

Redrawing the Color Line in Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person"

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IN THE CONCLUSION TO FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "THE DISPLACED PERSON," (1954) the "DP" in question, Mr. Guizac, is crushed by a runaway tractor as three bystanders, their eyes "froze[n] . . . in collusion forever" (234), passively watch the "accident" occur. I emphasize the word accident here because it is clear throughout the story, and unmistakable in its crescendo, that each of the story's characters, be they white or black, ultimately want the DP dead. What is unclear, however, is the motivation for such an emotion and in what ways the death of this Polish immigrant serves the small community's various interests. As the title of my essay suggests, I would like to propose that the answers to these questions may be found by locating O'Connor's story within the unprecedented volatility of the color line experienced in the postwar US, but most intensely in the South, as a result of the policies of Jim Crow—a system that radically unsettled rather than stabilized the concept and the attendant privileges of whiteness. At first glance this statement may seem somewhat peculiar, given that Jim Crow legislation had as its express purpose the maintenance of an apartheid system and a stable economy of difference that ensured the preservation of white social and biological purity from an adulterating black contaminant. Yet, as scholars such as Matthew Frye Jacobson and David Roediger have persuasively argued, one of the fundamental paradoxes of heightening the premium on race as color was that it systematically eroded the once salient differences between white races; in its attempt to draw a definitive color line separating monolithic white and black categories, Jim Crow unintentionally flung open the doors to the privileges of whiteness for a host of then distinctly raced immigrant groups such as Poles, Slavs, Saracens, Celts, Italians and Jews, who were decisively "whitened" by the logic of Jim Crow (Jacobson 96). Though the notion of white "races" seems counterintuitive to a contemporary reader, Jacobson argues that it only appears so because we have "transported a late twentieth-century understanding of 'difference' into a period whose inhabitants recognized biologically based 'races.'" In that former system of racial perception,

"one might be white and racially distinct from other whites" (6). Recovering this historical perspective, we see a curious paradox emerge from Jim Crow's attempt to prevent miscegenation between white and black races: it inadvertently created miscegenation between white ones.

Though native white Southerners had long lived within a society defined by the color line, the legacy of their plantation culture left them unprepared for the advent of what has been called the "partly colored races" (Foley 5).¹ While new immigrants overwhelmingly settled in the more prosperous urban centers of the North and West, the rural South remained somewhat cloistered from these consolidations of whiteness; however, at mid-century, the social and demographic changes wrought by the war economy quickly transported the problem of racial alchemy to the South's doorstep. During the first two years of the conflict alone the Bureau of Agricultural Economics recorded the loss of nearly three million agricultural workers, principally to the military and the industries which supported the war economy (Foley 205). In response, Congress passed legislation in 1943 and 1948 to relax strict immigration quotas and allow for the creation of guest worker programs that brought hundreds of thousands of Displaced Persons and Mexican braceros to work in the fields left vacant in the South. While exploiting this cheap global work force was a boon to the economically depressed South, these immigrants presented an insoluble problem to the polarized Southern racial order which was unable to parse the social positions of these "not non-whites."² Though their phenotypes allowed them to construct the white identity that Jim Crow solidified as the key to privilege, the immigrant's "foreign blood," language, and racial stigma simultaneously threatened that privilege by flagrantly suggesting a hybrid or amalgamated whiteness. And more troubling still was that these aspects of the immigrant's otherness were not discernible with the visual logic that sustained Jim Crow, which relied on distinct physiognomic features or skin color to perceive difference and establish hierarchy—a fact which rendered the "whitened" immigrant essentially invisible to the Southern regime of racial discipline.

