

ON FLYING MULES AND THE SOUTHERN CABALA: FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND JAMES BALDWIN IN GEORGIA

I believe that the truth of any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different readings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts of the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after.

—Alice Walker, “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O’Connor”<sup>1</sup>

**I**N a letter often quoted by scholars, Flannery O’Connor responds to her friend Maryat Lee, a social activist and playwright living in New York, who wants to set up a meeting between O’Connor and James Baldwin:

No I can't see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on — it's only fair. Might as well expect a mule to fly as me to see James Baldwin in Georgia. (April 25, 1959, *CW* 1094-95)

Although in 1959 Flannery O’Connor refused to meet James Baldwin in Georgia, her keen moral observations of southern manners, especially as they play out in relationships of power based on race, gender, and class, are oddly similar to his. By declining Lee’s invitation, O’Connor shows herself to be bound to the manners of her cultural environment at a particular moment in history. O’Connor and Baldwin produced much of their major work in the years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), when the old southern manners, ritualized under segregation, were under siege. “At such a moment,” writes Baldwin in “Faulkner and Desegregation” (1956), “one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew; to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed” (*CE* 209). Both authors were thus witness to white Southerners’ nostalgia for the past and panic for the future at this moment of change, which involved, in Baldwin’s words, “the breakup of the world” as they had always known it (*CE* 209). At the end of O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Julian, an adult son still living at home, lashes out in exasperation at his old-fashioned mother: “The old world is gone.” Julian sees himself as progressive on racial issues and seeks to distance himself from his mother’s worldview: “The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn” (*CW* 499). In

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*REN* 65.5 (Fall 2013)

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a rare interview O'Connor reluctantly consented to in June 1963, she confirms the value of southern manners: in the past they provided the formal structure and "social discipline" necessary under segregation for blacks and whites to interact harmoniously and extend to each other both "privacy" and "charity." According to O'Connor, a new set of manners will have to be developed to serve a similar function in the changing social landscape, and she notes that manners can never be legislated by a committee; they have to be worked out slowly over time among the people.<sup>2</sup>

Baldwin's commentary about white Southerners seems to describe many of O'Connor's fictional characters, as well as the society into which she was born and in which she remained immersed. "I talked to many Southern liberals," Baldwin writes at the end of his essay "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South" (first published in 1959, the same year O'Connor wrote her letter), "who were doing their best to bring integration about in the South, but met scarcely a single Southerner who did not weep for the passing of the old order" (*CE* 207-08). Given that O'Connor was living among those very people, white Southerners who were weeping for that old order, it is understandable that she would hesitate to entertain Baldwin in Georgia. The idea of her hosting him there would be seen as a scandalous crossing of social boundaries. "It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion." In O'Connor's mind, Lee, with a similar southern upbringing, should know better than to suggest such an impossible meeting. O'Connor responds with some humor to what she perceives as Lee's willful naïveté by turning to the southern figure of speech, "when mules fly," akin to the more familiar "when pigs fly." The mule, a famously stubborn creature, is known for planting its feet and refusing to move, and Lee expects it to fly? Lee is asking O'Connor to ignore the social realities of her time and place, to commit a taboo, and O'Connor plants her own feet and refuses. In O'Connor's words, she "feeds" on the people of her town — Milledgeville — as source material for her fictional characters, so she does not want to show ingratitude by disrespecting their manners. "It's only fair," she writes about this implied contract. Yet, at heart she's protecting herself. Already no doubt viewed as strange, even dangerous, by those locals who have bothered to read her work, O'Connor is the one who would suffer should she break the code and receive Baldwin as a visitor.<sup>3</sup>

O'Connor only declined to meet him in Georgia, however, not in general; she states in her letter she would see him in New York. A code of manners, like the grammar of a given language, changes with time and place.<sup>4</sup>

EACH writer approached the concept of the South from a different geographical and philosophical perspective. Baldwin, a Harlem native and cosmopolitan through his travels, made forays into the South; O'Connor, a Georgian native and cosmopolitan through her correspondence, made forays into the North. Baldwin's stepfather was raised in New Orleans, and he as a young adult joined the Great Migration. The young Baldwin, growing up the oldest of nine children in a poor family in Harlem, heard grisly stories of violence about the South from his father and paternal grandmother. Baldwin fled to Paris in the late forties to escape the stifling racism he experienced in New York. After nine years of living in France, where he was inspired by the notion of the politically engaged writer, he returned home in July 1957 to participate in the growing civil rights movement. In the late fifties and early sixties, Baldwin was commissioned to tour the Deep South and write about what he witnessed.<sup>5</sup> He interviewed a range of black people participating in the demonstrations, including children and college students, as well as white people who resisted the concept of integration. "If it was an opportunity to witness the foundation of a new South," his biographer James Campbell writes, "it was also a last chance to see the old" (118). By Baldwin's own account he approaches the South as a foreigner, or returning son of an emigrant, and studies its social codes as an outsider would, as an anthropologist or a journalist.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast O'Connor, "heir to the respect accorded one of Milledgeville's founding families" (Gordon 26), had every intention of leaving the South as an adult. After completing her graduate studies in Iowa, she lived for several years in the North, first in New York City and then Connecticut, but her diagnosis of lupus forced her to return in 1951 to live in her native Georgia under the protective wing of her mother. As Brad Gooch observes in his 2009 biography *Flannery*, "she had returned to settle in a society predicated on segregation and had taken on its charged voices and manners as the setting of her fiction" (332). Her two volumes of short stories make up an elaborate set of notes — what we might call *Notes of a Native Daughter*, an insider's satirical guide to southern manners. "She was able to probe the code of manners," writes Margaret Whitt, "with the objectivity of an outsider and the subjective assumptions of an insider" (158). From such a position, O'Connor observed the way her own family members, especially her mother, spoke to and interacted with those with less social power, the hired help on Andalusia farm, for instance, both black and white.

