



**MONTCLAIR STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University

Montclair State University Digital  
Commons

---

Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects

---

5-2022

**“The Delta is Filled Up With Death” : Death As Avoidance and the Construction of White Identity in Lewis Nordan’s Music of the Swamp**

Sarah Sturm

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Abstract

Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp* has not been fully explored with an emphasis on Nordan's personal history in relation to racism in the South. In Nordan's autobiography, *Boy With the Loaded Gun* (2000), Nordan describes growing up in Itta Benna, Mississippi — just one town over from where Emmett Till was murdered in 1955 (Nordan 80). I argue Nordan's depiction of death in the *Music of the Swamp* can be read as the early stages of him grappling with Till's death through writing, along with the broader historical context of Southern racism. Nordan's ambivalent relationship to this history informs how white identity is constructed in relation to death, as Nordan's protagonist, Sugar Mecklin, grapples with how his white identity is implicated by this racist history. Sugar's varying reactions to death indicate a destabilizing of a once unchallenged white identity.

I draw on Toni Morrison's study of American Africanism in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) to inform my investigation of Nordan's creative decisions in the novel. I also use James Baldwin's commentary on white identity in *The Fire Next Time* (1962) to explore Sugar's budding awareness of his and his family's mortality and how white identity relies on weaponizing the notion of death as a threat to Black people's mortality. In weaponizing death in such a way, white people avoid facing the universality of mortality for themselves.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“The Delta is Filled Up With Death”: Death As Avoidance  
and the Construction of White Identity in Lewis Nordan’s *Music of the Swamp*

by

Sarah Sturm

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

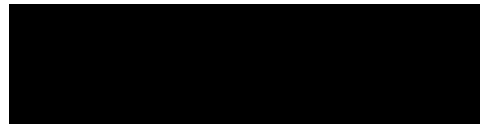
Master of Arts

May 2022

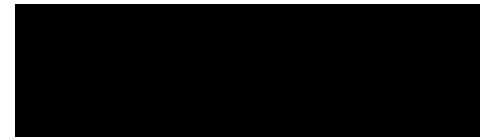
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

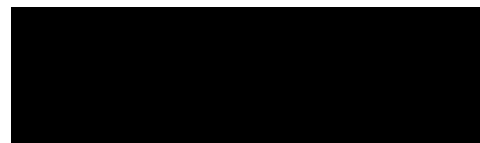
Department of English



Thesis Sponsor – Laura Nicosia



Committee Member - Jeffrey Gonzalez



Committee Member – Adam Rzepka

“The Delta is Filled Up With Death”: Death As Avoidance  
and the Construction of White Identity in Lewis Nordan’s *Music of the Swamp*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

Sarah Sturm

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2022

Copyright c 2022 by Sarah Sturm. All rights reserved.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	6
2. Literary Reception of Nordan’s Writings.....	8
3. Nordan’s Re-Imagining of Emmett Till.....	11
4. Sugar Facing Death.....	19
5. State-Sanctioned Executions and White Mortality.....	25
6. The Centrality of Sugar’s Feelings.....	29
7. Sugar Rejecting Death.....	38
8. Conclusion.....	39
9. Endnotes.....	41
10. Works Cited.....	42

## 1. Introduction

In Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp* (1991), Gilbert Mecklin, the father to the novel's protagonist, Sugar Mecklin, makes a poignant statement when he says, "The Delta is filled up with death" (Nordan 53). This mantra is present throughout the novel and speaks to the abundance of death which drives the narrative of the child protagonist. Nordan's young protagonist is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, ten-year-old white boy growing up in 1950s Mississippi. Sugar grapples with the identity and conception of the world hoisted upon him by his upbringing in the South. His only real model for identity is his father, Gilbert — a violent, racist alcoholic who remains emotionally distant to his wife and son. To escape his domestic turbulence, Sugar spends much of the novel roaming the Delta. He grapples with feelings of deep loneliness and sadness as he attempts to make sense of life. He also repeatedly encounters the notion of death, along with actual dead bodies: Sugar and his friend discovering a body in the lake (11), Sugar uncovering a woman buried in a transparent coffin (62), Sugar hearing about the execution of a Black man (81), and Sugar witnessing his father commit murder (149). As the novel progresses, Sugar's reactions to death fluctuate along a broad range, from nonchalance to silence to committing gruesome violence himself.

Nordan seems to construct many of Sugar's experiences with death based on his own upbringing in the South. In Nordan's autobiography, *Boy With the Loaded Gun* (2000), Nordan describes growing up in the small town of Itta Benna, Mississippi, which is just one town over from where Emmett Till was murdered in 1955 (Nordan 80). Nordan had just turned 16 years old at the time of Till's murder, and he admitted to being "obsessed with the case" (Nordan 82). Nordan wrote of the profound impact the murder had on his sense of identity and how, "The obsession [with Emmett Till] was completely private. I talked about my feelings and beliefs with

no one, neither friends nor family” (Nordan 82). Since Till's murder was such a major aspect of Nordan's life, it is worth exploring how he interacts with the history around Till's death — along with the broader history of racism in the South — through his writing. Critics such as Bethany Perkins and Brannon Costello have approached Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*<sup>1</sup> (1993) with this history in mind. However, this historical lens has not been considered as paramount to *Music of the Swamp*, and thus the novel has not been fully approached from such a perspective.

Nordan's familiarity with this history of violence and the abundance of death in the novel raises the question: What connection does Nordan draw between death and Sugar's search for identity in this novel? I argue Nordan's depiction of death in the novel can be read as the beginning stages of him grappling with Till's death and the broader historical context of violent racism in his native Mississippi. Nordan's ambivalent relationship to this history informs the construction of white identity in the novel, as Sugar copes with a newfound knowledge of the racist history surrounding the South and how that history may implicate his own identity.

I draw on Toni Morrison's study of American Africanism in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) to inform my investigation of Nordan's creative decisions in the novel. Morrison defines this theory as an exploration of how an Africanist presence impacts American literature, especially in the literary imagination of white authors (Morrison 6). She considers the Africanist presence to be, "The denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify" (Morrison 6). Additionally, she believes that this presence was, "crucial to [white authors'] sense of Americanness. And it shows" (Morrison 6). Morrison's theory speaks to my investigation, as I explore how Nordan interacts and uses his own familiarity with the historical racism in Mississippi. Perkins and Costello also approach Nordan through Morrison's theory, but they focus exclusively on *Wolf Whistle*. I focus



on *Music of the Swamp* instead, and I point to the centrality of Sugar's feelings as reflective of Nordan's own ambivalence towards directly discussing Till's death and the South's racist history. I also use the term "creative utility" to describe the artistic alterations Nordan inserts into scenes, especially when he is invoking Till's death.

By investigating death in the novel with an emphasis on the history of racism, Sugar's identity and his various reactions to death can be revealed and deconstructed. I use James Baldwin's commentary on white identity in *The Fire Next Time* (1962) to explore Sugar's budding awareness of his and his family's mortality and how white people's sense of identity relies on weaponizing the notion of death against Black people. In deploying death as a threat to Black people's mortality, white people deny the ubiquity of their own mortality. Thus, I also discuss how Nordan's construction of Sugar's white identity evokes the peripheral history of violence and discrimination against Black people, as Sugar's inconsistent reactions to death indicate a rattling of a once unquestioned white identity.

## **2. Literary Reception of Nordan's Writings**

Early criticism of Nordan's writing tends to focus on Nordan's use of memory. James F. Nicosia discusses the function of memory as recreation for the narrator in *Music of the Swamp*. He argues that the point of memory is not to "create an authentic reproduction of the past," but rather it can be a tool to cope with both the past and its impact on the present (Nicosia 67). He asserts that some details in *Music of the Swamp* are "re-ordered or combined with other details" which reflects the function of memory as non-linear (Nicosia 69). He also points to Sugar's tendency to fabricate details of a story to add metaphor to the retrospective story (Nicosia 70). He employs textual analysis of the motifs and metaphors within the novel to explore these claims. Nicosia also draws on critics such as Alan Belsches and Richard Gray who declare "the

Southern tradition of memory” as essential to understanding stories such as *Music of the Swamp* (Nicosia 67-68).