Southern letters have previously engaged the problems of transnational white identity, often figuring the recently arrived immigrant as a "second color menace" whose white-but-not-white person exposes the era's racial transience and registers as a new and more troubling kind of miscegenation.³ One particularly salient example comes in the form of Joe Christmas from William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932): as an orphan of uncertain parentage and racial composition, Joe Christmas lives his life haunted by the (ambiguous) specter of his (possible) miscegenation and becomes a singular frustration for the Southern community and its collective effort to apply categorical racial thinking to his person. Though Christmas' "parchment colored skin" is ultimately ambiguous, he is alternately considered to be white and black—but also potentially "Mexican" (377) or an Italian "wop" (225). Faulkner's text presents the Mexican and Italian as racial types, but ones which bear an uncertain and disconcerting relationship to whiteness. In the decades following the publication of Faulkner's novel, this peculiar anxiety

¹ The term was first used in 1930 by sociologist Max Handman in reference to America's Mexican immigrants. He concludes that American society had "no social technique for handling partly colored races. We have a place for the Negro and a place for the white man: the Mexican is not a Negro, and the white man refuses him an equal status" (609-10). More recent inquiries into this problem may be found in the work of Neil Foley, who also examines how Mexicans "[rupture] the black-white polarity of southern race relations," (5) and Leslie Bow, who examines the "racial interstitiality" of Asians in the Jim Crow South.

² The term "not non-whites" is from David Roediger's chapter entitled "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the 'New-Immigrant' Working Class" in *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*.

³ The term "second color menace" is from Neil Foley's second chapter in *The White Scourge* entitled "'The Little Brown Man in Gringo Land': The Second Color Menace in the Western South." See also Randy Boyogoda's *Race, Immigration, and American Identity*.

about white identity reached a point of crisis as America in general, and the South in particular, struggled with the revelations of the Holocaust and the uncomfortable homologies between Nazi Germany and the postwar, Jim Crow South.⁴ O'Connor's narrative, with its frequent, obtrusive allusions to the Holocaust (ovens, boxcars, camps and mass graves appear as striking images) is exemplary of this anxiety. As I read it, the native whites' anxiety about the Displaced Person in O'Connor's story is almost wholly constituted by the frustrated attempt to fit him into the conceptual schema of Jim Crow: though he initially facilitates a fantasy of displacing all of the "Negroes," thus purifying the community of its unwanted black elements, as the story progresses the Pole's "racial inbetween-ness" becomes a far more dangerous threat as he draws attention to a heterogeneous whiteness, disturbing the very system of difference that governs the social order and secures color-based privilege. Presented with these paradoxically white others, the power of Jim Crow to create and enforce racial distinctions along a strict binary was dramatically challenged; as a result, the monolithic whiteness articulated by Jim Crow was beset by incoherence, as were the identities based upon it. This problem is suggested in the text by the frequent experience of corporeal fissuring or fragmentation of the farm's white characters. The text, then, literalizes the loss of racial integrity that the immigrant represents, exposing the autonomous and unified self of Jim Crow as a delusion.⁵ Ultimately, however, the other members of the Southern farming community are unable to contain the conceptual instability the DP begets; they collectively begin to view him as "extra," or "not fitting in," (225) even as "upsetting the balance" (231) of their racial economy.⁶ Unable to assimilate the DP to their social and economic hierarchy, nor contain his disruptive suggestion of a miscegenated whiteness, the community adopts a kind of "final solution" designed to rid themselves of his problematic presence and reinscribe the familiar color line of their racial order.

I. Knowing Colors

The first instance of dialogue in the story is revealing. As Mrs. McIntyre, the farm's owner, and Mrs. Shortley, her employee, prepare for the arrival of the DPs, they adorn the windows of a small shack with curtains fashioned from red and green chicken sacks. Perhaps inspired by the mismatched colors of the curtains, Mrs. Shortley suggestively asks her companion, "You reckon they know what colors is?" While this question is intended to excuse the embarrassing lack of Southern hospitality provided by the shack's decidedly ad hoc décor, it additionally suggests an anxiety about how the members of the immigrant family will fit into the color scheme of the Jim Crow South. To not know color, of course, would be to fundamentally misunderstand the entire history of the South and its legacy—a complicated matrix of economic and social privilege divided unequally along the color line. Mulling over her own question, and imagining individuals living beyond the controls of Jim Crow, causes Mrs. Shortley to recall

⁴ In his recent book, *The Fourth Ghost*, Robert Brinkmeyer demonstrates how the horrors of the Holocaust and fascism effected a profound demystification of Southern racial ideology. He argues that the "South's system of racial segregation, together with its one-party political system, including its enforcement of widespread voting restrictions, came under intense scrutiny, the benighted South looking a good deal more benighted in the context of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany" (3). There are several other studies that specifically address the Southern reaction to European fascism or compare the Jim Crow South to the Third Reich. See Elkins, Myrdal and Scales-Trent.