However different their relationships to the South, Baldwin and O'Connor critique southern culture similarly: they both see what Matthew Day calls its "foul underbelly" — the threat of violence that underlies the southern code of manners. O'Connor as white native daughter could in her

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everyday life pass for someone who obeyed the code, whereas Baldwin in his travels south was always at risk. Yet, they were both masters of observing relationships of power in everyday social situations, and they could therefore see that the politics behind southern manners was potentially more dangerous than anything they could control as individuals. Thus, while Baldwin might feel insulted that O'Connor refused to receive him in Georgia, he might also agree with her that he should not go to Milledgeville, for reasons they both repeatedly illustrate in their fiction.

Because of their obvious biographical differences, Baldwin and O'Connor are rarely discussed or written about as a pair. Rarely do they appear together on a college syllabus. Our reluctance as twenty-first century readers to detect a shared vision between the two writers unwittingly reproduces or perpetuates the culture that made O'Connor turn down meeting Baldwin in the first place. Many O'Connor scholars have productively quoted O'Connor's letter to Lee announcing her refusal to meet Baldwin (most often to examine O'Connor's personal attitudes toward race),<sup>7</sup> but no one to my knowledge has reflected extensively on the large cultural context and meaning of their missed encounter. Going against the grain of O'Connor scholarship, I hope in this paper to put O'Connor and Baldwin in dialogue, to have them, after more than fifty years, finally meet.<sup>8</sup> Reading their essays, stories, and letters side by side is one action we can take now to counter-act O'Connor's refusal to meet him in 1959. To that end, and with the aim of being suggestive rather than comprehensive, I will examine some of Baldwin's prose writings, primarily those that draw on his first southern tours (1957-1963), next to O'Connor's stories "The Displaced Person" (1954) and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961).

Regarding my method, it is important to acknowledge that O'Connor, a devout Catholic, claims in her essays and correspondence that she is interested in probing social manners in order to get at something deeper and more universal, the Christian mystery that underlies all human experience. For the purposes of this paper, however, I put on hold O'Connor's own eloquent views on how to interpret her fiction — her vision as a writer that the Christian "mystery" takes priority over human manners — in order to highlight O'Connor's gift for exposing relationships of power at a particular moment in history: the point when segregation is coming to an end.<sup>9</sup>

Baldwin, an emerging activist in the civil rights movement from the North, and O'Connor, a social conservative from the South, confront the southern code of manners — the southern "cabala," in Baldwin's words — from radically different subject positions, yet they both arrive at similar conclusions about its formidable power, pathos, and potential to incite violence.

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**B**ALDWIN, like O'Connor, is aware of the violence ready to explode just below the surface of the most ordinary social interactions when anyone, black or white, fails to follow the code of southern manners. He also recognizes the tense, eerie nature of personal encounters even when blacks, who risk most if they fumble, *do* follow the code. Black men, in particular, must stay on high alert.

In May of 1960, on assignment for *Mademoiselle*, the thirty-six-year-old Baldwin traveled to Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University to interview black college students organizing a sit-in movement. In the following scene, which appears at the start of "They Can't Turn Back," Baldwin describes the encounter he witnessed upon arriving at the airport:

I am the only Negro passenger at Tallahassee's shambles of an airport. It is an oppressively sunny day. A black chauffeur, leading a small dog on a leash, is meeting his white employer. He is attentive to the dog, covertly very aware of me and respectful of her in a curiously watchful, waiting way. She is middle-aged, beaming and powdery-faced, delighted to see both the beings who make her life agreeable. I am sure that it has never occurred to her that either of them has the ability to judge her or would judge her harshly. She might almost, as she goes toward her chauffeur, be greeting a friend. No friend could make her face brighter. (*CE* 622)

Nothing could be more ordinary than this airport scene of a returning passenger who smiles brightly in greeting. The atmosphere, however, feels menacing as Baldwin is made aware of the watchfulness of the black chauffeur. His boss, "beaming and powdery-faced" (she could easily appear in an O'Connor story), approaches the chauffeur as a friend, but in fact she could fire him at any time. Baldwin uses restrained language — "I am sure that it has never occurred to her" — to broadcast her apparent lack of awareness of this social reality. With her greater social power, she has the luxury of feeling relaxed in this scene, whereas the servant must remain vigilant.

The chauffeur is also "covertly" aware of another suspect, Baldwin himself. The chauffeur would have reason to believe that Baldwin, the only black passenger at the airport, is an outsider, a northern liberal, for example, with progressive ideas about race. Should Baldwin intervene as a participant in the unfolding scene (which he does not do), he would potentially compromise the chauffeur's personal safety. Even the dog seems eerily significant, as if the leash he's on extends to the chauffeur. In the details of this tableau, Baldwin captures the core ideology of southern paternalism, a kind of colonial spirit exhibited in the master/servant relationship where the master treats the servant as a pet or child.

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Baldwin then shifts into a hypothetical situation as he imagines himself responding as someone naturally would to the woman's friendly demeanor:

If she were smiling at me that way I would expect to shake her hand. But if I should put out my hand, panic, bafflement, and horror would then overtake that face, the atmosphere would darken, and danger, even the threat of death, would immediately fill the air. (*CE* 622)

Here Baldwin imagines himself as someone who does not know how to interpret the politics of a smile and keep the proper social distance from a superior. How deadly his breach of etiquette could be. By contrast, the chauffeur knows to watch himself; he is a black man in the presence of a white lady, his boss, and a friendly handshake is out of the question. It would cause "panic, bafflement and horror," Baldwin speculates, just as O'Connor imagines in her letter "the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion" were she to greet Baldwin at her house.