Like the importance of memory, early critics also point to the use of autobiography in *Music of the Swamp*. Edward J. Dupuy acknowledges Nordan’s writing as autobiographical or memory-writing due to similarities between Sugar and Nordan’s childhoods, such as the Mississippi Delta time and setting<sup>2</sup>. Dupuy straightforwardly asserts “Nordan’s works, in short, are autobiographical” (Dupuy 98). He argues that Nordan transforms his memory of growing up in the South, ultimately blurring the lines between real and fictional memories (Dupuy 98). He notes some of the similar family dynamics between Nordan and Sugar, as “‘Sugar,’ incidentally, was a name Nordan’s parents called him from time to time” and Nordan also had a strained relationship with his stepfather, Gilbert (Dupuy 100). He also points out the retrospective narrative style in the novel, which “underscores the story’s autobiographical mode” (Dupuy 103). Dupuy relies largely on textual analysis of the novel. He also references other works which make use of autobiography, such as Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, to examine retellings of stories and the transformative function of memory (Dupuy 104). Dupuy’s investigation of *Music of the Swamp* highlights the mechanical and metaphorical aspects of autobiography which show up repeatedly throughout the novel.

In later investigations of Nordan’s work, the theme of death in Nordan’s writing has been approached from a psychoanalytical perspective. Mary Carney explores Gothic motifs with a psychoanalytical approach to death in her analysis of *Music of the Swamp*, *Wolf Whistle*, and *The Sharp-Shooter Blues*. She points out that, while Nordan’s novels don’t fit within the Gothic genre, his writing often uses Gothic elements and “the foundational influence of ‘horror’” (Carney 78). She draws on Anne Williams’s *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* and Julia

Kristeva's theories of the abject to explore how Nordan's Gothic motifs function to reveal the familial issues between Nordan's characters. She compares Nordan's writing to Edgar Allan Poe throughout her analysis, drawing parallels between the two authors' construction of deathly or horror-filled scenes. Carney also references the historical context of slavery, as she points to how Nordan's use of Gothic motifs reveal both family dynamics and racial issues (Carney 80). She recognizes such revelations in *Music of the Swamp*, particularly in how Gilbert "initiates his son into a growing awareness that in the Delta soil are buried the legacies not only of a familial defeat and sadness but also of the Civil War and racial strife" (Carney 81). Her exploration of race in Nordan's novels largely relies on generalized references to "the region's history of racism" (Carney 83). Carney's use of psychoanalysis to explore Gothic motifs and reveal social issues with Nordan's novels illuminates the power of death in his novels.

This thesis calls attention to the various receptions of Nordan's work to indicate the importance of highlighting the historical context of racism when addressing *Music of the Swamp*. While these critics investigate themes of memory, autobiography, and death, they rarely include Nordan's personal history with racism or specific historical moments in his life within their analysis. Critics such as Perkins and Costello focus exclusively on Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* with attention to Nordan's history regarding Till because *Wolf Whistle* focuses explicitly on Till's death<sup>3</sup>. Both critics draw on Morrison's theory of the Africanist presence in American literature, "Even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom," so it is a wonder that this exploration has not been applied to *Music of the Swamp* (Morrison 46). The surface-level of the novel is not about Till, yet it still bears the shadow of Nordan's obsession with Till's murder (Morrison 47). It is useful to place emphasis on Nordan's construction of death in relation to an Africanist presence; this exploration reveals

how Nordan's portrayal of white identity ultimately depends on the presence of Black deaths in the South, along with his difficulty coming to terms with this racist history.

Nordan's construction of the motif of death often acts as an avoidance tactic regarding the racial history of the South (despite also depending on that history). I use the word "avoidance" to suggest that, while Nordan was deeply affected by the racial history of the South — particularly Till's death — he is uncertain or ambivalent about how to discuss that history. This is evidenced in one interview, where Nordan admitted, "I was unable to write the Emmett Till story all those years in part because I didn't feel it was my story to write...I never said anything, and nobody else said anything about it either. We were horrified by it. We were so shocked we couldn't deal with it at all, couldn't even talk about it" (Ingram and Ledbetter 84). Based on his reaction, one can see why he may have struggled to write about the murder. He was unable to talk about Till while simultaneously having a private obsession with the case. In Nordan's ambivalence towards facing such racially motivated deaths, the novel constitutes the beginning stages of grappling with Till's death. Therefore, the history of racial violence in the South is key to fully investigating the novel's construction of identity for Sugar. Further, *Wolf Whistle*, which was published two years after *Music of the Swamp*, deals directly with the murder; thus, *Music of the Swamp* exemplifies Nordan's difficulty coming to terms with writing about the event, along with the broader context of racism in the South.

### **3. Nordan's Re-Imagining of Emmett Till**

In part I of the novel, titled "Music of the Swamp," Sugar encounters death for the first time. This is the only section of the novel which uses third person narration, indicating distance between Sugar and his deathly encounter. Before this encounter, Sugar awakens from a dream where he, "saw a beautiful creature of some kind, a mermaid maybe, rise up from the water"

(Nordan 4). The phrase “mermaid maybe” (4), highlighted by alliteration, suggests some dubiousness toward the image. Sugar’s conceptualization of the dream suggests a level of instability in Sugar’s identity when the narrator says, “[Sugar] believed that this creature could foretell his future, or endow him with power and knowledge” (Nordan 4). Sugar's youthfulness underscores his identity as not fully realized quite yet. The dream is shown as the starting point of a new day rather than the ending point of a completed day. As such, the dream seems to suggest a metamorphosis; it is a starting point for rattling Sugar’s sense of identity.

The following image Sugar sees in the lake suggests that blackness may act as a sort of tool for enlightenment. The morning after Sugar’s dream, he heads to Roebuck Lake and sees a choir of Black people singing to him about Jesus, “standing chest-deep in the water” (Nordan 7). The narrator describes how Sugar feels unbelievable happiness: “He was almost delirious with strong feeling. His face was flushed and even in the Mississippi heat he was almost cold, almost shivering with emotion” (Nordan 8). Although this moment happens outside of Sugar’s dream, it engages a fantastical element similar to the mermaid dream. The sudden presence of the choir, combined with the religious element of singing of Jesus, underscores the spectacular elements of the scene. Soon after this, he witnesses a baptism where “a young woman in a white robe, waded forth, chest-deep in the black water, and allowed herself to be dunked backwards” (Nordan 10). The baptism, along with the exuberance of the Black choir, represents a sort of rebirth or transition from one identity to another. Like the image of the mermaid, Sugar feels a sense of bizarre consciousness — an overwhelming feeling of knowing something, although the specifics of this knowledge are unclear. His emotions are so strong that they transcend into physically feeling his body temperature change. Sugar’s sense of identity seems to depend on the mermaid’s knowledge and the choir’s singing, as he can find “power and knowledge” through

these distanced, fantastical images. Thus, these perceived dichotomies — the sense that the mermaid and choir are relics of a distant past, here to provide Sugar some old, powerful knowledge — act as a catalyst for Sugar’s enlightenment.

Nordan’s simultaneous avoidance of and interaction with Till’s death can be established once Sweet Austin, Sugar’s friend, shows Sugar the body Sweet discovered. The narrator says, “Sugar Mecklin spotted the bare feet and legs sticking up out of the water...He knew this was a dead person...It was a body, of course, snagged upside down in a drift of brush” (Nordan 11). As the boys learn more about the identity of the body, the narrator describes, “The body was an old man, it turned out, who may have had a seizure of some kind before he went into the water. Later on, his boat was found with a fishing rod and baited hooks in the floorboards” (Nordan 12). The statement “of course” (12) provides the scene a level of matter-of-fact nonchalance, as if this is an ordinary discovery. The statement also suggests that Sugar has some level of familiarity with death. This seems to reflect Nordan’s own familiarity with death onto Sugar, as Nordan’s construction of this scene is nearly an exact copy of the real-life discovery of Till’s body. In Davis W. Houck’s “Killing Emmett,” Houck recounts the events surrounding Till’s murder, and he describes that Till’s body was discovered by a “[17-year-old] fisherman [who] noticed what looked to be a pair of legs elevated above the water’s surface.... [and caught up in] a drift” (Houck 227). Distinctly like Till’s body, the body Sugar and Sweet discover is located in the water, with the legs in the air and caught in some branches. Nordan’s construction of the fisherman’s death scene in *Music of the Swamp* evidently echoes Till’s death.

