mickey's thought: he is relieved to conclude that his past with Donna has been unveiled and they do not have to hide truths from each other anymore. But, like the foamy waters, they are communicating in intermittent whispers. Mason's men and women talk like the sea and the shore shell –their words come and go in discontinuous dialogues, and in the low volume that characterizes fearful questions and confessions.

In a story like "Private Lives", both men and women remain quiet but are also, and in equal measure, given a chance to speak. This is the writer's attempt to approach the point of view of both genders in conversation. However, the fact that Mason chose in the story "Window Lights" a male first person narrator illustrates how the cultural and emotional questions presented in her stories not only have a trans-gender validity but also a trans-generational one. Bill, the voice of this tale, maintains three conversations in the story: one with his grandmother, a second one with his wife, and a third one with the reader, metaphorically in the first one and by direct address in the other two. Maddie and Bill are separated. Maddie has just recently moved back to Lexington with their daughter Lisa. She is now considering reconciliation. Bill still loves her, but his extraordinary new habits, acquired in his lonesome existence without his wife and daughter, concern and bother Maddie. She is pragmatic, and while Bill has taken on a life of frugality and simplicity, his meditations and contemplations are complex, emotional and fanciful. This is the

source of their misunderstandings. Maddie lives in the present and Bill concentrates on his recollections of the past and the traditions his grandmother lived by, where he is finding a recognition and identification with the old ways. The bond he is establishing through memories with his grandmother seems unattainable with his wife.

The third person Bill is talking to is the reader. Bill starts the narration with a declaration of principles: “I don’t like the way the world is going nowadays, so I’m taking a break. [...] A lot of guys who feel the same are just staying home with their guns. I’ll stay here with my meager entertainments, waiting until the air clears” (139). If the narrator had no awareness of an audience, he would not begin with a statement that tells the person listening to him what will not be allowed or done. He is not going to participate in the craziness around him. The violence, speed, noise and consumption that led his life when he was a travelling businessman have been replaced by an austere and isolated routine: he barely leaves the house, he lives on a dollar a day, he does crafts, keeps a diary, watches television in the dark, takes care of his cats and observes the “slightest change” (140) that may occur in the world through his window. Gradually, he is turning into his grandmother (141).

This is a silent and “peaceful” life (141), but it is interrupted by Maddie demanding a dialogue over the phone:

“Bill, are you trying to starve yourself?”

“Oh, another day I might eat oats,” I said. “Not that instant stuff –you’re just paying for packaging and processing.”

“You can’t live on oats.”

“Why not?”

“You’re just too lazy to cook. You’re refusing to deal with food because I’m not there to cook for you.”

“It’s sociology,” I said solemnly. “I’m running an experiment.”

“Oh, come on.”

[...]

“Every day I write down an Insight of the Day” [...] “today I wrote, ‘If you stay alone without speech, until you can hear yourself think, the universe will be opened to you.’”

“Have you tried counseling? I know a good –”. (142)

Maddie attends an alienated-wives’ support group, has a new job, likes to eat in restaurants, and has a roommate. She does not keep quiet in contemplation, and is “too busy” to stop and try to understand Bill’s new ideas. She is speech and he is silence. And even though he still loves her, he acknowledges their incompatibilities: “Just when my dreams start to make sense, there’s a punch line, like Maddie calling” (145). In this conversation between genders, masculinity is challenged, as he knits instead of firing guns, and talks about emotions while his daughter studies geography. However, even though the narrator is not afraid to reinvent himself as a man, when he thinks about his ancestors he is aware of how much they would disapprove of his new mindset: “How would she [his grandma] laugh to see her grandson piecing a quilt! I’m sure she never knew a man who could thread a needle” (149). But stitching the old rags is a way of “communicating with Grandma” (149), so he would rather call into question gender preconceptions than lose a link with the past. In fact, somehow, as the quilt grows, his masculinity is empowered, as David Bolt explains in his article about Bobbie Ann Mason’s portrayal of male and female characters. According to Bolt, his identity and self-reliance are strengthened with the quilt (11). Bill says that

the sewing has become an act of “a meditation” (151) that provides him with a bond with his daughter and wife that is unreachable in conversation.

In the previous story, “Private Lies”, the man is desperate to recover fatherhood, while the woman wishes she had had an abortion. He offers a trite romantic gesture by handling a shell to his lover, while she declines the symbol and deconstructs it by adding a repulsive meaning to it –the creeping hermitage. In “Window Lights”, the man knits, keeps a diary and loves his cats, while the woman has found pleasure in an affair, reacts skeptically towards emotional declarations, and satisfies her professional ambitions. Consequently, it can be said that Mason is inspired by feelings that overcome southerners, male or female, who find their way into verbal communication, clumsily but effectively.

As a consequence of her gender inclusivity and impartiality, Mason repeatedly portrays mature female characters that struggle to reconstruct a family after a first failed marriage –that is, it is not only men who struggle to reconfigure her identities as adults. The cross-gendered conversations become even more complicated in these scenarios due to the phantom presence of the previous partner, who, even though not physically with them, influences the relationship in progress. As a consequence, dialogues not only take place between two people, the woman and the most recent companion, who are the ones producing speech acts, but also with the participation of the previous husband, in the form of memories.

Waldeen, in the story “Graveyard Day”, recently divorced Joe Murdock, an adventurous, impulsive and irresponsible man who now lives in Arizona. He is the father of Waldeen’s ten-year-old daughter Holly. Now Waldeen is dating Joe McClain, a very different personality –considerate, loving and family-oriented, but also a bit eccentric. His behavior fits the role of husband and father but he shows

extraordinary traits: he always carries a walking stick –a kind of object he is in the habit of collecting –and his family has the tradition of cleaning regularly the family graveyard and bringing fresh flowers. This ritual shocks Waldeen, and, in her confusion, she suggests having a picnic in the cemetery while he tidies up the place. Though aware of the unfortunate proposal, she later proceeds to invite two more friends. Hence, the solemnity of the moment seems endangered by its being turned into a social event.

Murdock, the ex-husband, is not present in the story, but Waldeen constantly mentions him. Her resentment towards her ex-husband interferes with her conversations with McClain. Besides, the communication between Holly and her mother do not flow in most cases. They represent a generation gap with their arguments, mainly about diet (Holly wants to be a vegetarian and her mother does not approve), but, in general, Waldeen feels judged and shunned by Holly, who proves her intelligence by listing facts she has memorized and uses to impose her will on her mother's more traditional views –Holly enjoys soybean delight but her mother cooks her liver and onions. McClain is the pacifier in this constant battle, but, still, as the narrator specifies, “shifting relationships confuse” Waldeen (162); that is why she has not accepted McClain's marriage proposal. The following dialogue between Joe and Waldeen exemplifies how miscommunication may occur in a quotidian scene. Joe brings pizza for lunch and expresses his concerns regarding Saturday, graveyard day:

“I'm afraid we'll end up horsing around and won't get the graveyard cleaned off,” Joe says. “It's really a lot of work.”

