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LECTURE

**Black, White, and Southern:  
Autobiography and the  
Complexities of Race**

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Matters of race continue to pervade our national consciousness. Over the past few years they seem to have done so to an extent unparalleled since the 1960s. The media madness that surrounded the vastly differing cases of Rodney King, Clarence Thomas, and O.J. Simpson nearly a decade ago combined with issues of affirmative action, the configuration of congressional districts, and welfare reform have kept racial matters fully in the center of national political dialogue. As Studs Terkel has written, “Race is our national obsession.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s an obsession that often hits much closer home for those of us in the South. The debate over the Confederate battle flag here in Georgia and elsewhere proved divisive and newsworthy for far too long. Trent Lott’s ill-fated praise of Strom Thurmond’s presidential candidacy as a Dixiecrat two years ago; revelations – or new proof – of interracial offspring fathered by Thomas Jefferson and Strom Thurmond; new investigations and revived legal action surrounding the murders of Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and other civil rights martyrs – all of these continue to show how the power of the past can collide with and shape the present in the South to an extent unknown in other parts of the country. William Faulkner’s adage about his native region – “The past is not dead; it’s not even past” – rings as true now as it ever did.

All of this means that over the past twenty years that I have taught southern history at the University of Georgia, and particularly the last few years, there are ample opportunities to actively engage students in exploring the long and convoluted legacy of black-white relations in the South. The parallels between the racial tensions and controversies currently in play and those of earlier eras resonate as forcefully now as they ever have and I find as much curiosity, concern, and responsiveness to issues of race among students that I’m teaching now as I ever have.

One of the biggest challenges we history teachers face – whether working with middle and high school students or college undergraduates – is in making sense of the vast complexities and variables that have always characterized the interactions of white and black Americans. It is all too easy to oversimplify the subjects of race and racism. Textbooks, the popular media, and even we teachers are often prone to broad generalizations in characterizing the ways in which whites have treated blacks. In his recent indictment of high school history texts, Lies My Teacher Told Me, James Loewen devotes a full chapter to “The

Invisibility of Racism in American History Textbooks.”<sup>2</sup> As part of a generation born well after the civil rights movement had run its course, our students all too often seem oblivious to past or even current struggles for racial justice and they react with genuine surprise, occasional shock, and some considerable confusion as they discover the extent and the intensity with which “the color line” long defined both southern and American society.

One of the most insightful and accessible sources for conveying the hard realities as well as the complexities of race relations in the classroom – and beyond – is through the use of autobiography. In using autobiographical works as supplementary reading in various history courses I taught over the years, I was always struck not only by what rich insights the genre can provide, but also by student response to these works. In assigning two or three such works in various classes on southern history, it dawned on me that a whole course could be structured around the autobiographies of southerners. In designing and teaching that course since – and I’ve taught it regularly over the past ten years or so – my purpose has been twofold: first to use these works to explore the variety and complexity of the southern experience over time; and second, to allow students to examine in depth one of the most vital, yet often overlooked, of historical primary sources: individuals’ accounts of their own lives.

Autobiography, as William Deans Howells once noted, is “the most democratic province in the republic of letters.” This is because anyone and everyone – “from presidents and generals to ex-slaves and convicts” – have told his or her own story in print.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the cumulative effect is that, as another critic has written, autobiographies “have been like a private history of the amazing crimes, achievements, banalities, and wonders of American life. Orthodox history is, by contrast, a bland soup.”<sup>4</sup> Its appeal to me, as a teacher, is that it becomes history at its most intimate, its most emotional, its most human. Autobiographers can bring the past alive in ways that more objective scholarly historians rarely do, and as such, engage us in ways that certainly no history textbook or monograph can.

Such narratives of the self seem to be a genre at which southerners excel. They seem to have a pronounced propensity for autobiography and memoir; and more so than other Americans, their perspectives on their homeland have been – and still are – closely tied to the impulses that led them to write about themselves, often for confessional or therapeutic purposes. In telling their own stories,

southern writers become either apologists for or, far more often, critics of the South as they knew it. The very title of Fred Hobson's book on the subject – *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* – aptly describes the phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

Among the unique features of autobiography as a historical genre is that it is one in which youthful experiences, from both childhood and adolescence, holds such sway. From the Salem witchcraft trials to the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, there have been occasional moments in American history in which teenagers have been catalysts in the unfolding of significant historical developments.<sup>6</sup> But otherwise, the impact of history on their lives is often overlooked, and their voices remain unheard. This alone makes autobiography so effective as a teaching tool for both high school and college students. It offers a vast array of case studies of young people struggling with issues and circumstances of historical import – which in the South means slavery, Civil War, emancipation, Jim Crow, and civil rights.

Is there any other form of historical documentation to which teenagers can relate so readily in terms of the perspectives and experiences of their peers? (Has any work enlightened more people as to the traumas of the Holocaust than the diary of a teenage girl hiding in an Amsterdam attic?) That formative age and all it encompasses – the learning processes, discovery, experimentation, social development, the questioning, probing, and challenging of ideas and authorities – these are among the most vital and richly expressed components of autobiography. When applied to matters of race, authors' insights into their early experiences, perceptions, and memories can be profound.