Baldwin continues to reflect on the complex politics of this scene:

On such small signs and symbols does the Southern cabala depend, and that is why I find the South so eerie and exhausting. This system of signs and nuances covers the mined terrain of the unspoken — the forever unspeakable — and everyone in the region knows his way across this field. This knowledge that a gesture can blow up a town is what the South refers to when it speaks of its "folkways." The fact that the gesture is not made is what the South calls "excellent race relations." It is impossible for any Northern Negro to become an adept of this mystery. (*CE* 622)

"Everyone in the region," Baldwin writes, "knows his way across this field." O'Connor is that native daughter who, in her fiction, captures spot-on the "small signs and symbols" that regulate southern race relations. Through her characters Astor and Sulk (in "The Displaced Person") and Morgan and Randall (in "The Enduring Chill"), she realistically dramatizes the vigilance southern black men are required to observe in the presence of white people. Morgan and Randall, for example, when speaking to Asbury, the son of their white lady boss, refuse to look him in the eye out of deference: "When they said anything to him, it was as if they were speaking to an invisible body located to the right or left of where he actually was" (*CW* 558). In this one sentence, Day writes, "O'Connor reveals a world where black men receive death sentences simply for looking white men in the eyes. She has . . . discerned the awful legacy of slavery and

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the gothic complexity of southern culture in the pattern of this isolated exchange" (137).

Baldwin in his passage gives a first-person account from the perspective of a black male Northerner: southern manners are collective, coded, and political, a baffling and secretive "cabala" designed to exclude outsiders. In writing as that outsider about his travels across the South, Baldwin examines his internal process, one of coming up with little fictions as a way of keeping vigilance: he must constantly imagine what would happen if he made that wrong gesture or said that wrong word. Baldwin invents these "what if" scenarios ("If I should put out my hand . . .") as a survival strategy; the little stories he tells himself are matters of life and death. To apply a title of an O'Connor story to Baldwin's situation, "the life he saves may be his own." Figuring out the code is exhausting, especially for an outsider. What appears to be a friendly gesture may not be; a transgression of the code could, in Baldwin's words, "blow up a town."

Remaining mostly measured in tone, Baldwin lets loose some sly sarcasm by the end of this passage to cut through the euphemisms he's heard southern whites use ("folkways," "excellent race relations") to describe how white Southerners deny the social power they hold over blacks even in everyday encounters. In public statements O'Connor herself uses such positive language to describe southern manners. In the 1963 interview when she was asked to speak about race relations, she discusses the value of a "common code of manners," which provides the formality, social discipline and privacy necessary for "two races to live together." Both writers understand the double-edged sword of paternalism under segregation: it both protects and controls. Baldwin, however, would challenge O'Connor's focus on the positive value of such a code — it protects the privacy of each race — to emphasize, with angry clarity, that the code also controls black people through the unrelenting threat of violence.

Regarding O'Connor's refusal to meet Baldwin in Georgia, I suspect Baldwin would judge O'Connor harshly (just as he implicitly does the white lady at the Tallahassee airport), recognizing her decision as a familiar form of paternalism, a sign that she is taking part in this mysterious "cabala." In O'Connor's own eyes, and in the eyes of her community, she may simply be practicing good race relations.

WE can imagine Baldwin's airport scene in "They Can't Turn Back" side by side with the opening scene in O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," where the Polish Mr. Guizac first greets the American landowner Mrs. McIntyre. In his essay Baldwin merely hints at the violent outcome should someone transgress the code, whereas in her story O'Connor makes

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the violence explicit.<sup>10</sup> Baldwin, unfamiliar with the everyday reality of segregation in the South, creates fictions in his prose as a survival strategy. O'Connor, familiar with the everyday reality of segregation, creates fiction as a cautionary tale.

In "The Displaced Person" (1954), described by Gooch as "an ambitious tale of manners and race" (244), O'Connor dramatizes the predicament of the outsider to southern manners who faces grave consequences should he break the code. Although the victim of violence in this parable is not black, the taboo he crosses is at heart a racial taboo, like the "forever unspeakable" in Baldwin's airport scene. Mr. Guizac, a Polish emigrant displaced by the war, arrives with his family to work for Mrs. McIntyre, a white, southern, middle-aged landowner, twice widowed and once divorced, who runs a dairy farm. Mrs. McIntyre has other long-term farm hands, a white itinerant couple, Mr. and Mrs. Shortley, and two black workers, Astor and Sulk. Mr. Guizac is that foreigner who, unversed in the "system of signs and nuances" of the southern cabala, does not know his way across the "mined terrain" of the southern landscape.

Early in the story, for example, Mr. Guizac witnesses Sulk steal a turkey from Mrs. McIntyre and reports it to her. When Mrs. McIntyre takes no action, Mr. Guizac is so upset that Mrs. McIntyre has to enlist Mr. Guizac's son to translate for him. The other workers, who have never before encountered a foreigner or heard a foreign language, witness the scene of translation. "All Negroes steal," Mrs. McIntyre announces confidently. The fact that Mrs. McIntyre allows Sulk to steal from her reflects her paternalistic stereotypes about her black workers as lazy and shiftless.

The other workers view Mr. Guizac with both curiosity and suspicion and objectify him in subtle ways. Mrs. Shortley especially, the hired hand who acts as Mrs. McIntyre's confidante, imagines Mr. Guizac in a cartoonish way before ever meeting him. In preparing the shack for the Guizac family, Mrs. Shortley muses with Mrs. McIntyre, "They can't talk. . . . You reckon they'll know what colors even is?" (CW 287). Mrs. Shortley asks this question naively and to establish a bond with Mrs. McIntyre at the expense of the foreigner (in private the two women refer to Guizac with the distorted name of "Gobblehook"). In the course of the story, however, Mrs. Shortley turns out to be right in her question: Mr. Guizac does not understand what color — race — is, and his incomprehension of the code marks him as an outsider. Of all the farm hands, Mr. Guizac is the one Mrs. Shortley most fears will replace her husband because the Pole is such an efficient worker.

The story begins when Mrs. Shortley observes from a distance the initial scene of greeting between Mr. Guizac and Mrs. McIntyre: "Suddenly, as Mrs. McIntyre held out her hand to him, he bobbed down from the waist



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and kissed it" (CW 286). Mrs. Shortley is shocked by the kiss, and her physical response is telling:

Mrs. Shortley jerked her own hand up toward her mouth and then after a second brought it down and rubbed it vigorously on her seat. If Mr. Shortley had tried to kiss her hand, Mrs. McIntyre would have knocked him into the middle of next week, but then Mr. Shortley wouldn't have kissed her hand anyway. He didn't have time to mess around. (CW 286)

Simply by watching this scene, Mrs. Shortley feels violated, as if Mr. Guizac's kiss of Mrs. McIntyre has contaminated her as well. She responds viscerally by vigorously rubbing her own hand against her backside to wipe the imaginary kiss off (soon she will also feel tainted by the family's language, as if their Polish words are contaminating her native English). To use Baldwin's words, "panic, bafflement, and horror" surely play across Mrs. Shortley's face, and the atmosphere darkens; a seed of "danger, even the threat of death" is planted in this otherwise conventional greeting.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Shortley then shifts into a hypothetical reflection about her husband, similar to Baldwin's from before ("if I should put out my hand"): "if Mr. Shortley had tried to kiss her hand" he would be beaten, or, in Mrs. Shortley's words (as reported by the narrator), "knocked into the middle of next week." The narrator's use of this idiom, a kind of insiders' language, shows that those native to the region know "the small signs and symbols" of the southern cabala, and the mere threat of a beating keeps Mr. Shortley in line.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the gesture would never be made proves how effectively the mere threat of punishment helps to maintain the code. And, as Baldwin would point out, that threat exists even before the arrival of an outsider like Mr. Guizac and even if everyone follows the code.

Mrs. McIntyre probably feels equally baffled by Mr. Guizac's gesture, but out of politeness and because he is foreigner, she doesn't say anything. Over time he proves to be such a hard worker, she is ready to accept him without question.

Then later in the story he crosses a racial taboo. When Mrs. McIntyre learns of Mr. Guizac's plan to bring his white cousin over from Poland to marry Sulk, Mrs. McIntyre, who has until now maintained polite language with her new worker, explodes into racist epithets: "Mr. Guizac! 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!" (CW 313). Mr. Guizac doggedly keeps explaining the situation from his European perspective, so Mrs. McIntyre preemptorily lays down the law:

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“Mr. Guizac,” she said, beginning slowly and then speaking faster until she ended breathless in the middle of a word, “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. Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can’t be done here and you’ll have to stop” (CW 313-14).

When Mrs. McIntyre lets loose a cascade of pejorative adjectives to describe her black worker Sulk — “half-witted thieving black stinking nigger” — her shift from “Negro” to “nigger” signals that something has snapped, and her exasperation is heightened by Mr. Guizac’s dense refusal to understand. Whereas in earlier scenes she shouts in conversation with Mr. Guizac because she recognizes there is a language barrier, here she seems to perceive his limited response as willful and defiant.<sup>13</sup> The panic in her voice is extreme. Mrs. McIntyre views Sulk as an animal unable to control himself around white women.

The heart of the taboo in “The Displaced Person” — in Baldwin’s words, “the forever unspeakable” — is miscegenation, a contamination or crossing of boundaries in the old world order. “Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can’t be done here,” Mrs. McIntyre shouts at Mr. Guizac. “In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not,” O’Connor proclaims to Maryat Lee about James Baldwin. In Mrs. McIntyre’s charged voice we hear an echo of O’Connor’s own. O’Connor does not literally fear a mixing of the races in an encounter with Baldwin, but she does fear a crossing of boundaries in the social order: “It can’t be done.”

Henceforth in the story, Mr. Guizac is a stand-in for Sulk: whatever punishment he receives for breaking the code would happen to Sulk were he to marry the white girl. In the ensuing scene, Mrs. McIntyre looks on from the top of a slope as Mr. Guizac is working in her field, and she takes stock of the recent conversation. Even though she was the one who resorted to using aggressive language with him, she feels as if she has been attacked: “Her heart was beating as if some interior violence had already been done to her” (CW 315). She stands watching Mr. Guizac, in the words of the narrator, “as if . . . through a gunsight” (CW 315). Long before the “accident” that takes Mr. Guizac’s life at the end of the story, Mrs. McIntyre, who feels as if she’s defending her life — but who is really defending a way of life — is prepared to take part in murder.

Mrs. McIntyre turns her former graciousness into a weapon against Mr. Guizac. She repeatedly sets out to fire him but holds back because she hates to see herself in this role. She is looking for a way to get rid of Mr. Guizac without having to disturb her self-image as a good woman. In the final scene of the story, Mr. Guizac is on his back, working beneath a small tractor. Mr. Shortley, who wants Mr. Guizac gone, has just parked a large

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tractor nearby. The narrator reports what happens next as Mrs. McIntyre remembers it:

She heard the brake on the large tractor slip and, looking up, she saw it move forward, calculating its own path. Later she remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone. (*CW* 325-26)