Nordan interacts with the discovery of Till’s body through whitewashed substitutions. He replaces Till’s body with an old fisherman, and the narrator makes no mention of his race. Meanwhile, the young fisherman who discovered his body is replaced by the adolescent boys.

These substitutions may seem like an arbitrary shuffling on Nordan's part, but his later writing points to an intentional avoidance of inserting Till's murder into the novel. Nordan later admitted in an essay published at the end of *Wolf Whistle*, titled "Growing Up White in the South," that "The narrator reports the body to be that of an old man who had 'spells.' I knew it was not...I knew when I wrote the chapter that this dead person was none other than Emmett Till, floating upside down at the end of a barbed wire tether that was tied at one end to a hundred-pound gin fan and at the other, around the child's neck" (Nordan 295). He adds that the details he wrote into the scene, "even the phrase "a drift of brush," survive in my memory from a newspaper article [about Till's murder] of thirty-six years before" (Nordan 295). Evidently, Nordan intentionally based the scene of the dead fisherman on Till's death. Thus, Nordan removes Till's body from the scene while still using his death for literary inspiration.

Nordan's construction of this scene and his creative utility of Till's death speaks to a point Morrison makes about death. Morrison commented on the construction of death in relation to innocence when she wrote, "innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell...[is a response] to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence...the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population" (Morrison 5-6). Morrison points to death, especially combined with innocence, as a direct reflection of the Africanist presence upon American writers. With this notion in mind, Nordan's reversals complicate the value placed on the fisherman's life in the scene. The fisherman is an older man who has, presumably, lived a full life. His age juxtaposed with the adolescence of Sugar and Sweet heightens the dichotomy between the boys and the fisherman. This juxtaposition imparts the reader with a sense of sympathy — not for the fisherman, but for the boys who have been exposed to death at such a vulnerable age. Had the

boys discovered a young body close to their age, a different reaction to the scene may have been produced. Instead, Sugar and Sweet's dulcet names and youthfulness seem out of place when posed against the deathly image of the old fisherman. Nordan takes the youth and gender of Till — a fourteen-year-old boy, just a few years older than Sugar and Sweet — and places these traits onto the people who discover the body. Thus, Nordan's avoidance of directly addressing Till's death leads to him using Till's death for creative utility. Due to Nordan's ambivalence towards writing about Till, Nordan removes the original social and racial context of the real-life death, but he keeps the visual setting and positioning of the body.

Nordan briefly uses another real aspect of the murder in this scene. The narrator goes on to mention the real-life newspaper *Greenwood Commonwealth* (Nordan 12), which was one of the local papers of Till's murderers (Houck 228). Houck describes how this newspaper, among other local newspapers, reacted to Till's death by downplaying the role of race (Houck 235). The paper admitted to the depravity of the killer's actions but focused largely on defending the South by adding that Till's mother's comments about her son's death<sup>4</sup> were "evidence of the poison selfish men have planted in the minds of people outside the South" (Houck 235). Essentially, the South felt they were being unfairly implicated in Till's death by the rest of the country.

Nordan himself expressed that, at the time of the event, he also felt unfairly accused, stating "I grieved [the event], but not with a social conscience, I'm sorry to say, and not with much compassion for Emmett Till or the loving mother who suffered this loss, but with a defensiveness that bordered on neurosis. To my mind, something had been done to me, to us, to the South...by the 'Northern' media. I felt personally accused" (Nordan 82). This general feeling of defensiveness amongst white southerners at the time led to local newspapers such as *Greenwood Commonwealth* to treat Till's death as if it "wasn't much of a news story, just a lone,



isolated incident that happened to take place in the South” and was not “indicative of ‘racial hatred’” (Houck 235).

The dismissive tone of the newspaper in the novel seems to emulate the tone of the real-life local newspapers. The narrator speaks of the newspaper by stating, “The [fisherman’s] daughter, The *Greenwood Commonwealth* reported, had told her father not to go out on the lake by himself, because he had ‘spells’” (Nordan 12). The tone of the fictionalized newspaper mimics the notion of the death being an isolated or one-off event. Just as Till’s murder was locally designated “a lone, isolated incident” that happened to take place in the South (Houck 235), the fisherman’s death is described as an accident resulting from going to the lake when he had fainting “spells” (Nordan 12). Within the novel, the news article is simply about a fisherman’s accidental death on a fishing trip. However, since Nordan had Till in mind when he wrote the death scene, he may have also drawn on the way newspapers reported on Till’s death to inform how newspapers — within the context of the novel — also downplay the fisherman’s death (who is, in Nordan’s mind, representative of Till).

Sugar’s immediate reaction to the death seems indicative of a repressed sense of identity. Since this section is told in the third person, his emotions throughout this section are not always clear or explicit. However, the narrator does point out Sugar’s immediate reaction: He thinks back to his father “smearing paint over the bathroom ceiling,” which was “the oddest thing” for Sugar to immediately think of after seeing the body (Nordan 12). Sugar’s reaction indicates that readers should draw an association between his father and death. The visual of the father painting with his head just below the ceiling parallels the image of the body’s head underneath the water. It also recalls an earlier part of the chapter, in which Sugar tells his father, “‘I love you, Daddy!’ in a bright voice, and his father struggled and finally muttered, ‘Good luck on your travels

through life,' and then went out to the garage...to paint the bathroom" (Nordan 5). Gilbert is unable to reciprocate Sugar's unobstructed love for him, and instead changes the subject and quickly walks away to paint the bathroom. Sugar thinks back to his father's stoic, frigid state of being, which parallels a state of numbness. Thus, Sugar's reaction directly correlates with the identity modeled for Sugar.

Since Nordan wrote the death scene with Till in mind, Sugar's immediate reaction also draws some connection between Till's death and Gilbert's detached behavior. As the chapter progresses and Sugar tries to tell his father about the body they found, Gilbert drunkenly tells Sugar, "Hush, hush up, Sugar. Listen to this song" (Nordan 20). However, the narrator goes on to say how, "Gilbert had not meant to say this...What he meant to say was that there was just so much death in the Delta, it was everywhere, he didn't know how a child could stand all of it" (Nordan 20). Gilbert's dismissal of the dead body Sugar tries to tell him about has a similar tone to the dismissive attitude of local papers such as the *Greenwood Commonwealth*, downplaying and rejecting the racism behind Till's murder. Although Gilbert is aware of the death all over the Delta, he prefers to avoid explaining this reality to Sugar. In that avoidance, Gilbert wallows in alcohol and ignores his child's attempts to talk about the dead body. While Gilbert is deeply impacted by death as shown by his substance abuse, his alcoholism also suggests an internal repression of the reality of death and rejection of emotionally connecting with Sugar.

In some ways, Gilbert's behavior and identity are defined by a repressive refusal to face racial tragedy with honesty. Baldwin speaks to this avoidance: "[White people] are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (Baldwin 9). Nordan's construction of whiteness in this first section of the novel speaks to Baldwin's commentary. By repressing the looming presence of the dead body in

this chapter, Nordan portrays how white people in the South may ignore their racist history or deny history's ubiquity in the present-day. By denying that ubiquity, they deny reality. While Nordan portrays this attitude of denial, he also maintains that repression himself by changing the identity of the body from its true source. Since Nordan admitted in an interview that, "We were so shocked we couldn't deal with [Till's murder] at all, couldn't even talk about it," one can connect Nordan's construction of Gilbert's attitude based off this reluctance to face the death (Ingram and Ledbetter 84). The fantastic nature of the shifting images in the lake, along with Nordan's creative utility with Till's death, underscores Nordan's construction of whiteness as something which both ignores and depends on Morrison's concept of the Africanist presence.