These are stories infused not only with emotion – but in which moral values are often at the forefront. As such, they can serve as vital resources in the character education of students today. Character education – or values education – has been a major initiative of the Georgia legislature and Department of Education since the early 1990s, and our state has been recognized as one of the leaders in that movement. The Georgia Humanities Council has made it a priority as well, and has worked closely with teachers, school administrators, and community leaders, to promote and enhance character education through history and literature. Jamil Zainaldin has made this a priority of his leadership of the Council and has spoken eloquently on how integral character education is to citizenship in the twenty-first century, and the role of the humanities in making

it happen. “The humanities,” he has written, “are the heart and head working together. They are the food of citizenship; the conscience of communities.” The humanities are also stories, Jamil has noted. “They are stories read and told, and shared. Stories are the building blocks of the craft of citizenship” – their power to do so comes from their “power to inspire.”

And that is what I’d like to share with you today: examples of how southern voices, telling stories, very personal and often painful, have the power to inspire. These stories offer valuable history lessons that help all of us as southerners to understand our past. In particular, they offer us remarkable insights as to how young people – through their later insights as mature adults – remembered and chose to present to readers what it meant to come of age as southerners, black and white, at various points in our region’s history and what that says about the moral values – the character, if you will – of us as individuals, as communities, and as a region. These are often stories of cruelty, of oppression, of intolerance, and disappointment, but through the thoughts, actions, and reactions of these authors as their own central characters in the face of such adversity, southern autobiography also provides excellent examples of many of the character traits which we hope will inspire students – courage and perseverance, compassion and empathy, tolerance and understanding, respect for oneself and for others.

It was as children that southerners black and white were first introduced to the harsh, and often perplexing realities of racism in their worlds. No one wrote more knowingly than Georgia writer Lillian Smith of that process. In her 1949 memoir, Killers of the Dream, one of the most devastating critiques of the segregated South ever to come from a white southerner, Smith wrote:

From the time little southern children take their first step they learn their ritual, for Southern Tradition leads them through its intricate movements. And some, if their faces are dark, learn to bend, hat in hand; and others, if their faces are white, learn to hold their heads high. Some step off the sidewalk while others pass by in arrogance. Bending, shoving, genuflecting, ignoring, stepping off, demanding, giving in, avoiding . . . So we learned the dance that cripples the human spirit, step by step by step, we who were white and we who were colored, day by day, hour by

hour, year by year until the movements were reflexes and made for the rest of our life without thinking.<sup>8</sup>

As subtly and perhaps gradually as these behaviors and attitudes were learned over the course of southern childhoods, some of the most telling incidents autobiography has to offer are authors' descriptions of how they learned that "crippling dance," of their discoveries of those realities of racial mores and the implications on their own lives. For many it was a single incident that brought those sobering truths home.

Lillian Smith herself described a strange childhood encounter in which her parents, then in a small north Florida town, took in what a local social worker assumed was a white girl who had been found in the "colored section" of town, living in a broken-down shack with a black family who had just moved there. The assumption was that she had been kidnapped. Janie, as she was known, was brought to the Smith household, where she shared a room with Lillian, and was generally made a part of the family. She was, Smith wrote, "dazed by her new comforts and by the interesting activities of my big lively family; and I was as happily dazed, for her adoration of me was a new thing; as time passed a quick, childish and deeply felt bond grew up between us." Then one day, a phone call from a black orphanage led to nervous meetings, whispered conferences, and finally an announcement made by Lillian's mother that Janie would be returning to the black family she had been taken from. The only explanation offered was that Janie was found to be "colored."

In response to repeated queries from Lillian in all her innocence and confusion as to why Janie had to leave, how she could be colored, and why she couldn't continue to play with or ever see her new roommate and friend again, her mother finally said: "You're too young to understand. And don't ask me again, ever again, about this!" "Mother's voice was sharp but her face was sad and there was no certainty left there," Lillian wrote. "I knew something was wrong. I knew my father and mother whom I passionately admired had betrayed something that they held dear. And they could not help doing it. And I was shamed by their failure and frightened, for I felt they were no longer as powerful as I had thought."<sup>9</sup>

Some black adolescents discovered in more public incidents not only their place within the Jim Crow regime, but their very identities as well. Walter

White of Atlanta, long the Executive Secretary of the NAACP, began his autobiography, A Man Called White, with an account of the Atlanta race riot of 1906 as he experienced it as a boy of thirteen. In his opening chapter entitled "I Learn What I Am," White declared: "I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me." He went on to ask: "Why then do I insist that I am a Negro, when nothing compels me to do so but myself?"

White proceeded to answer that question, so often posed to him by others, either directly or indirectly. "I know the night when, in terror and bitterness of soul, I discovered that I was set apart by the pigmentation of my skin . . . and the moment at which I decided that I would infinitely rather be what I was then, rather than take advantage of the escape that was open to me, of becoming part of the race which had forced the decision upon me."

That night was Sunday, September 23, 1906, the second night of the Atlanta race riot. A day earlier, the young White was caught downtown with his father, a postman, who was making his rounds when the riot broke out on that fateful Saturday afternoon. From their wagon, they witnessed the savagery of the white mob as they pursued defenseless black victims through the streets and beat them to death "to the accompaniment of savage shouting and cursing," and then moved on after "new prey." Because of their light skin color, father and son made it safely home, but learned the next day that the white hooligans were regrouping and planned to move into their neighborhood, the edge of what was known as Darktown in order to "clean out the niggers." White provided a harrowing account of his family's preparations for the onslaught to come. He and his father, armed with guns, waited on the front porch of their home, which they had been warned was to be the torch-carrying mob's first target, while his mother and sisters hid in the back of the house. His father instructed him: "Son, don't shoot until the first man puts his foot on the lawn and then – don't you miss!"

