
**"GONE TO TEXAS" AND THE "TERRA INCOGNITA":
CROSSING BORDERS IN PETER TAYLOR'S LATE FICTION**

Sara Lewis Dunne
Middle Tennessee State University

"Gone to Texas," a phrase that appears several times in Peter Taylor's fiction, is used to describe Tennesseans--usually men--who have decided to leave family, community, and social restraints behind and head west for a new life. Much of Peter Taylor's earlier fiction is devoted to the idea of crossing the rigid social boundaries dictated by upper- or upper-middle-class life in the modern South. Some women are able to cross social borders while others cannot in "The Fancy Woman," and two women in "A Long Fourth" realize that the borders of race and class can be transcended by common human experiences of love, loss, and suffering. In a later story, "In the Miro District," the borders of generations are briefly erased by a shared love of mischief. And, in Taylor's most recent fiction, the borders between life and death and real and imagined experiences are blurred by ghosts, dreams, and visions which lead characters out of the conventional upper-class South and into the "terra incognita." A survey of Taylor's last four fictional works reveals his continued fascination with geographical, social, moral, racial, and existential borders and their crossing, but the phrase "Gone to Texas" seems to sum up the most radical rejection of the social and moral values associated with Taylor's fictionalized versions of Tennessee.

The phrase "Gone to Texas" first appears in "The Old Forest," a short story which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1979 and was collected in 1985 as the title story of a volume. It is narrated by an older middle-aged man, Nat Ramsey, who remembers an incident which occurred in Memphis in 1937 when he was engaged to marry a debutante, Caroline Braxley, and he was employed in his father's cotton brokerage. In the Memphis of 1937 debutantes did not hold jobs, and young women who worked in offices did not "come out." Nat remembers that in spite of his engagement, he and his friends liked to go to bars and beer gardens with "working girls of a superior kind" (66) even after the engagement had been announced "at an an MCC [Memphis Country Club] party" (33). Nat and his friends, in a combination of arrogance and innocence, refer to the working girls as "demimondaines," and later as "demimondaines," but he describes them this way:

They read books, they looked at pictures, and they were apt to attend any concert of play that came to Memphis. When the old San Carlo Opera Company turned up in town, you could count on certain girls of the demimonde being present in their block of seats, and often with a score of the opera in hand. From that you will understand that they certainly weren't the innocent, untutored types that we generally took to dances at the Memphis Country Club and whom we eventually looked forward to marrying. (32)

Nat is involved in a minor automobile accident while one of the working girls is riding in the car with him. The girl, Lee Ann Deehart, runs away from the scene of the accident and hides from the police, from Nat, from Nat's father's friends--one of whom edits the newspaper--and lawyers, who all feel that they must find her and assure

themselves that she is both unharmed and un-pregnant before the wedding can take place seven days later. However, it is Caroline who finds Lee Ann because, she tells Nat, to cancel the wedding would make her "a jilted, a rejected girl" and, she continues, "some part of my power to protect myself would be gone forever" (88). Caroline, very much to Nat's surprise, admires Lee Ann and the "demimondaines" because, she tells him,

they have the freedom to jump out of your car, freedom from you, freedom to run off into the woods. . . . Men have always been able to do it. . . just because they wanted to. They used to write "Gone to Texas" on the front door and leave the house and the farm to be sold for taxes. They were considered black sheep for doing so, [but] they were something of heroes, too. (85)

Even before Caroline utters the phrase "gone to Texas," Taylor's narrator suggests that Texas is seen as a place free of the social constraints of cities like Memphis. In the search for Lee Ann, she is believed by several people to be "from Texas" (61,71), a place sufficiently large and vague in their Memphis imaginations to seem as exotic--and as liberating--as California, and Caroline compares her to the adventurous Tennessee men who have "gone to Texas." Significantly, Caroline and Nat have traveled East on the old Bristol Highway when Caroline makes her remark about going to Texas. If Texas and the West represent a new start or a new way of life, Caroline realizes that she is forever allied to the older, more traditional kind of life in Tennessee, represented by their brief journey backwards into Tennessee's past, signified by one of its easternmost cities, Bristol. Nat remarks that Caroline and the other Memphis debutantes are "the heirs to something" (50) and that they are connected to old family plantations somewhere in their pasts, but that the working girls are free from the social constraints dictated by their pasts. Texas, Caroline says, is "Out West" where the men she has described "got a new start or [began] life over. But there was never a women in our family who did that! There was no way it could happen" (85). Lee Ann and her working-girl friends betoken a new life where women, too, can "go to Texas."

