

WRITING (IN) THE CONTACT ZONE:
KATE STONE'S *BROKENBURN*

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In the description of her childhood home inserted into the margin of her Civil War diary, the retrospective introduction to *Brokenburn* written in 1900, Kate Stone Holmes inadvertently maps the intricate social and racial relations of the antebellum South. Her choice of structure is itself revealing. After introducing the household consisting of Amanda Stone, her eight children and two of her brothers, as well as the family tutor and frequent visitors, Kate anchors the household spatially with a description of the Big House of Brokenburn and its grounds. From here she outlines the plantation hierarchy with introductions to the overseer's log house, the cookhouse and stables, the Negro slaves divided into house hands and field hands, and finally the family's ponies. "Life seemed so easy and bright before us," she concludes, oblivious even in 1900 to the voices her choice of "us" ignores.

Kate's privileged perspective surfaces as well in the panorama of Brokenburn land she offers to her readership. As Sara Mills has shown, the panorama alone suggests a colonizing gaze, a mastery through description (78). More literally, however, Kate occupies a dominant position in the complex relations of what Mary Louise Pratt designates a "contact zone," a colonial frontier where disparate cultures meet, bond or clash, often in asymmetrical structures of oppression and submission (4):

Looking out from the side gallery across the wide grassy yard through the trees and wild vines that had been spared when the place was cleared for building, one could see the two long rows of cabins facing each other across a broad sweep of thick Bermuda grass, set with an occasional great tree, grey in the winter with long festoons of moss. (4)

Though Kate situates herself neither inside nor outside the Big House, she is unambiguously surveying the terrain from a location

of privilege. Her description of the plantation environment moreover evokes Pratt's significant question, "Where, one asks, is everybody?" (51). The inhabitants of the slave cabins appear only indirectly in the empty landscape as the passage continues with Kate's view of a crooked white path, "beaten smooth by the march of the many black feet that journeyed over it" (4). Her discourse indicates a feminine point of view, for example with the term "spared" in relation to the cutting of trees and the civilizing impulse of her painterly vision and her picturesque prose. Her gaze nonetheless remains colonizing.

Other gazes crisscross the Brokenburn lawn and trees. While the plantation owners survey both slaves' and overseer's domiciles, the overseer's vision expands that of his employer: "standing on his front gallery, he could see what was going on in the 'quarter lot'" (5-6). The passage moves along with a rhetorical emphasis on the overseer's sight, inscribed as well in his title: in reviewing the overseer's duties, Kate three times repeats the phrase "he must see that" (6). Only slaves, of course, are barred from looking. The ten-year-old slave girl Sarah, whose province, Kate explains "was to stand or sit on a low footstool just behind Mamma's chair . . . never spoke unless spoken to and stood like a bronze statue" (10). Sarah remains, in short, voiceless and intended, like a statue, for unilateral viewing. Positioned behind her mistress, however, Sarah can observe Amanda without herself entering Amanda's vision, an ironic twist in the well-designed hegemony of Brokenburn. Blind to such ironies, however, Kate Stone Holmes unearths in "In Retrospect" not just a map of antebellum southern society but also a certain acceptance of the hierarchical layerings of this terrain.

Any break in the boundaries set by established lines of vision led, from her dominant perspective, to discontent and fear. When Amanda and Kate in May, 1861, visit the wife of a new overseer, they immediately recognize a violation of traditional visual contracts: "She seems entirely too nice for a woman, for her fashion is evidently from the planter class She does not look like a contented woman" (15). Along racial boundaries, however, a look from black (man) to white (woman) suggests not just social but also sexual transgressions. In Kate's words from 1863, the year her

family fled from enemy troops to Texas, "as we passed through our quarters, there were numbers of strange Negro men standing around. They had gathered from neighboring places. They did not say anything, but they looked at us and grinned and that terrified us more and more" (197). In short, from the owners' partially blind, but voluntary gaze to the overseer's required and the slave population's forbidden looking, the lines of vision in the Introduction landscape imply the (mis)readings that defined representational negotiations—and explosions—in the Civil War South.

The geography of Kate Stone's text—genre, structure, what is there and what isn't—constitutes an initial bargaining point. The diary form, with its day-to-day recordings, encourages a sequential account; the Stones' westward move, a pioneer framework. In fact, Kate explicitly constructs her text as a pioneer narrative. Writing in Lamar County, Texas, about three months after the Stones' departure from Brokenburn, Kate compares the innumerable fireflies to "the eyes of the departed Indians, come to look again at their old hunting grounds, flashing through the night, looking with scowling, revengeful faces on the changes wrought by their old enemies, the palefaces" (228). Yet Kate realizes that her experience does not fit into the tradition of western conquest. The Indians are, after all, "departed" and their hunting grounds changed; the author's repetition of "fancy" and a brave Indian "fading into thin air" emphasize the impossibility of her narrative project. After all, as she writes in mid-June 1863, finding herself on the road to Texas, "I imagine no party of emigrants ever started with sadder hearts or less pleasure in anticipation" (220).

Conscious of the popular genre of survival literature, with its emphasis on hardship, danger, and curiosities encountered, Kate casts her journey West as a travel notebook. She describes an unsuccessful attempt to get the mules on the wagon to climb up high hills, and the travel diet of fat meat and cold cornbread (221). She informs the reader that the prairie they cross "is called a thicket prairie" and that a "mass of waving purple plumes" is called "French pinks" by "the natives" (226). Even in the sentimental variant of survival writing (Pratt 86), however, Kate seems

uncomfortable and resorts to humor and irony to pose as a romantic heroine lost upon a "bleak cold prairie" and in a sentimental discourse that refers to "balmy sleep" as "nature's kind restorer." Kate and a girlfriend temporarily look for "relief to two distressed damsels," but laughingly give in to the absurdity of the role and the discourse as soon as their male driver turns his back (247). With the added constraint for female writers of travel narratives discussed in Sara Mill's *Discourses of Difference* (77ff)—the events that require physical endurance, the architectural and geological information, the taboo subjects, to mention just a few—Kate Stone had to elasticize and feminize the travel genre.

With Confederate deaths and defeats making sad hearts sadder, Kate recasts her war itinerary as a tragic script. She demonstrates her awareness of genre in reading Lincoln's fate, which "overtook him in the flush of his triumph on the pinnacle of his fame, or, rather, infamy" as "a most complete tragedy" (341); she writes her own descriptions of a defeated South in forms of tragedy, albeit with less explicit emphasis on fatal flaws or overreaching: "We have given up hope for our beloved country and are all humiliated, crushed to the earth. A past of grief and hardship, a present of darkness and despair, and a future without hope. Truly our punishment is greater than we can bear" (340). More seamless than Kate's other genre experiments, her choice of tragedy nonetheless operates within the negotiation of traditional genre options that results in the formal vacillations of *Brokenburn*.

The editor of Kate's printed diary, John Q. Anderson, pushes with his chapter headings towards a structure of descent, if capped with the almost-obligatory final lift so treasured by publishers and, presumably, readers of Civil War journals. For the year of 1861, Anderson chooses the heading "Our Cause is just," followed for subsequent years with "These troublous times" (1862), "Strangers in a strange land" (1863), "Disaster and despair" (1864), "The darkest hour" (1865), "The burden of defeat" (1867), and "The outlook is brighter" (1868). Anderson's structural framework seeks to impose linearity and order on a text that consistently escapes control. In the year of 1865, designated in the heading "The darkest hour," Kate experiences "the happiest hour of my life" (358), though she

attempts to fulfill what linear expectations she might encounter.

Landscape descriptions she obviously considers departures from her narrative chronology, since she brackets them with phrases like "To resume the earlier record" (101) and "But to descend to dry facts" (274). But not just geographical cracks appear in the textual surface. In Kate's record of the Stones' flight from *Brokenburn*, pain disrupts her linear mode in obliging her to postpone a description of the events preceding and immediately following the family's departure. In her own words, "I have not had no heart to write of our horrid flight from home but will some day when anchored somewhere" (189). Other silences break up her narrative intent, as when in April, 1865, she confesses that "I myself am out of time, and so no more scribbling until I am myself again" (327). Kate's failure to conform to conventions of linearity, despite efforts in this direction, might originate in the circular pattern of her own life as a privileged southern lady. Her pastime of visiting, for example, necessitates a circular travel pattern of departure from home and return to home; her war experience merely expands the circle but ends, after the "horrid flight" and the Texas refuge, where it began: at Brokenburn. In a sense, then, Kate inverts the structure of western conquest and in the process questions the geopolitical interpretations of American history as a westward move towards settlement and political power. In a contrary move, however, Kate's concessions to linearity destabilize her text; the sequential and the circular enact the conflicts of the contact zone and, of course, of the author's mental landscape.

The narrative figure of Kate Stone again dramatizes a difficult negotiation process, except for her regional basis. In her own introduction to *Brokenburn*, "In Retrospect," she writes in 1900: "I was born and raised in the South (and to this day I have never been, north of Mason and Dixon's line) as were all my relations before me as far back as we can recall them. . ." (7). Her southern identity, in other words, transcends any bargaining. As a writer, however, Kate seems more fragile. Despite her choice of the relatively private, even feminine diary form, she repeatedly questions her own performance as a speaker and writer: "Mr Dobbs preached a passable sermon, but why should I criticize," she writes in the early

pages of *Brokenburn*. "Could I do as well?" (30). The older Kate Stone, fifty-nine in 1900, shares the younger Kate's insecurity: "How I wish I could write well so that this old life could live in the imagination of my children, but I never had the gift of expression with my pen" (11). Despite agreeing on anxious authorship, the Kate of the Civil War and the Kate at the turn of the century contribute with their differences to the kaleidoscopic writing persona. The younger Kate describes a lavish table or, later, the hardships of hunger, while the older Kate of the introduction adds her own interpretation: "Thinking it over by the light of later experience, I know our cook was a hard-worked creature. Then, we never thought about it" (9). Even the younger Kate constitutes an ambiguous author-function, despite the diary form's avoidance of the experiencing versus the writing I of formal autobiography. During the seven-year span of her diary, Kate rereads the pages of earlier years and thus adds self-interpretation to self-expression. On the last page of the diary, she thus distances herself from the girl who began the journal in 1861: "Looking back to the beginning so many years ago, I realize what an unthankful, wicked girl I was not to be supremely happy" (377).

The woman whose life constitutes the author's writing project, if a separation is at all possible, further complicates the Kate Stone persona. As a woman, Kate must negotiate between the culturally prescribed roles of daughter, sister, belle (in short southern femininity), and wishes for independence and self-determination (in short, feminism). She must also reconcile external views of her character with internal self-interpretations. Amanda Stone's talk of Kate's babyhood and early years thus clashes with the daughter's own beliefs, expressed with youthful exaggeration: "Finding that I have been much beloved all my life, I will try to put away the morbid thoughts that have so often harassed me—the fear that, being ugly and unattractive, no one could ever really care for me, and that I was doomed to a life of loneliness and despair" (34). On a later occasion, Amanda reveals that she considers Kate "the most reserved person she ever knew," a comment that Kate feels "like a blow on my heart . . . I never knew I was reserved" (329). In a sense, then, Kate Stone—southerner, author, woman—embodies

the struggles of the contact zone.

These struggles surface, however, most explicitly in Kate's representation of the Confederacy. Throughout *Brokenburn*, she constructs the South as an ideological landscape, for example by repeated personification. Amidst a discussion of Louisiana deserters, Kate records: "My cheek crimsons as I write thus of our own beloved state, but I cannot believe that she has brought her name to be a disgrace and reproach to her loyal children" (249). The signifiers of femininity and virginity, the burning cheeks of the author, create the South as an uncontaminated moral landscape, the familial imagery simultaneously inserting a nurturing consensus into the ideological space. Kate further writes the South into a field of innocence and victimization by casting the Confederacy as an unborn child (27) or a hunted deer (85). In fact, she composes the South as a rhetorical landscape, precariously unified through a repetition of "we" as well as the reinforcement of totality evident in the subjects of the following April 1863 entry:

Everybody was animated and excited. All had their own tales to tell of the Yankee insolence and oppression and their hairbreadth escapes. All were eager to tell their own stories of hardship and contrivance, and everybody sympathized with everybody else. All were willing to lend a helping hand and give advice to anybody on any subject. Nearly everybody took his trials cheerfully, making a joke of them, and nearly all are bound for Texas. (191)

Though the consensual cracks begin to show at the passage's end, Kate rhetorically glues together the South, a languagescape also dominating her rewriting of antebellum vices into Confederate virtues. "In proportion as we have been a race of haughty, indolent, and waited-on people," she notes, "so now we are ready to do away with all forms and work and wait on ourselves" (110). The use of antithesis and sentence rhythm activates her southern moral script, as does her inclusion of religious space in the consensual southern terrain. "Oh! may the prayers of so many ascending, laden with the same petition, bring God's blessing on our Nation," she records in the "Our Cause is just" section of *Brokenburn* (25). By

emphasizing the deterioration and disfigurement of this moral-religious landscape, she writes southern history as a tragedy, set in motion outside her ideologically privileged space by its implied other: the North.

The southern landscape owes its contours to its adversaries, in *Brokenburn* homogenized into a generic "they" or "Yankees." The North and its undifferentiated soldiers exist in a demonic space beyond negotiation. Kate constructs the northern enemies as diabolic by associating them with chaos and infection, as when she notes that a northern wife must have "contaminated" her husband (177) and that the Yankees are "polluting the waters of the grand old Mississippi" (122). She further establishes the connection between the North and disorder by casting Yankees as the disrupters of the southern moral landscape: "Bowling Green," she writes in February 1862, is "evacuated and shelled and burned by the enemy, and the Northern hordes [are] marching on Nashville" (90). Not only do the Yankees literally disfigure Confederate territory, but also the designation of "hordes," which, she notes elsewhere, "are swarming" within and across southern boundaries (283, 297) associate the enemy with moral transgression and blindness. Disrupting southern moral codes, the North constitutes "the evil one" (130), occasionally represented through Lincoln himself, who, Kate states, has "little chance of a happy hereafter" due to his "sins against the South" (146). In this corrupt space, northerners coexist with blacks in an inhuman coalition, as "detestable creatures" (239) of "malicious" intent (128). The sexual subtext that remains outside Kate's discourse as an empty, but disruptive space leaves traces also in Kate's discussion of "a mongrel crew of white and black Yankees" that make her present "an anxious time for only women and children" (137, 218). Through constant repetition of the Northern textual terrain as a demonic, sexual chaos occupied by an undifferentiated and unnegotiable evil, Kate creates the North as a hyperreal, a simulation more real than the landscape to which it refers and also, as in Beaudrillard, a realm of fatalism beyond any hope of intervention.

Suspended between, inside and across both southern and northern territory, blacks embody the zonal and moral tensions of

Kate's Civil War. They hover, in a sense, forever beyond Kate's representation as an ambiguously positioned, ever-shifting presence, or, quite frequently, absence. As in the introductory panorama of Brokenburn, where only traces of the Stones' slaves appear in the path beaten smooth by their feet, blacks merge, to Kate, with the land they work and occupy. "The Negroes seemed as much ours as the land they lived on," she states at the end of "In Retrospect" (11). She further delegates slaves to invisibility by denying them any will of their own, their desires forever overlapping with those of their masters. When "My Brother" leaves for the front in May 1861, for example, Wesley accompanies him as a body servant, "very proud," as Kate records, "of the honor of being selected to 'go to battle with Marse Will'" (17). In describing a slave whipping witnessed by her younger sister, Amanda, Kate focuses on her sister's emotions, the victim himself occupying an absent center in her July 1861 entry: "Little Sister . . . came back a sadder and a wiser child." The whipping, Kate writes, "seemed to shock and startle Sister greatly. She never before realized how dreadful a whipping was, as she had never seen one administered" (37). Again representing blacks only through absence, Kate praises Dr. Carson because "he raises plenty of fruit and vegetables for everybody on the place," the slave labor as invisible in this sentence as in her sketch of the Carson slave quarter lot. It is, Kate notes, "a great stretch of thick green turf dotted with great forest trees and a double row of two-room cabins shining with whitewash" (41). The slaves, in fact, seem as absent from their houses as from Kate's consciousness and prose.

As the war enhances Confederate defensiveness over slavery, Kate increasingly withholds from blacks a linguistic presence. She refers to slavery through the euphemism of "all our institutions" (96) or through the distance and irony of her term "Corps d'Afrique" (337). In a final demonstration of the black absence from her (linguistic) landscape, she writes at the close of the war: "there is no disorder. Occasionally we hear of a Negro shot down and lying unburied in the woods" (356). Despite the black bodies of her sentence, visible and, indeed, unburied, Kate does not allow for any rupture in her vision of (dis)order which, even in 1865, she reserves

for whites only.

The Brokenburn slave population nonetheless vacillates between absence and a sort of presence, which manifests itself precisely at the moment of its disappearance. In 1863, for example, Kate writes of the family plantation: "The place looks deserted now with empty cabins and deserted fields, and the scene is the same wherever we go" (172). She notices, it seems, the black presence only through absence, as when she praises a house servant after having had to wait on herself for a few weeks following the Stones' flight from the Yankees (211).

Inhabiting a space of invisibility and otherness, blacks do, in fact, constitute a presence in the *Brokenburn* landscape. Not only does Kate devote some narrative energy to blacks throughout the diary, she also grants her racial and psychological other a demonic, inhuman existence. "The boys say there is a runaway about the country," she writes one February night in 1862. "That makes one feel creepy when alone at night. So out with the light and to sleep to dream" (88). Though the runaway slave exists in an anonymous realm beyond Kate's horizon, s/he nonetheless disrupts Kate's nightly routines and grasps at identity if only through negativity. Also the house servant Jane carves for herself a presence in the racial landscape of Brokenburn:

Jane cut a great gash in Lucy's face with a blow from a chair and hurt her severely. Mamma had Jane called up to interview her on the subject, and she came with a big carving knife in her hand and fire in her eyes. She scared me. She is nearly six feet tall and powerful in proportion, as black as night and with a fearful temper. She is a splendid cook and that is why Dr. Buckner has kept her so long. (171)

Like the powerful Jane, the slaves of Kate's diary effect a literal presence in proportion to the fear they induce in the privileged writers of their existence. "We live on a mine that the Negroes are suspected of an intention to spring on the fourth of next month," Kate confesses to her journal in June 1861. Though she removes blacks from subject position and agency through passive voice ("are suspected") and nominalization ("intention to"), her mine metaphor

simultaneously displaces and acknowledges the black presence, further emphasized by the centrality of "the Negroes" in her sentence. "Our faith is with God," she concludes the passage, thus referring increasingly difficult racial negotiations to, she hopes, a biased judge (28).

Kate's oblique identification with blacks further destabilizes the racial hegemony of the contact zone. Possibly benefiting from hindsight, she writes in "In Retrospect": "my first recollection is of pity for the Negroes and desire to help them. Even under the best owners, it was a hard, hard life . . ." (7). In her panoramic view of the Brokenburn property, an other perspective indeed interferes with her own. She mentions, for example, "the weary, hot noonday" and "the welcome dusk," along with "weary hours of plowing, hoeing, clearing land, and long days of cotton picking in the lovely fall weather" (4). In the diary proper, she confesses after her brothers' unsuccessful pursuit of a runaway slave: "I was glad he escaped" (28). Kate's empathy, as well as history itself, might account for the black visibility characteristic of her final diary pages. Here, she admits that freedom for slaves means poverty for herself (335), but lo(o)se(n)s her grip upon her former slaves by granting them a full, if generic visibility. She describes "a number of ex-Negro soldiers [sic], who strutted around in their uniforms and were hard to control" and records a "Negro" taking a stand for her brother Johnny, who came near to killing a black field worker and was mobbed in return: "the Negroes brought him to the house—a howling, cursing mob with the women shrieking 'Kill him!' and all brandishing pistols and guns" (368). Kate's description of racial tension certainly outlines the limits of her racial benevolence and the perceptual and literal violence of black/white relations in the contact zone. In short, the racial landscape of *Brokenburn* occupies a central, if often empty textual space, a complex field of tension and disruption frequently escaping, yet always already determining, the representational negotiations of Kate's journal

The concluding diary section written in 1868, intended to communicate the postwar (in)activities of *Brokenburn's* main characters, Kate reserves for members of her own class and race. "Let us hope that now the current will change and success will be

our portion," she notes, "as the outlook is brighter than for three years" (376). As in the retrospective introduction, this sentence and the context in which it appears ignores the black population of Rose Hill, the Stones' temporary quarters away from the flooded Brokenburn. Instead, Kate focuses her representational energies upon acquaintances, friends, and, above all, on relatives, arranged in a structure mirrored by "In Retrospect." Beginning with more distant friends and neighbors, Kate zooms in, for her conclusion, on Uncle Bo, "My Brother," and other male siblings, to end with her mother, Sister, and above all herself. Where the introduction thus arranges the cast of characters in a structure of declining importance, "The outlook is brighter" uses one of ascent, the top positions reserved for the Stone women. The mirroring and reversal of introductory features in the conclusion exemplify not only the formal negotiations characteristic of Kate's diary text, which she positions someplace between a pioneer notebook, a sentimental survival account, and tragedy. Kate's final chapter suggests as well the successful negotiation of and by herself as a woman, writer, and despite Confederate defeat, as southerner. The twenty-seven-year-old diarist had by 1868 paid a price for her position of dominance, which, as her discourse suggests, resembles something of a pedestal:

It has taken trouble to teach me my faults, and how earnestly I try now to enjoy instead of repine, to be thankful instead of fault-finding. I will try always to see the silver lining of the cloud. All my life I have been surrounded with love and care, far more than I deserved, and I will try in the future to be more worthy of the blessings that brighten my pathway. (378)

As the clichés of this final passage would indicate, Kate usurps a space from which to represent herself by conforming to ideological and linguistic practices that contained southern women within domesticity, cheerfulness, patience, and morality. "So this is the end—shall I ever care to write again?" she asks immediately prior to the editor's FINIS. The diarist's subsequent silence not only completes the list of southern women's virtues and answers her own question but hints as well at the exhaustion resulting from

living within the contact zone and, not least, the negotiations of the women writing it.

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