“Why's it so important, anyway?”

“It's a family thing.”

“Family. Ha!”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what’s what anymore,” Waldeen wails. “I’ve got this kid that wants to live on peanuts [...] –and didn’t even see her daddy for Christmas. And here *you* are, talking about family. What do you know about family? You don’t know the half of it.”

“What’s got into you lately?”

Waldeen tries to explain. “Take Colonel Sanders<sup>74</sup>, for instance. He was on *I’ve Got a Secret*<sup>75</sup>, years ago, when nobody knew who he was? His secret was that he had a million-dollar check in his pocket for selling Kentucky Fried Chicken to John Y. Brown<sup>76</sup>. *Now* look what’s happened. Colonel Sanders sold it but didn’t get rid of it. He couldn’t escape from being Colonel Sanders. John Y. sold it too, and he can’t get rid of it either. Everybody calls him Chicken King, even though he’s governor. That’s not very dignified, if you ask me.”

“What in Sam Hill are you talking about? What’s that got to do with families?”

“Oh, Colonel Sanders just came to mind because C. W. and Betty [the friends she has invited to the graveyard picnic] saw him. What I mean is, you can’t just do something by itself. Everything else drags along. It’s all *involved*. I can’t get rid of my ex-husband just by signing a paper. Even if he *is* in Arizona and I never lay eyes on him again.”

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<sup>74</sup> Colonel H. Sanders was a southern businessman, best known for starting the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise.

<sup>75</sup> This was a panel game show that was first broadcasted in 1952. The participants had to guess a secret that the guest of the night, usually a celebrity, kept from the general public. Its success secured several reruns and special episodes.

<sup>76</sup> John Y. Brown is a Democratic politician and businessman from Kentucky (1933), who served as governor of this state from 1979 to 1983.

Joe stands up, takes Waldeen by the hand, and leads her to the couch. [...]. She doesn't understand the walking stick, or why he would buy such an enormous pizza. [...]

“One of these days you'll see –I'm not such a bad catch.”

Waldeen stares at a split in the wallpaper.

[...]

“Nobody else can do Jimmy Durante<sup>77</sup> imitations like I can.” [Joe jokes].

“I wouldn't brag about it”. (167-168, author's italics)

In many of Mason's stories men and women engage in conversation trying to decide in which phase of womanhood and manhood they can locate themselves. The past failures and the legacy of first marriages become a speaking entity in their dialogues in the form of recollections, souvenirs or offspring. Depending on the story, one of the members of these couples, either the man or the woman, falls into a fanciful introspection that distances them from a romantic experience. This is mainly caused by the pain of regrets that has made the establishment of marriage fall from grace. This entails a paradox in the behavior of these characters because, even though they underline in their discussions the absurdity of courtship and symbols of love, at the same time they hide introspectively in dreamy lapses to ponder on the meaning of idealized love. So they ridicule romanticism, while still being sentimental. In the last story, “Graveyard Day”, for instance, Waldeen closes the scene by jumping on the mountain of leaves that her boyfriend has just cleaned away from his family's graves. As the leaves fly apart, she metaphorically deconstructs monolithic definitions of households. The suggestive image may confuse the rest of the characters but it is consistent with Waldeen's previous declarations in the dialogue, so the unexpected

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<sup>77</sup> Jimmy Durante (1893-1980) was a singer, comedian and actor, recognized for his strong New York accent and prominent nose.

reaction would be meaningful for the reader. Thus, men and women in Bobbie Ann Mason's stories need to combine words with their bodies and the landscape in order to fully convey their silent emotions. Equally, the reader will benefit from an interpretation of the stories that incorporates both speech and image, that is, spoken words and silence.

#### 6.6. Talking to Strangers.

Regardless of the stagnant nature of the lives of Bobbie Ann Mason's characters, they are all travelers. The geographic setting may not vary drastically throughout the stories but the imagination of the characters is constantly shifting in time and location. And not only do they embark on metaphorical journeys, as movement is also a constant theme in these stories. The people that interest Mason are attracted to the road, even if they do not leave their towns; they need to trespass the walls that trigger a sense of claustrophobia. Transportation and hotels often feature in Mason's collections, and, as a consequence, strangers creep into the stories. Alien voices become part of the consistency of the plot, enriching the soundscape of the stories.

The small cities and rural towns of western Kentucky convey in Mason's fiction a confinement that influences the characters and the personae they present to their environment. They can hardly evolve if they do not allow themselves to travel, in fancy or on the road, and also if they do not talk to strangers, who integrate new nuances to the characters' own language and imagination. But these strangers are not passive tools at the mercy of the protagonists, as the influence is mutual. The main characters feed from the fresh voices encountered and, in exchange, the strangers



temporarily find solace for their immediate distresses. When protagonists and strangers engage in conversation they both erupt in what seems a condensed flow of energy that cries out to be articulated. As a consequence, they share privacy, secrets and emotions that do not feature in the dialogues within their respective households.

Ellen Gilchrist, short story and novel writer from Mississippi, published in 2014 the collection *Acts of God*. The stories touch on topical affairs and are linked by tragic interruptions of plans and normalcy. The story “Toccata and Fugue in D Minor” takes place in Heathrow. Three successful southern women are on their way to a heavenly Tuscan holiday, but before the threat of a terrorist attack the airport is shut down. The women are awaiting news while they chat nervously on a table; gradually strangers join in the conversation. Initially, they talk about the panic and chaos that surround them; however, one of the new acquaintances says: “Let’s tell stories of our lives”, because that is what “stranded travelers” (117) are supposed to do. The narrator, one of these three women, is a worldly journalist who usually is in control of knowledge and words, maintaining a guarded attitude. But she starts to volunteer to compatriots, flight attendants and fellow passengers information about her parents, family traumas, concept of motherhood, and life crises without any protection filter, showing a desperate need to connect at a human level. Similarly, in their chats with strangers, Mason’s characters initially refuse to interact as they fear delving into the peculiar world of their memories, imagination and emotions, but after yielding to the spoken word and the flow of dialogue, they find themselves offering information impulsively.

The story “Charger” was published in the collection *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* in 2001 and it evolves around the main linking theme between the eleven stories included: travelling, movement or change. This concern has appeared in Bobbie Ann

Mason's fiction from her earliest writing, because her characters have always found on the road<sup>78</sup> and in the passing landscape a temporary remedy for their worries. In this case, Charger, the protagonist, is a nineteen-year-old boy, in love with his attractive girlfriend, Tiffany Marie. He still lives with his mother and works in a fertilizer plant. His life is simple but he yearns for more, and the proximity of their engagement and the recent abandonment of his father have activated a series of introspections, causing him to reconsider his desires, an appetite for drugs, and a restlessness that manifests in his spontaneous chats with strangers. He indulges these random acquaintances by becoming the person he thinks they need him to be at that precise moment.

He was given that nickname because he tends "to charge" into situations without measuring the consequences. Throughout the story he is found in his truck "cruising", "driving fast", "veering" and "scooting" into places. He is "poised for possibility", as Mason said in an interview with Cara Feinberg the year the collection was published. He is "zigzagging down a wild trail" because in these changes of directions, he is expecting to find a straight path to follow. The reason why he wants to experiment with Prozac is because he wants a "shift of attitude" (192). He can foresee his life becoming that of his parents: tired adults with no passion and out of love. This dissatisfaction is what caused his father to run away, and "once he got out of Kentucky, he couldn't turn back" (193). Charger enjoys the company of his young girlfriend but fears a future nostalgia for all that he did not see, the "skies" he did not observe, which is what his father admires now in Texas. Mason's characters are wanderers and daydreamers who, simultaneously, sense the value of the South that

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<sup>78</sup> The symbolism of the road was partly discussed on chapter 5, when I took into consideration vehicles as products of American popular culture that can embody the unarticulated emotions of Mason's characters.

nurtures their pragmatic personalities. In order to balance these two urgencies they need to zigzag down wild trails. This wish to make sudden changes in their routine lives appears already in one of Mason's first characters, Norma Jean, in the story "Shiloh", which is analyzed later in the chapter. Norma Jean gradually frees herself from the suffocating role of wife towards independence. The ultimate stage of her identity split from her husband occurs during a road trip. She walks away from him "following a serpentine brick path" (17). She wanders through twisting motions in a journey that symbolizes the discovery of new opportunities and abilities. This is exactly why Charger needs a trip to Texas.

Charger and Tiffany's trips are constantly interrupted by the voices of strangers, and even if Charger does not engage in these conversations, his attention is immediately drawn to them. The words of the strangers include either dismissing remarks or lies. He can hear someone saying "go to Paducah for all I care" (190), which might be a threat for the speaker but a relief for Charger. A teenager and her mother queue in a Wal-Mart to get the autograph of a famous singer. Charger deceives them into believing Tiffany is part of the band (193), a false life of excitement and travelling that he does not have. He then tries to convince Tiffany's aunt Paula to give him some of her Prozac (198), dramatizing his current situation: "My *self* doesn't have that much to do with it [meaning he has no chances of personal growth]" (198). In all these conversations he creates a false version of himself that seems to erupt spontaneously; as if it were some condensed vigor he cannot control. He mingles self-destructive impulses with a desire to escape and stir away abruptly, unexpectedly. These conversations border on provocation but always following the rules of politeness. Jeffrey J. Folks analyzed the anxiety felt in the ordinary lives of Eudora Welty's characters, and his conclusion of social relations and internal turmoil

resonates with the Charger's situation. Folks explains that the maintenance of politeness in the dialogues between characters is nothing but an illusion that "conceals an underlying strata of violence" (16). Charger needs to find a way out for his nervousness; he is a very young man that feels entrapped, and his aggressiveness shows in his challenging dialogues with strangers.

The culminating exchange takes place on their way to Texas. They stop to spend the night in a road motel, and Charger cannot but have an unplanned conversation with the night clerk, because he does not "want to go back upstairs just yet" (205). Upstairs, Tiffany awaits, representing an uneventful future of stability in Kentucky. These speeches summarize the randomness of their chatting, while they irritate each other:

"What's private anymore?" the clerk said, with a burst of bitterness like chewing gum cracking. [...] The government knows everything about everybody. [...]

"If they're that good, they could find my daddy," he said.

"Is he on the FBI list?" The clerk seemed impressed.

Charger shrugged. "No, he took a wrong turn and he just kept going."

"If they want to find him, they'll get him. [...] They come in here on stakeouts all the time. [...]."

"Bullshit," Charger said. [...]

The clerk looked angry, ready to pounce at him. [...] "Matter of fact, right before you came in, I checked in an escaped convict," he said in a superior tone. [...]

Charger felt his stomach flip. But he was on to the guy, he thought. [...]

"Well, call the police, then." [...]

Charger breathed once and talked fast. He said, "Hey man, I'm busy. [...]"

Charger grabbed the portable telephone and dialed 911.

[...]

Nine-one-one answered. Charger said, "This is the night clerk at Dunn's Motel off the exit forty-eight." He made his voice low and conspiratorial. "We've just checked in that escaped convict that was in the paper. [...]"

The clerk was trembling. "Stay here with me till the cops get here," he said. "Please."

Charger rolled his eyes. "Sorry, buddy. Gotta get back to my Nellie-babe."

(205-208)

Charger briefly discloses the most painful fact of his past, that is, the abandonment of his father. The clerk begs for company. They appear to give each other advice, and address each other within the parameters of politeness in this context. However, they are both hostile and enter a battle to prove bravery and masculinity, through knowledge and temperament. Conversely, the speed of their voices and the irascible answers prove their insecurity and need of company.

Charger observes from the window the arrival of the police and the gestures of the clerk as he talks to an officer. Nothing seems to happen, but he cannot move from between the drapes. Tiffany calls him and he answers: "'I'll be ready in a minute,' [...] his voice muffled by the drape" (209). He is still not ready to face adulthood, and is asking for time because until he has experienced liberty, his voice will still be "muffled", silenced. Before his manhood can be articulated he needs to "fool the destiny" (209) that he has inherited from his parents. Charger has used this stranger, unbalancing, in a selfish impulse, the life of the clerk, as he has fed on the insecurities of the receptionist through inquisitive demands. This story exemplifies the rhetoric

power that Mason's characters may decide to employ, enhancing the complex characterization the writer is able to create by combining silence and speech.

This integrative structure of silence and speech is one of the most recognizable traits of the story "Shiloh", which Mason's the most frequently anthologized and studied story, and the title story of her first collection. More broadly, it also encapsulates her style, her demographic and geographical interest, and plot structure. Even though in the introduction of this project I already provided an overview of Bobbie Ann Mason's literary characteristics, some of them will be invoked now once again. The title is significant. Shiloh is a small town in southwestern Tennessee, site of a major Civil War battle in April 1862. The characters, a married couple, Leroy and Norma Jean, plan to visit this town, which represents the history of the South, after having been coaxed into it by Norma Jean's mother, Mabel. The old woman went to Shiloh for her honeymoon. The family lives in Paducah, a small town in western Kentucky that will be the setting of many of Mason's stories. Paducah remains traditional but is slowly developing, integrating modernity through consumption and businesses, yet remaining a humble semi-urban location.

The couple never had more children after their newborn died. Leroy is unemployed because he had to quit his job as a truck driver after an accident. Norma Jean works at a drugstore, studies in the local college and practices sports, while her husband feels purposeless at home, observing her changing attitudes and trying to figure out what to do with himself—a man that has lived on the road, visiting home occasionally, is now stuck in his wife's life, where he does not seem to fit.