Texas or "going to Texas" represents for the characters in "The Old Forest" a new start, a clean break from the past, but at an option traditionally open primarily to men. We learn that in their later lives, after they have married, Caroline and Nat leave the comfortable world of Memphis' upper class and Nat earns the degree necessary to become a university professor (much as Peter Taylor himself had done). Perhaps because she understands the value of "going to Texas," Caroline is able to make the transition successfully.

A subsequent Taylor work shows us a women who is not able to take up her roots and move West. In *A Summons to Memphis* (1986), as in at an earlier story "The Captain's Son," Taylor contrasts Nashville to Memphis, and the more Western city, rather like the "Texas" in "The Old Forest" is "something else. . . . Memphis was today. Nashville was yesterday" (*Summons* 28). Similarly, in "The Captain's Son," Memphis is "flat, and sunbaked and endlessly sprawling" (36)--a description that might well fit the state of Texas. Mrs. Carver, the narrator's mother in *A Summons to Memphis*, is prepared to adjust to her husband's choice of Memphis over their home in Nashville. Phillip Carver tells us, "I believe Mother did instantly love Memphis and but for Father would have melted into the life there. She likes cards, and gossip and striking clothes and Country Club food" (27). In the geographical economy of *A Summons to Memphis*, Nashville is--as Taylor told William Broadway--"starchy" (19), and in the judgment of Taylor scholar Catherine Clark Graham, Taylor's Memphis in this novel is "vulgar" (158). But with vulgarity also comes, we have seen, the chance to begin life anew, as Phillip's two vulgar sisters do. Mrs. Carver is not allowed to enjoy her new life in Memphis because of her husband's unfavorable comparisons of the two cities, and so she eventually takes to her bed. Her son's escape--his version of "going to Texas"--is, ironically, achieved

by going to Manhattan. As we will see, Manhattan also proves to be a later character's "Texas."

Taylor's next work after *A Summons to Memphis* was [The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court](#), published in 1993. It was Taylor's final collection of short stories, and it contains some of his least typical works in terms of theme, if not in terms of form. Perhaps because he was near to the end of his own life and in failing health from strokes and heart attacks, there are supernatural characters in many of the stories who drift back and forth across the borders of this world and the next with remarkable ease. Three of the short plays are reprints from his volume *Presences*, published twenty years previously, in 1973. All seven plays from *Presences* are about ghosts who return to speak with the living. Other stories in *Oracle* feature similarly liminal characters who straddle "existence" in two worlds. For example, the principle female in "The Witch of Owl Mountain Springs: At an Account of her Remarkable Powers" is a witch, Miss Lizzie Pettigru, who lives in a fictional version of the Monteagle Assembly Grounds and gets revenge for a youthful jilting. She has--perhaps--been able to do this by changing herself from a person into a small woodland creature, crossing the border of humanity into the animal kingdom.

In a less Gothic short story, "Demons," the narrator remembers at an older cousin named Talbot who crosses both matrimonial and geographical boundaries. Talbot sets fire to his house, which had been the family's first homestead built in the ante-bellum days, abandons his wife, and disappears on his galloping horse. "Two days later, news came that a married woman in a neighboring town, whose name had long been connected with Talbot's had vanished that same night." The narrator remembers feeling "envy, admiration, and [importantly] dread" upon hearing this news (94). Talbot has not "gone to Texas" literally, but his behavior certainly fits the description Caroline has given in "The Old Forest" and has provoked both envy and fear in those left behind in Tennessee.

The same sense of curiosity and dread is expressed in "Cousin Aubrey," the story from *The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court* which was later expanded into Taylor's final novel, [In the Tennessee Country](#). It begins with this sentence: "In the Tennessee country of my forebears it was not uncommon for a man of good character suddenly to disappear" (167). These words are spoken by Nathan Longfort, the narrator of both the story and the later novel. Cousin Aubrey, the illegitimate son of Nathan's great-uncle, disappears after the death of the Nathan's grandfather, who was the former governor and, at the time of the story, Senator from Tennessee. Aubrey's disappearance is backgrounded for Nathan by the narrator's own near-mania for other stories of vanished Tennesseans: stories about Sam Houston, who left his bride, "a Nashville belle. . . and abandoned as well his newly won gubernatorial chair" to live, for a time, among the Indians before :he went on to found the independent Republic of Texas. But, for us, the point is that he never returned to Tennessee" (169). Other Tennesseans Taylor's narrator cites are a Confederate senator who "went off to live in Brazil" and numerous other private citizens of Tennessee who left only "a crudely lettered sign nailed to a tree trunk in the front yard of at an abandoned farmhouse, reading simply, 'Gone to Texas'" (170-71).

