

American Literature Readings in the 21st Century

Carson McCullers in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by

ALISON GRAHAM-BERTOLINI
AND CASEY KAYSER



American Literature Readings in the
Twenty-First Century

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Unit 402

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

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ISBN 978-3-319-40291-8

ISBN 978-3-319-40292-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-40292-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016955735

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG Switzerland

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

PREFACE

By 1947, when *Quick*, a weekly news magazine, selected Carson McCullers as “one of the best postwar writers in America” (qtd. in Carr 294), she had already found success with *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), published several short stories and novellas including *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943), and had received wide critical acclaim for *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), a novel that she would soon adapt into a successful Broadway production. Around the same time, Gore Vidal declared McCullers “the best American woman novelist” (qtd. in Rodwan). In 1951, the *New York Times* “expressed thanks that America was the country of Carson McCullers” and *Time* magazine declared Carson McCullers one of America’s most important contemporary writers (qtd in Savigneau 207–8). McCullers’ success and productivity were especially impressive in light of the illnesses she battled throughout her life, suffering as a child from respiratory disorders and misdiagnosed rheumatic fever as a teenager; three strokes before the age of thirty that led to multiple operations to improve loss of muscle function and mobility; a heart condition; and finally, a brain hemorrhage that resulted in her death at the age of fifty. Writing of McCullers’ 1967 death, biographer Virginia Spencer Carr concludes, “Twentieth-century America had lost its lonely hunter” (3). Such compelling critiques and accolades all situate McCullers as one of the major writers of the twentieth century. However, the chapters to come will demonstrate that McCullers’ legacy and influence continue into the twenty-first century, and that readers and scholars are finding new and increasing social applicability within her themes and ideas.

The impact of McCullers' work on scholarship, art, and popular culture in the twenty-first century continues to grow. Moreover, her work has found new relevance with a wide-reaching international audience. 2001 saw the English translation and publication of Josyane Savigneau's *Carson McCullers: A Life*, originally published in French. It is without question the most comprehensive biography of McCullers' life since Virginia Spencer Carr's *The Lonely Hunter* (1975) and is enriched by quotes from additional letters and unpublished work by McCullers, as well as material supplied by Dr. Mary Mercer, McCullers' once psychiatrist and close friend. Additional evidence of the influence of McCullers' work on readers and scholars in the twenty-first century include the following examples: In 2001, the Library of America published a collection of her novels followed by a second print run in 2004. In 2002, Women's Project and Productions and Playwrights Horizon of New York City collaborated to stage *Carson McCullers (Historically Inaccurate)*, by playwright Sarah Schulman, which the *New York Times* deemed the "latest evidence of renewed interest" (A5) in McCullers and her work. In 2004, Oprah Winfrey selected *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* for her book club, a move that widened the influence of the novel significantly. In 2005, McCullers appeared in Sherill Tippins' biographical history *February House*, an account of the Brooklyn Heights home and artistic experiment she shared with W. H. Auden, Paul and Jane Bowles, Benjamin Britten, Richard Wright, and Gypsy Rose Lee during the 1940s. Tippins' book was followed by a 2012 Broadway musical adaptation of the same name, in which McCullers is also a significant figure. Also in 2012, Sarah Gubbins' play *fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life* opened in Chicago at the Steppenwolf Theater and played more recently in Atlanta in 2015. This play situates the work of Carson McCullers in a contemporary context, the world of texting teenagers at a Catholic high school, where a new English teacher assigns *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. In 2014, the state of Georgia chose *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* as part of the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read program, an initiative that is designed to promote reading in American culture, and the Atlanta production of *fml* provided several opportunities for Atlanta and surrounding communities to discuss the novel and play in conjunction. And in 2011, singer songwriter Suzanne Vega performed a hybrid piece of narrative and music titled "Carson McCullers Talks About Love" at New York's Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, in which she portrays McCullers reflecting on her life and work. Finally, in 2014, the Carson McCullers Society (formed in 1990) once again became active, electing

a new board of officers and drawing a small but dynamic membership of individuals who are dedicated to the study of this great American author.