"Shiloh" configures the three vertices of Bobbie Ann Mason's fictional world: postsouthern Kentucky, life crises, and quirky personalities. The story starts in *medias res*: there is no long introduction to the setting or the characters. The readers are

opened a window into these lives amid an ordinary scene. Descriptions of the surroundings and recollections of the characters' pasts are offered by a third person narrator. The reader observes and learns about the characters indirectly, that is, without the characters articulating their thoughts. The scenes take place in silence. Scattered awkward dialogues complement the symbolic actions, objects and landscapes illustrated. The coda of the story is inconclusive but lyrical, containing a final trope that brings to the surface a skew and underlying metaphor that has been created and maintained throughout the story. This is the general strategy of composition that Mason follows in her short fiction.

Leroy misses driving. Norma Jean has led the life of a widow because he was never present and he was an independent and solitary man, used to silence and movement. Paducah has been home all his life –the haven he could come back to after being in his truck for long periods of time, finding his comfortable home, his complacent wife and a town he recognized and managed easily. Now unemployed, he feels alienated from his wife, his manhood and the South he knows. It feels as if he had arrived to a foreign country, filled with strangers, with whom he does not know how to communicate. Because of this, words suffocate him as much as the confinement of the house, and he feels stability crumble:

Now that Leroy has come home to stay, he notices how much the town has changed. Subdivisions are spreading across western Kentucky like an oil slick. [...]. Leroy can't figure out who is living in all the new houses. [...] Leroy meets a kid named Stevie Hamilton in the parking lot at the new shopping center. While they pretend to be strangers meeting over a stalled car, Stevie tosses an ounce of marijuana under the front seat of Leroy's car. [...]. His [Stevie's] father is a prominent doctor who lives in one of the expensive

subdivisions in a new white-columned brick house that looks like a funeral parlor. In the phonebook under his name there is a separate number, with the listing “Teenagers.”

“Where do you get this stuff?” asks Leroy. “From your pappy?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” Stevie says. He is slit-eyed and skinny.

“What else you got?”

“What you interested in?”

“Nothing special. Just wondered.”

Leroy used to take speed on the road. Now he has to go slowly. He needs to be mellow. He leans back against the car and says, “I’m aiming to build me a log house, soon as I get time. My wife though, I don’t think she likes the idea.”

“Well, let me now when you want me again.” Stevie says. He has a cigarette in his cupped palm, as though sheltering it from the wind. He takes a long drag, then stomps it on the asphalt and slouches away. (5-6)

Leroy’s body language is defenseless as he leans back on a car and confesses his hopeless attempt to recover his masculinity by building a house. The timid attempt to trigger empathy on the young dealer fails, and Leroy loses face and is ridiculed by the gestures of the boy. Like the cigarette butt smashed against the asphalt, Leroy’s pride, after having felt protected in the cupped hand of his childish confidant, is now abandoned by the roads of Kentucky –the same roads he can no longer drive in with his injured leg. The emasculating encounter finalizes with the image of youth idling away to liberty, so, once again, members of the older generation, the night clerk in “Charger” and Leroy in “Shiloh”, are stripped of masculinity in a conversation with a young stranger.



Mason is interested in generation gaps because in the postsouthern reality there is a tag of war between those that remember the past and those that are already creating the future. The linking element, as previously explained, can be found in popular culture, where Bobbie Ann Mason's finds a surrogate communicative system when characters fail to express their emotions in words and out loud. The products and commodities consumed by the southern general population that Mason portrays adopt a symbolic significance that mirrors the feelings not addressed in dialogue, or in first person and omniscient narrators' declarations. In 1987 the writer published the satirical short piece "La Bamba Hot Line" in *The New Yorker*, which, notwithstanding its brevity, contains, at least, one reference to popular culture per paragraph. Besides, the core of the plot evolves around the popular rock song "La Bamba"<sup>79</sup>. The track was very successful in the United States in the late 50s and it became fashionable in the media. The nameless main character, who is also the first person narrator, complains about her difficult job as an operator for La Bamba Hot Line. People often call seeking personal advice, or asking surreal questions in relation to the song. The bizarre amusement of this story resides in the parody of the irrational juxtaposition between historical facts and popular culture, resulting in a narrator that represents the enlightenment of absurd knowledge. The fact that the callers seem to have no control

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<sup>79</sup> The popularity of the song in America was reached thanks to the adaptation of a Los Angeles born singer of Mexican descent, Ritchie Valens. The song is originally from Veracruz and it is part of the folklore of this state of eastern Mexico. The lyrics are sung in Spanish, which emphasizes the Latino influence in the southwest, for centuries the area with the greatest concentration of Latino immigrants. In areas with cultural diversity, social equity sometimes manifests first in popular culture and buying goods than in the actual population's life quality. Consumers approved and incorporated this Mexican folk song into their entertainment, while the actual Latino Civil Rights revolution did not erupt until the 1960s. In 2013 Tracy Thompson published the book *A New Mind of the South*, which studies Latino immigration in the South and their influence in the changes of the region. For more general statistics showing the evolution of Mexican migration in the United States, the following link to the think-tank Migration Policy Institute may be useful:

<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states>

over real facts and commercial products is symptomatic of the fictitiousness of history and cultural heritage –that is, what turns into a generation or nation’s legacy may very well be an invention, a made up piece of information.

Bobbie Ann Mason’s short story ridicules the American obsession with popular culture to expose, simultaneously, how business profits from people’s tendency towards deification. If a character finds it very difficult to articulate his inner world, name-dropping a famous song or TV show personality will have two effects. On the one hand, the interlocutor will be distracted from the initial course of the conversation where the speaker was being cornered into talking about intimacy. The speaker mentions a well-known actor, for instance, and, immediately, the dialogue centers on the criticism, praising or knowledge the participants in the conversation want to share about this celebrity. Hence, the speaker escapes any face-threatening act. On the other hand, however, the popularity of these products, well spread by the media, facilitates their use as symbols. If this same actor were to be known for showing a sexist attitude in his roles, for instance, the people present in the scene would quickly establish the connection. Consequently, up to a certain point, popular culture may serve opposite purposes: to distance two characters from an emotional connection, while also bonding through the unspoken mutual understanding of a popular cultural symbol.

If this is true of most of Bobbie Ann Mason’s stories, it is particularly remarkable in “La Bamba Hot Line”, where the writer mentions all the following referents: the rhythm and blues Berry song “Louie Louie”; the talk-show host Phil Donahue; a former colonel, member of the National Security Council, turned political commentator and best-selling author, Ollie North; the conspiracy theory Paul-is-dead, which suggests Paul McCartney died and was replaced in his band The Beatles by a

look-alike; Elvis; and the rock and roll star Big Bopper, among others. However, the satire emerges when such elements of popular culture are placed side by side with historical characters, such as Shakespeare, Jimmy Carter, and 70s Uganda President Idi Amin. Establishment, scholarship and censorship are ridiculed by these comparisons. As an illustration, the writer invents respectable characters like a scholar who investigates the hidden meanings of the song “La Bamba”, through its connection to sixteenth-century sonnets; also, a senator, another honorable character, studies the potential obscenity of the lyrics. The narrator says she spends hours in libraries trying to be prepared for these “sharp” people “wanting to know about roots, symbolism, [...] [and] double-entendre [...]. Idea stuff” (27)<sup>80</sup>. But no exchange of “ideas” really takes place in the conversation of the hot line. These deliberations are there to provide a comic layer to the story.