⁵ This fragmentation is echoed in the Nordacist and eugenicist writings of the day. One Nordacist wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post* that the deluge of inferior whites flooding America would produce "a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good for nothing mongrels of Central American and Southeastern Europe." And a "hybridized people," wrote the eugenicist Charles Benedict Davenport, were "a badly put together people" (qtd. in Foley 53).

⁶ Yet another way to explain why the immigrant doesn't "fit in" is the paradox he generates as a subject of both white supremacist and white nativist discourses. To the extent that the immigrant was a "foreign element" who was nevertheless white, he threatened a closely allied project of white nativism: while the "logic" of Jim Crow demanded that the immigrant be viewed as a consanguine white leagued against a black "Other," nativism insisted that he be viewed as a foreigner who must be denied the whiteness that had long been synonymous with being an American. The immigrant, therefore, draws two formerly allied discourses—white nativism and white supremacism—into conceptual opposition, producing a paradox whereby both discourses mutually negate each other as they vie for dominance in the articulation of what the immigrant's "whiteness" truly means.

a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing. [. . .] Mrs. Shortley had the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks, like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place. (196)

Mrs. Shortley associates the possibility of the immigrants' ignorance of color with documentary footage from a liberated Nazi concentration camp—a Holocaust vision of corporeal fragmentation which inspires a confused fear of disease or pollution. Though initially appearing as a bizarre non sequitur, the film's black-and-white images constellate sex with death and a loss of corporeal integrity, making it an apt objective correlative for the much-feared miscegenation that threatened to transform the purity and wholeness of the collective white Southern body into a pile of mixed, anonymous racial fractions. The monstrous sexuality of these "naked" bodies, "thrust[ing]" "in a heap," their "arms and legs tangled together," exposing genitals that "should have been covered up," clearly expose a pronounced Southern fear of taboo sexual relations and the amalgamated bodies that result. Wrenching the Holocaust image free of its context, Mrs. Shortley is able to foresee her white Southern community as victims of racial extinction, not through genocide, but through the effects of miscegenation with the immigrant body. Significantly, even Mrs. Shortley's absurd anglicization of "Guizac" into "Gobblehook" compactly expresses a fear that incorporation is fragmentation.⁷

II. Racial Contamination

That Mrs. Shortley imagines the immigrant family in terms of filth or disease further suggests the violation of a symbolic system of race purity. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, the concept of "dirt" is a wholly culturally constructed idea that serves as an indicator of the presence of ideologies or systems of power. She maintains that our "dirt avoidance" is not rooted in fear of disease but is, instead, a manner in which cultural distinction, social order, and social categorization or hierarchy are achieved. "Where there is dirt," she argues, "there is a system":

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. . . . It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. . . . Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity. (35)

If dirt is merely "matter out of place" then the Displaced Person cannot help but become the filth of the Southern community.⁸ Indeed, when Mrs. Shortley defines the term "Displaced Person" for the bewildered Negroes she explains that it "means they ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go"

⁷ In addition to the passages I analyze in this essay, there are several additional depictions of fragmented bodies within the story. In a prophetic vision which seems to foretell her own death, Mrs. Shortley sees a future where the "children of wicked nations will be butchered . . . Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of hand. Who will remain whole?" (210). Later, while in the midst of her own death throes, Mrs. Shortley "grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself. . . . She thrashed forward and backward, clutching at everything she could get her hands on and hugging it to herself, Mr. Shortley's head, Sarah Mae's leg, the cat, a wad of white bedding, her own big moon-like knee . . ." (213). While in a conversation with her black laborer, Astor, Mrs. McIntyre sees "Bars of sunlight [fall] from the cracked ceiling across his back and cut him in three distinct parts" (214). Mr. Shortley, while exiting a barn, pauses "half in the sunlight and half out" (217). The angel which adorned the Judge's grave had been hacked off by a disgruntled employee and stolen, taking "all but its toes" (221). Finally, moments before his death, Mr. Guizac is viewed by his employer from a distance as he repairs a tractor: "[Mrs. McIntyre] could not see his face, only his feet and legs and trunk sticking impudently out from the side of the tractor" (234).