The fifteen chapters included in this volume explore how McCullers and her writing are being read and understood in a twenty-first-century context. To begin, **Casey Kayser**, in “From Adaptation to Influence: Carson McCullers on the Stage,” considers some of the aforementioned plays and performances and the ways in which contemporary playwrights, artists, and audiences are interacting with McCullers, her work, and her legacy. The contemporary explorations of McCullers on stage are appropriate in light of her own experiences with theater, with the successful dramatic adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*, which ran on Broadway from 1950 to 1951, and the not so successful production of her single stage play *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957). Kayser explores McCullers’ successes and challenges in adapting her work to the stage during her lifetime and examines potential explanations for ambivalent critical responses, in addition to considering twenty-first century stage engagements with McCullers’ life and work.

Several other essays included in this volume are the product of opportunities to study McCullers in new contexts. Columbus State University has converted McCullers’ childhood home in Columbus, Georgia, into the Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians, which is dedicated to preserving McCullers’ memory through educational and cultural programming for the campus and community. The Center offers The Marguerite and Lamar Smith Fellowship for Writers, named after McCullers’ parents, for which they annually receive numerous applications from writers and artists hoping to engage in a productive period while in residence in the home. In 2011, Columbus State hosted an interdisciplinary conference for McCullers’ 94th birthday, drawing an international group of scholars and featuring a performance by Suzanne Vega of her one-woman show. In celebration of McCullers’ 100th birthday, John Cabot University, the Carson McCullers Society, and the Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians at Columbus State University are hosting “Carson McCullers in the World (1917–2017): An International Conference to Celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Carson McCullers’ Birth.” This event will take place in July 2017 in Rome, Italy. Finally, Columbus State recently acquired a collection of McCullers-related papers, mementos, correspondence, and other materials from Dr. Mary Mercer upon her death in April 2013. These materials are housed in the archives at Columbus State, in a collection that rivals that of the University of Texas at Austin and Duke University.

The archives, including nine transcripts of Mercer's therapy sessions with McCullers recorded on a Dictaphone between April and May of 1958, are attracting international scholars who are interested in new insights into McCullers' life and work.

In the chapter, "Impromptu Journal of My Heart": Carson McCullers's Therapeutic Recordings, April – May 1958" **Carlos Dews**, who is known for bringing McCullers' unfinished autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare* to publication in 1999, discusses the details that the transcripts reveal regarding McCullers' friendships and relationships, including her relationship with Swiss heiress Annemarie Clarac Schwarzenbach, with whom McCullers was infatuated. Dews additionally provides further insight into *Illumination and Night Glare* and "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing," a piece published in *Esquire* in 1959 that was partly based upon inspiration from the sessions, which Mercer and McCullers saw as "literary experiments" to help her overcome a period of writer's block.

Melanie Masterton Sherazi, in "Collaborative Life Writing: The Dialogical Subject of Carson McCullers' Dictaphone 'Experiments' and Posthumous Autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare*," also engages with these transcripts, exploring their connection to McCullers' unfinished autobiography and Dews' approach to its editing and publication. She reads *Illumination and Night Glare* as a work of women's autobiography, marked by its nonlinear nature of storytelling and "the collaborative nature of its posthumous supplementation." Sherazi demonstrates that although the text was composed in 1967, *Illumination and Night Glare* is an assemblage of McCullers' sustained engagement with life writing as a collaborative practice, which is also affirmed by the content of the Dictaphone experiments. Then, in "Telling It 'Slant': Carson McCullers, Harper Lee, and the Veil of Memory," **Jan Whitt** explores the arbitrary boundaries between the autobiographical novel and the memoir. Whitt compares the autobiographical novels of Harper Lee and Carson McCullers, both of whom grew up in the South and lived periodically in New York City. Examining McCullers' work from the perspective of the autobiographical novel and comparing her writing to that of Harper Lee is especially relevant today, given the release of Lee's recovered manuscript *Go Set a Watchman*. In an alternate biographical approach to McCullers, **Carmen Trammell Skaggs**, in "Musings between the Marvelous and Strange: New Contexts and Correspondence about Carson McCullers and Mary Tucker," focuses on the close relationship between McCullers and her childhood piano teacher, Mary Tucker, and the importance of