As it does in "The Old Forest," the phrase "Gone to Texas" implies much more: leaving behind the social and moral constraints of family and, in Taylor's stories, social class in order to experience the outside world. The Confederate Senator dies a street pauper in the slums of Rio de Janeiro; Cousin Aubrey, we discover in *In the Tennessee Country*, becomes a gigolo and a poseur, but in the process he ceases to be the bastard son of a Tennessee politician; we all know what happened to Sam Houston. Those left behind, because of their own "narrow natures," live in a world no larger than their own part of Tennessee, and what the leaving characters go to or become when they get there is far less important to those left behind than the fact that they "never returned to Tennessee."

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Another character from this novel who literally "goes to Texas" also "goes to Texas" metaphorically. While living in Greenwich Village, Nathan develops a crush on an actress old enough to be his mother. The actress, who has already been married five times, takes a sixth husband, a fellow cast member who is also a licensed pilot. The two of them marry and fly off "in his plan to East Texas. But the 'smart-looking little plane' as I had heard him describe it, crashed in fog while passing over the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee" (140). Nathan must go there to identify the bodies, but he says of his former lover, "the face of the dead Linda Campbell seemed strangely unfamiliar. Like the face of someone I could not place in the receding past of my boyhood" (140). His old lover's attempt to leave her familiar world behind for the unknown world of East Texas ends, ironically, where Nathan's own past resides--"in the Tennessee country." Perhaps, like Caroline Braxley and unlike Lee Ann Dehart, the actress cannot successfully "go to Texas." Nathan never quite leaves the Tennessee country, either, settling for a stodgy appointment as at an art history professor at the University of Virginia rather than becoming the artist he hoped to become as a young man.

Nathan Longfort does finally rediscover his long-disappeared cousin Aubrey, with the help of his grown son Brax. Nathan and his family live, at this time, in Charlottesville, and Brax is the artist his father hoped to, but could not, become. Brax and old Cousin Aubrey bond together as friends, and like Cousin Aubrey, Brax, too, leaves without notice, although he does not disappear completely. he goes off into another 'terra incognita'--Greenwich Village, the place where Nathan had tried to establish himself as at an artist many years before, without success. Only after leaving the comfortable academic world of Charlottesville--and his father's metaphorical world of Tennessee--can Brax cross the borderline from smug, conservative gentility into the morally and aesthetically more open frontiers of Greenwich Village and successful artistic expression. The realization that his son has metaphorically "Gone to Texas" causes Nathan some dismay at first, and he remembers thinking: "He was going to abandon us all and begin with the other life that was inevitable for him. I could imagine that there had been a mutual confession between him and his old cousin" (221). Eventually, though, Nathan realizes the value of leaving, just as Phillip Carver did in *A Summons to Memphis*. Nathan finally says, "Like those men I heard about even before he was born, he was plunging into the terra incognita from which no man willingly returns" (224). however, *In the Tennessee Country* ends with this sentence: "Certain thoughts may occur to me sometimes, but I've taught myself better than to voice them--not even questions about Cousin Aubrey Bradshaw and whether his course was perhaps the better one" (226).

The reader can voice the questions as well as the answers. Although "Texas" in its many manifestations may be "endlessly sprawling and sunbaked," "vulgar," or--in the case of Sam Houston and Davy Crockett--deadly, it is the goal of the adventurer, the man or woman who strikes out to find his or her own way. In the final analysis, "Going to Texas" means leaving the familiar world--the Tennessee Country--behind, as Sam Houston did, as Nathan's actress/paramour did, as all the countless migrants did throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century did. Taylor told Hubert H. McAlexander, "Sam Houston lived at the right time for him--that frontier period when a

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This web page is maintained by

Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College

400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu

BORDER STATES
ON-LINE

Border States: Journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association, [No. 11](#)
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This web page is maintained by

Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College

400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu