

## Of Black Boys and Haunted Houses: Spectrality and Historical Rewriting in Randall Kenan's Short Fiction

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O czarnoskórych chłopcach i nawiedzonych domach: spektralność  
i historyczne przepisywanie w krótkich opowiadaniach Randalla Kenana

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**Abstract.** Since the so-called *spectral turn* of the 1990s, the ghost has been placed at the forefront of critical debates as a conceptual metaphor through which to destabilize the hegemonic discourses and values of modernity. Adopting the theoretical framework of spectrality studies, this paper seeks to interrogate the functions fulfilled by the ghost in “Tell Me, Tell Me” (1992) and “Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*” (2018) by Randall Kenan. The comparative analysis of both narratives will render spectrality as a multi-layered metaphor of great socio-political import that allows for the articulation of transhistorical Black oppression in America and effects a historical revision aimed at the re-inscription of marginalized and silenced voices.

**Keywords:** spectrality, Black oppression, historical revision, Randall Kenan, values

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**Abstrakt.** Od czasu tzw. spektralnego zwrotu w latach dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku duch został umieszczony na czele ważnych debat jako metafora conceptualna, za pomocą której można zdestabilizować hegemoniczne dyskursy i wartości nowoczesności. Przyjmując teoretyczne ramy badań spektralnych, autor artykułu stara się zbadać funkcje pełnione przez ducha w „Tell Me, Tell Me” (1992) i „Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*” (2018) Randalla Kenana. Analiza porównawcza obu narracji przedstawi spektralność jako wielowarstwową metaforę o dużym znaczeniu społeczno-politycznym, która pozwala na artykulację transhistorycznego ucisku Czarnych w Ameryce i dokonuje historycznej rewizji mającej na celu ponowne wpisanie zmarginalizowanych i uciszonych głosów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** spektralność, ucisk Czarnych, historyczna rewizja, Randall Kenan, wartości

Since the so-called *spectral turn* of the 1990s, the ghost has been placed at the forefront of critical debates as a conceptual metaphor through which to destabilize the hegemonic discourses and values of modernity. The seminal works of Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (1997), and Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting* (1998), provide a conception of the spectral intrinsically rooted in socio-historical coordinates. As such, Gordon describes haunting as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known” (1997, p. xvi). On the grounds of this basic notion of the return of the repressed, Brogan singles out the phenomenon of *cultural haunting* that emerged in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and whose ghosts fulfilled a dual function: the revision of the past into the present and the re-construction of ethnic identity (1998, p. 4). This will lead to subsequent inquiries into the deployment of spectrality in minorities’ literature. As such, current theories such as *spectrography* put forth in Joanne Chassot’s *Ghosts of the African Diaspora* (2018) have examined mobilizations of spectrality in contemporary African diasporic fiction and crafted an analytical model with a greater emphasis on trauma and memory, especially as transmitted collectively and inter-generationally (2018, pp. 20–26). Thus, the engagement with the spectral has been framed within a growing tendency among Black writers toward the anti-realist representation of historical processes intended to redress the pseudo-objectivity of master narratives. Since the publication of his first novel, *A Visitation of Spirits* in 1989, African American author Randall Kenan has become one of the foremost proponents of this trend within the Black literary tradition. Deeply influenced by the Latin American Boom authors of the 1960s and 1970s, his fiction has been defined by the blurring of the line that divides realism and fantasy and the integration of the extraordinary into everyday life with a special focus on the Black experience. This strategic use of magic realism has allowed Kenan to tap into the potential of the spectral to subvert the dominant rhetoric of the South, one defined by the values of patriarchy and white supremacy, as well as the realist paradigm that governed its literature during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. His work engages the margins

of the normative, chiefly the African American queer experience, a tradition where he has become a key reference.

This paper is concerned with the examination of two short stories authored by Kenan: “Tell Me, Tell Me” (1992) included in his first collection *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*; and “Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard and Promises*” (2018), anthologized in *If I Had Two Wings* and published in 2020, a year before his premature death. Adopting the theoretical framework of spectrality studies, this paper seeks to interrogate the functions fulfilled by the ghost in these two texts. Through these specters, the realities of slavery and Jim Crow are resurrected. Based on the physical and sexual exploitation of African captives enslaved in the New World, the former fueled the consolidation of the emerging United States as a world power. This, furthermore, established a stern racial order grounded on the oppression of the Black population that will be sustained beyond Emancipation. As such, in the aftermath of the Civil War and the Reconstruction, first the Black Codes and then the Jim Crow regime upheld the control, subjugation and discrimination of the African American community. The comparative analysis of both narratives will render spectrality as a multi-layered metaphor of great socio-political import inasmuch as it allows for the articulation of the transhistorical crisis of the Black condition in America and it effects a historical re-inscription of marginalized and silenced voices that directly appeals to the precarious state of race relations in America today.

“Tell Me, Tell Me” is structured around two plot strands that revolve around the character of Ida Mae Perry, a white middle-class woman, widow of the late Judge Theodore, “Butch,” Sturgis Perry. The primary plotline deals with Ida’s uncanny sightings of the ghost of a Black boy, while the secondary is anchored on the present-day situation of the aging woman, alone and frightened by the possibility of suffering from cancer. These two strands develop alongside one another pitting the past against the present and providing further insight into the racial dynamics and social configuration of the southern town of Tims Creek. The story opens *in medias res* with Ida’s desperation at the latest sighting of the kid in her bedroom and proceeds backward to explain how her situation came to be. This is done through the retelling of five preceding sightings that are mixed in the broader depiction of the widow’s lonely and withering life. Throughout this analysis, I will contend that each of these occasions functions as a structural device and sheds light on the purpose of the specter. Furthermore, these six spectral sightings are organized around two spheres of action: the public and the private, and their progression from the first to the second illustrates the individual and collective dimension of the haunting.

Ida recalls that the first time she saw the youngster was when she was at the dinner of the Friends of the Crosstown County Library, which had among its guests such important figures as the state senator’s and the mayor’s wives. The banquet

takes place in the tellingly named Old Plantation Inn, a venue inspired by the aesthetics of the Old South. The sight of the ghost boy maps the differences between both characters: “They peered at each other, over the distance, through the rain and glass, and Ida – warm, richly fed, impressively dressed, and comfortable – became unaccountably angry with the boy – probably cold, definitely wet, unshod, black – staring at *her*. She flinched” (Kenan, 1993, p. 247). This scene both reproduces and actualizes the structures of the antebellum plantation model where prominent white men and their families thrived on the exploitation of Black labor. By introducing the disruptive figure of the boy in this setting, Kenan is both indicting the benevolent view of slavery that the South often expounded and also ascertaining the hold that the ideology of white supremacy continues to have. This is especially emphasized by showing how the present social roles continue to reinforce the racial order: the former enslavers have now become judges, mayors and senators and the African Americans continue to be, to a larger extent, at the lower stratum of society. This is perpetuated through what Isabel Wilkerson has defined as a caste system – what she calls “the architecture of human hierarchy” – described as “an artificial construction that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of another group on the basis of ancestry and immutable traits” (2020, p. 17).

After this encounter, Ida forgets about the boy who “like a price tag, had been discarded without thought” (Kenan, 1993, p. 247). This willful obliviousness is present in the two subsequent sightings that Ida registers: the first of them, when she is running errands at the Crosstown Shopping Mall and she “paid him no mind” (Kenan, 1993, p. 247), and the third when she drives along the Beauty Parlor. Resembling the first instance, on both occasions, she is obfuscated by her feelings of being “annoyed, angered and invaded” (Kenan, 1993, pp. 247–248), but these emotions are ultimately erased by her disdain. These spectral sightings are inscribed in common places of the public sphere associated with the daily life of the widow, where it is easier for her to evade the boy’s uncomfortable presence. The shift from these public spaces to the private sphere is epitomized in the fourth sighting that takes place when Ida is tending to her vegetable garden, and it initiates a progressive closing of the haunting over her that will culminate with the presence of the ghost in her bedroom. This progression from the public to private spaces, from the social to the personal, parallels a deepening in Ida’s memory that will conclude with the final moment of realization of the boy’s identity.

This cycle of confrontation and disavowal begins to erode in the fifth spectral sighting. One night, when Ida is driving home with her friend Bela after celebrating Dr. Henderson’s retirement party, the kid appears in the middle of the road, Ida gets off the way and crashes into a tree utterly convinced that she has run over him, and yet, “She refused to get out of the car” (Kenan, 1993, p. 240). The relevance

of this spectral sighting resides first in the boy's look of recognition that will initiate Ida's memory cascade and, second, in registering her inability to be moved or changed. Despite the certainty that the youngster is fatally wounded, she never tries to help him, and the few moments in which she dwells on him are soon displaced by her concern for herself. When the police arrive she asks the white officer about the boy but, throughout, her focus is on her wellbeing by assuring the officer that *she* can take it. By the time she arrives home, Ida feels relieved that at least she did not leave the scene or she would otherwise have been harshly punished for a hit-and-run; instead, she already feels "exonerated in her own mind" (Kenan, 1993, p. 244).

The "physical" collision between Ida and the ghost on the day of the accident can be read symbolically as the confrontation of the widow with her past actions, for it is after this moment when the wall built by "Reclamation, doubt; swirling and opaque obfuscation, nagging presentiments, dread fear, deep-rooted arrogance, proprietary pride, all thick and treacherous and ever-present" (Kenan, 1993, p. 265) between the present and the past is finally knocked down and she realizes the identity of the nameless Black boy. Ida is plunged into the memory of a summer day on Emerald Isle in 1937 with her soon-to-be husband Butch Perry and another couple. That fateful day a Black kid accidentally ran into the couple having sex on the beach and was paralyzed by the intrusion. Furious, Butch lunges at him, beats him almost to death and, aided by his friend Rafe, throws him into the ocean to let him drown. Ida's faint attempt to make Butch reconsider never goes beyond her hardly inaudible articulation of his name and the manufacturing of his redemption. This is based on the excusing of Butch's actions – "he is just a bad boy, her Butch: tsk, tsk: Butch, no you shouldn't have" (Kenan, 1993, p. 268) – and on the absolute devaluation of the boy's life – "Just a nigger: Just a nigger" (Kenan, 1993, p. 268).

If Ida's silence speaks of her involvement with and acceptance of her boyfriend's actions, the narrative also stands as a testament to the gender oppression she suffers. In the moments preceding the incident, the narrative draws a dire picture of the power imbalance between Ida and Butch: described as the epitome of white, American maleness, domination is part of Butch's character and surrendering is part of the role that society has prescribed to Ida, for whom "submitting is not a question, only enduring" (Kenan, 1993, p. 266). Defined through the patriarchal model, first of her father – Frank McTyre, a self-made man who provided her with an education and a good marriage – and later of her husband, Ida is a vivid example of the conservative gender roles and values ascribed to white women in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, deeply influenced in the South by the model of the "southern lady" and its adjacent ideology. Despite this, Ida opts for the racial solidarity that will uphold her white privilege and her status in the community. In

this context, the ghostly presence of the boy emerges as a disruptive element that seeks to destabilize her accommodated position.

In the story, spectrality becomes a means through which to bring to light the abuses of the past that have been mangled in the narrative of progress espoused at a regional and national level, and to re-inscribe this violence in the present through the indictment of a representative of the criminal justice system – one that has turned into a major agent in the perpetuation of racial oppression – as well as of white innocence. The most flagrant action in this regard is Ida's reaction to the discovery of the ghost's identity: "She knew who that boy was: finally. *Then she wiped the thought from her mind, like wiping mucus from her nose*, and stepped inside and about her daily life" (Kenan, 1993, p. 244; emphasis added). The abrupt frustration of the expectations created by solving the mystery of his identity is stressed by the absolute indifference and disdain with which the news is received. Far from using the opportunity to reassess and assume responsibility for her actions, Ida discards her memory in the same way she has discarded him every time he unsettled her. This not only demonstrates her dismissive attitude but also serves to denounce the disposability of Black life in America, one of the most powerful critiques put forward in the story that is emphasized through the waste imagery that punctuates each dismissal that Ida makes. Thus, this sighting works as the spectral reiteration of the boy's murder: while back then she was not the actual perpetrator of the crime, her silence and compliance with the norms of a white supremacist social order were equally pernicious. In this second iteration of violence exerted against the Black body, she is the one unequivocally responsible and yet she again opts for silence and inaction. Therefore, she not only failed to avoid the brutal murder of an innocent child in the past, but years later she dejectedly refuses to recognize the identity of that boy to whom she, thus, denies subjecthood, to acknowledge the events and come to terms with her own responsibility.

At this point, the narrative's tone shifts and irony is replaced by an unambiguous evaluation of Ida's behavior that deprives her of any claim to redemption:

But some things you forget to remain innocent; some things you forget to remain free; some things you forget due to lassitude. Moral lassitude, intellectual lassitude, human lassitude. However, Ida had not cared to remember; not to remain innocent, not to remain free, not to spare herself worry, but because she simply did not care. She did not care to remember. (Kenan, 1993, p. 268)

In his assessment of the story, Brian Norman states that "to remember is to accept culpability, even in inaction. To remember is to forfeit white innocence. And yet to forget is to remain hostage to the dead" (2015, p. 145). The final spectral sighting is an accurate representation of this: the ghost appears in Ida's bedroom

and she, alone and in danger of being declared senile, cannot but run away from him. It is at this point that her isolation becomes more apparent: her daughter Carol has grown into a staunch critic of her parents and the order they upheld, and her son, Ida's source of pride and joy, has started his own family away from the South. With the single distant company of Bela, she is left alone in her "plantation-style house," "a house of loneliness" (Kenan, 1993, p. 245) that symbolizes the inevitable decaying southern power and the values it represents.

This sixth spectral sighting, which at once opens and closes the narrative, portrays Ida's entrapment in a vicious circle. Even at this point she holds close her prejudice: she criminalizes the presence of the boy by employing the racist rhetoric that reduces him to a potential robber or rapist, which becomes ironically flagrant in light of past events. The denouement of the story, thus, provides a reflection on haunting and personal responsibility. The last image of Ida running away from a wordless and harmless ghost could lead us to argue that she is perpetually haunted because she has chosen not to give heed to the specter. In this sense, the ghost could be understood as a marker of the protagonist's repressed unacknowledged guilt. This notion of white guilt has been a point of contention in past and current debates on race relations in America. James Baldwin's essay "The White Man's Guilt" (1965) taps into key issues put forward by the story that continue to be relevant to this day. He denounces the existence of what he calls "a curtain of guilt and lies" (1998, p. 725) behind which white America hides. According to him, for whites, the Black body stands in for an "appallingly oppressive and bloody history" (1998, p. 722) which they are unwilling to confront and prefer to relegate to the oblivion of forgetfulness. These attempts prove futile as "the guilt remains, more deeply rooted, more securely lodged, than the oldest of trees" (1998, p. 722). The project of historical revision that he defines as imperative to overcome the legacies of racism would entail an honest reckoning on the part of those vested with the privilege granted and condoned by history, but their paralyzing resistance proves detrimental to the self and the nation as a whole (1998, p. 723). This seems to be precisely the position embodied by Ida and, as such, the haunting exerted by the ghost materializes the inescapable hold of the past in the present.

The ending does not differ much from the beginning, an idea that is textually marked through the use of the same spectral sighting at the beginning and at the end of the story, which approximates the tale to an Afropessimist portrayal. Therefore, while the transformative potential of the ghost is thwarted by Ida's attitude, its mobilization serves to render the multiplicity of ways in which a nation like the United States has, for the most part, chosen to shroud the past in a narrative of progress and colorblindness that refuses to reckon with individual and collective responsibility. This attitude is the most aggrieving on the face of the iteration of these oppressions.



As Norman explains, “literary exhumations reject historical amnesia and equip us to understand injustice in the present” (2015, p. 147). In this context, the silence of the ghost could be interpreted as imposed by the obliviousness of its witness, but also as one that signals that the responsibility to come to terms with the Other should lie with the oppressor, not with the oppressed (Norman, 2015, p. 147). The story, therefore, effects a historical revision of white America’s approach to race relations by recovering through the figure of the specter those who were systematically silenced and foregrounds the precarious state of race relations. Thus, in a parallel process to the unravelling of the Perrys’ past, the narrative raises awareness about the erasure of the African American collective as well as the racial violence its members endured and with which they continue to struggle decades later.

Similarly to the previous story, “Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard & Promises*” weaves two plotlines: the return of Randall, a Black homosexual, to his native Dumplin County, North Carolina, to settle there after working as a professor and magazine editor in the North, and a haunting that develops through different spectral scenes in his newly-restored property. Despite their structural similarities, this story presents a deeper integration of the sightings with space and foregrounds issues of subjectivity that re-signify the events of the previous story. These six spectral scenes appear as photographic snapshots of a parallel story whose fragments acquire meaning as the protagonist immerses himself in the history of the house and the town and are incorporated into the rendering of his personal life. The latter configures an individual that, due to his race, gender and sexuality, is placed in diametrical opposition to Ida. Kenan introduces a character that speaks of matters that preoccupied him throughout his oeuvre, especially sexuality and race, and aims to provide a space of representation for individuals that have often been written out of literature. Autobiographically inflected, Randall’s account of his life provides a first-person rendition of the racism that governed the South of his childhood and stresses the efforts of his family to abate this social hatred with love. Likewise, his account engages with homosexual representation through the depiction of Randall’s relationship with Siddiq, his Egyptian boyfriend twelve years younger than him. This personal relationship confronts the protagonist with his own implicit racial bias, which becomes apparent to him through the stereotypical approach to his lover. This contact with Otherness and the subsequent deconstruction of his Orientalist position will be paramount in his approximation to the ghost.

The narrative is prefaced by a scene that introduces the main specter:

I heard him before I felt his presence or saw him. A panting, a mild groaning as if from pain. [...]. He was not hiding in the curtains, but rather on the floor, crouched, the gossamer fabric poorly hiding his dark skin. And he was so very dark. *I could see him panting, his body not quite heaving*



*but rising and falling as if in distress.* A quilt, made by my mother was folded at the foot of my bed. That is what I used to cover his nakedness and urge him into bed. He relented, eyeing me somewhat panicked, yet soothed by and by. *I petted him, cradled him.* (Kenan, 2021, p. 113; emphasis added)

This opening registers a stark contrast with “Tell Me, Tell Me” since it offers an utterly different approach to the spectral object defined by the openness of the protagonist to the alterity the ghost represents. This is shown at three different levels: in opposition to the silent drowned boy, this specter is both seen and heard first by the narrator, who provides an accurate description of his state, and, in subsequent sightings, by his partner and friends. Furthermore, the narrator’s responsiveness is translated in his physical approach that seeks to provide solace and shelter for the distressed guest. This could be understood as a literalization of what Bianca del Villano has called “(g)hospitality,” that is, the understanding of the ghost as a psychic guest of the witness that disrupts and questions the system it enters (2009, p. 82). This literalization ultimately elevates the presence of the ghost to a prosthetic bodily materiality as means of reinforcing the acknowledgment of his presence that was absent in the previous case. In addition to that, this sighting is placed in diametrical opposition to that of “Tell Me, Tell Me,” concerning the process it sets in motion. Far from the indifference espoused by Ida, the new owner begins a research process about the history of the property that will simultaneously explain and prompt the rest of the spectral scenes. The entirety of this initial spectral scene, furthermore, foreshadows the importance of memory and commemoration in the story. The room in which the specter first appears is crafted as a reproduction of “certain museums” the narrator “visited in the countryside of France” (Kenan, 2021, p. 113). Erased from the community’s history, the specter will be configured as the embodiment of a memory that the region and the nation have resisted commemorating.

In the second spectral scene, Randall observes the Black boy accompanied by an older white man. He decides to seek answers by digging up the history of the house. This process will bring the internal setting of the story, turned into the paradigmatic Gothic trope of the haunted house, in close relation to the broader external space of the South and its history. The expert on the county’s history with whom he contacts turns out to be a British woman “transplanted but fiercely dedicated to the Southern past” (Kenan, 2021, p. 126). This woman is ideologically removed from the type Randall had imagined, someone like his “fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Hollingsworth, a card-carrying member of the Daughters of the Confederacy” (Kenan, 2021, p. 126). Pitted against each other, these two characters seem to stand, respectively, for a sanctioned and upheld, and a silenced and unsanctioned historical narrative. The first appears as a mouthpiece for the narrative of the Lost Cause

and the nostalgia for the Old South, while the second is a foreigner who harbors a deep knowledge of the state's sins and offers a critical view on a generalized lack of interest in history. This permeates her assessment of the realtor who sold the house to the protagonist without informing him about its past: "She views local history as a nuisance. Only interested in MacMansions and her fee" (Kenan, 2021, p. 126), a statement that stresses the process of erasure that characterizes capitalist commodification. The woman tells Randall about the origins of the building: the Holt House used to be an inn run by Quakers that was believed to have been used as a station to "smuggle slaves to freedom" (Kenan, 2021, p. 127) through a man-made canal adjacent to the house. She further explains how the Quakers were "exterminated" for being "staunch abolitionists" (Kenan, 2021, p. 127) and had disappeared from the region by 1860. Her historical testimony, therefore, unearths two elements that have been obliterated from official history: first, the acts of resistance of the enslaved, embodied in their tortuous escape from the plantation, hiding and transportation to the North; and, second, the oppression exerted against the facilitators of freedom, both of which problematize the aforementioned rhetoric of benevolence and harmony that the South espoused during and after the Civil War.

This disclosure provides Randall with a full understanding of the haunting. In symbiosis with this new awareness and, as if stressing his empathetic approach, the haunting becomes more vivid and the couple watches how the spectral forces take hold of their home: "After I found this room the noises and lights started. Outside. Voices really, and the sound of feet trudging around in the yard. Murmurs each to each, and the lights flickered as if by flame" (Kenan, 2021, p. 128). This third sighting evokes the clandestine nature of the runaways and the Quakers' endeavor, and denotes the danger in which their enterprise was carried out as well as the losses they had to endure. These become more evident in the fourth spectral scene that the couple attends to in the attached barn where they see the stage of a long-gone bloodbath:

As a student of modern Russian history, I have always conjured up an image of what the czar's family looked like the moment after their ignoble assassination. [...] The sight in my barn was akin to that. The man in black, a woman in a black dress, three girls all askew, and a boy-soon-to-be-a-man. All expired, all teetotaciously exfunctioned. (Kenan, 2021, p. 135)

This scene shows the retaliation against the Quakers in its full crudity. The comparison with the Russian czars evokes their theoretical privileged position on account of their whiteness, and the use of the term "assassination" points out the political motives behind their murder: to uphold the *status quo* by maintaining racial hierarchy and to deflect and deter any prospects of escape on the part of the enslaved. After this, there is a brief spectral scene witnessed by one of Randall's friends, Ron,

who finds the ghost boy hidden in the bathroom. This represents the concealment that those that would be smuggled went through and its relevance resides in the fact that its presence is matter-of-factly acknowledged by another individual who shares a similar background to the narrator and, thus, it reinforces the idea of being haunted as associated to a particular subject position defined by their shared alterity.

The final spectral sighting constitutes the last stage in the ghost boy's journey to freedom as well as the haunting. This develops in two acts: the first one is a testament to the full integration of the haunting in the life of the narrator; emphasizing the aforementioned literalization of (g)hospitality, Randall wonders "Do ghosts eat?" and proceeds to make "breakfast for two" (Kenan, 2021, p. 138). Indeed, the ghost sits at the table with him, but this unusual image of homely bliss is interrupted by the present reality that rings from the distance of time. The protagonist opens the door to find the uncanny transformation of his backyard into an old landscape dominated by the approach of an eager boatman:

"We need to get a-going. Seen two patrollers on horseback a few miles back, but past Greensboro, I reckon. Can't be too careful now." My friend clambers aboard and looks upon me, expectantly. [...] "Get on in," the boatman says to me, eager to shove off. "I think I'm good where I am," I say. The boatman spits absently. *"It's your funeral, brother. Take your chances. I know they are a-coming."* "I will be fine." (Kenan, 2021, pp. 139–140; emphasis added)

This scene illustrates the complex workings of what has been called the Underground Railroad, a net of connections between different social agents that were organized to transport the runaways away from slaveholding states, as well as the danger and terror surrounding the feat. The exchange ends with a misgiving that is suffused with ambivalence and speaks to the contemporary social panorama. The erroneous identification on the part of the Quaker boatman between the Black subject and a condition of enslavement proves reductionist from today's perspective and highlights the social progress of the African American collective. In the story, Randall is defined by a multiplicity of factors that transcend his race and the institution of slavery. And yet, the history of the region, as symbolized in the haunted house he inhabits, is, as well, an ineluctable factor of definition in the configuration of his subjectivity as a Black man living in a still white supremacist society that resists a sincere exercise of memory. In this sense, the final statement of the Quaker turns into an urgent warning against rampant anti-Black violence and the vulnerability of the Black male to new forms of institutionalized racism. Set in the North Carolina of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ambivalent statement the story makes is that, in America, notwithstanding the racial conquests and achievements, Black life is always at risk and resistance is a struggle in progress.

Since the landmark publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in 1987, African American literature has increasingly leaned toward the spectral mode of representation as a means of articulating a social critique. This has been the case not only in Kenan's oeuvre, but also in myriad other contemporary authors such as Angela Flournoy, Natashia Deón or Jesmyn Ward who, in their works, conjure up the ghosts of families fleeing the terrors of the South in massive waves of migration during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of enslaved mothers, prisoners or murdered youths, all victims of racial violence. Against the traditional association between spectrality and a state of dispossession, these stories mobilize the spectral metaphor as a space of resistance that materializes the haunting hold that the past continues to have in the present. While "Tell Me, Tell Me" offers a crude account of the brutality that defined race relations during the period of segregation, "Resurrection Hardware or, *Lard & Promises*" retreats into the antebellum period to provide a chronicle of escape as one of the few options to lead a free life away from bondage. These narratives put a special emphasis on the subject position occupied by those who stand as witnesses of the spectral objects and their values: if Ida's unraveling ends with her desperately running away from the ghost boy, Randall welcomes another ghost boy in his life, and, unlike her, he is ready to confront and exorcise his ghosts. Ida's dismissive stance complies with her resistance to change and her wishful advocacy for a *status quo* that would safeguard her white privilege. Conversely, Randall's embrace of the ghost seems to connect with his intersectional identity where Blackness and homosexuality mark him as Other. This connection between the spectral and the subaltern ultimately defines the haunted individual as one ethically positioned regarding the social awareness of those inhabiting the margins of mainstream society. Thus, in a broader sense, these stories dramatize the urgency of a reckoning with the legacies of slavery and of a national debate on historical memory and commemoration in a country besieged by what Toni Morrison has called "national amnesia" (1994, p. 257), an ailment that interventions such as Kenan's attempt to redress.

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