McCullers' musical training to her fiction. Skaggs considers archival materials that reveal Tucker's formative influence on the young writer by examining correspondence between McCullers and Tucker from the Mary Sames Tucker Papers, 1936–1967, which are housed in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University. Her perspective is enriched further by materials recently acquired by the Margaret S. Sullivan Papers and the Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection at Columbus State University, including the therapy transcripts, which also provide primary insight into McCullers' thoughts about Tucker and her influence. It was McCullers' early experiences as Tucker's pupil and her response to Tucker and her husband's 1934 move away from Columbus to Maryland that helped give voice to her expression in *The Member of the Wedding* "the we of me," as she felt that the Tuckers completed her in this way and was devastated by what she perceived as their abandonment of her (Carr 35–6).

Though McCullers would ultimately give up her dream of becoming a concert pianist to focus on her writing, her childhood love of music would remain a mainstay in the form and content of her writing. **Kiyoko Magome** investigates McCullers' use of musical form in "The Image of the String Quartet Lurking in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*." Magome demonstrates how the relationships among the five main characters of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* evoke the image of a musical performance like a string quartet. John Singer, she argues, is the center of the musical composition, which invokes the image of four musicians performing a string quartet without a conductor. Magome also discusses evidence of a similar structure within McCullers' early short story "Court in the West Eighties," arguing that the image of "the string quartet existed in her imagination as early as 1934" and that the string quartet can be identified as part of "a much larger musico-literary, socio-historical context."

McCullers' fiction depicts characters and situations that only now, in the twenty-first century, are we in the academy finding the language and theory to explore. In "Entering the Compound: Becoming with Carson McCullers' Freaks," **renée c. hoogland** analyzes Frankie, the adolescent narrator of *The Member of the Wedding*, by moving away from previous sociopolitical readings of this character to consider her function and effect as a literary and aesthetic being. Using the theory of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, **hoogland** foregrounds the novel's protagonist as an aesthetic creation, a literary design with possibilities and movement that cannot be reduced to the strict operations within established forms of literary criticism.

The twenty-first century's increased concern with human interactions with the environment and all of its living creatures has given rise to critical animal studies, a rapidly growing interdisciplinary field that examines human treatment of animals and their role and value in an unprecedented era of challenges related to exploitation, extinction, and ecological threats. **Temple Gowan**, in "To be a Good Animal": Toward a Queer-Posthumanist Reading of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, adds a posthumanist lens to queer readings of this text, to foreground the importance of both human and nonhuman bodies in the novel. She focuses her analysis on Firebird, a horse that is notably listed as a "participant" in the tragedy in the first pages of the text and that she argues is a "full character." Though the horse is lowest on the hierarchical listing of the novel's participants: "two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse" (309), Gowan argues that the horse has an agency that produces self-knowledge in the human subject and collapses human and nonhuman binaries. However, the ideology and physical violence that are used to maintain hierarchical categories that organize and govern our world are highlighted in Captain Penderton's mistreatment of the horse, as he attempts to regain power over his queer tendencies and reinstate species hierarchies. Gowan argues that through this violence, McCullers "foregrounds the insidious nature of disciplinary structures that are grounded in species difference and links the oppression of the nonhuman to the oppression of the queer."

