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Author(s): Mae Miller Claxton

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Migrations and Transformations: Human and Nonhuman Nature in Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path"

by Mae Miller Claxton

Works by southern female writers have often been categorized as "regional," suggesting that their subject matter is limited, circumscribed, "domestic." In her essay "Place in Fiction," Eudora Welty characterizes the term "regional" as "careless" and "condescending" (*Stories* 796). She argues instead that most writing could be called "regional" because the writer writes from the place he or she knows (796). In 2015, more than sixty years after Welty's essay was written, our views of "place" and "region" have changed dramatically, influenced by issues ranging from local food production to the global environmental and human devastation of war. Karen Halttunen, in her 2005 presidential address to the American Studies Association, mentioned Welty's discussion of place in fiction in her call for more attention to fields of inquiry such as bioregionalism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and ecofeminism. Halttunen believes that "space and place have never been more analytically important than they have recently become in the humanities and social sciences, demonstrating that globalization—with its acceleration of border crossings—has actually made place more important, not less" (2). She concludes, "In literature, the new

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regionalism and the booming field of ecocriticism foreground what had been considered mere background or setting, taking seriously Eudora Welty's affirmation that 'fiction depends for its life on place,' and exploring new relationships between natural places and human culture" (2). In "A Worn Path," one of her best-known stories, Welty creates a transformative space through which her main character moves. As Phoenix journeys through the forest to Natchez, her path takes her from a nonhuman natural world into a space impacted by human issues of race, gender, and class. The contrast between human and nonhuman introduces layers of complexity into the seemingly simple story of an old African American woman seeking medicine for her sick grandson. In "A Worn Path," Welty creates a story that contrasts the cruelties and injustices of human nature with the balance and order of nonhuman nature. Readers are left to wonder what kind of medicine can provide healing to the world Phoenix journeys through.

Throughout her fiction, Welty displays a complex awareness of the relationships between place and the human and nonhuman communities that inhabit these spaces. The repeated emphasis in Welty's fiction on the human community intersecting with the nonhuman community rather than the human community dominating the nonhuman community displays her awareness of the differences between what Patrick D. Murphy calls "things-in-themselves" as opposed to "things-for-us" (4). Scholars have long associated Phoenix Jackson, the main character in "A Worn Path," with the natural world instead of the large town she travels toward. In her discussion of Welty's photographs in *The Welty Collection: A Guide to the Eudora Welty Manuscripts and Documents at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History*, Suzanne Marrs argues that "setting does far more than lend credibility to the story's action. The natural world of the Trace is Phoenix's home, and its qualities are to some extent her own. Her life has been relatively untouched by 'progress.' She is not removed from nature but lives naturally" (84). Ruth Vande Kieft discusses Phoenix's "sense of familiarity with nature—the ease with which she talks to the birds and animals" (29). She concludes that Phoenix is, "like Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, a completely and beautifully harmonious person—something one does not often find in the fiction of either Eudora Welty or Faulkner" (29). These scholars are correct in their assessments of Phoenix, but connecting women, especially African American women, with nature can lead to dismissive stereotyping. In fact, even with the challenges she faces as an elderly African American woman,

Phoenix successfully achieves her goal in the story, negotiating both nonhuman and human communities.

Ecofeminist scholars have debated at length about the problematic association of women with nature, especially African American women, who often provide a connection to nature, or magic, or God in films and books. Noël Sturgeon explains, "A constant and ongoing focus of ecofeminist theorizing, as well as critiques of ecofeminism, has been how to conceptualize the special connection between women and nature presumed by the designation 'ecofeminism'" (263). While some ecofeminists discuss traditional women's cultures as "less alienated from nature and more in concert with the processes of ecosystems," other scholars see the connection of women and nature as socially constructed (Griffin 215). Ursula K. LeGuin writes in "Women/Wilderness," "Civilized Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other—outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and the wilderness, to be used as I see fit" (45). Like LeGuin, many believe that in a patriarchal society that assumes the superiority of Western culture to nature, women and nature will be equally degraded (Sturgeon 263).

In her story, Welty creates a character whose connection to nature provides her with wisdom and knowledge that the other humans in the story do not possess. At the same time, she vividly portrays Phoenix's difficult history as an African American woman in Mississippi during this time. The story begins, "It was December—a bright frozen day in the early morning" (*Stories* 171). A very old, small figure trudges across the landscape "moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock" (171). Phoenix carries a cane, which she taps on the earth in front of her with a noise "that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird" (171). Here, Welty identifies the season and compares Phoenix's movement to both a clock and a bird. The natural world intersects closely with the human crossing slowly through it. The time of year is also significant. A mild day in winter could actually have been an easier time to take a journey, a fact that Phoenix knows well. She says, "Glad this not the season for bulls . . . and the good Lord made his snakes to curl up and sleep in the winter. A pleasure I don't see no two-headed snake coming around that tree, where it come once. It took a while to get by him, back in the summer" (173). Even though

she is wary of the snakes, Phoenix asserts that they belong to “the good Lord” and recognizes that they have a place in the natural world, just as she does. Even in her comparison of Phoenix’s movement to the “balanced” pendulum of the clock, a “human” instrument of time, Welty’s depiction of Phoenix’s relationship with these animals suggests a comfortable coexistence, not human domination of the nonhuman.

Welty’s focus on the “worn path” also indicates an ordering of nature. This is not wilderness but space impacted by humans. “A Worn Path” is a path that has been well traveled, more than a trail through the woods but much less than a superhighway used by hordes of people speeding by in their vehicles. Trails, traces, and roads have symbolized change and transformation throughout human history. An animal trail through the forest becomes a worn path that becomes a road. A road suggests human migration, a search for something better, but roads also signify development and a transformation of nature in the service of humans. A path is an in-between state. It orders nature but still allows intimate interaction with the plants and animals encountered along the way. Elaine Orr writes that Phoenix is “both simple and wise, marginalized within the social fields she traverses and yet mysteriously beyond the boundaries drawn by her social superiors” (61). She travels her own path but as the story continues increasingly encounters human boundaries.

Even the woods that Phoenix travels through tell their own stories of human intervention. Phoenix walks “along a path through the pinewoods” (*Stories* 171). She comments later, “‘Up through pines,’ she said at length. ‘Now down through oaks’” (172). By the time of Welty’s story, the forests in Mississippi had undergone a huge transformation, beginning with human impact by the Native Americans. They often used fire for clearing or hunting purposes although the impact of Native Americans on the forests is difficult to determine (Fickle 8–10). After exhausting the fertility of the fields, they often moved villages to new locations. The Native American population increased until the age of the Mississippian culture with the most development between about 1200 and 1600 A.D. in northeast Arkansas, in the Delta, and around Natchez (Fickle 7–8). Three mounds near Natchez mark the religious and political capital of the Natchez Indians in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (“Grand”). Phoenix walks through a landscape impacted by Native Americans who lived in the region and used the natural resources surrounding them.

Welty was also very much aware of recent environmental abuses of these resources. In 1941, when she published her story, forests were experiencing a period of regrowth after terrible devastation around the turn of the twentieth century. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the forest would have been seen mostly as an impediment to settlement and agriculture. New settlers would have spent much of their time clearing out trees for their fields and homes. The timber industry did not turn its eye to Mississippi until after railroads opened up much of the state after the Civil War and new technology permitted money to be made in transporting logs to national markets. Welty knew about the devastation of Mississippi's forests during this period. In an interview in 1994, she explained that although Mississippi is "really a pretty well-endowed state by nature," many of these natural resources had been misused (personal interview). Discussing the logging south of Jackson, she commented, "They had squandered the riches of the state a good while ago. They cut down all the trees" (personal interview). As Welty noted in the interview, most of the forests in the state were cut over completely by the late 1920s, leaving a bleak and depleted landscape (Fickle xii).

By the 1930s, Mississippians were beginning to realize the consequences of their actions (Fickle 117–118). While they were left with devastation, many large corporations had taken their wealth and departed to new stands of timber. With her travel all over Mississippi for the Works Progress Administration in 1936, Welty would have come into contact with new government programs promoting the regrowth of the forests, fire control, and conservation efforts. She contributed three photographs to *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State*, published in 1938, which describes the rise of large-scale lumber and timber-product industries in southern Mississippi's Piney Woods. The *Guide* notes that "with the exhaustion of its virgin timber reserves, the Piney Woods region is faced with the problem of returning either to small-crop cotton farming or to such things as cattle and fruit raising, and the making of pulpwood products" (76). In her walk through the woods, Phoenix encounters a "natural landscape," but it is a landscape impacted by significant cultural and historical forces, never static and always changing.

As she continues to walk the path, Phoenix talks to the nonhuman animals and plants she encounters on the way, naming them and asking them respectfully to let her go her way in peace:

Now and then there was a quivering in the thicket. Old Phoenix said, "Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons and wild animals! . . . Keep out from under these feet, little bob-whites. . . . Keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don't let none of those come running my direction. I got a long way." Under her small black-freckled hand her cane, limber as a buggy whip, would switch at the brush as if to rouse up any hiding things. (*Stories* 171)

Most of the animals would be familiar inhabitants of the woods surrounding her, but Phoenix also mentions the "big wild hogs." These animals could be truly dangerous, animals domesticated by humans turned "wild."

Phoenix addresses the plants in a similar fashion. When her dress gets caught in a thorn bush, she talks directly to it: "Thorns, you doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir. Old eyes thought you was a pretty little *green* bush" (172). She does not resent the thorns, knowing their place in the woods, but she wants to keep moving. She also encounters a spring flowing through a hollow log in a ravine and stops to drink from it. The spring is ancient beyond even Phoenix's knowledge: "Sweet-gum makes the water sweet. . . . Nobody know who made this well, for it was here when I was born" (174). Phoenix realizes that the woods can be treacherous but seems to understand these nonhuman communities. She displays an awareness that the natural world was here long before her birth and will continue long afterward.

In contrast to the meditative quiet of this journey on a sunny winter morning, Welty uses the physical landscape to tell a human story of centuries of racial oppression. As Phoenix walks the path, Welty documents her history along with the history of oppressed minorities in Mississippi. Phoenix complains as she climbs a hill, "Seem like there is chains about my feet, time I get this far. . . . Something always take a hold of me on this hill—pleads I should stay" (*Stories* 172). Ruth Weston comments, "Not only gothic entrapment but also the historical reality of slavery in the South is suggested by Phoenix's own image for her weariness" (30). Nancy K. Butterworth expands on this idea, asserting that Phoenix's age spans the history of African Americans from antebellum times to 1940 (167). Butterworth explains that "[v]iewing Phoenix as an emblem of her people also helps to explain the title, 'A Worn Path,' which seems to imply that others have trod and retrod the same arduous path before

her" (169). The chains of slavery trapped African Americans both literally and symbolically into a specific place while European Americans experienced more freedom in their ability to migrate and settle undeveloped areas. Phoenix's "chains" on her journey are her race, age, and poverty, but they prove to be barriers she can overcome.

Welty's story of racial oppression reemerges when Phoenix encounters more tangible signs of humans impacting the landscape. First, she must go through a barbed-wire fence, a much more radical ordering of nature than the worn path through the woods: "At last she was safe through the fence and risen up out in the clearing. Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field. There sat a buzzard" (*Stories* 173). This scene can be read several different ways. As a former slave, "too old at the Surrender" to go to school, Phoenix would probably have worked on neighboring cotton plantations (178). Her opportunities were limited. In the early 1800s, and especially after the Indian Removal Act of 1830, settlers moved west to Mississippi and took the land from the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, often bringing their slaves with them to clear large tracts of land. Joel Martin writes of the removal, "The expulsion of tens of thousands of Indians from the South drastically changed the region, not least by bolstering the strength of state's rights and providing new land for the expansion of cotton culture. It was to these lands that many of the children of planters in Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Tennessee moved with their African-American captives" (134). The buzzard suggests the death and removal of the Native Americans from their homelands and certainly the exploitation of the African Americans who were subjected to slavery and, after the Civil War, sharecropping and segregation.

There is also a more direct sinister connection. The big dead trees that look like "black men with one arm" remind readers of the prevalent lynching that would have been a source of fear through all of Phoenix's life (173). From 1882 until 1968, a total of 539 black people were lynched in Mississippi, and, of course, many more deaths were never recorded ("Lynching"). These statistics would include both male and female lynching victims. The mention of "one arm" in Welty's story also possibly hints at the horrible custom of cutting off body parts as souvenirs. Phoenix would have lived in an environment of fear, where the beautiful pastoral landscape could be the setting for a grim purpose.

Several scholars have explored the difficulty of applying ecocritical readings to the writings of African Americans. In his article "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery," Michael Bennett argues that for most nature writers, the "wilderness" is something to escape to. For slaves, the domesticated landscape of plantations was something to escape from. Frederick Douglass's time in the city of Baltimore, for example, provided him with opportunities to learn to read and write, a more secure home with good food and clothing, and, ultimately, an easy springboard to escape to freedom. Bennett also discusses the pastoral settings of lynchings that often functioned as public picnics: "Distrust of rural environments is still deeply associated with images of southern violence and lynchings. The historical memory of slavery and its aftermath includes a forest of trees that were used to enforce southern lynch law, as we are reminded in cultural images from Billie Holliday singing 'Strange Fruit' to Speech, of Arrested Development, rapping about 'trees my forefathers hung from' in 'Tennessee'" (207). This connection is represented by the presence of the buzzard in Welty's story. As a symbol of nonhuman nature, the buzzard has an important place in the ecosystem. In this case, however, it suggests unnatural death. Certainly, Welty is not creating a pastoral Eden. Phoenix appreciates the beauty of this world, but she also recognizes its dangers. Passing from the old cotton into the field of "dead corn," Phoenix encounters something "tall, black, and skinny there, moving before her. . . . She shut her eyes, reached out her hand, and touched a sleeve. She found a coat and inside that an emptiness, cold as ice" (*Stories* 173). Again, humans are frighteningly associated with death. The reader is left with repeated images of skinny black figures turning in the breeze.

Welty's story reminds us that African American women were susceptible to violence, rape, and death. Susan Griffin describes the connection between *rape* as sexual violation and *rape* as ecological destruction, as in the rape of a forest: "Neither rape, nor the word *woman* can be understood without an understanding of the social construction of gender, nor can either be fully understood apart from ecology. The racist mind, the misogynist mind, the mind afraid of nature and which denies natural limitation and mortality are often the same mind. The historical convergence of these attitudes is not a coincidence (225). Griffin links rape to lynching as an act of domination and aggression rather than as "an expression of an irrepressible, uncensored sexuality" (224). In "A Worn Path," Welty closely links violence against nature with violence against women.

This link becomes most clear when Phoenix finally meets a real human being, a young hunter who helps her up after a strange black dog "came at her" and she tumbles into a ditch (*Stories* 174). The hunter seems pleasant enough at first, showing Phoenix the bobwhite he has killed. Earlier in "A Worn Path," Phoenix talks gently to the "little bob-whites": "Keep out from under these feet, little bob-whites," and Welty writes, "The quail were walking around like pullets, seeming all dainty and unseen" (171, 174). Unfortunately, the hunter does see them: "He patted the stuffed bag he carried, and there hung down a little closed claw. It was one of the bob-whites, with its beak hooked bitterly to show it was dead" (175). Today, the northern bobwhite quail is seriously endangered largely because of loss of habitat (Dimmick, Gudlin, and McKenzie). Phoenix's attitude toward the bobwhites suggests relationship and an acknowledgment of their place in the environment as equal to hers. The hunter, on the other hand, exerts his power over the nonhuman community with his gun.

He clearly identifies Phoenix with the nonhuman community as he next turns his gun on her, demonstrating his power over her: "and then he laughed and lifted his gun and pointed it at Phoenix. She stood straight and faced him. 'Doesn't the gun scare you?' he said, still pointing it. 'No, sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done,' she said, holding utterly still. He smiled, and shouldered the gun" (*Stories* 176). In Mississippi during this time, black people were still killed with few repercussions if their murderers were white. Phoenix has lived in this kind of violent environment her whole life and understands that she has no way to defend herself. The hunter advises her to "stay home, and nothing will happen to you" (176). Welty does not include rape in this scene, but domination and aggression characterize the interaction between the young hunter and Phoenix. The path has become a site where violence and even death can occur. When the hunter points his gun at Phoenix, he confronts her as Other, conflating her with the quail.

In the fall of 1940, when Welty wrote "A Worn Path," Mississippi struggled with its violent past even as it faced global turmoil as the war escalated in Europe. Welty wrote a letter to Katherine Anne Porter in August 1941 stating her belief that "undigressing malice" had been set "loose in the world," a "malice" particularly destructive for the women, children, and environment in the path of rampant militarism (qtd. in Marrs, *Eudora* 86). Ecofeminism emerged from the nonviolent direct action movement against nuclear power and nuclear weapons, and ecofeminists have equated aggressive sexuality, militarism, and

mistreatment of the environment (Sturgeon 262; Christiansen 240). Karen J. Warren argues in her essay "Toward an Ecofeminist Peace Politics" that "one can begin to see violence as a sort of *power play* whereby there is dominance, conquest, manipulation, mastery, or other forms of social control exercised by some (individuals or institutions) over others or the nonhuman natural environment" (179–180). Welty creates an allegory of the impending war in the scene with the hunter, who asserts his domination over Phoenix and the nonhuman world. Phoenix was already a grown woman by the end of the Civil War and had lived through World War I. "A Worn Path" includes multiple intertwined narratives connected to violence and war.

Phoenix, however, perseveres in her journey. Told by the hunter to "stay home," she replies, "I bound to go on my way, mister" (*Stories* 176). In addition to asserting her physical independence in choosing to keep moving on the path, Phoenix also asserts economic independence as she distracts the hunter and steals a nickel from him. She feels a pang of guilt, saying, "God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing," but the present she is able to buy for her little grandson when she reaches her destination fills her with joy (176). In fact, Welty includes two scenes in her story in which Phoenix obtains money by subterfuge, first with the hunter and later with the nurse in Natchez. Phoenix probably has gone for long periods without any money at all living far "out in the country" (171). She and her neighbors would have shared and bartered for what they needed. Self-sufficiency was necessary for survival. It is only when Phoenix reaches Natchez that she has a need for money. Significantly, the hunter lies to her, claiming he has no money with him, but she takes the nickel anyway. Phoenix also later talks the nurse into a nickel when she offers her a few pennies. The two encounters indicate the economic relationship between whites and blacks during this time. White people were content to exploit black people while returning just a pittance and labeling it as "charity."

Toward the end of her journey, Phoenix finally comes to a real road. This is the historic Natchez Trace, symbol of American pioneerism and Manifest Destiny and a setting for many of Welty's stories. She describes it: "Deep, deep the road went down between the high green-colored banks. Overhead the live-oaks met, and it was as dark as a cave" (*Stories* 174). The Natchez Trace began as a trail used by animals, Native Americans, and later settlers moving west into the new territory bought by the United States in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase. Dean Bethea calls the Trace a "Trail of Tears"

for African Americans as a former transportation route for cotton and for the newly arrived slaves who would be sold to nearby plantations. He continues, "Having Phoenix arrive in Natchez sets a host of negative historical associations reverberating throughout the story. Mississippi's first capital, Natchez was once the apotheosis of the King Cotton, slave-built South, a territorial hub where by 1850 two-thirds of the nation's millionaires lived and where at least forty mansions had been erected by 1860" (36). Bethea notes the irony that Phoenix is "walking through the midst of a material opulence she once labored to build, against her will" (37). Natchez is a symbol of an American pattern of exploitation and domination of African Americans and Native Americans in order to achieve wealth.

Welty was well aware of Natchez as a symbol of oppression. She photographed the first Natchez Pilgrimage in 1933 and photographed several of the large plantation houses in 1935–1936 (Marrs, *Welty Collection* 83, 97, 105). One photo is entitled "*Home open to the public/Dunleith, Natchez; The First Garden Pilgrimage*" (Welty, *One* 48). The image shows a large two-story columned mansion with people dressed in antebellum garb picturesquely displayed outside the house. A man with a film camera captures the scene. The photograph exposes Natchez's manipulation of history to obtain tourist dollars by trying to recapture a time when one race held all power and wealth while Native Americans were defrauded of their land and African Americans were forced to work for their white masters.

Welty continues to portray these issues in *The Robber Bridegroom* and many of *The Wide Net* stories, illustrating the westward movement on the Natchez Trace and the profligate use of natural resources in the American quest for prosperity. The Trace serves as a link for African Americans who traveled it as slaves to reach new lands for growing cotton along with the Trail of Tears for Native Americans exiled from their lands in the early decades of the 1800s. The Natchez Indians were exterminated even before the exploitation of the slaves. In "Notes on River Country," Welty writes that the French "one day, in a massacre for a massacre, slew or sent into slavery at Santo Domingo every one of its namesakes, and the history of the nation was done in 1773" (*Stories* 767). The Natchez fell prey to imperialistic conflicts among European nations long before the Indian Removal Act of 1830 that sent the Choctaw and Chickasaw to lands in the West. Like the forests, Native Americans and African Americans were viewed as resources to be used up and then discarded.

Phoenix finally reaches the “Celestial City” of Natchez at the end of the story. Welty describes her arrival: “She walked on. The shadows hung from the oak trees to the road like curtains. Then she smelled wood-smoke, and smelled the river, and she saw a steeple and the cabins on their steep steps. Dozens of little black children whirled around her. There ahead was Natchez shining. Bells were ringing. She walked on” (*Stories* 176). On the other hand, Welty also describes the city as a place alien to Phoenix, disconnected from the natural world: “In the paved city it was Christmas time. There were red and green electric lights strung and crisscrossed everywhere, and all turned on in the daytime. Old Phoenix would have been lost if she had not distrusted her eyesight and depended on her feet to know where to take her” (176). She stops a white woman carrying “an armful of red-, green- and silver-wrapped presents” and asks her to tie her shoes. The woman, who “gave off perfume like the red roses in hot summer,” lays down her packages and ties both shoes tightly (176–177). Although she is kind to Phoenix, the woman reflects a consumerism that Phoenix is almost completely excluded from. The natural world has been paved over and a more artificial one superimposed on top of it. In fact, Natchez could be better seen as Vanity Fair rather than the Celestial City.

Phoenix’s knowledge of time of day and season of year is useless in this setting. Instead, she must trust to memory to find the object of her search, a bottle of “soothing medicine” for her grandson that will help him “get his breath” (178). She knows she has reached the right place when she sees a “document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head” (177). Welty comments in her essay entitled “Is Phoenix Jackson’s Grandson Really Dead?” that Phoenix sees the doctor’s diploma hanging up in his office (*Stories* 817). It is a tangible sign of education that gives his knowledge more credibility than her knowledge acquired through years of living far from a town or city—knowledge of what kind of water to drink and the trees and animals in her world.

Significantly, Phoenix cannot speak in the doctor’s office for a time, to ask for what she has traveled so long to get. Her voice seemed to be fine in the woods as she talked to the plants and animals, but here it fails her. The nurse complains, “‘You mustn’t take up our time this way, Aunt Phoenix. . . . Tell us quickly about your grandson, and get it over” (*Stories* 178). Finally, her memory returns, and she tells the nurse why she has come. The nurse labels her: “‘Charity,’ she said, making a check mark in a book” (179). For the reader,

Phoenix is a heroic individual who has surmounted many obstacles to achieve the object of her quest. For the white people, she is just a check mark.