Finally, the chapter's conclusion underscores how Sugar does not conceptualize the permanence of death. By the end of the chapter, the narrator says, "The world was not the way Sugar Mecklin wanted it to be, but he had to admit, this particular day had turned out even better than he had expected" (Nordan 27). Despite discovering a dead body, Sugar looks back on the day, joyfully. Sugar does not seem immediately affected or bothered by the death. This could be interpreted as simply the positivity of youth, or the fact that he was able to spend time with his friend Sweet; however, it also indicates that Sugar does not understand the link between finding the body and the broader history he is part of. The third-person narrator's matter-of-fact tone heightens the distance between Sugar and this history. Although Sugar does not seem deeply affected right away, his youth suggests that he still has time to diverge from his father's avoidance and face death — along with the notion of one's mortality— with honesty.

The way Nordan paints the notion of death for the characters within the novel seems to accurately reflect how white people in the South may have treated death. In recreating Till's death but changing his identity completely, Nordan's narrative reflects his complex ambivalence

towards writing about Till. As Nordan introduces the theme of "power and knowledge" for Sugar (4), he also tentatively asserts the current state of Sugar's unquestioned white identity. Ultimately, this first section constitutes the beginning stages of Nordan facing the racial tragedy which defined his upbringing in the South.

#### **4. Sugar Facing Death**

In Part II of the novel, the notion of death for Sugar transforms from a one-off discovery during a day with his friend to a thing which he must actively seek out, as he chooses to do. In a chapter titled "A Hank of Hair, A Piece of Bone," Sugar decides to start digging into the Delta. After part I of the novel, the narrative is told from Sugar's perspective, which allows a more intimate look at his emotions and identity. He is prompted by a comment his father makes when Sugar tells him he's acquired a shovel: "The Delta is filled up with death" (Nordan 53). Opposed to the first section of the novel where Gilbert ignores discussing death with Sugar (Nordan 20), this time Gilbert does not change the subject. Instead, he states matter-of-factly that, indeed, death is everywhere in the Delta. Gilbert's sense of self is, both consciously and unconsciously, defined by death. He is conscious of it in the sense that he has a constant awareness of death all around him and internalizes that consciousness, as there are various mentions of Gilbert's suicide attempts throughout the novel<sup>5</sup>. Yet, he seems unconscious of the fact that death — the history behind all that death — defines his very being in the Delta.

Gilbert's comment prompts Sugar to search for the death his father claims is out there, saying "The Delta was filled with death. The information came like a summons, a moral imperative to search" (Nordan 54). He says he was digging for:

Chickasaws and Choctaws. Slaves had died here. There might be bones. A well-digger once dug up a Confederate mortar shell near the dog pen and it was still on display in the

Plantation Museum in Leflore. Sometimes a kid would find an arrowhead or spear point.

My father was right — the remains of other civilizations did still occasionally poke

through into our own.... I was digging for evidence of other worlds. (Nordan 55)

Sugar points to the history of American colonialism — particularly Indigenous objects and the bones of enslaved people — as the source of the remnants he is searching for. However, he attributes this history to “other civilizations...other worlds” (Nordan 55). For the young Sugar, this history is something so far away that he does not consider it part of the present. It is something which he may decide to search for if he wants to, like buried treasure from thousands of years ago. He does not conceptualize that the very presence of these objects — bones of enslaved people, Indigenous objects — are very proof that this history is here now. It is the very reason why Sugar and his family live on this land.

Carney points to Sugar’s searching as tied up in his own identity, as “The world of his forefathers and evidence of their violence might provide clues for this boy trying to understand his father’s words” (Carney 81). Carney’s interpretation of Sugar’s digging projects onto the child an expectation of awareness. Beyond evidence of the violence of Sugar’s forefathers, is the real lives of those impacted by it. It seems unclear whether he sees this evidence as part of the history of his ancestors. Rather, he considers it evidence of an entirely separate universe from his own — “evidence of other worlds” (Nordan 55). This is further affirmed when Sugar retrospectively thinks about how he only considered the history he dug for “in a general way. I think I was only playing, only digging for fun. I was a child, and I enjoyed the child’s play” (Nordan 56). Sugar is not aware that this proves any violence from his ancestors, as his very consideration of death does not consider the tragedy or permanence of it. For Sugar, the bones he is searching for are not real; I use the word “real” to suggest that, for Sugar, the bones are fragmented pieces

separated from the real reality of their existence. They do not exist as evidence of anything, except maybe his father's words. The implications of his father's words do not stretch into a conscious, real-life presence of death — caused by the violent history of colonialism — as something which is part of Sugar's very identity. His father's words are merely a spur to start a treasure-hunt. It is a search for something which he believes has nothing to do with himself — nothing to do with his very existence. He feels compelled to search for these bones because he does not believe they exist in a way that has an important relationship to him. Sugar does not conceptualize that the death he searches for is there because of his lineage — that his existence in the Delta is predicated on a people whose racist notions of intrinsic difference and entitlement led to the violent colonialism which placed these objects in the Delta dirt. Meanwhile, the bones and objects of enslaved and exploited peoples are reduced from humanity to a treasure for child's play. As "The remains of other civilizations did still occasionally poke through our own," he views their remains as a mere fluke or incident, like a stranger walking into the wrong room (Nordan 55). For Sugar, they are not tied up in the current state of the Delta, much less the state — or existence — of his family's lives.

When he first starts digging, there is further evidence that he does not fully understand death. He has not fully conceptualized its permanence or the ripple effect it can have on people for generations to come. He digs a trench which causes a dog to crawl under a fence and kill his father's rooster, so he "threw the dead rooster into some tall weeds near the trailer...my father thought it had flown the coop and been killed as a result of its own restlessness and vanity. So that was good" (Nordan 55). Although a rooster's death is not typically considered in the same way a human's death is, it is still notable as Sugar's digging makes him inadvertently responsible for the death. Sugar can toss the rooster's body aside and avoid any blame or fault in the

rooster's death. He shifts the blame of the death from his own actions to the "vanity" (55) of the rooster. Thus, he conceptualizes death as something which one does not need to take responsibility for. Responsibility can be shifted and distorted from one being to another, regardless of whose fault it truly is.

As he continues digging day after day, Sugar's conceptualization of death slowly starts to teeter. He says, "Suddenly, or rather gradually, this became no abstraction I was searching for, not merely *death*. I believed now that whatever bone I found...was not without a human history, that a single bone was a person, someone whose life was as filled with madness and loss as the lives of my father and mother" (Nordan 59). His pursuit of bones and historical remnants starts to become something he can envision beyond the excitement it might provide. He is beginning to see that there is humanity or proof of life within the Delta dirt. When Sugar finally faces death, he immediately recognizes its permanence and connectivity with the present day. Sugar's days of digging finally pay off, as he brushes the dirt away from the vessel and discovers, "Beneath the glass was a dead woman, beautiful, with auburn hair and fair skin...One second, less than a second, and I never looked again" (Nordan 62). He finally considers the notion of death as much more jarring than it was to him previously, as he immediately looks away from her. Yet despite this brief glance, Sugar describes, "The dress she was wearing was red velvet, down to her ankles. Her shoes were tiny, with pointed toes" while repeatedly asserting that he only looked at her for a single second (Nordan 62). Unlike the vertical body he found in the water, the woman is lying horizontally in her under-ground coffin.

Nicosia points out Sugar's discovery "was not something unexpected, but rather what he intended to find" (Nicosia 74). Yet Sugar does not find what he expected. Sugar had expected to find bones or objects from enslaved Black people or Indigenous tribes. He did not expect to find

a white woman — especially whose body is explicitly preserved, untouched from the decay that comes with death. Further, this is not a random woman; the woman directly reminds him of his mother, as he says, “In the dead woman’s face I had seen my mother’s beauty, the warm blood of her passion, as my father had once known her and had forgotten” (Nordan 63). Thus, the dead woman holds a deep familiarity to Sugar, which is why he is so deeply impacted by the discovery of her (and, perhaps, the reason he is able to describe her in such meticulous detail). Sugar’s discovery teaches him that history cannot be divorced from the present. He is confronted with the mortality of his family and the fact that they, too, end up in the ground along with those who are subjugated through colonialism.