McCullers-related criticism in the field of queer studies has generally fit within two categories: work that considers McCullers' own gender and sexuality and that which examines depictions of gender and sexuality in her work; while there is "considerable controversy" about McCullers' own sexual identification, her textual representations of gay and lesbian characters and themes related to gender and sexuality are "less ambiguous" (Dews 382). McCullers presents transgressive images as a means to resist the status quo, images that have been and remain important to the emergence of a queer activism in gay and lesbian communities (Brasell 65). McCullers' characters, many of whom don't fit within traditional gender and sexuality conventions, offer important models of identification for adolescents who identify as queer. One such example is the character Jo of Gubbins' *fml*, for whom texts by McCullers provide an avenue of resistance to the taunts of her peers as well as examples of alternative sexualities. Further, McCullers' themes contribute to the contemporary dialogue surrounding bullying and the tragic suicides of young LGBTQ individuals. In "Coming of Age in the Queer South: Friendship and Social

Difference in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*,” **Kristen Proehl** explores the ways in which McCullers’ own queer friendships, including those with playwright Tennessee Williams and her cousin, Jordan Massee, contribute to the non-normative models of friendship that appear in her work. While Singer and Antonapoulos might be the most commonly considered example of queer friendship in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Proehl expands such definitions to involve transgressive relationships between people of many different identity categories, such as age, race, and gender, reading other pairs in the novel, like Mick Kelly and Biff Brannon, and Singer’s various relationships with particular characters as queer. Proehl argues that the depiction of these queer relationships is “a vehicle through which McCullers imagines the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of political alliances across social differences.”

Miho Matsui, in the essay “Queer Eyes: Cross-Gendering, Cross-Dressing, and Cross-Racing Miss Amelia,” interprets *The Ballad of the Sad Café* as a story of a white woman’s resistance to white male dominance. The character’s cross-gendering, cross-dressing, and cross-racial performance allows readers to interrogate the meaning of the word “queer,” as it is used in the story, especially when employed to describe Miss Amelia’s crossed eyes. Through analyzing both Amelia’s gaze and the narrator’s perspective in opposition to the male, authoritative, normalizing gaze, Matsui concludes that being queer allows the characters to attain an alternate subjectivity, one that is not always possible in a world that is typically constructed of binaries. **Alison Graham-Bertolini**, in “‘Nature is Not Abnormal; Only Lifelessness is Abnormal’: Paradigms of the In-valid in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*,” argues that McCullers deliberately undermines conceptions of “normality” in the characters Captain Penderton, Alison Langdon, and Anacleto by demonstrating how performances of “the normal” lead them to unhappiness and tragedy. Moreover, she observes that the atypical attributes of the aforementioned characters allow them to resist and challenge a social order that denies equal treatment to all. **Stephanie Rountree** is also concerned with disability studies in her essay, “An ‘archaeology of [narrative] silence’: Cognitive Segregation and Productive Citizenship in McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*,” in which she argues that the novel bears out the racist and classist rhetorics that led to the growth of mental institutions in the early-twentieth-century South and the marginalization of cognitively disabled persons during this time, individuals like Antonapoulos, a lesser-explored character in criticism of the novel. She views this history as “manifest in Carson McCullers’ *The*

Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in ways that expose national, neoliberal ideals of U.S. citizenship while simultaneously organizing the narrative.” Through the lenses of disability studies and new historicism, her essay demonstrates how the practice of cognitive segregation to make way for the productivity of normative citizens that informed institutional practices in the 1930s still impedes disability politics in the twenty-first century.

Since the reformation of the Carson McCullers Society in 2014, a noted increase of interest in McCullers’ work among international scholars, students, and other overseas readers has taken place. **Lin Bin**, in “Seeking the Meaning of Loneliness: Carson McCullers in China,” discusses two iterations of the “McCullers craze” in China, first in the 1980s and now in the twenty-first century, periods shaped by sociopolitical forces that have led Chinese people to negotiate two frameworks she introduces: that of “isolation by community” in the 1980s, and in the twenty-first century, “alienation in a crowd.” Bin postulates that the tension between the individual and community, one also explored in McCullers’ work, holds particular relevance for Chinese readers because of the historical focus on community in Chinese culture. Bin concludes that Chinese readers and scholars avidly study McCullers’ texts with the hope of “deconstructing McCullers’ loneliness” and finding something redemptive in the bleak isolation of her characters. This interpretation, in turn, writes Bin, offers some resolution to Chinese readers who are themselves seeking to balance the needs and values of the individual with those of the community. In another international context, **Barbara Roche Rico** uses postcolonial and transatlantic theories to present a new comparative reading of McCullers’ *Ballad of the Sad Café* and Nicholasa Mohr’s *In Nueva York*, a work of the best known female writer of the Puerto Rican diaspora. In “The Ballad of Two Sad Cafés”: Nicholasa Mohr’s Postwar Narrative as ‘Writing Back’ to Carson McCullers,” Rico analyzes similarities related to narrative and characterization in the two texts, suggesting that Mohr was not only influenced by McCullers, but engages purposefully with *Ballad*, “writing back” to McCullers and her text. Rico argues that Mohr has adapted pieces of McCullers’ text to achieve “an artful dismantling of clichés often found in the literary representation of the working class.” Further, she explores the ways in which both texts consider affiliation and membership versus exclusion within their particular communities.