The mob indeed surged toward the house, but was quickly dispersed by a volley of shots from neighbors before the Whites had to fire themselves. It was at that moment, Walter later wrote, that his epiphany came. As he put his gun aside, he found himself "gripped by the knowledge of my identity, and in the depths of my soul I was vaguely aware that I was glad of it . . . I knew then who I was. I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked

me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance, in order that those whose skin was white would have readily at hand a proof of their superiority.”

White continued this extraordinary diatribe against the white race and all it had inflicted on other races: “I was sick with loathing for the hatred which had flared before me that night and come so close to making me a killer; but I was glad I was not one of those who hated; I was glad I was not one of those whose story is in the history of the world, a record of bloodshed, rapine, and pillage. I was glad my mind and spirit were part of the races that had not fully awakened, and who therefore had still before them the opportunity to write a record of virtue as a memorandum to Armageddon.”<sup>10</sup>

Anne Moody was hit by the implications of her black skin in equally traumatic terms. The brutal lynching of Emmett Till, a fourteen year old black boy from Chicago murdered by Mississippi whites in 1955 for making a suggestive, but merely playful, remark – or simply whistling – to a white woman, sent shock waves through much of the nation. But only in Moody’s classic narrative, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, do we get a real sense of what that incident meant to other blacks in the state. Also fourteen at the time it occurred, Moody wrote this chilling description of her reaction to the news: “Before Emmett Till’s death, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me – the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I was a good girl, I wouldn’t have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn’t know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought.”<sup>11</sup>

Emmett Till was not the only youthful victim of racial violence nor was his lynching the only crime that opened other eyes to the tragic implications of racial hatred in the South. The bombing of Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963 and the death of four young girls in their Sunday school class takes on new meaning when one reads Morris Dees’ account of how white Alabamians responded to it. In his powerful 1991 autobiography, *A Season for Justice*, Dees, who would later go on to found the Southern Poverty Law Center and Klanwatch, recounts what happened in his own white congregation in Montgomery the following Sunday. A lifelong member of the church, he rose

and asked the congregation, friends and acquaintances all, to pray for “another Baptist church that needs our help.” These “good hearted, charitable people,” as Dees calls them, nodded in approval until he mentioned what church it was. “The blood drained from my friends’ faces, the nodding stopped.” They were all either angry at his suggestion or too shocked to be angry, and the only verbal response was an old woman who stood up and said, “This ain’t none of our business, Morris Jr.” Even his attempt to lead them in a silent prayer was met with a quickly emptied sanctuary. “More than a quarter of a century after the fact,” Dees wrote,

it seems such a small gesture. Asking for a contribution, praying for the souls of little girls, hardly seems extraordinary, certainly not worthy of self-congratulation. I hadn’t gone to Washington, DC for Dr. King’s march; I’ve never marched period. I hadn’t stood up to Bull Connor in Birmingham. Just a silent prayer, an act consistent with Christian teachings, praying for the souls of other Christians. *Children*. And yet my good friends and neighbors could not free themselves from the slavery of southern tradition and, forgetting about color, do the Christian thing.<sup>12</sup>

It is these passages and dozens of others like them that make autobiography such a powerful medium for historians and such effective resources in a curriculum of character education. Its ability to personalize, to humanize, to give immediacy to historical events often rendered in far more straightforward, cut-and-dried terms allows for levels of empathy, sympathy, emotional reaction, moral suasion, and ultimately understanding on the part of students in a way no textbook can duplicate.

Other themes that do – or should – resonate with teenage readers include the quest for learning and the traumas of achieving it. Both Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright, for example, provide memorable accounts of how they were made aware of what empowerment literacy represented to black teenagers over a century apart. For Douglass, a slave, it was overhearing a dispute between his beloved Baltimore mistress and her husband when he discovered that she had been teaching her black charge the alphabet. “Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world,” he scolded his wife. “If you teach him how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.” Those

words, Douglass wrote, “sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things . . . I now understood the white man’s power to enslave the black man.” “I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which by the merest accident I had gained from my master . . . The argument against which he so warmly urged, my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn.” In learning to read, Douglass concluded, “I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master as I do to the kindly aid of my mistress.”<sup>13</sup>

Toward the end of *Black Boy*, yet another classic account of growing up black in Mississippi, Richard Wright described a discovery of similar import. A mere fifteen years old and well aware that his formal education is well behind him after his 8th grade graduation, Wright, living on his own in Memphis, Tennessee, came across a denunciation of H. L. Mencken in the local newspaper. Curious as to “what on earth this Mencken had done to call down upon him the scorn of the South,” Wright managed to trick a librarian into allowing him to check out books by him.

In his small rented room that night, Wright described his reaction to what he read: “I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? How did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American . . . laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. Yes this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club . . . I was amazed not by what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.” “I concluded the book,” Wright wrote, “with the conviction that I had somehow overlooked something terribly important in life. I had once tried to write, had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing.” From that experience, Wright became an avid reader and the intellectual revelations that fifteen-year-old boy gained remained central to his determination to leave the South and ultimately to become a writer himself.<sup>14</sup>

Could there be any sharper contrast than that of William Alexander Percy’s description of his educational opportunities and what he did with them? In

*Lanterns on the Levee*, his often melancholy memoir of his privileged life as a planter's son in Delta Mississippi, Percy wrote wistfully of the vast amount of schooling to which he had been subjected. After attending the University of the South at Sewanee and Harvard Law School, both based more on his father's connections and initiatives than his own, Percy noted, with rather disarming self-deprecation, that neither had provided him with much sense of purpose or direction in life. "For eight years – in fact for twenty-three," he wrote, "a great number of people have been pouring out money, skill, time, devotion, prayers to create something out of me that wouldn't look as if the Lord slapped it together absent-mindedly. Not Alexander the Great nor Catherine II had been tended by a more noble corps of teachers." And yet there was little in all that training that had inspired a career-choice. "Obviously," Percy continued, "I was cast to justify the ways of man to God, as it were. But how? What does one do with a life, or at any rate, intend to do?"<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, for lack of a better option, Percy simply returned home to Greenville, Mississippi, and opened a law practice. Far more of the undergraduates we teach today are likely to identify with Percy's dilemma than with those of Douglass or Wright, but perhaps in reading of these vastly differing degrees of educational yearning, they won't take their own opportunities quite so much for granted.