Meanwhile, his father’s misery and alcoholism are proof of a generational history which Sugar does not have to seek out. On some level, he expected that people of color have died on this land. However, he saw it as something far away, separate from his own family. He had not considered that white people, too, are damned in the pursuit of colonialism. As he hears above him his “father filling and emptying tumblers of water, and all around me I heard this poured-out water gurgling down through pipes, headed for sewers,” he is faced with the notion that his family is tied up in the history of the South (Nordan 63). That history is happening all around him, and it is happening all at once.

Sugar’s immediate reaction is to try to make sense of his discovery. He imagines what her life may have been like or what her name was (Nordan 64). He also says, “In my mind I gave the woman gifts. I gave her a candle stub. I gave her a box of wooden kitchen matches. I gave her a cake of Lifebuoy soap” (Nordan 65). Sugar seems almost as if he is trying to negotiate her death, as if it is something he can undo through gift-giving to fix the reality of it. Baldwin comments on the notion of white people avoiding the fact of death:



White Americans do not face...the fact that life is tragic. Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos...races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have (Baldwin 91-92)

Baldwin's commentary speaks to Sugar's reckoning with the death. He has been confronted with the tragedy of life, but he attempts to repress that tragedy or bargain with the reality of death through imagined gift-giving. Sugar's sense of identity depends on this bargaining — a denial that death is a part of life, just as the violent history in the South is part of his current reality. As Sugar tries to cope with this reality, he washes his hair, puts on fresh clothes, eats a package of peppermint candy, and throws up (Nordan 65). Finally, he walks brazenly into Gilbert's room and steals two condoms and two bullets (Nordan 65). Immediately after this, Sugar "walked beside Roebuck Lake and threw away the rubbers and the bullets and hated my father and myself" (Nordan 65-66). Sugar's reactions of cleaning himself up, only to vomit after eating the candies, underscore the fact that Sugar is a child grappling with the notion of mortality. When Sugar ultimately turns his frustrations towards objects which remind him of his father, who told him to search for death in the first place, he chooses a bullet and condoms which suggest a rejection of the violent male, sexualized identity he sees in his father. Sugar's actions also connect his bargaining tactic to Gilbert, as Baldwin's commentary speaks to Gilbert's alcoholism and misery in life. Although Gilbert himself told Sugar that death is everywhere in the Delta, he uses alcohol to ignore and repress the fact of that death.

## 5. State-Sanctioned Executions and White Mortality

Once faced with the reality of death, Sugar begins to think more seriously about the history around him. He hops on trains, traveling from town to town aimlessly, and thinks, “I was afraid my parents would understand the real danger, the great magnetism, the centrifugal pull away from everything familiar and true” (Nordan 75). This moment signals Sugar’s desire for an alternative identity outside of the one he knows in his parents — an identity in which he does not commit the violence of his ancestors or end up as miserable as his father is. This alternative identity is “the real danger” because his current identity has been recycled for hundreds of years (75). While he still holds onto his current identity as “familiar and true,” he has come to suspect that it may not be what he wants for himself (75).

With these suspicions in mind, he also starts to mention the racism in his hometown. While on a tour of an exhibit about the electric chair, a group of older high school boys in the tour make joking comments about the chair, such as, “‘Buckle up for safety,’ and the others snickered” (Nordan 79). The comment implies that death is not taken seriously — especially when death is considered a punishment. Sugar asks the guide if he can sit in the chair, and when the guide gives him permission, Sugar says, “I looked back at the high school boys, who suddenly seemed quiet and afraid. I sat in the chair. Then I heard one of them say, ‘You’re sitting where many a grinning n—— died’” (Nordan 80). The boy’s racist comment provides more context for the boys joking comments earlier, as it was not simply death in general which they do not consider seriously; they were specifically making fun of the state-sanctioned murder of Black people. The boys only stop laughing when they see Sugar in the chair, and they become “suddenly quiet and afraid” (Nordan 80). This sudden shift from laughing to quiet fear further underscores the boy’s racism; they are not accustomed to seeing a white person sitting in the

electric chair. Their comments point to a view of the chair as a tool specifically for ending Black people's lives.

The moment also recalls Sugar's initial attitude toward death when he started digging for the bones of enslaved Black people. While Sugar was not explicitly racist in the way the high school boys are, he had a similar expectation or association between death and blackness. When he's confronted with a dead white body which reminds him of his mother — similar to when the boys see Sugar's white body in the electric chair — there is a major tonal shift toward the notion of death. White identity in Sugar's town depends on such racist divisions — the notion of perpetual, uninterrupted white lives empowered by a history of dead, murdered Black lives.

The South — especially Mississippi — has a long history of executions. In Julius E. Thompson's "Lynchings in Mississippi: A History, 1865-1965," Thompson recounts the history of state-sanctioned executions as a sort of legalized form of lynching. During 1940 to 1955, the electric chair became a portable tool for executing 57 Black people in total, as opposed to only 16 white people (Thompson 141). Thompson discusses how white mobs would gather to celebrate the executions of Black people and adds that, "This was terror practiced by the state, in general, the state as a violent lynching mob" (Thompson 145). Nordan's choice to emphasize this specific form of racism in the South — state-sanctioned executions of Black people, along with the groups of white people who would celebrate such legalized executions — underscores how the construction of white identity is based on us versus them mentalities. As Sugar sits down in the electric chair, Nordan interacts with this history by positioning violent, state-sanctioned death as a sort of racialized experience. In the South, white society has constructed death as something which has completely different implications for Black people. For Black people, it is a constant threat and reminder of white supremacist control. For white people, it is a tool for that control

and a method of entertainment for the white mobs. Meanwhile, as the boys' demeanor changes when Sugar sits in the chair, the notion of death is considered seriously by the boys — a tragedy for white bodies.

The scene speaks to a white disbelief in the notion of death. As Baldwin points out, “But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them” (Baldwin 92). Johanna C. Luttrell interprets what Baldwin's commentary says about white identity:

The denial of mortality in whiteness is a colonial inheritance. Other people's flesh is wounded, humiliated, and decays; not [white peoples]. [White people] must prove this by wounding others symbolically and literally trafficking in black people's flesh...mortality's dread is centered squarely in the direction of the loss of self, including the loss of [white] identity. To dis-identify with whiteness' contents (anti-blackness) can feel like, to white people, a sort of death. (Luttrell 107-108)

Luttrell's interpretation of Baldwin provides a clear image of the interconnection between white people's mortality and their sense of identity. She points to the major aspect of which white people envision death: through denial. They deny that death is a fact of life for everyone and position it instead as a punishment for non-white people (Luttrell 107). Their denial places an intrinsic value — or otherworldly value — on whiteness. Thus, the value placed on whiteness depends on such racist dichotomies. Under a racist society, death becomes part of a hierarchical social structure in which white people feel justified to have control or dominion over death for those who are not white. With such a worldview, death becomes something which is no longer a state of being or a universal fact. Instead, it becomes a tool — an institutionalized apparatus or mechanism for punishment and domination. Death is appropriated from something that is a fact

of life to something which is weaponized by white people against non-white people. Therefore, the boys in the scene are immersed in an identity which relies on Black death. When Sugar sits in the chair and the boys react with fear, they see a reversal of the mechanism which defines their identities. If that reversal were to truly take hold in society, their identity would cease to exist. An identity which depends entirely on the subjugation of an entire people is a brittle, hollow identity.

Nordan's construction of the scene also points to how white people in the South used Black death as a form of entertainment. Sugar responds to the boy's comments by inwardly condemning their actions, as he stays "silent and respectful" during the exhibit tour (Nordan 79). Sugar's silence ultimately allows the boy's comments to go unchallenged and therefore keeps them socially permissible. The scene recalls back to Nordan's own youth. In his autobiography, he recalls how a group of boys at his high school talked about Till's murder as if "It was a funny story, like a movie plot you remember as having scared you at the time, maybe, but now is a big joke" (Nordan 79). Nordan recreates the tone of such conversations in the tone of the high school boys at the electric chair exhibit.