Finally, while McCullers’ final novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1961), is not always given the high praise assigned to her other work, the fact that she saw it through to the end despite the advanced stage of her illnesses is a great

achievement. The novel's focus on death and dying in the character of JT Malone, who is diagnosed with leukemia, parallels what might have been McCullers' own confrontation with her mortality in the last decade of her life. Some critics fail to see the unity and coherence in this novel, but **Craig Slaven** offers an explanation for this apparent lack in "Jester's Mercurial Nature and the Hermeneutics of Time in McCullers' *Clock Without Hands*." Slaven reads Jester Clane as a trickster figure, who both disrupts and reaffirms cultural narratives of white supremacy, and argues that the inner conflicts of Jester Clane become an allegory for the historical moment that undergirds the novel, the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision regarding desegregation. Slaven demonstrates that the text's incoherence "reflects a heightened sense of discord between personal, regional, and national narratives of selfhood," and suggests that through Jester, McCullers "exposes the cultural processes by which such narratives are reproduced and propagated." The concern with racial injustice and violence in McCullers' work may be even more relevant in the contemporary cultural climate of America, as we consider the supposed "post-racial" period marked by Barack Obama's election to the presidency in 2008, a label that was later exploded by controversies and protests surrounding the ubiquitous and violent deaths of young black men at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, and other American cities. Considering the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the threat of racial violence, and the mob mentality featured in *Clock* alongside today's conversations about power dynamics and clashes between government, military, police, and people of all colors may provide us with new insight into our history, our present, and our future.

The essays in this collection provide a cohesive and dynamic sampling of the ways in which McCullers is relevant to reading audiences, artists, and scholars in the twenty-first century and demonstrate ways in which her work is being read with new and innovative lenses and approaches by our contributors and others. We believe that now is a timely moment to return to McCullers and re-examine her texts and life from new perspectives, and we hope that this collection builds on and enriches the body of criticism her work and legacy have engendered up to this point. In 1961, Gore Vidal famously wrote that "of all the Southern writers, [McCullers] is most likely to endure" (50). We believe that McCullers has indeed endured, and that her work's ongoing relevance to the social issues of today suggests that we can look forward to continued opportunities to reconsider her life and work, and that readers will engage with her texts, in both analysis and pleasure, for years to come.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Columbus State University Archives, Columbus State University, Columbus, Georgia, for permission to quote from the letters, transcripts of therapy sessions, and other materials in the Margaret S. Sullivan Papers (MC 298) and the Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection (MC 296).

We also gratefully acknowledge the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, for permission to quote from the Mary Sames Tucker Papers.

Finally, we would like to thank The American Literature Society of Japan for permission to publish material that was originally published in Japanese as “*Shisen, isou, jenda ekkyou: The Ballad of the Sad Café ni okeru 'kuia na me.'*” *Gaze, Cross-Dressing and Cross-Gender: Queer Eyes in The Ballad of the Sad Café*,” by Miho Matsui, *Studies in American Literature* 41 (2005): 37–52.