⁸ On this subject, see chapter three of Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire*.

(199). Douglas argues that any object, people or ideas—any experience of alterity—that confuse or contravene a specific culture’s foundational ideas and sacred classifications are deemed “dirty” and thus create a hierarchy. Viewed in this light, Mrs. Shortley’s “sudden intuition” that the “Gobblehooks” are the carriers of a disease clearly emerges from a threatened disintegration of her “ordered relations” and the desire to reject or eliminate foreign bodies from the white Southern communal one. Just like the fleas which spread typhoid through the incorporation of contaminated and healthy blood, so the foreigners may corrupt the purity of the white race of which she claims membership. Yet, when the immigrants finally do arrive at the farm, Mrs. Shortley’s attempt to project her fears of miscegenation onto them is frustrated, as their bodies are visually indistinguishable from the other whites in the community. Though she does initially attempt to view them in the terms established by the cinematic lens of the newsreel—her vision “narrow[ing] on the [DP] and then widen[ing] to include the woman and the children in a group picture”—all she is able to see is that “the woman had on a dress that she might have worn herself” and the children were “dressed like anybody from around.” Even the DP himself “had on khaki pants and a blue shirt” (195). While the newsreel’s focus was on grotesque, naked bodies and fears of racial contamination, Mrs. Shortley’s perceptions of the Guizacs are noticeably disembodied, fixating instead on the familiar, mass-produced clothing that further signifies their similarity to “anybody from around.” The only differences that Mrs. Shortley is able to observe about the Guizacs though this encounter is that the immigrants speak little English and have names like “Sledgewig” that sound “like something you would name a bug, or vice versa” (195); yet, these differences are incorporeal and serve to illustrate the failure of Jim Crow to establish categorical difference and hierarchy without salient corporeal markers of race. Unable to see the Guizacs as the abject harbingers of disease or racial contamination she had imagined, Mrs. Shortley is forced, through the binary logic of Jim Crow, to view them as consanguine whites leagued against a black “other.” If the DPs do not serve to pollute whiteness, she reasons, they may actually serve to concentrate it through the elimination of the South’s traditional “others.” This thought is amplified into something of a messianic fantasy moments later when one of the farm’s remaining peacocks unfurls its multicolored tail from a tree near Mrs. Shortley. Though the bird’s tail is “full of fierce green planets” and has eyes “ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second’s light and salmon-colored in the next,” Mrs. Shortley views it with “unseeing eyes.” Instead, she experiences an “inner vision” where she sees “ten million billion [Displaced Persons] pushing their way into new places over here and herself, a giant angel with wings as wide as a house, telling the Negroes that they would have to find another place” (200). Significantly, Mrs. Shortley’s vision tacitly acknowledges the process through which formerly “colored” immigrants gained access to whiteness through their perceived opposition to blacks in an American racial schema defined by Jim Crow.⁹ Though the text connects the shifting, mixed hues of the peacock’s tail “full of . . . planets” with the alien Guizac—subtly

⁹ Perhaps the earliest, and best, statement on this observation is James Baldwin’s essay “On Being White . . . And Other Lies” (1984). Within the field of Whiteness Studies, David Roediger’s *Working Toward Whiteness* (2005) examines this historical process in great detail.

suggesting Guizac is a threat to the racial integrity of the white community—it also makes clear the inability of Mrs. Shortley to see him in these terms. The blind eye that Mrs. Shortley casts upon the bird's multicolored tail foreshadows the degree to which the native whites will be frustrated in the endeavor to see a difference between the immigrant and themselves due to a system of racial apprehension and classification invested in the visual economy of Jim Crow. Emboldened by her vision of a displaced black population, Mrs. Shortley assumes the mantle of a prophet, heralding to the farm's black laborers her vision of their elimination from the community. Seeking out Astor and Sulk in the cow lot, she thinks about "how the tractor had made mules worthless. Nowadays," she considers, "you couldn't give away a mule. The next thing to go, she reminded herself, will be the niggers" (205). Addressing Astor and Sulk, she states, "All you colored people better look out . . . You know how much you can get for a mule. . . . Before it was a tractor," she said, "it could be a mule. And before it was a Displaced Person, it could be a nigger" (205-06). Likening the Guizacs to the forces of the New South economy, which were rapidly erasing the South's agrarian past, Mrs. Shortley fantasizes about the day when waves of immigration would obviate the need for black laborers, eventually creating a time "when it won't be no occasion to speak of a nigger" (205-06).

III.

Fear of Miscegenation

Mr. Guizac's reckless disregard for racial distinctions and social distance, however, quickly turn Mrs. Shortley's fantasy into a nightmare. Though Mr. Shortley prefers to tap the Negroes on the shoulder with his shovel as a form of greeting, Mr. Guizac actually shakes the hands of his coworkers, "like he might have been as black as them." Initially this behavior is tolerated because the immigrant "don't know any better," (209) but when Mrs. McIntyre discovers Sulk lasciviously fondling a small photograph of Guizac's cousin, an innocent young girl "in a white dress," her worst possible fears are realized: Mr. Guizac has pledged to intermarry his family with the Negroes. Although the Southern racial regime would view this relationship as intolerable and impossible, Guizac simply claims that his cousin "no care black" (222). Guizac's disregard for the color line creates what Neil Foley describes as the immigrant "back door" (63) to whiteness through which blacks who (putatively) desired to improve their color could enter into whiteness, thus defiling the purity of the white Southern community and producing progeny who could slip back and forth across the color line undetected, defying social controls. Upon learning of his intentions, Mrs. McIntyre marches out to the fields in order to lecture Guizac, exclaiming "You would bring this poor innocent child over here and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger! What kind of monster are you!" As she awaits his response to what clearly is not a question but an exclamation of discovery, Mrs. McIntyre

looked at him as if she were seeing him for the first time. His forehead and skull were white where they had been protected by his cap but the rest of his face was red and

bristled with short yellow hairs. [. . .] His whole face looked as if it might have been patched together out of several others. "Mr. Guizac, that nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can't talk to a nigger that way. You'll excite him and besides it can't be done. [. . .] I cannot run this place without my niggers. I can run it without you but not without them. [. . .] Do you understand?" The patched face did not say.¹⁰ (222-23)

In this curious passage Mrs. McIntyre begins to experience a shift in her visual perceptions of the DP's whiteness. Simultaneously as she insists that Guizac and his family are whites and, therefore, prohibited from marrying blacks, Guizac's visage appears to change before her very eyes, allowing her to see him "as if for the first time." Though his "forehead and skull" appear "white," his "red" "face," "bristl[ing] with short yellow hairs," offer the suggestion of racial impurities. And though in the end she maintains that the marriage "can't be done," the logic of her position—based on the visual economy of the color line—is disrupted by the immigrant's apparently miscegenated body which now appears "patched together out of several others."

IV.

Desire for an Uncomplicated "Other"

Mrs. McIntyre's final caustic remark that she "cannot run this place without [her] niggers" suggests that the farm's blacks aren't incidental but rather indispensable to the operation of her farm; however, this statement is in direct contradiction to the remarks she had earlier given to the priest about the cost savings the DP brings to her farm and his superiority to her native black and white workers. I would like to suggest that the sudden necessity of Negroes stems from the turbulence the immigrant has begun to initiate in the color line, as his white-but-not-white body destabilizes a putatively monolithic whiteness and threatens an erosion of color-based methods of identity formation. While the distinct phenotypes of the farm's black laborers facilitate the creation and consolidation of white identity, the immigrant's uncanny physique denies contrast, thus troubling attempts to make out the differences between "us" and "them." Or, as Mr. Shortley explains the problem to Sulk:

"If I was going to travel again, it would be to either China or Africa. You go to either of them two places and you can tell right away what the differences is between you and them. You go to these other places and the only way you can tell is if they say something. And then you can't always tell because about half of them know the English language. That's where we make our mistake," he said, "—letting all them people onto English. There'd be a heap less trouble if everybody only knew his own language." (233)

Unlike the white South's black "others," the possibility for inadvertent racial mixing was greatly increased in the case of these European immigrants whose "difference" is merely cultural or linguistic, and therefore invisible. Mr. Shortley's fantasy of travel to foreign locales signals his anxiety about the erosion of difference at home; the stable white identity that is constituted over and against

¹⁰ Guizac's seemingly progressive attitude about an arranged marriage of his sixteen-year-old cousin with a black farmhand may be explained as an act of desperation designed to expedite the relocation of his family from the DP camps in Europe to the US. After all, Guizac does explain that his cousin has lived through a war, lost both her mother and father, and presently waits alone in a DP camp for an opportunity to join him in America. However, as a Pole who experienced the Nazi invasion in 1939 (ironically named "Fall Weiß," or "Case White"), Guizac likely saw first-hand how truly destructive Nazi racial thinking was, an experience which may have resulted in a disinclination to consider race purity or superiority in his dealings with his new countrymen in America. In addition to being witness to the horrors of ethnic cleansing, summary execution, slave labor, and concentration camps which Poles were subjected to by the Nazis after the invasion, Mr. Guizac would have additionally experienced the *Polenerlasse*, or Polish directives, which articulated a race-based apartheid system bearing profound similarities to the Jim Crow system in the US South. As Ulrich Herbert documents in his *Hitler's Foreign Workers* (1997), the *Polenerlasse* created strict regulations designed to limit how Poles could participate in the "cultural life" of Germany. The directives barred Poles from entering "places of amusement," such as restaurants or theaters, and restricted the use of public transportation. Failing to obey these directives carried the harsh penalty of being sent to a forced labor camp, there to toil in agricultural production or the war-related industries. The most severe penalties, however, were reserved for directives designed to eliminate racial contamination between Poles and Germans: "Sexual intercourse with a German woman or man, or indecent advances toward them," the directives read, "is punishable by death" (qtd. in Herbert 73). As Herbert concludes, the decrees "were interested not so much in effective [economic] deployment of Poles as in a codification of [Nazi] superiority over them as the 'master race'" (71).

the black body finds it impossible to reach the same cohesion with the Polish immigrant. Unable to place his finger on exactly what makes the DP different, Mr. Shortley begins to desire solidarity with his black counterpart and even appears to long for an even more basic encounter with a conceptually uncomplicated and conspicuously raced "other"—someone from Africa or China—in order to re-establish a trustworthy system of difference and therefore secure his own racial identity.

V.

A Conspiracy of Silence

Mr. Shortley's desire that language serve as an indicator of race and a bulwark against miscegenation is suggestively revealed by his unintended double entendre on the word "knew." Taking the word in the biblical sense, Mr. Shortley's wish that "everybody only knew his own language" expresses a desire that no mixing occur outside of one's "own" kind. Moreover, his feeling that they would be in a "heap less trouble" if white foreigners couldn't speak English suggestively recalls Mrs. Shortley's vision of bodies "piled in a heap" and her subsequent one of a "war of words" fought between the Polish and English languages:

She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel (209).

Both Shortleys' response to language appears conditioned by Jim Crow and suggestively reveals the difficulty in establishing their difference from the DP with the conceptual tools provided by their Southern racial ideology. Mrs. Shortley makes words flesh, fearing the contamination—even death—of the anthropomorphized "clean" English language at the hands of the "dirty" Polish words; Mr. Shortley, on the other hand, fears the foreigner who speaks fluent English, and is therefore invisibly different to himself, an impossible-to-recognize "other" who only passes as the same. Mr. Shortley, with his desire that "everybody only knew their own language," fantasizes about making an invisible, evanescent language an inviolable marker of difference; and Mrs. Shortley's war of words attempts to resolve language's invisibility by actually giving it a body subject to the controls of the color line. But, in the end, neither course of action is feasible, which is why when the brake on the tractor slips high on the hill above the DP one cold morning, no one says a word. As the tractor speeds down the hill, "calculating its own path," the "Negro jump[ed] silently out of the way," Mr. Shortley "turn[ed] his head with incredible slowness . . . star[ing] silently over his shoulder," and Mrs. McIntyre "started to shout to the Displaced Person but . . . [did] not" (234).

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