The Politics of Silence in Southern Rhetoric

I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other.

William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
Most accounts of the day Ruby McCollum shot Dr. C. LeRoy Adams invariably mention two Live Oak landmarks: the First Methodist Church and the Suwannee County Courthouse. In 1956, for example, William Bradford Huie described the shooting in Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee Jail: “The shots were fired in the doctor’s office across the street from the Suwannee County courthouse and jail,” he wrote. “They were fired within eighty yards of the white Methodist church, and the first shot came at the instant the white Methodists began taking communion” (21). Jack Harper, a reporter for the Tallahassee Democrat, also noted the murder’s close proximity to the church and the courthouse. In his 1973 retrospective “News of Famous Killing First Heard from Pulpit,” he wrote that the shooting “was announced from the pulpits of the town’s churches,” and that after the murder “a crowd of towns people and farmers were milling about the courthouse grounds” (39). Even today, over fifty years after McCollum catapulted Live Oak into the national media spotlight, the church and the courthouse continue to figure prominently in recollections of August 3, 1952. “We were in church,” one Live Oak resident said when I asked him and his wife to recall the day of the shooting, “the Methodist church, right across the street from the courthouse.”

If the Methodist church and the Suwannee County Courthouse are included in most descriptions of what happened in Live Oak on August 3, 1952, it is perhaps because religion and law have traditionally bolstered not only the community of Live Oak but also its larger framework: the American South. In 1952, Live Oak was a small, rather picturesque town, and today it retains many of the same characteristics described by Stephen Trumbull, staff writer for the Miami Herald. “Live Oak, Suwannee County,” he wrote in 1954, “is more small-town-South than anything ever dreamed up for Gone With the Wind or The Birth of a Nation. It’s picture book stuff, with long, grey beards of Spanish moss draping the trees, plus magnolias in the background.” Trumbull’s choice of words is telling. His headline reads, “Live Oak Drama Like Fiction,” and indeed what happened that memorable August morning does seem incongruous to its setting—an act of unprecedented evil completely out of place in the snug confines of a law-abiding, Christian community like Live Oak. Yet the story is real, and it is made all the more so by McCollum defiantly choosing to pull the trigger that ended Adams’s life in the shadow of the Methodist church and the Suwannee County Courthouse, both symbols of Live Oak’s permanence and order that seldom, if ever, had been publicly challenged prior to August 3.
The setting of the murder, a quiet southern town, and the fact that a black woman had shot and killed a prominent white man made Live Oak and McCollum famous overnight. McCollum’s arrest and conviction created a media frenzy comparable only to that generated by the trials of O. J. Simpson and Michael Jackson, and accounts of it covered the front pages of newspapers nationwide. Reporters from around the United States crowded into tiny Live Oak, and with them came decidedly un-Christian allegations that Adams had fathered McCollum’s youngest child. With all the media attention, residents of Live Oak were nervous. Their little town, formerly a quiet sanctuary characterized by good Christian living and southern civility, was increasingly being depicted in the press as a stranger to both.

There is no denying that McCollum broke the law that Sunday morning she murdered Adams, but she did not act without a sense of justice; it was justice by her own definition. And if she was not physically in church that day, I am convinced that when she methodically pulled the trigger she looked—on her own terms—full on the face of God. There is, then, more than one story line informing the events of August 3, 1952, and McCollum herself is actually only part of a much larger drama, a longtime southern mythology dominated by acts of silence and often enforced by fear. Of course, McCollum’s actions in the summer of 1952 were wildly out of character for a black woman in a small southern town. The fact that she shot Adams, in effect, turned on the houselights in Live Oak in midperformance and left the community scrambling to regain its composure in the unexpected glare of intense media scrutiny. For her error, McCollum was summarily tossed out of the production, placed in isolation, and all but forgotten. From the very beginning, however, McCollum realized that the murder of a white man by a black woman did not fit into what she knew to be her reality. Huie writes in *Ruby* that when McCollum was asked why she killed Adams, she didn’t answer directly. Instead she replied, “I don’t know whether I did right or not” (26). Like most citizens of Live Oak in 1952, McCollum undoubtedly knew the importance of “doing right”; laws both written and unwritten made certain that what was “right” was clearly scripted for both blacks and whites in Live Oak.

If the story of Ruby McCollum seems like fiction, then perhaps it is because the process of “doing right” in the South is itself the product of larger fictionalizing practices. McCollum broke two cardinal rules the day she ended Adams’s life, one public and one private. First, she committed murder, a legal and religious taboo, for which she was swiftly and with
much fanfare brought to justice. Second, and in many ways more threat-ening to the community than the murder itself, she exposed to the rest of the world the complex and often contradictory process of “doing right” in the South. Silence is a crucial part of this process, especially in terms of Live Oak’s delicately balanced race relations that, although on the surface they appeared calm in 1952, were the result of strict and often violent enforcement. McCollum is exceptional because as a black woman she acted against the rules of “doing right” when she murdered a prominent white physician. But—and this is the point—the reaction of the community of Live Oak to the murder is as revealing as the murder itself. After the shooting, city officials and ordinary citizens alike rallied to justify their handling of the McCollum case. McCollum, however, was actually of secondary concern to Live Oak. Much more pressing to the townspeople was the justification and protection of the myth of white supremacy, a regional fiction so revered that when the actions of one black woman threatened to challenge its validity, an entire community became mute and perhaps has not yet regained its voice.

