Fear of Family, Fear of Self: Black Southern “Othering” in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*

Trudier Harris

A careful perusal of African American literature reveals that most of the writers include representations of southern U.S. territory at some point in their work. Writers as diverse as James Baldwin, Edward P. Jones, Tayari Jones, William Melvin Kelley, Randall Kenan, Yusef Komunyakaa, Toni Morrison, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, and a host of others imaginatively engage the South in fiction, drama, poetry, and essays. African American writers, whether born in Idaho, New York, and Massachusetts, or Alabama and Georgia, do not seem to be able to claim themselves as African American writers until they have allowed the South to dominate their imaginations. Perhaps because of the collective history of slavery, or the southern soil that shapes so much of the interpretive power of African American life and culture, black writers traverse southern soil in identifying with the totality of African American experience. It could reasonably be argued that no writer of African descent born on American soil can consider himself or herself an African American writer until he or she has made peace—or attempted to do so—with what the South means to him or her in particular and to black people in general.

There is no better example of this than James Baldwin. In *Just Above My Head* (1979), narrator Hall Montana observes: “Look at a map, and scare yourself half to death. On the northern edge of Virginia, on the Washington border, catty-corner to Maryland, is
Richmond, Virginia. Two-thirds across the map is Birmingham, Alabama, surrounded by Mississippi, Tennessee, and Georgia.” To actually travel those states and to go along the roads observed on the map “can be far more frightening than the frightening map.” Hall makes this observation as his brother Arthur, a member of a singing quartet, is preparing to make a trip to the South. For Baldwin, the South is an enigma, an engulfing space specially designed to destroy young black men. He uses *Just Above My Head* to highlight the physical violence, both imagined and real, that can be done to black men and the psychological violence that other black men suffer as a result of it.

He does this initially by allowing Hall’s fears to become reality. While the quartet from Harlem is singing in a small southern town, one of their members, Peanut, on a trip to the outhouse behind the church, simply disappears. No amount of searching uncovers Peanut’s whereabouts. No amount of searching locates his body. He just disappears. It is that fear of disappearance on southern territory that informs the notion of a scary Mason-Dixon Line. The fear of castration is tangible and psychologically destructive enough, but imagine the greater fear of actually having a body lost and never finding it, indeed never learning a single fact about how it disappears or where it might have ended up. In that mental space of the possibility for and the knowledge of disappearance is where James Baldwin and many other nonsouthern black writers reside when they think of the South. Your body can be destroyed. You can disappear. You will be lost and not found.

As fearful to Baldwin as the black body disappearing is the black body hanging on southern territory. There is no more vivid example than his depiction of the lynching in the flashback in *Going to Meet the Man* (1965). The lynched black man, accused of the age-old crime of impropriety toward a white woman, is the image that fuels racism and repression. The white sheriff in the story, who remembers his father taking him to the lynching, castrating, and burning of a black man, conjures up that image to gather the scattered pieces of his manhood when he is confronted with young black demonstrators in an unnamed southern town. By recalling the lynching and imagining that as the “rightful” place for black men who step out of line, Jesse the sheriff can collect his nerves sufficiently to confront the demonstrators and can bolster his sexuality sufficiently to make love to his wife “like a nigger.”

Lynching black men but desiring the very sexuality that has presumably led to the lynching, Baldwin posits, is the natural position of white men in the South and the natural reason for black men to be