Nordan notes his own complicity in the racism of such conversations, as he stayed silent and likely "smiled at the joke, I don't remember" (Nordan 79). He mentions that, during one of these real-life conversations, one boy did outwardly condemn the boys' hateful comments, saying "It ain't right. Kill a boy for that. I don't care what color he is" (Nordan 80). Nordan adds that "For forty years, I have wished I had been the boy who spoke those courageous words" (80). In *Music of the Swamp*, Nordan exercises his creative utility by removing any outward condemnation of the high school boys and instead having Sugar remain silent (79). Thus, Sugar's silence allows the reader to focus on the high school boys' racism and Sugar's inability to

directly confront that racism. The entire context of the scene further underscores death as a form of entertainment for white people. Sugar and the high school boys are touring an exhibit about the electric chair; Sugar points out that the chair was going to be used for an execution, in which people were invited to witness (Nordan 78). The chair is something which Sugar and the high school boys may choose to come visit — even take a seat in, if they want to. It is not something which they register as a threat to their own lives, because they consider its utility as something which does not apply to them. The scene also constitutes the novel's first explicit portrayal of racism in the South. In the beginning of the novel, Nordan whitewashes Till's death and avoids discussions of race. Here, Nordan places the racism in Sugar's hometown at the forefront and provides a more honest depiction of how racism could be a key part of everyday conversations amongst white people.

### **6. The Centrality of Sugar's Feelings**

Nordan extends this depiction of racism into Sugar's home life and focuses on Sugar's feelings towards the racism. This is the first scene in the novel that explicitly portrays the racism within Sugar's home — especially from his father. After his day at the exhibit, Sugar comes home and asks his father if he can watch the television; his father responds that he does not want Sugar watching Black people on the television (Nordan 81). Later on, Sugar mentions the execution of the Black man and says, "His name was in the paper, not his picture, which meant he was a black man. I cried my guts out when I heard about it" (Nordan 81). As Sugar cries at the event, he seems to conceptualize death as something which Black people should not be punished or threatened with; death is no longer a purely abstract thing or a benign reminder of the past like when he was digging for the bones of enslaved peoples. It is now something which he has begun to see as real.

Meanwhile, the scene places the execution of the Black man in the background of the plot with Sugar's feelings at the forefront. Sugar's complicated feelings become increasingly clear as the scene progresses. After seeing his father nearly drink himself to death in response to Sugar's comments, Sugar says, "I had always known he drank because of me, and for the first time I didn't care. I wished he would die and then I cried my guts out about that too" (Nordan 82). He believes Gilbert drinks because of Sugar's presence. The focus on Sugar's feelings is largely due to the first-person narrative. However, Sugar's feelings notably have some similarity to white guilt since these emotions arise after Sugar learns about the electric chair.

According to Shelby Steele, white guilt results from an awareness of the advantages of being white in America (Steele 499). Although Sugar learned about the electric chair, it is unclear how aware he is of the social advantages of whiteness in a white supremacist society; there is no directly stated connection between Sugar's emotions and a broader understanding of privilege and structural racism. However, Steele importantly adds how white guilt can centralize one's own feelings and, "lead us to put our own need for innocence above our concern for the problem that made us feel guilt in the first place" (Steele 502). Steele points to how indulging in one's feelings of white guilt is a slippery slope to prioritizing such feelings over the actual issue of racism. The emphasis on Sugar's emotional reactions to both the Black man's execution and his father's racism end up removing the focus of the scene from the problem or prevalence of racism in the South to Sugar's personal feelings about it. While Sugar's conceptualization of death is perhaps more sympathetic towards Black lives compared to when he was digging for bones, he only thinks of the man's death in terms of his own feelings.

When he discovered the body of the white woman, he imagined an entire life and identity for her, including various names such as "Kate and Molly and Celia, even Leda" (Nordan 64).

Meanwhile, the Black man — whose name was apparently printed in the paper — remains nameless and unidentified within the narrative. This is largely because the dead woman reminds Sugar of his own mother, but it is still notable that Sugar does not attempt to conceptualize the man's life. He does not feel the level of familiarity he felt between the dead woman and his mother, so instead Sugar quickly moves on to his own personal feelings of distress towards the execution. Sugar's disgust with the racism is an important ethical response; however, the emphasis on Sugar's feelings ends up prioritizing his emotions over the Black man's death. Thus, the execution becomes a briefly mentioned plot point to advance the narrative about Sugar's emotional state.

While the construction of the scene certainly uses Black death as a plot tool and ultimately centers white feelings, Nordan does show how racism can be both disempowering and potentially deadly for white people. After Sugar cries, he sees Pearl Bailey, a real-life Black actress and singer at the time, singing on television (Nordan 81-82). Sugar says, "She's pretty," and immediately afterwards Gilbert "left the room in disgust and got so drunk he had to be taken to the hospital to have his stomach pumped" (Nordan 82). In this moment, Gilbert's silent disgust and alcoholism speaks to his racist viewpoint as both an outward and inward poisoning. Thus, Gilbert's deep-rooted racism is conveyed with violence against his own body. For Gilbert, Sugar's comments contradict the racist ideology he expects of Sugar. Eric Lott speaks to such racism amongst working-class white people, in which they would disavow "...ideologically, all modes of intercourse with black people, from "amalgamation" to abolitionism" (Lott 241).

Gilbert is repulsed that his offspring showed sympathy for the executed Black man, along with complimenting a Black woman. As Gilbert turns this racist attitude inward by nearly drinking to death, it seems almost as if he is trying to expel Sugar from his being. He cannot



fathom the idea of his child simply seeing Black people as humans who deserve life and love. After the centuries of violence Gilbert's ancestors likely inflicted on Black people, this violence also manifests inwardly in Gilbert. The use of the Black man's death to reveal Sugar's familial emotional turbulence presents limits to the conception of an alternative identity for Sugar. However, Nordan's focus on emotions in this scene presents a valuable critique of the brittleness of a white identity which depends on a racist ideology.

Sugar goes on to engage a sort of hyperbolic display of white guilt through violence. As Sugar grapples with his father's racist, alcoholic outburst (82), Sugar enacts violence himself:

I walked straight to the Baptist church and climbed into the loft and, with a four-foot board, I swatted down a metallic-colored pigeon from the rafters and stomped it till its hard eyes popped out, and pulled out all its feathers and stuffed them in my mouth and puked and swore I would never say, not even to condemn it as evil, the word n—— for the rest of my life. Today, for the one millionth time, as I tell this story, I am breaking that vow. I have no explanations. To seal the vow I pulled down from a corner of the church loft a wasp nest, papery and alive with terrified little red dive-bombers, and squeezed the fiery nest in my hand until my hand was filled with poison and big as a football and I was stung many times all over my body. I also vowed to catch the train.

(Nordan 82)

Sugar's reaction to his father is both jarring and brutal, as Sugar's violence happens so abruptly. As Sugar faces his frustrations towards his father, he ends up adding more death to the Delta and fully leaning into the violence of his ancestors. Especially as a child, Sugar sees no clear-cut way of making change. So instead, he embraces the violence of his ancestors while simultaneously attempting to condemn it. As he eats the pigeon, it is as if he is swallowing — or trying to

forcibly face — the racism his father is culpable of. This is underscored as he attempts to condemn the racial slur. Moreover, Sugar's violent reaction does nothing to actually, directly challenge his father's racism. Gilbert may have considered Sugar's compliment about Pearl Bailey as a sort of challenging of the racist status quo for Sugar, but there is no straightforward confrontation with Gilbert's racism. Thus, Sugar's violence is completely displaced and ultimately futile in truly challenging his father. He wants to reject Gilbert as a role model, but he has no model for how to reject that identity. As he wraps his hand around the wasp's nest, Sugar indulges in a sort of self-punishment. An indulgence in pain may seem paradoxical, but it is not unlike Gilbert's overindulgence in alcohol, which certainly results in pain for Gilbert when he is sent to the hospital (82).

I also want to point to how the retrospective narration ultimately points to an over-indulgence in feelings of white guilt; the violence of the scene is so hyperbolic and potent that one almost forgets what triggered Sugar's interaction with his father in the first place: the execution of a Black man. While he stayed silent when the high school boys made racist comments during the exhibit (Nordan 79), he reacts to his father's actions with ruthless violence against the pigeon. Thus, the violence of the man's death ends up falling into the backdrop in the face of Sugar's own violence and emotional state. That being said, exploring Sugar's feelings can be useful, as Gilbert's racism certainly impacts Sugar's sense of self.

Further, since Sugar is a child, his focus on his own feelings of distress throughout this chapter makes sense; he is ultimately powerless in this situation. However, the account of the scene is retrospective; the retrospective Sugar also perpetuates the feelings of white guilt he had as a child. His use of the racial slur in his condemnation of the slur points to Sugar's inability to completely divest from a racist Southern identity. Even as he attempts to reject this identity, the

child-Sugar enacts a racist white identity by committing unnecessary, senseless violence. Meanwhile, the retrospective-Sugar ends up enacting a racist white identity by using the racial slur in his retrospective account, which he has “no explanations” for (Nordan 82). The retrospective-Sugar is aware of the immorality of racism, but he simultaneously feels compelled to enact such an identity.

Sugar also fantasizes about escaping to deal with his complex emotions. Steele comments on how one’s indulgent focus on one’s own feelings regarding guilt can turn into “a pressure to *escape* the guilt-inducing situation. When selfishness and escapism are at work, we are no longer interested in the source of our guilt and, therefore, no longer concerned with an authentic redemption from it” (Steele 502). This desire to escape is certainly reflected when Sugar decides to jump on a train the next day just after killing the pigeon, as he expresses feelings of despair: “I wanted to die in a ditch. I wanted to disappear. I wanted a different history and geography” (Nordan 83). It may be unclear whether what Sugar is feeling is an all-encompassing guilt; however, Sugar’s desire for escape and “a different history and geography” (83) points to white guilt as one aspect of his emotional turbulence. As he says, “In rhythm with the wheels I said *I want I want I want I want*” (83) the repetition reflects the dynamics between Sugar’s desire for an alternative identity outside of his father’s racism and the reality of his upbringing. His desire to escape the South and its history further alludes to his developing awareness of the major flaw in Gilbert’s conduct along with the history of racism tied to his family line — a line of behaviors passed down, taught by a long line of fathers to sons, and underscored by a history of institutionalized racial violence.

Later in the same paragraph, after a couple of kids throw rocks at Sugar and one hits his hand, he yells back at them the same racist slur he previously condemned (Nordan 83). The slur

effectively undermines the hints at Sugar's consciousness of the full breadth of Gilbert's immorality. Instead, the abruptness of his racist outburst suggests how deeply imbedded racism is to Sugar's Southern identity. He wants "a different history," (83) but he cannot escape the mirror effect such history has on a person — especially someone who has yet to discover alternative identities. When the retrospective-Sugar comments on the scene, "I was a sick and bitter child," he points to a cognizance of the racism he enacted as a child (Nordan 84). Yet, the narrative comment is ironic in some ways since he just repeated the racial slur earlier, with "no explanations" for why (Nordan 82). The retrospective-Sugar seems as if he, still, is grappling with the pervasive racism of his hometown.

It seems that Sugar's guilt springs from a simultaneous awareness of racism paired with a lack of ability to do something about his awareness. Later that day when Sugar leaves the train, he sees a Black man having a seizure (Nordan 84). All Sugar can think to do is watch: "When the seizure ended the man slept and snored and finally woke up...and set out across the lot" and Sugar calls after him "I'm sorry!" (Nordan 84). Since Sugar is a child, he is generally powerless to do anything effectual; it makes sense that he does not know what to do and ends up just sitting there watching. However, the scene recalls his lack of forward or actionable anti-racism. Just like Sugar's killing of the pigeon, his apology is ultimately futile; he did nothing to help the man during the seizure, and then apologizes after. It is unclear if he is apologizing because he did nothing, or because of his budding awareness of his culpability in the racism of his hometown. Regardless, Sugar's futile apology underscores that white guilt is one aspect of the complicated emotions he is facing.

In some ways, Sugar's reaction to his budding awareness of the racism in his hometown can be described in terms of avoidance. Baldwin comments on why white people may avoid facing their history:

“[White people] have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. (Baldwin 8-9)

Baldwin implores white people to earnestly examine the roots of their oppressive behavior while recognizing the difficulty of facing it. Baldwin's point also speaks to how, in many ways, white identity depends on avoidance. While Sugar's youth positions him as a sympathetic protagonist, his identity seems dependent on avoidance; he stays silent at the high school boys' racism. He does not confront his father's racism head-on, but instead displaces his frustrations onto the pigeon. He does not help the Black man having a seizure but apologizes afterwards. Sugar does not act directly since he is a child who is powerless, but his lack of action also stems from his attachment to the only identity he's ever known — even when this identity is also being disrupted. His sense of identity is rattled after learning about the executions of Black people by the electric chair.

Nordan later wrote how he struggled with his identity after Till's murder, as he "began to feel torn apart by my loyalties, to what I knew of right and wrong and to the morality of the only home I had ever known" (Nordan 82). Nordan's ambivalence towards his identity seems to reflect into the narrative, as Sugar — both as a child and retrospectively — constantly embraces and rejects a racist identity. As he has no clear model of what rejecting that identity should look like, he ends up repeating the very actions that are indicative of a racist identity.

I also want to emphasize, again, that the entire chain of events in this section is a result of Sugar learning about the electric chair and hearing about the execution of a Black man. Yet, the chapter focuses largely on Sugar's emotional state, leaving Black death as a plot device to Sugar's development. This does not result in an actively anti-racist identity for Sugar, as an alternative identity for him is never actually determined. He does start to question his current identity, which is a starting point to finding an alternative identity — but the retrospective account of the events often undermines this starting point, such as when he uses the racial slur after stating he "would never say [it], not even to condemn it as evil" (Nordan 82). The man's execution has a profound impact on Sugar's personal sense of identity; yet it does not lead him to embrace anti-racism in any concrete way, neither as a child nor in the retrospective account of the events. Thus, the death becomes an occasion for white self-reflection, rather than for social change. By wallowing in Sugar's own feelings of despair, Nordan avoids directly interrogating the persistent issue of racism.

Yet, despite the potentially problematic focus on emotions, Nordan simultaneously and importantly exemplifies the persistence of racism within the white Southern identity. As Baldwin points out, "To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger" (Baldwin 9). Sugar's lack of direct action is, indeed, a fear of danger because action challenges the status quo;

even an act as simple and indirect as watching Black people on television leads to his father's hospitalization (Nordan 82). Thus, Nordan shows how such racism negatively impacts white people across generations, as their identity depends on poisonous, but frail, notions of difference.

### **7. Sugar Rejecting Death**

Towards the end of the novel, there are inconsistencies which point to Sugar reverting towards a rejection of death. As Gilbert and Sugar attempt to save Mr. Shanker, a local pharmacist and drug addict who has overdosed, Gilbert injects him with morphine and kills the man (Nordan 149). Sugar says, "He was dead. I don't know what I expected my father to do, or say. I had never seen a dead person before, though I suppose my father had" (Nordan 150). Sugar's comment is jarring because repeatedly throughout the novel he has seen death. From the very first chapter when he and Sweet discover a body in the lake (Nordan 11), the novel is, to a fault, haunted by death. Marcel Arbeit's interpretation of the narrative structure could explain this inconsistency: "*Music of the Swamp*, although advertised as a novel, is nothing more (but also nothing less) than a sequence of short stories inhabited with characters many of whom already appeared in Nordan's previous works" (Arbeit 176). Nordan certainly tends to recycle characters, as before *Music of the Swamp*, Nordan wrote about Sugar's character in other works<sup>6</sup>.

However, despite Nordan's tendency to recycle characters, *Music of the Swamp* is advertised as a novel and should be read as such. I interpret Sugar's comment as an explanation for why he, both as a child and retrospectively, never truly adheres to a defined identity. He suppresses all the death he has witnessed in the Delta, settling on a deluded, suppressed state in which death is something he can avoid the fact of. Sugar states that "It is hard to say why, but I am certain that this was the closest moment my father and I had ever shared. I was very much in love with my father, though I might have known even in this moment that something inside me

had frozen solid and would be a long time in thawing” (Nordan 151). Sugar feels closest to his father in a moment where they commit murder and thus, add even more death to the Delta.

Sugar’s participation in his father’s actions — something which he wanted to avoid, as suggested by his interaction with his father after the execution of the Black man (Nordan 82) — leads him down a similar path to his father, one in which he must numb the truth of death in the South.

Thus, the way Sugar’s reactions to death change constantly throughout the novel can be seen as tied up in his complicity in his father’s identity. As he retrospectively recounts the events of his childhood throughout the novel, he is still grappling with these events as they take place. Hence, Sugar never truly finds a home in his conceptualization of his identity. As he recounted the feelings of guilt earlier in the novel when he stomped out the pigeon (82), he was still thawing the thing that “had frozen solid” (151) inside of him, which is also the thing which inhibits him from looking honestly — without an indulgent self-hatred — at the racism of the South.

## **8. Conclusion**

Nordan’s construction of white identity in the novel uses the South’s racist history regarding death to contextualize Sugar’s upbringing in the South. As Nordan tentatively begins to address this history, he grapples with Till’s death and the problematic state of white identity’s relationship to death. Nordan frequently succeeds in honestly and uncomfortably portraying the long-standing impact of racism in the South, such as when Sugar learns about the electric chair (79), or when he kills the pigeon (82). Even when Sugar digs into the delta and discovers the buried woman (62), Nordan paints a poignant picture of the young boy’s discovery of death and its implications for his own family. Yet, the hyper-focus on Sugar’s emotional state sometimes undermines such moments. While Sugar sometimes seems cognizant of the racism in his upbringing, he simultaneously leans into the tenets of a racist identity. He both rejects and



embraces death, constantly pivoting along various conceptualizations of death. Ultimately, there is no clear-cut anti-racist identity for Sugar.

In many ways, this is a difficult novel to investigate because everything — the history of racism, Nordan's autobiography, and the retrospective narration — is happening all at once. Sugar is both confronting death and ignoring death. He is both youthful and retrospective. In exploring the novel's portrayal of Sugar's racial identity alongside Nordan's autobiography, I was led to embrace the nuances of Sugar's coming-of-age in the novel. As I witnessed these nuances happening all at once, I embraced the notion of constant contradictions when overcoming a pre-determined identity. Just like the novel's narrator, Nordan struggled immensely with the racist history which defined his social standing in the South. As Nordan sometimes focuses too intently on Sugar's emotional state regarding his identity, he removes focus from the very history which led to emotional turbulence. Yet, this focus is, in some ways, prerequisite to the beginning stages of facing such a deep-rooted, ever-present trauma.

With these constant contradictions in mind, Nordan's novel — and the writing of white authors in general — must be investigated and re-evaluated in context of the country's racial history. With Morrison's study of American Africanism in mind, any novel which centralizes white identity should be subject to honest, discursive interrogation. A novel cannot exist in a vacuum, and it should not be separated from history — even when that history is placed in the periphery of the narrative. One must not glance over that peripheral presence, as the periphery is the very frame in which the narrative rests.

## 9. Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> In “The Critical Reception of Lewis Nordan,” Thomas Bjerre writes *Wolf Whistle* “won the Southern Book Award, the Mississippi Author’s Award for Fiction, an American Library Association Notable Book citation, and The Bloomsbury Review named it ‘one of the top 15 books of the past 15 years’. Not surprisingly the novel also gained Nordan a wider audience... *Wolf Whistle* is by far the novel that has attracted the most scholarly attention. So far, seven academic essays have dealt exclusively with that one novel, while several others have included *Wolf Whistle* alongside other Nordan novels” (Bjerre 924-925).

<sup>2</sup> According to Nordan’s autobiography, Nordan was born in 1939 in Forest, Mississippi and grew up in Itta Bena, Mississippi (Nordan 7).

<sup>3</sup> In an essay written by Nordan titled “Growing Up White in the South,” which was published at the end of *Wolf Whistle*, Nordan discusses how he came to write *Wolf Whistle* and how “In the early drafts of the novel, I kept all the remembered details — including Emmett’s real name” (Nordan 296). He explicitly discusses how “Emmett (Bobo, in the fiction) and his family are the moral, emotional, psychological, life-affirming core of this novel” (Nordan 297-298).

<sup>4</sup> Houk describes how Till’s mother, “Mamie Till Bradley sobbed, ‘someone is going to pay for this. The entire state of Mississippi is going to pay for this.’ What’s unclear in her statement is the all important referent. As Hugh Stephen Whitaker claims, Till Bradley was referring to her impending legal bills. Even so, the overwrought mother was also quoted in the DDT as stating, “It’s like walking into a den of snakes. They will do these things with hardly any provocation—they don’t even need provocation” (Houck 234). Essentially, White Southerners interpreted Till Bradley’s comments to be an offensive accusation against their identity.

<sup>5</sup> In the first part of the novel, the narrator mentions that while Gilbert was listening to “wrist-cutting music” he “jammed an ice pick straight into his breast bone” (Nordan 18). Near the end of the novel, Sugar also witnesses his father stabbing himself in the stomach with a butcher knife (Nordan 158).

<sup>6</sup> His short stories collection titled *Sugar Among the Freaks* (1996) comprises stories about Sugar which were originally published in the mid to early 1980s before Nordan wrote *Music of the Swamp*.

---

**10. Works Cited**

- Arbeit, Marcel. "Lies as the Structural Element in the Fiction of Lewis Nordan." *The Southern State of Mind*, Ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999, pp. 175–84.
- Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. Vintage International, 1993.
- Bjerre, Thomas Ærvold. "Shocked Into Maturity: Sex and Death as Initiation in the Fiction of Lewis Nordan." *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 4, Fall 2007, pp. 735-747.
- Bjerre, Thomas Ærvold. "The Critical Reception of Lewis Nordan." *Literature Compass*, vol. 7, no. 10, Jan. 2010, pp. 922-934.
- Carney, Mary. "Gothic Undercurrents in the Novels of Lewis Nordan." *The Southern Quarterly*, Spring. 2003, vol. 41, issue 3, pp. 78-84.
- Costello, Brannon. "Poor White Trash, Great White Hope: Race, Class, and the (De) Construction of Whiteness in Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2004, pp. 207-223.
- Dupuy, Edward J. "Memory, Death, the Delta, and St. Augustine: Autobiography in Lewis Nordan's *The Music of the Swamp*." *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1998, pp. 96-108.
- Houck, Davis W. "Killing Emmett." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2, Michigan State University Press, 2005, pp. 225–262.
- Howorth, Richard. Sugar's Buddy: An Introduction. *Sugar Among the Freaks*, by Lewis Nordan, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, Jan 1996, pp. vii-xvi.
- Ingram, Russel and Ledbetter, Mark. "An Interview with Lewis Nordan." *The Missouri Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, Oct. 2011, pp. 73–90.

---

Lott, Eric. "The Seeming Counterfeit": Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy."

*American Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 2, 1991, pp. 223-254.

Luttrell, Johanna C. *White People and Black Lives Matter: Ignorance, Empathy, and Justice*.

Springer, 2019.

McElwee, John and Chris Fowler. "A HOUSE OF CROSSED LOGS: Finding Lewis Nordan."

*Oxford American*, issue 92, April 2016. Accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

<https://main.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/826-a-house-of-crossed-logs>

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books,

1992.

Nicosia, James F. "Still I am not Sure What was Real and What My Mind Invented" The

Tradition of (Re)Creating the Past in Lewis Nordan's *The Music of the Swamp*." *Southern*

*Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1993, pp. 67-80.

Nordan, Lewis. *Boy With the Loaded Gun: A Memoir*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2000.

Nordan, Lewis. "Growing Up White in the South." *Wolf Whistle*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1993.

pp. 293–299.

Nordan, Lewis. *Music of the Swamp*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991.

Nordan, Lewis. *Sugar Among the Freaks*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1996.

Nordan, Lewis. *The Sharpshooter Blues*. Algonquin Books, 1997.

Nordan, Lewis. *Wolf Whistle*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1993.

Perkins, Bethany. "Not My Story to Write": Indirection, Southern Discourse, and the Elusive

Black Voice in Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*." *The Mississippi Quarterly* vol. 60, no. 4,

2007, pp. 697-712.

Steele, Shelby. "White Guilt." *The American Scholar*, vol. 59, no. 4, 1990, pp. 497–506.