The fact that it was men of Percy's station in life who were often proved the most formidable barriers toward such opportunities or aspirations for black children often added to the frustrations and anger of black writers looking back on their school experiences. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou provided a heartrending account of her high school graduation in Stamp, Arkansas. The upbeat mood of the school's African-American students and faculty was dampened considerably by the condescending address by a white official who extolled the achievements of former white graduates of the county school system, and only as an afterthought, made reference to a football tackle at the state's A&M college and a basketball player at Fisk in whom his black audience should take pride.

Angelou seethed in her seat, and on paper years later. "The white kids," she wrote, "were going to have the chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises." While she acknowledged that they

were indeed “the great heroes of our world,” she went on to say, “what school official in the white-goddom of Little Rock had the right to decide that those two men be our only heroes?...Which concrete angel glued to what county seat had decided that if my brother wanted to become a lawyer he first had to pay penance for his skin by picking cotton and hoeing corn and studying correspondence books at night for twenty years?” “The man’s dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium,” Angelou wrote,

and too many [of those bricks] settled in my belly...to my left and right the proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads. ...Graduation, the hush-hush magic time of frills and gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called. The accomplishment was nothing. We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous. ...It was awful to be a Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead.<sup>16</sup>

And that’s only the beginning of a diatribe that continues for another couple of pages.

Strong words! And they still have the power to move, and even to shock students reading them today. Where else does one find such anger, such frustration, such defiance in historical documentation? And from adolescents, no less. Again, these are powerful teaching tools and – take my word for it – students find it hard not to respond in meaningful ways to them.

Equally moving are accounts of early integration efforts a generation later. Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the nine black students to integrate Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957, suggests the trauma and the drama of her story in a single diary entry she reprints in her memoir, *Warriors Don’t Cry*. “Everything in my life is so new,” she wrote after her first day of class. In what seems almost a prayer, she continued, “Could I please do some of the old things that I know how to do again. I don’t know how to go to school with soldiers. Please show me... . P. S. Please help the soldiers to keep the mobs away from me.”<sup>17</sup>

Or Mae Bertha Carter, a Mississippi Delta sharecropper who in 1965 decided with her husband to make seven of their children the first blacks to desegregate the white schools of Sunflower County. While not technically an autobiography, author Constance Curry tells much of their story in their own words in her recent account of their experience, *Silver Rights*. Thrown into a situation in which the Carter children, from age seven to seventeen, faced up to four years of “spitballs, name-calling, ostracism, and unceasing harassment” Mrs. Carter described her feelings during the first days of their ordeal.

When the bus pulled off, I went in and fell down cross the bed and prayed. I stayed on that bed and didn't do no work that day. I stayed on that bed until I heard the bus coming back in the afternoon. When they came off one by one, then I was released until the next morning. But the next morning I felt the same way, depressed, nervous, praying to God. I wasn't saying a whole lot of words; just saying “take care of my kids.” After about a month I started easing up a little bit. I had prayed to God so much! I had been going to church and talking about trusting in Jesus, but I never trusted Jesus until my children went to that all-white school. That school sure brought me to God!<sup>18</sup>

Like Mrs. Carter, parents, white and black, had profound effects on their children's racial perceptions, and often offered significant, if not always intentional, lessons in the realities of the Jim Crow South. Sisters Sadie and Bessie Delany were over 100 years old when they recorded their memories of growing up black in turn-of-the-century North Carolina, the daughters of a Georgia slave who rose to become an Episcopalian priest and college administrator in Raleigh, in a 1993 best-seller, *Having Our Say*. Their father provided a powerful role model to both girls in terms of survival tactics in an increasingly oppressive turn-of-the-century racial climate. Like Booker T. Washington, he stressed economic advancement and mutual support as vital weapons in battling discrimination. “So,” recalled Bessie, “Papa would drag us all the way to Mr. Jones' store to buy groceries, since Mr. Jones was a Negro. It not only was inconvenient to shop there; it was more expensive. We used to complain about it, because we passed the A&P on the way...but Papa would say “Mr. Jones needs our money to live on, the A&P does not. We are buying our economic freedom.” So Papa put his money where his

mouth was.” But, his daughters added, “lest you think Papa was some kind of saint, well, he did have a weakness. He did slip into the A&P now and then and buy that Eight O’Clock Coffee, which he was very partial to. So you see, he wasn’t perfect, but Lord, he did try!”<sup>19</sup>

It is not always simple pictures of right and wrong that are conveyed through these life stories. Pauli Murray, herself the author of an extraordinary family saga of her mixed race heritage, was describing the ups and downs of her own life story when she stated that “Great art is not a matter of presenting one side or another, but presenting a picture so full of the contradictions, tragedies, and insights of the period that the impact is at once disturbing and satisfying,” but she could also have been describing those of many other southerners as well.<sup>20</sup> Or to quote Lillian Smith yet again, she once wrote of southern mores: “There is a structural, bony sameness through the region that can be called accurately “the South”; but it is fleshed out in ten thousand different ways – ways often strikingly inconsistent with the “beliefs” that seem inherent in the structure.”<sup>21</sup>

It is often the quirks, the flukes, the unexpected incidents or observations that remind us that racial interactions throughout southern history have always been subject to as many foibles and as much variation as has human nature itself.

Who would expect Henry Louis Gates, for example, to state that there were certain advantages to segregation and things that he and other blacks missed once it was dismantled? In *Colored People*, his poignant portrait of the African American community of Piedmont, West Virginia, where he grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, Gates writes of how much his family missed the Jim Crow railroad cars on which they had to travel to visit relatives elsewhere in the state. “So what if we didn’t feel comfortable eating in the dining car? Our food was better. Fried chicken, baked beans, and potato salad...a book and two decks of cards...and I didn’t care if the train ever got there.” Gates also admitted how much he missed *Amos and Andy*, when it was, during the civil rights era, deemed too politically incorrect and too racially stereotypical and was no longer shown on television. Everybody loved it, he insisted. “I don’t care what people say today. For the colored people, the day they took *Amos and Andy* off the air was one of the saddest days in Piedmont.”<sup>22</sup>

And how shocked students can be to read Anne Moody’s cynical reaction to the March on Washington in 1963, which she attended and where she heard

Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Far from inspired, Moody wrote that she sat on the grass in front of the Lincoln Memorial and "listened to the speakers, to discover we had 'dreamers' instead of leaders leading us. Martin Luther King went on and on talking about his dream. I sat there thinking that in Canton [Mississippi] we never had time to sleep, much less dream."<sup>23</sup> Such passages tell us much about the very human dimensions to the Movement that allowed for such mixed emotions and second thoughts on the part not only of Gates and Moody, but probably many other southern blacks as well.

Other quirks and surprises come from young whites as well. While it probably shouldn't alarm us to realize that some white children were not as "innocent" of supremacist sensibilities as others, the contexts in which they demonstrate their already inherent prejudices are themselves often unexpected and atypical, and as such, provide eminently teachable moments. Thomas Wolfe wrote very matter-of-factly about a rather startling episode in his young life that confirms the deep-rootedness of Jim Crow not long after it was imposed. In 1904, Wolfe was a mere three years old when he accompanied his mother and siblings by train from their home in Asheville, North Carolina, to St. Louis, where Mrs. Wolfe planned to operate a boarding house there for the duration of the World's Fair.

In *The Lost Boy* (a thinly disguised fictionalization of incidents from his youth) Wolfe recounted, through his mother's retelling, the gallantry of his eleven-year-old brother in protecting her on that train ride. When the train crossed from Kentucky into Indiana, she recalled Simpson Featherstone, "that big old yellow, pock-marked darky which your father got to go out with us to St. Louis", who walked into their car from the car behind and "swaggered right down the middle of the aisle, as if he owned the place." Much offended by his "impudence," Mrs. Wolfe tried to suggest to Simpson that he was in the wrong place and should go back to his "own car," but he calmly replied that "I don't have to go back there no more; we's in Indiana now and I can ride anywhere I please."

At that point, Grover intervened and forbade his mother's employee to remain. When Simpson insisted that "it's the law," the eleven-year-old replied, "It may be their law, but it's not ours. It's not our way of doing, and it's not your way of doing either. No, you know better cause you were brought up different." Mrs. Wolfe could hardly contain her pride in her son in retelling the story. "Of

course, like every one, he respected Grover's judgement . . . and he got up, sir, he got right up, sir, without another word" and marched back to his own car, "where he belonged." When a fellow passenger remarked to her that her son was "a remarkable boy," she fully agreed. She concluded the story by stating that the stranger had recognized that "Grover had more sense and character than most grown-ups. And he was right."<sup>24</sup> Grover, it seems, had already fully learned the "dance that cripples the human spirit," much to the approval of all who witnessed his performance.

If Grover fully emulated and demonstrated the values taught him by the adults in his life, and won parental admiration for his courage for imposing southern tradition even beyond the bounds of the South, it was also one's elders who often inspired very different behaviors by whites. Strong role models are mainstays of character education, and autobiographical accounts abound with examples of parents or other relatives credited as the sources of authors' inspiration and moral grounding. Morris Dees is one of those who learned important lessons from his father. In *A Season for Justice*, he writes of working in his father's Alabama cotton fields from the age of 10 alongside 15 or 20 black wage laborers. He admired his father's treatment of African-Americans, noting that "Daddy gave black people something that was even scarcer than money – he gave them respect." He recounted an incident in 1948 when at the age of eleven, Dees carried water to his father's workers. When one elderly black woman, Miss Perri Lee, took a drink, Dees' father not only picked up her hoe and worked her row as she drank, but also made another gesture that much impressed his son.

There were no paper cups. The hands drank from a gourd with a hole cut into its rounded big end." After she'd taken a drink, Daddy traded Miss Perri Lee her hoe for the dipper and took a long drink. There is something about this simple scene, something that it says about my father, that even now the memory brings tears to my eyes. The field hands, all of them black, never thought twice about drinking one after another from the dipper. The white folks had no qualms about sharing the same bottle of Coca-Cola or something stronger. But how many white men in Montgomery County, in the South, in the entire nation for that matter, would have been color-blind enough to do what my daddy did in 1948

– when the Jim Crow laws were at their peak, when there were separate drinking fountains for white and colored?<sup>25</sup>

A generation later, another white Alabamian – this one of far different socio-economic means – learned a similar lesson, though his inspiration came from across the color line. In *All Over but the Shoutin'*, his best-selling memoir of growing up dirt poor in the 1960s and 1970s, Rick Bragg wrote of an incident involving black neighbors: “In the middle of hating and fear, was a simple kindness from the most unexpected place, from people who had no reason, beyond their own common decency, to reach across that fence that so many people had worked so hard to build.”

In 1965, Rick was six years old. His mother was pregnant, sick, abandoned by her alcoholic husband, and unable to do anything for Rick and his little brother. They had hit “rock bottom,” with nearly no food and no resources to turn to. One day there came a knock at the door from a small black boy, whose family lived just down the road. “He said his momma had some corn left over and please, ma’am, would we like it.” Bragg said of their benefactors: “They must have seen us, walking that road. They must have heard how our daddy ran off. They knew. They were poor, very poor, living in unpainted houses that leaned like a drunk on a Saturday night, but for a window in time they had more than us.”

“It may seem like a little bitty thing,” Bragg wrote, “by 1990s reasoning. But this was a time when beatings were common, when it was routine, out of pure meanness, to take a young black man for a ride and leave him cut, broken or worse on the side of some pulpwood road. For sport, for fun.... It was a time of horrors, in Birmingham, in Montgomery, in the backwoods of Mississippi. This was a time when the whole damn world seemed on fire. That was why it mattered so.”

Bragg wrote that they had only seen these neighbors from a distance; in the few contacts they had with them as children, Rick and his brother had thrown rocks at them. He ends this episode on a sobering note: “I would like to say that we came together after the little boy brought us that food, that we learned about and from each other, but that would be a lie. It was rural Alabama in 1965, two separate, distinct states. But at least, we didn’t throw no more rocks.”<sup>26</sup>

Two of the most poignant examples of lessons whites learned from black acquaintances come from two white men, William Styron and Melton McLaurin, whose encounters with elderly African-Americans were, at least in hindsight, cathartic experiences. In 1935, a ten-year-old Styron watched a 99-year old black man named Shadrach wander into his small Tidewater Virginia town – “a black apparition of unbelievable antiquity, palsied and feeble, blue-gummed and grinning, a caricature of a caricature.” In the most memorable of the recollections in his recent memoir, *A Tidewater Morning*, Styron relates the story of this elderly man who as a slave boy in 1850 had been sold from Virginia to Alabama, and then, over eight decades later, had walked all the way back in order to die and be buried on the plantation grounds of his first master. Though little looked familiar to the former slave, his craggy face seemed to respond only to a millpond and local children swimming in it. Bewildered at first by this strange nostalgia for a place in which he had been enslaved and sold away, the young Styron slowly came to understand the reason for Shadrach’s return. In his gazing at the millpond, Styron wrote,

his face was suffused with an immeasurable calm and sweetness, and I sensed that he had recaptured perhaps the one pure, untroubled moment in his life.... I had no way of knowing that if his long and solitary journey from the Deep South had been a quest to find this millpond and for a recaptured glimpse of childhood, it might just as readily have been a final turning of his back on a life of suffering. Even now, I cannot say for certain, but I have always had to assume that the still young Shadrach who was emancipated in Alabama those many years ago was set loose, like most of his brothers and sisters, into another slavery perhaps more excruciating than the actual bondage.... His return to Virginia, I can now see, was out of no longing for the former bondage, but to find an earlier innocence.<sup>27</sup>

Such vignettes speak volumes about the traumas of the southern black experience, and again, do so in ways more traditional history rarely approaches.

Finally, historian Melton McLaurin at UNC-Wilmington has written an extraordinary memoir called *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South*. In Wade, a small crossroads in eastern North Carolina, McLaurin worked

in his grandfather's general store, and in that capacity, came to know local African-Americans who did business there in a way that few white teenagers did in the 1950s. "My appreciation of Wade's blacks as individuals," he wrote, "presented me at an early age with the complex intellectual and emotional dilemmas of segregation."

McLaurin's book consists of a series of character sketches of these individuals, his relationships with each, and how to varying degrees, each of them forced him to make some difficult moral judgments about racism and segregation. One of these was Carrie McLean, "the only black woman I ever heard whites address as Miss, the universal term of respect for all mature white women, married or not." Miss Carrie was a retired school teacher, and "looked and acted every inch a school marm." When she came into the store, she ordered me about as if I were a student, her voice filled with humor and kindness but sharp enough to command my full attention." While he knew Miss Carrie and her husband Jerry better than any other blacks in Wade, McLaurin knew them only on his own terms, seeing them outside their homes, only in the store or around the community. Black homes, he wrote, "remained private – they formed a world of which I knew little. When delivering groceries to black families I was never asked to carry packages into their homes."

"Since I didn't enter black homes," McLaurin continued, "I assumed that they were somewhat like mine and those of my friends. I knew that some poor blacks probably didn't have the furnishings that we did, that their houses were smaller, but if I thought about it at all, I thought that their homes were simply scaled-down versions of my own. Not until I was 17 did Miss Carrie invite me into her home. I will never forget that visit or the impact it had on me." Entering their sparsely furnished kitchen, he saw a rustic room, with wood-planked walls covered by old newsprint. A newspaper photograph of FDR hung on one wall, a picture of Jesus on another, and a cardboard, handlettered sign "God Bless Our Home" on the other.