But Phoenix perseveres even in this alien human landscape. She decides to buy a present for her little grandson from the money she has obtained from white people along the way, a little paper windmill, and take it back to him all that long way "holding it straight up in this hand" (179). And then the journey home begins: "her slow step began on the stairs going down" (179). Phoenix continues her fight for life over death. Threatened by poverty, old age, and even violence and death, Phoenix, a former slave, moves with understanding through the natural world and even negotiates the human world of Natchez. In her essay, Welty describes the image of the African American woman moving across her line of sight that inspired the story: "And her going was the first thing, her persisting in her landscape was the real thing, and the first and the real were what I wanted and worked to keep" (*Stories* 816). Phoenix survives in all of the landscapes and communities through which she passes, both human and nonhuman. The story portrays a more daring kind of heroic quest than the usual search for glory or honor.

As a writer, Welty embarks on a different narrative path in her story, one that emphasizes the importance of all communities, nonhuman and human. Phoenix's goal is healing for a child, not a traditional kind of male heroism. In "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies," Ursula K. Heise writes that in contrast to writers such as Gary Snyder, John Haines, Edward Abbey, and Wendell Berry, who often describe the experience of "single, mostly male individuals encountering wild landscapes or homesteading agricultural ones," ecofeminists, Native Americans, and environmental justice activists have "put far greater emphasis on collective modes of inhabitation, on the ways in which they are shaped by social inequalities, and on the necessity of political resistance in the face of persistent and disproportionate technological and ecological threats, especially to the health of women and minority communities" (384–385). An ecofeminist reading of Welty's story, for example, would note the absent mother and father of the child. Phoenix says, "We is the only two left in the world" (*Stories* 178). The child's mother could be dead, or she could have abandoned her son. On the other hand, many African American women, especially in 1941, were forced by economic necessity to work for others away from home, often in the homes of white families, caring for white children while grandmothers and other female relatives cared for their children. As

an African American man during this time, the child's father would have faced a whole array of obstacles to freedom and economic stability. Patricia Yaeger writes, "How much history can be wrung from a figure? Welty stumbles on a little-analyzed fact about the burdens white labor practices imposed on African Americans, as well as the costs to children and the elderly of the very freedoms celebrated during the Great Migration" (157). Yaeger believes that Welty writes about a history that has previously been "erased from the map of southern history" (157). She comments, "Welty and her cohorts catalogue histories that have been subsemantic, unspoken, out of use" (157). If these stories could be categorized as "regional," they also reflect much more global issues.

Welty writes in her essay that "the only certain thing at all is the worn path. . . . The path is the thing that matters" (*Stories* 817). It doesn't matter whether the grandson is waiting at home to get the medicine. She explains that a story "depends on the strength of the emotion that has set it going" (817). In this case, the starting point is the love of the grandmother for her grandson. This emotion sets Phoenix onto the path that remains the main point of the story. In the end, for Welty, place is not about standing still but movement, the figure walking across her line of sight in the distance. The writer, too, Welty suggests at the end of the essay, is on the same "worn path," seeking out the healing medicine that will affirm life. Ecocritics are on a similar path. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy assert that "[t]ransformation may very well be the single term to which all adherents of ecofeminism would assent" (3). This kind of theory, Murphy argues, should not be a kind of critical discourse functioning just in the classroom but a "transformative pedagogy" that affects how we live and act in the world outside academia (4). Welty viewed fiction as deeply transformative, as writing that recasts our views of the world. Walking Welty's worn path with Phoenix helps us understand our world better, in all of its complexity. By reconsidering our views of place and region, and the human and nonhuman communities that inhabit them, I hope that we can retravel the worn paths of other southern women writers to see what they have to tell us about our world.

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