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From Adaptation to Influence: Carson McCullers on the Stage

Casey Kayser

While Carson McCullers is primarily known as a novelist, she also found success as a playwright with the stage adaptation of her 1946 novel *The Member of the Wedding*, which ran on Broadway from 1950 to 1951. This production was universally praised, winning several Donaldson awards and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Unfortunately, her next attempt at writing for the stage, with the 1957 play *The Square Root of Wonderful*, was a critical disaster that closed after only 45 performances. Biographer Virginia Spencer Carr pronounces this play "the square root of humiliation" ("Novelist Turned" 49) for McCullers. In 1963, Edward Albee adapted *The Ballad of the Sad Café* to the stage, and while the play received fairly positive reviews, it only ran for two and a half months, and McCullers felt that Albee had not translated her novel well (Carr, *Lonely Hunter* 504).

Despite McCullers' ambivalent experiences with the theater during her lifetime, and the lack of critical attention given to her plays in relation to her novels, her oeuvre has retained compelling connections with the theater world into the twenty-first century, both in adaptations and

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in drama influenced by her life and work. In 2002, Women's Project & Productions and Playwrights Horizons teamed up to present Sarah Schulman's *Carson McCullers (Historically Inaccurate)*, and seven years later, playwright Rebecca Gilman's adaptation of McCullers' novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) was staged at the New York Theatre Workshop. More recently, several interesting pieces of McCullers-inspired work have appeared on the stage, such as "Carson McCullers Talks About Love," a show by singer songwriter Suzanne Vega, and Sarah Gubbins' *fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life*, which premiered in Chicago in 2012. In the same year, following the publication of Sherill Tippins' 2005 book of the same name, *February House* debuted at the Public Theater, a musical exploration of the Brooklyn Heights home McCullers lived in with other artists during the early 1940s. Clearly, there are some interesting connections between McCullers' own experiences in the theater in her lifetime and the ways in which McCullers' life and work have influenced or been adapted for stage productions in the twenty-first century, all of which compel this chapter's exploration of McCullers' successes and challenges in adapting her work to the stage, and potential explanations for the ambivalent critical responses to her stage adaptations. Ultimately, I am interested in the ways in which contemporary playwrights, artists and audiences are interacting with McCullers, her work and her legacy, and how these inform our contemporary understandings.

McCullers experimented with playwriting as a child, staging productions in her living room for her family and neighbors ("How I Began" 249–50); however, she seemed to move away from the genre after her success with the novel. Then, in the spring of 1946, she received a letter from Tennessee Williams, who by this time was well-known for *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). Williams, who had never met McCullers, was so affected by the story that he wrote to McCullers, expressing his appreciation of the affinity between her work and his own plays. He later recalled that he knew "at once that we were kindred souls. There was something wounded in Carson, you know, as I was quick to discover" (qtd. in Carr, "Novelist Turned" 38). At the time, Williams had been suffering from heart pains and palpitations, and he was certain that he was dying, even though he was only 34 years old. His dying wish, he wrote in his letter, was that he might meet this young artist with whom he already felt a strong connection. Carson accepted his invitation to visit him in Nantucket, where he suggested that she adapt *Member* for the stage.¹

Ironically, it was a critique of *The Member of the Wedding* that provided her with additional motivation for adapting her text. McCullers said, “I was challenged in one malicious part of myself because *The New Yorker* in reviewing the novel said that I had many of the components of great writing, but the chief thing I lacked was a sense of drama. Clifton Fadiman attacked the book because it ‘was not dramatic’” (qtd. in Madden 87).² Williams was sure that Carson’s work possessed the necessary components for drama, and she became determined to try. The two artists wrote together daily, she diligently on *Member*, and he with new passion on the *Summer and Smoke* script he had nearly abandoned. Williams describes the process:

We sat opposite each other at a long table on which we worked mornings and dined at night. And—yes—the story about our shoving that bottle of whiskey back and forth between us is pretty much the way it happened—but it never interfered with our work. Carson was the only person I have ever been able to work in the same room with, and we got along very well. She was deadly serious about her writing, and I admired her for that. Otherwise, our friendship never would have survived. (qtd. in Carr, “Novelist Turned” 39)