The actual relevance of these dialogues between strangers is found in the fragility and loneliness of the American experience. People need to resort to a hot line of a popular song in order to get advice on their life and have some form of human contact over the phone. The narrator of the story complains: “The things people want to know: they want to know are they going to get cancer, will the plane they have a ticket on for tomorrow crash, which stores are giving double coupons this week?” (27). Anne Rothe published a book in 2011 about the manipulation of psychological pain in popular culture in order to achieve success. Bobbie Ann Mason exemplifies the marketing of trauma through this operator, who thinks her job is “at a critical juncture” (27), and the way out of a time of crises relies on the exploitation of

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<sup>80</sup> These complex interpretations of artistic creations equally bothers Bobbie Ann Mason as a writer. In the conversation I held with the writer in the winter of 2014 for the American Studies journal *Transatlantica*, Mason explained: “The approach of the literary critic is so different from that of the fiction writer. The critic wants to explicate and comprehend what the writer may not be of a disposition to explain. The writer is not thinking in those terms”.

people's fascination with these kinds of popular culture phenomena, where the media, as Rothe states, make use of and exploit a genre that sensationalizes the extraordinary aspects of the lives of ordinary people in order to create a best-selling spectacle (57); that is, this kind of popular culture phenomenon uses the uncanny tragedies typical citizens undergo to make a profit. A desperate mother calls, asking for advice on her teenage daughter's strange behavior:

"She refuses to eat, and she has frown lines on her face. She's become aggressive with her parrot and when you talk to her she just says everything is geeky. The doctor can't find anything wrong with her. What should I do?"

"I'm glad you asked. The La Bamba Hot Line has a special pamphlet dealing with problems of teen-agers. Just send a self-addressed stamped envelope to La Bamba Hot Line, P.O. Box 4700. But first, I'd have a heart-to-heart with that parrot."

"Much obliged."

"Likewise, I'm sure. La Bamba Hot Line." (27)

The absurdity of the question and of the suggestion results in a caricature of real help lines. Phone calls represented in fiction are often a series of communicative failures due to the nature of the medium, which can be easily interrupted and favors brevity in the messages exchanged. In the calls of "La Bamba Hot Line", the questions presented do not genuinely seek information. The callers elongate the discussion to sustain human proximity. The counterpoint to these vacuous dialogues is the private conversation of the protagonist and her boyfriend. They talk in person in the physical closeness of their home, without the distance of phone lines; and yet, their argument evolves around the help line. Carl Darryl Malmgren wrote a study of postmodern fictional spaces in American fiction. In the section that analyzes phone calls, people

on the line are seen as “passive recorder[s] of sensations, a human machine” (123). Bobbie Ann Mason’s narrator in this story jumps from one dialogue to another without reflecting on their meaning and linking them with an automatic phrase, ““La Bamba Hot Line”. The repetition reinforces the automatization of human relations when they are mediated by postmodern artifacts.

This last story can be read as an allegory for the complete selection of the chapter. Bobbie Ann Mason’s dialogues typify two traits of postmodern conversation: an intuitive deployment of language, and robotic responses that protect the characters from personal disclosure. Mason displays in her short fiction personalities that belong to a world of noise. The South of these stories is framed by walls of information that close in on the characters. As an instinctive reaction, people take refuge in quietness and employ language to function in daily routines. However, the constant intervention of popular and consumerist culture equally gags the emotions of the characters.

Once the inner world of these individuals feels the oppression, there is a conversational compulsion, and feelings are shared. American Journalist Vivian Gornick wrote an article in *The New York Times* in 1990 reflecting on postmodern sentiment in fiction, concluding the following: “There’s a certain kind of American story that is characterized by a laconic surface and tight-lipped speaking voice. The narrator in this story has been made inarticulate by modern life [...] [However,] [h]e yearns in fact for tender connection” (1). This metaphor of terse lips that attempt to talk but feel sedated by the injections of postmodernity can be applied to Bobbie Ann Mason’s characters, who, again, are not inarticulate people. They have the power of rhetoric and are highly sensitive to the music of their language. The limited dialogues and the “laconic” quality of their speech are a result of the analgesia of popular culture and induced distractions of the media. Newspapers, radio stations, drug,

phones ringing and television shows intervene between people when they attempt to connect verbally.

Canadian Nobel Prize writer Alice Munro shares style and themes with Bobbie Ann Mason, who has herself expressed identification with Munro<sup>81</sup>. They both have a rural background, a preference for simple language, and an ability to create aesthetically pleasant images that echo in the minds of readers once the books are closed. It is then that the reverberations of symbolic comparisons, scattered declarations, and carefully detailed descriptions of the landscape align, designing a meaningful whole. Munro depicts an autobiographical version of a female writer in the story “Family Furnishings” (2001). This woman approaches a reverie while sitting on her own in a noisy drug store, sipping coffee with a “medicinal” taste (119). The emphasis on noise and artificial stimulant substances brings about a similar atmosphere to Mason’s *South*. In the middle of fast movement and tumult, these transient souls remain static to discern the consistency of the air that supports them; that is, surrounded by sound, they keep still sensing the quality of their context, as the weaver stops in the distance to observe the stitches that knot the pieces of a quilt together, enjoying the fragments and the whole. The first person narrator in Munro’s story finds pleasure in that temporal solitude and becomes a membrane highly sensitive to the stimuli around: “The cries of the crowd came to me like big heartbeats, full of sorrows. Lovely formal-sounding waves, with their distant, almost inhuman assent and lamentation” (119). The quiet observer grabs humanity from the

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<sup>81</sup> Already in 2011, in an interview with Ted Tarkington for the magazine *Nashville Scene*, Mason mentioned Alice Munro as a contemporary writer whose work she is passionate about. In fact, the admiration is mutual, as *New Yorker* journalists Richard Avedon and Daniel Menaker report in a piece published in 1994 on account of the gathering in New York of 14 writers who were frequent collaborators of this prestigious magazine. In the reunion, Bobbie Ann Mason declared being flattered to find out that Alice Munro and her husband had travelled to Kentucky because they admired her stories and wanted to experience the inspiration behind them.

air around her, including what is not poetic. Both the grotesque and the delicate are combined to reveal purpose.