In *Ruby*, Huie describes McCollum’s arrest by members of the police force, sheriff’s office, and highway patrol. “And here the irony begins,” he writes. “These men represented the state of Florida, the county of Suwannee, the city of Live Oak. They were guardians of the society of Suwannee County. Ruby had broken the law, defied the society. Yet these men were afraid, not of Ruby but of consequences of her act. They were afraid of what might ‘come out’ at a trial. They feared collective ‘embarrassment’” (26). More than anything else, these men and the greater population of Live Oak resented possible outside intervention in the white-based autonomy of their community—and an entire region—governed by silence and enforced by fear. So the question remains: Did Ruby McCollum “do right” when she took the law into her own hands and murdered a white man whom she asserted had repeatedly raped and beaten her over a period of six years? If to “do right” means to remain silent about practices that are wrong, then the answer is no, she did not. But a much more compelling question is, Did McCollum have the right to do what she did, and if so, why was the community of Live Oak so terrified at the possibility of publicly admitting so?

This chapter aims to present the story (or, rather, several different versions of the same story, depending on who is doing the telling) of Ruby McCollum and the events of August 3, 1952. Central to this act of telling is a discussion of Live Oak—a tightly knit community heavily influenced
by the larger framework of the American South. Therefore, in order to
begin to understand McCollum, one must also understand her position-
ing in both the small community of Live Oak and the larger community
of the southern states as a whole. Or more precisely, one must appreciate
how in 1952 McCollum did not fit the expectations set forth for an Afri-
can-American woman in a segregated, deeply conservative southern town.
Discourses written about McCollum reveal much about the definition
and enforcement of what was “right” in Live Oak and the South at large
in the early 1950s. Yet as important as these discourses are, they are actually
indicative of a larger cultural language: the all-encompassing rhetoric of
southern silence.

Silence in the South is like a shimmering mirage that hovers in the dis-
tance over a blacktop country road; it is always there, yet at the same time
it is impervious to close inspection. As a child in Live Oak, I thought that
if only I could run fast enough, I could reach that place where the road
met the horizon. Many times I picked a marker immersed in the magi-
cal waves—a fence post, a tall pine, a weathered tobacco barn—and ran
toward it. But always when I reached my landmark, it would have lost its
bewitching shimmer and stand solid and impermeable against the blue
summer sky. The dynamics of southern silence, and particularly acts of
silence informing the McCollum affair, work in much the same way. Time
has worked its magic, and August 3, 1952, has largely faded from memory.
Citizens of Live Oak are now over fifty years down the road from the infa-
mous day McCollum killed Adams. The journalists have long since gone,
and her trial, accounts of which were once front-page news from coast
to coast, has for the most part been forgotten. The site of the murder no
longer stands; Adams’s office was torn down long ago to make way for a
neat row of shops. Even the Suwannee County Hospital where Adams
practiced is gone, recently replaced by a more modern facility of which
the residents of Live Oak are especially proud. The Methodist church
and the Suwannee County Courthouse, however, remain today much as
they were in 1952. They are solid reminders of what is important in this
small town and testimony to the convictions of its citizens. But also still
standing is the former home of Ruby McCollum. It is difficult to find; tall
stands of bamboo and vines weave a nearly impermeable wall around the
perimeter, as if the house itself is attempting to discourage prying eyes.
Once described as one of the finest homes in the county, it is now wildly
overgrown. Thick ropes of wisteria drape its tightly shuttered windows,
and its once regal yellow stucco has faded to ochre. Sam Jr., McCollum’s
son, still owns the house. He is now in his seventies and never speaks of his mother or what happened that August morning when he was nineteen years old. And while most days the Methodist church and the Suwannee County Courthouse are teeming with activity, the McCollum home is always silent.

In 1952, according to Zora Neale Hurston, silence characterized Live Oak. She writes of “a smothering blanket of silence” she found typical during her stay in the community while covering the McCollum trial for the Pittsburgh Courier:

Some conformed by a murmuration of evasions, some by a frontal attack that this was something which it would not be decent to allow the outside world to know about, and others by wary wordlessness. It amounted to a mass delusion of mass illusion. A point of approach to the motive for the slaying of the popular medico and politician had been agreed upon, and however bizarre and unlikely it might appear to the outside public, it was going to be maintained and fought for. Anything which might tend to destroy this illusion must be done away with. Presto! It just did not exist. (“My Impressions”)

Acts of silence surrounding McCollum surface again in the January 14, 1980, follow-up piece that journalist Al Lee wrote for Florida’s Ocala Star-Banner. When Lee questioned Suwannee County sheriff Robert Leonard about the murder, Leonard responded, “To tell you the truth, it’s a thing of the past,” and Live Oak police chief Elwood Howard answered in kind: “Why it’s all but forgotten. You don’t hardly hear anything about it around here now. I never hear it mentioned any more.” Even McCollum herself had little to say: “Ruby McCollum is unable to remember the shooting incident, the trial, or her term in jail,” Lee wrote. “She does not deny that one of her three daughters—Loretta—was fathered by the doctor. She will not confirm it, either. To that question, she rests her chin on folded hands, stares ahead through a pair of shades, and remains stoically silent. The question goes unanswered” (“Animosity”). Since Lee’s interview, little has been written about McCollum to break these kinds of silences, and my several visits to Live Oak during the course of this project only confirmed what I already knew: Live Oak continues to downplay or outright ignore Ruby McCollum. She is no longer, for the most part, an anomaly, or, as many asserted in 1952, a monster. Instead, she is becoming something much worse. For most people she is now not even a memory.