"Nothing about my relationship with Jerry and Miss Carrie," McLaurin wrote, "had prepared me for this moment... . The emotional impact of her kitchen produced the physical responses one feels as a roller coaster begins its downward plunge: the tightening of the stomach; the quick gasp for breath; the queasy sinking feeling inside. Stunned by the appearance of the room, I searched for

words while bursts of understanding exploded through my brain... . Appalled by what I saw, by the realization that these people whom I admired had so little, I wanted to somehow disappear from the scene, to sink through a crack in the floor and avoid this confrontation with reality. I felt as if I had invaded their privacy and discovered some long-kept secret, which I had." McLaurin concludes this story by saying, "My relationship with [Jerry and Miss Carrie] remained unchanged, but the visit to their home had confirmed my growing suspicions that I could not become a part of what had been, that I could never completely accept the racial etiquette that had been an essential reality in the world of my father and grandfather. It thus made inevitable my final rejection of the segregated South."<sup>28</sup>

Neither McLaurin's experience nor those of the other authors I've cited can be considered as typical or representative of most southerners, black or white. One does not read autobiographies for the "typicality" of the lives they reveal. It is the uniqueness of their stories, their situations, their viewpoints, and their voices that make them so revealing, so compelling, so engaging. Yet greater truths emerge from these individualistic voices. Ralph Ellison once observed that autobiographical works both emerge from history and allow us access to it. "One of the reasons we exchange experiences," he wrote, "is in order to discover the repetitions and coincidences which amount to a common group experience."<sup>29</sup>

In a provocative account of growing up black in early 20th century Alabama entitled *South to a Very Old Place*, novelist Albert Murray noted: "The ironic thing about these two great hyphenate minorities, the Southern-Americans and the Negro-Americans, confronting each other on their native soil for three and a half centuries, is the degree to which they have shaped each other's destiny, determined each other's isolation, shared and molded a common culture. It is in fact impossible to imagine the one without the other and quite futile."<sup>30</sup>

It is indeed, and the interaction and interdependency of each race on the other are themes that come through in all sorts of ways in the autobiographical work of southerners. Yet equally as prevalent – and certainly evident in the works I've cited this morning – is the tremendous gulf that separated black and white worlds for so much of our southern past. It is not then simply our "common group experiences" that we extract from this rich array of self-revelation. No two of these authors, black or white, experienced slavery, Jim

Crow, or the civil rights movement in the same way, and the sheer variety of what they witnessed, felt, responded to and were ultimately shaped by leaves students with a far more sophisticated sense of the complexity and the diversity in their own and their region's past.

For high school or middle school students, exposure to this vast range of both issues and viewpoints may prove perplexing. But the issues raised by these very intimate and human stories serve to broaden the ways in which character education can infuse the study of history, of literature, and of life. Jamil has noted: "The humanities promote empathy. What better way to know about the other than to walk in her shoes, see the world through the eyes of another, to find common connections in tragedy, pain, and joy."<sup>31</sup> And how better to understand our own identities as Georgians, as southerners, and as Americans than to read how others have wrestled with their own identities as such.

To give Lillian Smith the last word, what she once wrote as the foreword to a particular black memoir applies to southerners' life stories in general: "Perhaps one reason this book is so fascinating," she wrote, "is that we feel nuances we have been unaware of; we guess at actions we had not dared think other southerners were capable of; we learn that differences between each of us are terribly important to cherish even though we value more and more our common humanity. And we learn this in a subliminal fashion as we listen to this soft voice telling a tale that sends shivers down the spine."<sup>32</sup>

And so it is for all of the other writers, who in soft and not so soft voices, in subliminal and not so subliminal ways, remind us as readers both of our differences and of our common humanity.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Quote from Atlanta Constitution, July 9, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995), Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> "Introduction: American Biographical as Individual Stories and Cultural Narratives," in Albert E. Stone, ed., *The American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1981) 2.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Sayre, "The Proper Study: Autobiographies in American Studies," in Stone, ed., *The American Autobiography*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Hobson, *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Scholarly work on the role of children and adolescence in history includes Joseph F. Keet, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); and Harvey J. Graff, *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Jamil S. Zainaldin, "Building Vital Communities and Strong Citizens: The Character Education Connection," *The Georgia ASCD Reporter – Special Theme Issue on Character Education* (Winter 2000), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, rev. ed., 1961), 96.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-38.

<sup>10</sup> Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (1948; rpt. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 3, 10-12.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell, 1968), 125-26. A number of works deal with the impact of the civil rights movement on young people in the South, black and white. See Palladino, *Teenagers*, Chapter 11: "The Content of their Character: Black Teenagers and Civil Rights in the South," 174-89; Ellen Levine, *Freedom's Choice: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993); and Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis, Vol. I: A Study of Courage and Fear* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); and

<sup>12</sup> Morris Dees, with Steve Fiffer, *A Season for Justice: The Life and Times of Civil Rights Lawyer Morris Dees* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 87-88. Anne Moody too describes a strong emotional reaction to the church bombing in Birmingham. See *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 316-19.

<sup>13</sup> William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely, eds., *Narratives of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself* (New York: W.W. Norton, A Norton Critical Edition, 1997), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945), 272.

<sup>15</sup> William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1941), 126-27.

<sup>16</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1970), 151-53.

<sup>17</sup> Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, abridg. ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) 91.

<sup>18</sup> Constance Curry, *Silver Rights* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1995), 42-43.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah L. and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years* (New York: Kodansha America, Inc.), 97.

<sup>20</sup> Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (1956; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), Foreword by Patricia Bell Scott, vii.

<sup>21</sup> Lillian Smith, "Introduction" to 1966 edition of Ely Green, *Ely: An Autobiography* (1966; rpt. Athens: University of Georgia Press, xxxi.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 19, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 307.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Wolfe, *The Lost Boy* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1992), 40-42. This represents the original text of a "novella" written by Wolfe in 1937, and first published, in abbreviated form, in 1941.

<sup>25</sup> Dees, *A Season for Justice*, 67-68.

<sup>26</sup> Rick Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin'* (New York: Pantheon, 1997),

<sup>27</sup> William Styron, *A Tidewater Morning: Three Tales from Youth* (New York: Random House, 1993), 73.

<sup>28</sup> Melton McLaurin, *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 146-54. For comparative analysis of McLaurin's and Moody's books, see Lynn Z. Bloom, "Coming of Age in the Segregated South: Autobiographies of Twentieth Century Childhoods, Black and White," in J. Bill Berry, ed., *Home Ground: Southern Autobiography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 110-22.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Schultz, "To Be Black and Blue: The Blues Genre in Black American Autobiography," in Stone, ed., *The American Autobiography*, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Murray, *South to a Very Old Place* (New York: Random House, 1971), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Zainaldin, "Building Vital Communities and Strong Citizens," 15. See also another lecture from the Governor's Awards in the Humanities series on this website, Thomas Lickona, "Educating for Character: The School's Highest Calling" (1997).

<sup>32</sup> Lillian Smith, "Introduction" to *Ely*, xxxiv.

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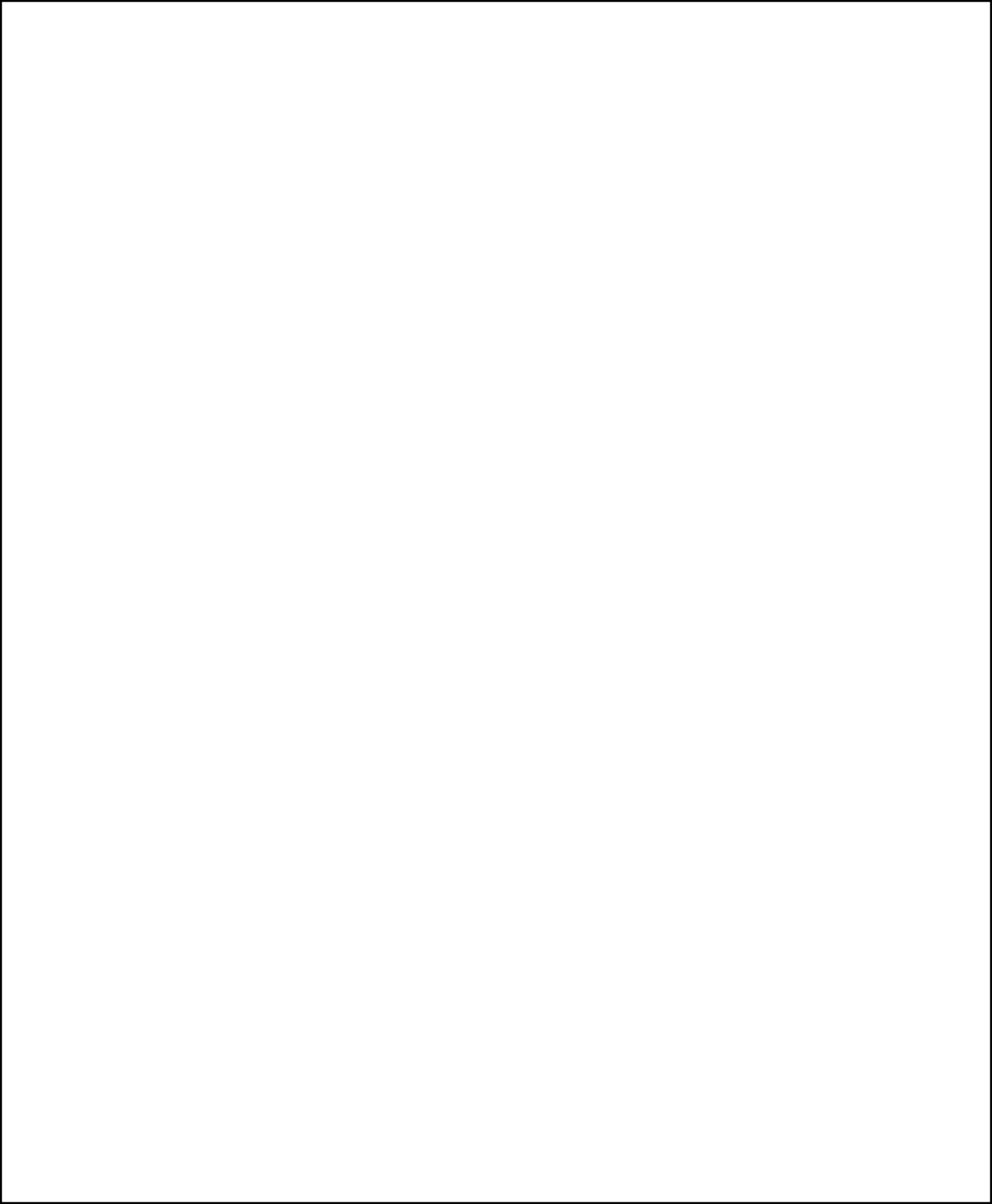
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