The dialogues that have been quoted in this chapter contain a mechanical, inhuman consent to postmodernity, but they are the words of sensitive personalities in need of soothing voices of mutual understanding. These characters talk to keep the rhythm of postsouthern everydayness moving forward, and, suddenly, they also converse to establish an emotional covenant with their fellow, laconic storytellers. Meaning converges in the synthesis of verbalization and silence, both subsisting on the earthly heritage of the South.

Having accepted the impossibility of the total absence of sound, and the relevance of southern speech for Mason, it was necessary to explain how silence exists as the backbone of her writing –for this reason, I have carefully analyzed these dialogues between characters who are, mainly, introverts. The study of Mason’s silences is facilitated through the intense rhythm of her narratives. The pattern becomes apparent in the combination of verbose and quiet scenes. The stylistic arrangement came to demonstrate a complexity in the southern character: these are people who entertain through words, embracing the role of storytellers, but who, at the same time, welcome silence in their routines. Therefore, in every dialogue studied in this chapter, silence has appeared as an agent that influences behaviors and sentiments. The normalcy of the home, the transmission of heritage through stories, the struggling communication between genders and the attraction to talkative strangers have been chosen as to demonstrate that Mason’s characters can and do talk effectively and beautifully. However, they will always measure their words and carefully fit them within Mason’s southern context.





- Afterword: Mason's Conversation with Silence.

"Silence"

I catch the pattern

Of your silence

Before you speak.

I do not need

To hear a word.

In your silence

Every tone I seek

Is heard.

- Langston Hughes (126).

African American poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967) found the essence of communicating love in silence. The instinctive and intuitive nature of human emotions makes them imperceptible –they are not tangible; and yet, feelings have featured throughout history in the literary and artistic creations of humankind. People wonder on the effectiveness and failures of language while, paradoxically, putting these questions into words, and thus sharing the consequent dissatisfaction and curiosity. Writers and readers, hence, bond through texts that attempt to approach the subtlety of sentiment and its articulation. But how does the impalpable become discernible both for artist and audience? When a quality is recurring and arranged in patterns, the rhythm created becomes distinctive. Hughes hears the beloved's feelings

in this person's silence through careful perception. Similarly, I embarked in this project after identifying silence as the characteristic motif providing coherence and cohesiveness to Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction.

In the early stages of my research, I encountered critics who labeled Mason's characters as inarticulate. I struggled with this classification because I read her stories and novels as texts of unique sensitive eloquence. I questioned then if the reader was restricted to the voice of the narrators in order to find deeper layers of meaning –the messages that are created alongside the plot, but do not only advance the story: they add texture to the personalities described, they create aesthetic value to the images presented, and also provide social and cultural information. The narrators in Mason do not appraise the acts of the characters, and their voices are presented without any authoritative tone, but, most importantly, narrators do not explicitly address emotions. As a reader, I was relying on the rich matrix that Mason generates to illustrate these lives of western Kentucky. My readings gathered Mason's depicted knowledge and artistry from more than just the narrators' descriptions, which are, nevertheless, essential, of course. The characters successfully expressed emotions but employing silence as a communicative code. Consequently, they are not muzzled. They have control over language, which is indeed terse and with a laconic tendency. However, their lucid and enjoyable speeches, even if sparse, proved the label of inarticulateness to be very wrong.

Once I had identified a gap in the previous readings of Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction, I decided to study the communicative power of silence as her main literary trait. The next challenge was to specify the significance of silence. The remarkable sensuous descriptions of the settings in Mason's stories made it impossible to accept silence as an absolute absence of sound because she constantly mentions noises, of a

piercing and soft nature. Therefore, my dissertation has dealt with silence as a moment when characters do not speak out loud, but still, the writing contained in these silent moments describes a dense fabric of information about landscape, soundscape and character's demeanors. Additionally, silence has been identified as well as a presence in dialogues. That is, even when the characters talk to each other, Mason interweaves silence in the scenes through omissions. These absences can be either the messages eclipsed by a diverting conversation, helping the speaker hide complex feelings, or, equally, the muted lips that appear when intercalating words and pauses in the dialogues.

Having analyzed the presence of conversation in Mason's fiction, and the constant inclusion of noises in her descriptions, I realized that the coexistence of sound and the intermittent silences was the pattern creating the rhythm of her literary works. This discovery led me to an analysis of the stylistic consequences of the combination of the sonorous and the muffled. I have been able to trace silence as a logical social trait in the South due to a history of prohibitions, fears, violence, together with regional pride, rooted folklore and enduring nostalgia. Unavoidably, silence became visible in the literary production of many southern writers; but to test the pertinacity of silence as a creative tool, I expanded my close reading to writers of different nationalities and literary traditions. And, furthermore, parallel to the monographic research, I have provided guidelines to expand an inquiry on silence onto different writers and fields.

Finding examples of texts that had used silence in similar ways to Mason, I finally focused on her short stories to analyze her themes, characters, words and lyricism, using silence as the backbone of her conceptualizations. Silence proved to be a center for her unique language, consistent tropes and characterizations. In this

exhaustive study of her language, silence turned into a fictional entity because it provided meaning and beauty to the stories. Therefore, in sounds, words and lull, the poetics of Bobbie Ann Mason have been unveiled through the relentless employment of silence as the essence for figurative language, human conversation and context differentiator. In *Clear Springs* she tackles her difficulties in fitting in the modern urban life of northern cities and, mainly, she says, is because of her way of communicating: “Mumbling, I tried to explain how Southerners expressed themselves differently, [...]. Most of my real explanations came later, silently, in lucid afterthoughts. It struck me then that Southern behavior was devious, depending on indirection, a fuzzy flirtation that relied on strategic hinting” (49). Ergo, silence and oblique figures of speech define the creative identity of Mason, who has articulated southern heritage with a postmodern inflection. Postmodern insofar as her complication of the contemporary southern genre fragments traditional conceptualization of southern literature, through a bricolage of realism, fanciful passages, noisy popular culture and quiet attentiveness.

Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd”, first published in 1840, describes a narrator following a man. From a café to the populated streets of London, the perceptive skills of the narrator sharpen gradually: “At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses and thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance” (122). This process of progressive interpretative clarity delineates the process of my research, but, more importantly, it exemplifies the unveiling process undergone by both Mason’s characters and readers.

Bobbie Ann Mason's characters cultivate verbal quiescence in the interstices of ordinary arguments. These intervals provide the reader with interpretative tools to increase empathy with their fictional selves. They are thus capable of recognizing the evolution undergone by Mason's round characters, in the apparent plot paralysis, which her stories allegedly suffer from. The author often turns, in muteness, the average and familiar into something peculiar, unexpected and complex, a symbolic component of the background that mirrors the postsouthern reality. This strategy results in a surface of a bare employment of language that requires an understanding of silence in order to obtain a wholesome and overall interpretative experience of descriptive passages and dialogues.

The reader should decode silence bearing in mind the aforementioned consideration: quietness does not imply, for the purpose of my argument, the nonexistence of sound, or a lack of thoughts on the characters' minds. Nature, objects, physical actions, the movements of modernity, the human body and thoughts will constantly produce noises that find their way into the words of the narrators. Hence, silence in this project needs not be understood as a total absence of sounds. It is dealt with here as a lack of the spoken word. The sounds listed above are silences from a linguistic point of view, as long as dialectics and verbal exchange is concerned, because no words are articulated. However, from the communicative point of view, these noises are effective as they convey meaning; they are active participants of Mason's stories.

Diane Stevenson claims that minimalist writers often describe "a class left voiceless (because 'tasteless')" (84) due to their uncritical assimilation of popular culture, consumption and advertising. But I partly disagree because I do not believe these characters are tasteless, and neither do I think that it is only their uncritical

consumption of popular culture that has rendered them speechless. I verily believe that such a trait in them necessitates a more nuanced and thorough examination. Mason's respect for popular culture as a valid and integrative element of the society she writes about is evident from her employment of tokens of this culture in a largely respectful manner. The items portrayed become loudspeakers of the characters' sensitivity to beauty. Stylistically this is shaped in lines devoted to observation, like Poe's character mentioned before. As the narrator describes what the character is seeing, the reader acknowledges the character's appreciation for the attractive qualities of his or her surroundings. Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, in his study of minimalism and postmodernism, describes the technique known as a "built-in mirror system", in which "every detail [reflects] the main concern of the novel in some way" (136). It is true that Mason's characters do not articulate their experiences with their voices, but the reader can learn about their inner world through the atmospheric descriptions included in the narration.

To integrate the characters' aesthetic judgment, writers like Mason, close to minimalism, admire the complexity of popular culture and media, without measuring it against highbrow manifestations. They try to steer clear of the latter by adhering to an (often deceitful) outward simplicity, maintained through the employment of basic semantic tropes that are nonetheless oblique enough to require a full understanding of the matrix of the story in order to have access to their meanings.

Mason's characters may be socially inarticulate, as they do not often engage in dialogues, but they have active creative skills, employed to express their souls without words. They allow the objects to speak for themselves so that verbal silence predominates within the background noise –a deafening flood of aural information. Sociologist Christopher Lasch states: "Language becomes part of the background

noise, [...] in a culture that finds silence unbearable and fills up every moment with precoded announcements” (139). In the same manner, Mason’s characters are drowned in the sounds of postmodernity, and, consequently, dialogue becomes primarily superfluous in the transmission of emotions. They resort to quietness as a way of foregrounding the relevance of their identities, making themselves heard and seen in silence. Omissions and elisions, what is not said, sometimes speak the most in these stories<sup>82</sup>.

This stylistic choice requires careful and sensitive reading. Confronted with these sparse dialogues, the reader may be deceived into believing that the tales do not contain rich layers of meaning. In fact, the scattered dialogues increase expectation and engagement. Jean-Francoise Lyotard explained that within an existential feeling of general void, the sublime [unexpected and shocking beauty] might appear by holding the hope that “something will happen [...] [even within] the most minimal occurrence” (67). Mason’s portrayal of the South she was brought up in and where she developed her adult identity and creative skills requires a careful and balanced reading of descriptive paragraphs with drops of verbal interaction, or “minimal occurrences”.

As mentioned before, the characters in Mason’s fiction experience a sense of engulfment, produced by the continuous speeches of the media. But I read these verbal lacunas not as an assimilation of vacuous and poor language coming from television, music or advertising, in the words of Russian writer Leonid Andreyev (1871-1919) “those who were silent could say something but would not” (16); that is, as a resistance to be part of the superfluous employment of words and attempt to find a way to coexist in society being generally quiet. Consequently, “to reply in this mode

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<sup>82</sup> Joanna Price mentions this unveiling nature of silence in her study of Bobbie Ann Mason’s fiction, *Understanding Bobbie Ann Mason*, published in 2000 (6).

is to adapt a voice that refuses to participate in the official record” (Chambers, 51). Hence, in the fragments where the characters are silent and the reader is aware of the tangible absence of dialogue in a scene where it would otherwise be expected, the muted moment is “like pointing”, as Charles Raymond Myers (51) explains in his study of the unspoken –pointing at relevant information.

The identity of Mason’s characters becomes stronger when quiet, and their intentions or emotions reverberate in silence. Filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha employs this technique as a “‘soundless’ space of resonance” (8); which is exactly what occurs with Mason’s silences: they evoke images, memories and emotions that are not shared out loud. The paradox is that, actually, these silences are loud, strong, full and deep in the effect they have on the reader, almost disturbing. This is due to the marked and recognizable rhythm of Mason’s writing, which derives from this combination of long descriptions with short, sporadic speeches, and silences; all of them together produce the musicality of her writing.

For the purpose of my analysis, I will equally function not only as communicative rebellion and a shelter from the noisy bombing of the postmodern, but also as a banner of individuality as well. Abády-Nagy explains that a minimalist agent can frequently be a “*passively reacting actor*”, conveying the importance in these tales of “*observation and registration* as opposed to analysis and evaluation” (2002, 237, author’s italics). This watchful and attentive attitude is constant in the characters Mason presents. They are aware of the changes but rarely assess them; they humbly develop their identities in a changing environment that “calls more for understatement than shouting”, explains Phillip E. Simmons in dealing with the effect of mass culture on postmodern fiction (110). In the transformation American culture underwent from the 60s to the 80s there was a general sense of loss of coherence. In that framework,



Mason's characters feel simultaneously alienated, as there is no longer a unified concept of community, and clichéd, i.e. seeing themselves perpetually labeled and represented in the media.

In such a context of permanent alterations, landscape, cultural artifacts and mundane objects are then symbolized through the employment of effective images in order to articulate the emotions that are hardly ever verbally articulated in dialogue interaction. Language has lost efficiency in the postsouthern reality and the characters resort to silence as a space, medium and code to perform their identities, among the speech invasion of cultural outsiders that attempt to commodify the cultural memory and treasures of the South. This laconic style should be read as a quiet rebellion on the part of Bobbie Ann Mason's characters. As an illustration, a fragment from Mason's short novel *Spence + Lila* reads:

The way the doctors throw their forty-dollars words around like weapons is infuriating. Spence knows big words, plenty of them. He prefers not to use his vocabulary in conversations though, for fear of sounding pretentious. Using the right simple words at the right time requires courage enough. At times there is no way on earth he can say what he feels.

He knows what he *wants* to say, and he imagines saying it to Lila, but it takes guts to admit guilt and wrong, to express sorrow, to lavish loving feelings on someone. [...] He has never said those things because he would feel as though he were speaking lines. Real love requires something else, something deeper. And sometimes a feeling just goes without saying. [...] Words are so inadequate. Phony. Nobody he knows says things like that anyway. (90-91)

According to this confession, words should never be produced in abundance, as it would mean that they are being poured out without control; and that abundance would

be equivalent to being inadequate. Hence, they would not satisfy their actual purpose of communication. Not only that, but words in excess, in an uncontrolled flow, would be deceiving, a mere imitation of the actual emotion, and by being phrased the latter would be emptied of feelings.

One of Mason's recurrent stylistic strategies is to include meta-literary reflections on the value of words, as illustrated above. In the story "A New-Wave Format", a character claims: "Words are so arbitrary, and people don't say what they mean half the time anyway" (221). In Mason's southern society, people do not use a systematic pattern in communication; it is frequently random, unpredictable and whimsical, with no conscious decision on how to express feelings or the moment for sharing them. Words are, most of the time, the result of an emotional explosion. However, Mason's words are methodically chosen, and this can be seen in their collocation, symbolic construction, metaphoric similes and use of oxymoron; she means what she says, as opposed to her characters. She talks for them but hardly ever through dialogue, mostly employing tropes, with a complex figurative result but built upon simple, everyday, unrefined, down-to-earth vocabulary and referents. However, characters are highly attuned to the purpose of verbal communication. For instance, the female protagonist in the tale "Big Bertha Stories", Jeannette, accepts that she "wasn't brought up that way, to examine someone's soul. When it comes to something deep inside, nobody will take it out and examine it, the way they will look at clothing in a store for flaws in the manufacturing" (131). Jeannette, like most of Mason's characters, refuses to linguistically determine the origins of and motivations for people's emotions or thoughts, even actions, but, conversely, they are more than capable of describing their surroundings vividly.

Consequently, there is a strong contrast between the capacity to inspect in

detail the conditions, state, variations and composition of the environment, both natural and human-made, and the inability to ponder on someone's feelings or even on their own feelings on the part of characters. As Ihab Hassan states: "Silence fills the extreme states of the mind –void, madness, outrage, ecstasy, mystic trance –when ordinary discourse ceases to carry the burden of meaning" (Hassan-1971, 13). Emotions are rarely broached, but, when they are, it is in a final stage of outer recognition or inner analysis. This process of deeper comprehension resonates with platonic and romantic contemplation, which advances from the simpler and most immediate reality towards a broadening glimpse of the abstract concepts and the human soul.

The purpose of Mason's language both in her silences and dialogues is to create realistic characters that collocate with the southern context she describes. In the story "State Champions", the first person narrator claims: "I couldn't say anything, for we weren't raised to say things that were heartfelt and gracious" (145). This is just another reminder that verbalization should not be employed as an ornament to phrase emotions acutely felt. It is part of the southern heritage to transmit feelings in silence through actions and to rely on the perceptive skills of interlocutors. As well as that, the pragmatic nature of the southern rural or underdeveloped urban setting prevents any sentimental approach to everyday vicissitudes. Sharing the same sentiment towards silence, William Faulkner mentions the value of quietness in the following lines of his poem "L'Apres-Midi d'un Faune":

Utterance limits the poetic life of language and `silence represents a purer stratagem  
than the act of speech  
[...]  
I have a nameless wish to go

To some far silent midnight noon

Where lovely streams whisper and flow

And sigh on sands blanched by the moon (Faulkner-1963, 39).

Faulkner feels a communion with the land, appreciating the soft music it creates and foregrounding the value of not “naming” emotions. Mason, like Faulkner, writes about her very own background, though western Kentucky appears different to Faulkner’s Mississippi, and through its landscape, colors, shapes, smells and movements she gives access to her characters. The aforementioned *Spence + Lila* actually fictionalizes the story of her parents, and includes the following reflection on verbal exchanges:

But it occurs to Lila that how true it is that people either won’t or can’t come out with their feelings. She appreciates all the cards and the visits from the preacher and the kinfolks and her friends. But there’s something wrong, like a wall she’s slamming against, like those ocean waves Spence sometimes dreams about. She recalls Rosie clamming up and hiding in herself, for years, where nobody could get to her. Lila married into a family that never knew what to say. Spence is all bottled up and Lee and Nancy are just like him. All those books Nancy reads, and she never has much to say about what she really feels. (155)

Lila’s perception of her beloved ones and their interactions has been transformed after a forced change of setting, that is, her stay in hospital after surgery. Emotions, by definition, are indistinguishable elements of our awareness, elements that melt into the general landscape of everyday life. However, due to the presence of an unfamiliar background, the hospital, her perception is sharpened and what was previously imperceptible becomes identifiable. From that moment, the wall that was holding

back all her affective pressure and, equally, protecting her from the emotional reactions of others, is undermined.

It is often the case in Mason's stories that the confinement of feelings is regarded as a collective trait in the family. Consequently, silences are symptoms of what is kept unshared through time. Characters may not be consciously sharing intimate stories, but their wordless mouths unintentionally point the reader towards moments of importance disguised as simple signals coming from apparently inarticulate and unsophisticated personalities. Michele Boulous Walker, in her study of silence and women, recommends a "symptomatic reading" for these kinds of texts, in which the reader is motivated "by what is repressed" and "seeks to see/articulate what the text cannot" (35-6). That is, the reader can decode Mason's stories by examining silences, which are indicative of meaning and hence which acutely demand interpretation: the occurrence of a quiet character will most often mark the presence of relevant information within the story.

Mason sometimes warns the reader. Nancy, the benchmark character mentioned before, is described in the following manner in the story "The Prelude": "Never good at small talk, she had always found it difficult to issue congratulations or happy, encouraging words. She was often preoccupied; she was laconic; she didn't elaborate or waste words" (211). This confession obviously does not only hold true for this character but for the terse speech of most of Mason's characters. However, this statement is not only relevant because it resonates with the general communicative style in the stories but because it denies any assumption that an absence of elaborate sentences equals simplicity of mind. In fact, the character explains her straightforward and concise use of words by her mind being constantly engrossed. Similar preoccupations may absorb the attention of many other of her

characters, preventing them from phrasing sentimental demonstrations. This is the psychology of silence in Bobbie Ann Mason's characters as well as the reason for her stylization of silence.

My conclusion draws on Bobbie Ann Mason's motivation for writing. She wants to pay homage to the land that formed her as woman and writer through a sensitive and accurate portrayal of the language that gives sound to western Kentucky. This language equally includes verbal articulation and moments when characters remain silent. The rhythm created by the triangle sounds-words-silence creates vivid images thanks to Mason's and her characters' exquisite perceptive abilities. The imagery that coexists with Mason's simple language structure is justified by the importance of metaphorical thinking in the lives of her characters. These southern personalities speak plainly but interpret the world through analogies and symbols because they attach memories and emotions to the physical world. As a result, the materiality or palpability of silence leads Mason to elaborate similes as a dominant device for her storytelling. Mason tells stories to play the music of the South she knows, with the aesthetics of pragmatism, resilience and acceptance of postsouthern personalities. To successfully connect with the readers, silence is employed as cohesive thread, providing in this manner a space of deeper interpretation. Ergo, Bobbie Ann Mason writes to establish conversations with and through silences.

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