This chilling scene pictures a kind of lynching. Mr. Guizac is the victim of a collective act of terror — passively staged by Mrs. McIntyre, Mr. Shortley, and Sulk, so that no one has to claim responsibility for it — that results in the public display of his mangled body. Significantly, the old man Astor appears to be absent. There is tremendous pathos in Sulk's collaboration since Mr. Guizac not only plays the role of the black man; he also dies by the same kind of mob violence that Sulk may very well have suffered had he crossed a racial taboo and married a white woman. Mr. Guizac escapes the concentration camps in Europe only to face a lynching in the United States. "The Displaced Person" emphasizes that the Nazi persecution and racial terrorism are expressions of the same thing, the superiority of one people over another.<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. McIntyre is so traumatized by her complicity in Mr. Guizac's death that she faints on site and can only picture what happened after the fact. Her health soon fails, and she is left bedridden, with only a colored woman and a priest by her side. The fact that Mrs. McIntyre is left in the care of the two types of people she least respects — blacks and Catholics — seems to be on O'Connor's part a satirical commentary on the southern code, as well as an inside joke. The question remains: with whom?

**L**IKE language, a code of manners permeates every aspect of life, including gender, race, and class. Gender intersects powerfully with race and class in O'Connor's nearly anthropological exploration of southern manners. According to Matthew Day, for her female characters especially, practicing good manners constitutes a way of life, a daily discipline or practice — "habits of choice" (similar to O'Connor's notion of "habits of being") embedded into the fabric of everyday life. For Day, manners impose moral standards and make up what he calls "gracious living":

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For the white women who populate this fictional landscape, the southern code of manners reserves a kind of prearticulate, vernacular model of feminine virtue that might be called “gracious living.”. . . Gracious living is a particular kind of moral sensibility, an ethos that is expressed by the “habits of choice” that O’Connor’s characters manifest in every domain of their lives. Manners are, in other words, the embodiment of the southern woman’s moral life. (138)

Day writes, “O’Connor exposes the foul underbelly of the white woman’s ideal of gracious living. . . . O’Connor suggests again and again that the southern ideal of a graceful woman is morally suspect, a tradition that ultimately depends on repugnant distinctions based on race and class” (141-42).

Baldwin and O’Connor, who study the signs contained in the most everyday of social encounters, are equally mindful of the formidable power of the southern code of manners; it is not something one can violate without risk of consequences. In the process, they puncture the southern ideal of the gracious woman, which depends on unequal relationships of power based on race and class. In “The Displaced Person,” Mrs. McIntyre, one in a long list of O’Connor’s gracious ladies, extends southern hospitality to Mr. Guizac as long as he contributes to the labor of the farm, but she snaps when he disregards a racial taboo. Her formerly polite language becomes venomous, and by story’s end, in a morally reprehensible act of nonintervention, she colludes in his death. Mrs. McIntyre is a more extreme version of the white powdery-faced lady in Baldwin’s airport scene. Baldwin uses sarcasm to show that her apparent graciousness toward her black chauffeur is in fact a display of power over him.

In both stories an ordinary scene of greeting is haunted by the specter of punishment — a lynching, or some other form of racial terrorism. Both authors thus tease out from a single scene the power dynamics and moral sensibility of an entire culture. In the opening scene of “The Displaced Person,” Mr. Guizac makes the spontaneous gesture that Baldwin in the Tallahassee airport only imagines making; by story’s end, Mr. Guizac is dead. He is punished for an indiscretion, a violation of manners, which begins with a kiss. In the end, he pays a high price for simply imagining a transgression of the racial code.

Against such a cultural backdrop it makes sense that O’Connor would feel reluctant to meet James Baldwin in Georgia, as familiar as she was with the secret knowledge of the southern cabala and the consequences of transgressing it. She might have been trying to protect him.<sup>15</sup>

**B**OTH O'Connor and Baldwin study the code of southern manners — O'Connor as a native to the culture, Baldwin as an outsider — and for each writer there is something haunting and elegiac about their subject position. They each observe their parents' generation, Southerners born in the nineteenth century, with ghostly nostalgia.

Throughout her career, O'Connor rewrites the character of Mrs. McIntyre in various guises: Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. May, Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Fox, the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," as well as the mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." In different ways they each embody the southern ideal of the gracious lady. The fact that O'Connor keeps writing this character over and over might suggest that she's working through a problem — her feelings of ambivalence about an ideal that must seem both natural to her because so familiar, and, in Day's words, "morally suspect."

The model for this character in O'Connor's own life is her mother. Immersed in her mother's speech and manners, O'Connor manages, through her large fictional cast of white, middle-aged, female characters, to channel the voice of her mother, as well as the collective voice of her mother's generation. This is a cohort of women born at the end of the nineteenth century, when segregation was first established, whose members are now seeing segregation come to an end. O'Connor's mother, Regina Cline O'Connor, was born in 1896, the same year that segregation was legally instituted in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. "The Displaced Person" was first published in *The Sewanee Review* in 1954, the year segregation was legally banned in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. At such historical moments especially, moments of huge cultural change, people who have lived their whole lives under one set of manners, which includes a range of habits connected to one's daily emotional life, cling desperately to the old ways that are now in danger of becoming obsolete. They are caught between a past that still feels real and a future that threatens to the core their sense of identity and community.<sup>16</sup>

From her mother, O'Connor inherited a culture that was drenched in nineteenth-century views about blacks. About O'Connor's generational position, Jean Cash writes that: "Flannery O'Connor herself was a white Southerner only a generation removed from her mother's rather unsavory attitude toward blacks," which Cash describes as "not too unlike that of benevolent but supercilious slaveholders in the antebellum South" (149). According to Cash, Regina's treatment of her black workers at Andalusia "shows how deeply she remained entrenched in the paternalistic racial attitudes of the nineteenth century. She saw blacks as innately inferior, always in need of supervision" (148).

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O'Connor liberally recycles her mother's racist clichés and gestures in her stories, so that we are closest to O'Connor's autobiography when we listen to one of her many "gracious ladies" speak.<sup>17</sup> Nowhere does O'Connor paint the portrait of the southern white lady with more sly precision than in her story that borrows from the "topical."<sup>18</sup> In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the middle-aged mother comments on racial progress to her adult son Julian as they set off to take an integrated bus to her weight-reducing class: "They were better off when they were [slaves]. . . . It's ridiculous. It's simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence" (*CW* 487-88). Then when they're seated on the bus, the mother sees a black woman and her little boy, whom she perceives as "cute," enter the bus: "'I think he likes me,' Julian's mother said, and smiled at the woman. It was the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior" (*CW* 497).

This last sentence, spoken by the narrator from Julian's point of view, manages to nail the mother's graciousness, her adherence to the code of southern manners, as an act of power. Alice Walker would call it one of O'Connor's "sly, demythifying sentences about white women" (52). One could easily imagine Baldwin writing such a sentence to describe the "powdery-faced" lady smiling in greeting at her black chauffeur at the Tallahassee airport.<sup>19</sup> Baldwin's counterpart concerns the pet dog: "I am sure that it has never occurred to her that either of them has the ability to judge her or would judge her harshly." Sentences like these provide evidence of both authors' complex understanding of race, class, and the politics of manners as they relate to the southern ideal of the gracious woman.

By story's end Julian cringes as his mother roots around in her purse for a penny to give to the little boy.

"Don't do it!" Julian said fiercely between his teeth. . . .

"Oh little boy!" . . . "Here's a bright new penny for you," and she held out the coin, which shone bronze in the dim light. (*CW* 498)

The black mother, who interprets this gift as a condescending act of charity, explodes in anger and slugs Julian's mother with her own red pocketbook. Her violent blow causes Julian's mother to fall down and probably also triggers her having a stroke.

In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," O'Connor shows her pitch perfect ear for Regina O'Connor's speech and manners. She also reveals, through Julian's pained confusion in an enmeshed mother/son relationship, how much pressure the politics of manners, especially in times of "rapid change," place on intimate relationships. The fact that O'Connor keeps rewriting her mother into so many of her stories suggests that she is

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not only channeling the voice of her mother; she is trying to exorcise this voice from herself, even as she adheres to, in her own words, “the traditions of the society [she feeds] on.”

I would suggest that Baldwin, too, is trying to exorcise the voice of his southern parent, in his case, his stepfather, David Baldwin, but because he, unlike O'Connor, is not immersed from birth in the manners of this culture, he has a somewhat different ethical task. Baldwin's stepfather, as a black man growing up in the South, had a different relation to the southern code than O'Connor's mother. Whereas Regina O'Connor seamlessly embodied the southern ideal of the gracious woman, this same ideal put Baldwin's stepfather always at risk of being targeted for violence. He had to remain vigilant. A misstep, a wrong glance, a wrong word, could cost him his life. What David Baldwin passed on to his stepson, whom he raised as his own in Harlem, was fear and rage — against white people, in particular “the Man.” As Horace Porter suggests, Baldwin, who knew himself to be “but one generation removed from the South” (*CE* 199), had to divorce himself from the intensity of that emotion in order to write.

David Baldwin, born around the time of Emancipation in 1863, was raised in New Orleans, and as a young adult joined the Great Migration. Along with his mother Barbara, who was born into slavery, he moved to Harlem, where he worked in a bottling factory and continued preaching as a Baptist minister. He married Baldwin's mother Berdis, also from the South, in 1927, and together they had eight children.<sup>20</sup> Baldwin draws closely on his stepfather to create the character of Gabriel Grimes in his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), described by the critic Trudier Harris as “an extended rite of exorcism . . . against the tyranny of the father” (2, 9). He writes the essay “Notes of a Native Son” (1955), which begins and ends with the funeral of his stepfather, as a long reflection on the man's life. These texts, written before Baldwin ever set foot in the South, are so poignant because through them Baldwin attempts to exorcise his stepfather's rage from himself even as he pays quiet tribute to him.

Baldwin had a complicated relationship to his southern roots. About his upbringing, he said, “I was born into a Southern community displaced into the streets of New York” (Campbell 9). Baldwin was referring to the fact that Harlem in the twenties and thirties was largely populated by southern blacks who had come north to seek a better life, bringing their religion with them.<sup>21</sup> In “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin writes about his stepfather, “He was of the first generation of free men. He, along with thousands of other Negroes, came North after 1919 and I was part of that generation which had never seen the landscape of what Negroes sometimes call the Old Country” (*CE* 63-64). In “Nobody Knows My Name:

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A Letter from the South,” Baldwin records his impressions of his first trip to Georgia; he likens the position of a Negro born in the North who visits the South to “that of the son of the Italian emigrant who finds himself in Italy, near the village where his father first saw the light of day” (CE 197). The landscape, manners, and speech of the people are at once familiar and unfamiliar. About this uncanny traveling experience, he writes:

Everywhere he turns, the revenant finds himself reflected. He sees himself as he was before he was born, perhaps; or as the man he would have become, had he actually been born in this place. He sees the world, from an angle odd indeed, in which his fathers awaited his arrival, perhaps in the very house in which he narrowly avoided being born. He sees, in effect, his ancestors, who, in everything they do and are, proclaim his inescapable identity. (CE 197)

In this passage Baldwin describes an experience of haunting. As a displaced visitor to the South, Baldwin calls himself a “revenant” — both returning son and ghost. Through the black people he meets, he imagines, from an eerie remove, two other lives for himself running parallel to his own, the one he might have led had he been born a generation earlier, and the one he might have led had his stepfather stayed in the South and raised him there.

To ground himself in this unsettling time warp, he pays close attention to what older southern black men tell him about their youth. Through their words and memories, including those about lynching, he revisits his stepfather’s southern past, an invisible world that impacts the next generation — him and his siblings — in ways he cannot imagine.

At the heart of some of Baldwin’s early fiction — *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and “Sonny’s Blues,” for example — is an experience of trans-generational haunting between southern parents who joined the Great Migration and their adult children who never knew the South. This invisible world of the parents, a tightly held secret filled with racial violence, places a grave pressure on the parent/child relationship. In “Sonny’s Blues,” for instance, the mother reveals to her adult sons who grew up in Harlem a family secret: in his southern hometown the father as a young man had witnessed his brother being hit by a car in a so-called accident (as wrenching as what happens to Mr. Guizac in “The Displaced Person”) involving white men. The white men are not so much malicious as careless and drunk. The mother reports the scene:

“When they seen your father’s brother they let out a great whoop and holler and they aimed the car straight at him. They was having



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fun, they just wanted to scare him, the way they do sometimes, you know. But they was drunk.” (*ENS* 843)

The casualness with which the white men “whoop and holler” and then aim their car at the brother as if it were some kind of childish prank makes what happens next all the more devastating. The mother laments:

“Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and he heard the wood of that guitar when it give, and he heard them strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain’t stopped till this day. And, time your father got down the hill, his brother weren’t nothing but blood and pulp. . . . Till the day he died he weren’t sure but that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother.” (*ENS* 843-44)

The trauma of the father’s southern past continues unchanged into the present and carries a surreal weight that bears down on the life of his sons. Although the father never recovers from witnessing his brother’s death, the narrator hints that Sonny’s recovery from drug addiction begins when this family secret is aired.

When Baldwin as “revenant” travels for the first time to the South, he is retracing his stepfather’s path in reverse, returning for him, imagining what he might have seen or experienced. As his plane hovers over “the rust-red earth of Georgia,” he writes in “Nobody Knows My Name,”

. . . my mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps, or my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife.

My father must have seen such sights — he was very old when he died — or heard of them, or had this danger touch him. (*CE* 198)

Had he been born in his stepfather’s generation, Baldwin might have witnessed such a scene, and he listens closely to the stories of old southern black men to understand this time. He remembers especially an old black man who directs him to his first segregated bus in Atlanta. This is a somber counterpart to the scenes on the bus, also set in Atlanta, which O’Connor portrays in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” Baldwin writes:

He seemed to know what I was feeling. His eyes seemed to say that what I was feeling he had been feeling, at much higher pressure, all his life. But my eyes would never see the hell his eyes had seen. And this hell was, simply, that he had never in his life

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owned anything, not his wife, not his house, not his child, which could not, at any instant, be taken from him by the power of white people. This is what paternalism means. And for the rest of the time that I was in the South I watched the eyes of old black men. (CE 204-05)

In this passage, Baldwin as son pays quiet tribute to his stepfather and his stepfather's generation, men who do not "weep for the passing of the old order" (CE 208). By contrast, O'Connor as daughter, who in her daily life probably adheres to the southern code, tries in her writing to distance herself from the values of her mother and her mother's generation, women who celebrated and, in many ways, benefitted from the old order and its manners. Baldwin imagines that the old black man, a stand-in for his father, had lived under a constant unspoken threat of punishment if he did not abide by the southern code of manners. He extends this man's experience to all southern black men of his father's generation. Baldwin reveals that the driving force behind the southern cabala is what he terms paternalism: at heart the code is not about graciousness but control and power.

Flannery O'Connor's decision not to meet James Baldwin in Georgia, even if it had been made lightly as a simple matter of etiquette, was charged with the dark weight of history.

SCHOLARS often turn to O'Connor's letter to Maryat Lee to question whether O'Connor held racist attitudes: "No I can't see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion." We squirm when we read it. But how can any individual be judged without examining the daily human realities of the culture in which she lived? Reflecting on the scene at the Tallahassee airport, Baldwin, who wrote as a kind of anthropologist on the South, says nothing much different from what O'Connor says in her letter.

Although Flannery O'Connor and James Baldwin never met in person, through their writings they had a kind of conversation about the politics of race and manners, one Baldwin would recognize as part of the "interracial drama" of the United States.<sup>22</sup> In his essay "Stranger in the Village" (written in 1953, six years before O'Connor's letter to Maryat Lee), Baldwin reflects on his experience living as the sole black man in a small Swiss village, reminiscent of Milledgeville in its parochialism, in order to make a larger point about the "American Negro problem." At the end of the essay Baldwin explains what makes American history unique from European history, and his words (by simply changing "white man/

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men” to “white woman/women”) sound like an anticipatory response to O’Connor’s refusal to meet him:

The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa. This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. (*CE* 129)

Flannery O’Connor was no stranger to black people: she observed her mother’s frequent, intimate contact with the black hired help at Andalusia. Had O’Connor invited Baldwin there, how would he have entered the house? By which door? There is no way to imagine this encounter because he would have come as an equal or fellow writer, and that was the taboo. By teaching the writings of Flannery O’Connor and James Baldwin together, we recognize them as equals and extend the conversation they might have started had they met in 1959.

## Notes

1) Support for this project was provided by a PSC-CUNY award, jointly funded by the Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York. For invaluable feedback on drafts of this essay, my gratitude goes to Denell Downum, Loriann Fell, Bruce Gentry, Nathan Goldhaber, Remo Hügli, Barney Latimer, So Young Park, John Proctor, and Natalia Sucre.

2) On O’Connor’s interview, see Meacham (267) and Hardy (524-25). For a nuanced discussion of O’Connor’s ambivalent attitude toward southern identity and race, see Bacon (111-14).

3) I thank Loriann Fell, Bruce Gentry, Nathan Goldhaber, and Barney Latimer, as well as biographer Jean Cash (151-52), for their insightful discussion of O’Connor’s word choice in her letter to Lee.

4) Sally Fitzgerald, editor of *The Habit of Being*, gives us another contemporary example of how place matters to those who must decide whether to follow or break a code of manners. She and her husband Robert had themselves met Baldwin in Paris but regard O’Connor’s decision not to meet him in Milledgeville, as reported by Georgia Newman, “as the only one appropriate for that time and place” (tel int. 12 July 1997) (156).

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5) His first trip, on assignment for *Partisan Review* and *Harper's Magazine* in the fall of 1957, resulted in two publications: "The Hard Kind of Courage" (later renamed "A Fly in Buttermilk" for the collection *Nobody Knows My Name*) and "A Letter from the South: Nobody Knows My Name." His second trip, in May of 1960, inspired the essays "They Can't Turn Back" and "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King."

6) On Baldwin's life and relationship to the South, see Campbell, Kenan, Leeming, Porter, and Scott.

7) For a sampling of these brief discussions, see Bacon, Caron, Cash, Gooch, Newman, and Wood.

8) See also my article "James Baldwin, Flannery O'Connor, and the Ethics of Anguish." For anthologies on the civil rights movement that do include selections by both Baldwin and O'Connor, see Julie Buckner Armstrong's *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation* (2009) and Jon Meacham's *Voices in Our Blood: America's Best on the Civil Rights Movement* (2001). For a discussion of O'Connor and Martin Luther King, Jr. as prophetic witnesses, see Brinkmeyer. For a discussion of O'Connor and Rachel Carson as cultural critics, see Hagood.

9) Matthew Day claims that O'Connor's "pitch perfect" observation of social manners is one and the same with her "Christian literary project" of exploring the mystery of everyday life because, in his words, "the *artistic* and the *theological* were treated as identical" (138). Whereas he shifts the focus away from privileging a Christian reading of O'Connor's fiction, Roland Végső points out unsettling limitations of a religious approach. Using the "The Artificial Nigger" as his example, Végső claims that by story's end, the language of race is "suppressed" by the language of religion (69), and that a Christian reading of this story simply reproduces this suppression.

10) Baldwin's counterparts to "The Displaced Person," in which the racial violence is overt, include "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), about a lynching told from the point of view of a white southern sheriff, and his play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964), set in a southern town and based loosely on the Emmett Till murder. Baldwin dedicates this play to Medgar Evers, the slain civil rights worker, with whom he collaborated on investigating a lynching in Mississippi.

11) In Mrs. Shortley's uneducated mind, the kiss stands in for other forms of contamination or transgression of boundaries, including miscegenation, the unspeakable taboo at the heart of southern culture. Without understanding the Guizacs' past as victims of the Holocaust, she instead is prepared to see them as capable of murder: "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. If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?" (CW 287)

12) On the power of clichés to create insider and outsider groups, see Harris, "The Politics of the Cliché."

13) In the scene with Sulk and the turkey, Mrs. McIntyre recruited Mr. Guizac's son as translator. By contrast, in this scene she does not bother to find a translator.

14) For a discussion of "The Displaced Person" as O'Connor's "Americanization of the Holocaust," see Trendel. O'Connor's choice of "displaced person" falls between the cracks of established insider/outsider categories in the farm society depicted in the story, and that seems to be the point. Mr. Guizac is treated as a "nigger" and the other characters

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all feel themselves to be “displaced persons.” How he is treated in the story can be applied to the objectification of any minority group.

15) For this quiet observation I thank Richard Gabriel, a student at New York City College of Technology who was enrolled in my course on O’Connor (“Flannery O’Connor in an Age of Terrorism and Technology”) in Spring 2011.

16) In her study of the history of American etiquette, Judith Martin notes that people struggle to invent new manners because each generation holds a strong emotional attachment to the forms of their childhood, and this emotion is deepened at times of “rapid change” (21-22).

17) On O’Connor’s use of her mother’s dialogues at Andalusia for source material in her stories, see Cash (147-48), Gooch (242-243), Newman, Tedford, and Whitt. About the genesis of “The Displaced Person,” Gooch writes, “She started her story, with bold simplicity, almost as an eyewitness account of daily life on Andalusia, even more baldly rendered than “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”” (242-43). Gooch gives examples of how O’Connor “swipes” dialogue directly from conversations her mother has with the hired farm help, reproducing them in letters to friends and reading them aloud as part of story drafts to friends.

18) Responding to the publication in the *New Yorker* of Eudora Welty’s story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” — prompted by the assassination of Medgar Evers in 1963 — O’Connor proclaims in a letter to her friend Betty Hester, another Southerner, that writing about the “topical” in fiction is “poison” (*HB* 537).

19) On the politics of a smile, see Martin’s chapter “On Etiquette as Language, Weapon, Custom, and Craft.”

20) On Baldwin’s stepfather see Baldwin (*CE* 845), Campbell, Kenan, and Leeming.

21) Kenan describes *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as “one of our best evocations of African-American interwar life and of the world of the so-called Holy Rollers, a world of religious ecstasy and transplanted Southern culture” (27).

22) It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine Baldwin’s fiction in dialogue with O’Connor’s, but a rich place to start would be to pair *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) with O’Connor’s first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952). Gabriel Grimes, the tyrannical father of Baldwin’s novel, and Hazel Motes, the protagonist of O’Connor’s, evangelize with prophetic intensity, and in their fiery journeys we see how O’Connor’s theological concerns overlap with Baldwin’s early immersion in the church. The two writers also take on the charged voice of the “Man” — Baldwin in “Going to Meet the Man” and O’Connor in “The Artificial Nigger” — to explore how racism is passed on in white families.

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