

Final Written Report

2017 Professional Development Grant

“Gendering the Monstrous in Bernice L. McFadden’s *Gathering of Waters*”

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This final report addresses the results of a professional research project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

According to Harriet Pollack and Christopher Metress, the 1955 murder of Emmett Till continues not only to haunt the American consciousness, but also to surface persistently in American literary narratives. In *Gathering of Waters* (2012), by Bernice L. McFadden, we once again witness a reimagining of that murder. Even though New York author McFadden is not a traditionally defined southern writer, I examine the narrative both inside and outside of a specifically southern perspective.

McFadden oddly displaces guilt in this novel onto a black woman called “Esther the whore,” who, although “dead and buried for half a decade” when she takes possession of a 5-year-old girl, “had been a beauty once” (22-23). Although Esther is undeserving of their animosity, her beauty becomes such a castration threat to men that, in spite of her repeated expressions of love, they “beat her for loving them” until one of them finally cuts her throat. Although this scenario seems to be sympathetic toward Esther, she nonetheless is punished for her sexuality, and from then on is the primary source of an evil that typically manifests itself in destructive, even murderous female sexual desire, for a while.

When her female host drowns in the flood of 1927, Esther's spirit dives into the open mouth of J. W. Milam's floating corpse, which results in his resurrection, not as the "sweet child" he had once been, but as a cruel deviant, and, as a result, Esther somehow becomes the white male body that murders the desexualized body of Emmett Till.

Carolyn Bryant, the white woman who lies at the trial about the infamous whistle, is, however, exonerated to some extent for her role in Till's death. At the end of the novel, Till's ghost is reunited with the ghost of the girl he had innocently loved before his murder, and Esther reappears as Hurricane Katrina, a destructive force whose personification here seems to empty it of the racist implications surrounding its deadly aftermath.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association Symposium on Regionalism and Place in New Orleans, LA, and presented my paper there. I drove from Russellville to New Orleans on September 6 and drove back on September 10, 2017.

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is American, primarily modern and southern. I have taught other texts that focus on Till's murder, but this novel is new to me, and, although I used it in my southern literature course, it is written by a New York author. I am concerned in part with whether narrative differences can link to regional identities. The positive feedback I received on my paper will not only help in expanding my teaching of both southern and American literature, but also in my ongoing research in

both areas. I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

Working on this paper moved me in a slightly different direction. As a result, I am teaching a new graduate course this summer combining both southern and non-southern texts to study the south. I will teach an undergraduate version in the fall. The title of the course comes from a book I used in my research for the paper, *Undead Souths*. One of the editors of that book heard my paper and talked with me afterward about our mutual scholarly interests. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.