Carson too felt great admiration and fondness for Williams: theirs “proved to be one of the most enduring friendships and loves she was ever to experience with a fellow artist” (Carr, *Lonely Hunter* 277). However, despite Williams’ expertise in the dramatic genre, McCullers was stubbornly insistent on taking no advice from Williams in the process of adaptation, as he remembers:

If she wanted to ask me something or to read some lines aloud for my reaction, she would. But that was rare. Carson accepted almost no advice about how to adapt *The Member of the Wedding*. I did not suggest lines to her more than once or twice, and then she would usually have her own ideas and say, ‘Tenn, honey, thank you, but I know all I need to know.’ (qtd. in Carr, “Novelist Turned” 39)

In fact, the allure of the image of the two artists working side by side that summer, the period that “began one of the most affecting and strange friendships in American literary history” (Spoto 126) in itself inspired southern writers David Madden and Peggy Bach to imagine that time period in dramatic form. In “Tennessee and Carson: Notes on Concepts

for a Play,” Madden outlines his and Bach’s vision for a play exploring that summer in Nantucket and ultimately, the relationship between Williams and McCullers. While the two never turned the play into a final product, it was staged as a work-in-progress at Lynchburg College and in a bookstore in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (“Re: Play on Tennessee and Carson”).

McCullers encountered logistical difficulties, suffered health complications, and endured battles over artistic visions throughout the process of adapting *Member*, and it may have been her resiliency and insistence on her own vision that contributed to the play’s success, in addition to her newly established literary reputation. Virginia Spencer Carr and Judith Giblin James have both examined the process of her adaptation and the critical response to *Member*, pointing to factors such as these as key to its success.³ However, while the play was praised by the *Commonweal* and others “as a complete delight” (Phelan 437), many critics felt that the story had not quite transitioned from novel to play, and as a result, it lacked the dramatic movement that critics had commented on in novel form. In fact, the director, Harold Clurman, remembers his initial reservations: “It had no regard for theatrical conventions, little plot, no big climaxes or sweeping movements—in short, it was not Broadway material and the public won’t like it. The play was to be my fiftieth production and probably one of my biggest failures” (qtd. in Carr, “Novelist Turned” 44). While the play was not the failure Clurman had feared, critics agreed that it did not seem to fit within the genre: Robert Garland comments that it was “something special but not quite a play” (18), and Brooks Atkinson points out in the *New York Times* that its original status as a novel might have “some bearing on the fact that the play has no beginning, middle or end and never acquires dramatic momentum. Although Mrs. McCullers has taken the material out of the novel she has not quite got it into the form of a play ... It may not be a play, but it is art” (26). Critics seemed to agree that *Member* was effective and moving, but not a traditional play.

Despite the faults critics found with its qualifications for the dramatic genre, *The Member of the Wedding* received 17 of a possible 25 votes of the New York drama critics for top honors in 1950, including awards in the categories of “best play of last season,” and “best first play by an author to be produced on Broadway” (Carr, “Novelist Turned” 45). There were nominations for the performances as well; in fact, the quality of the acting and reputation of the performers may have been a major selling point of the play. Reviews deemed the performances by Ethel Waters as Berenice, Brandon de Wilde as John Henry and Julie Harris as Frankie as

“magnificent” (Wyatt 468; Gibbs 44), and “of a high order” (Barnes 12). Further, evidence suggests that McCullers’ reputation preceded her and because of her acclaim, critics were able to overlook the limitations of the play. Critics proclaimed that “its writing largely excuses its playwrighting” (“New Play in Manhattan” 45) and “in lesser hands” the play may not have succeeded (“New Plays” 74). *Member’s* shortcomings were excused because its author was Carson McCullers, who had become New York’s “new literary darling” (Carr, *Lonely Hunter* 98) with the publication of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* at only 23 years old.

The reception of *The Square Root of Wonderful* also seems to suggest that McCullers’ style did not immediately lend itself to dramatic adaptation or form. *Square Root* is the story of a dysfunctional family and several boarders living in their home, which culminates in the suicide of failed writer Phillip Lovejoy, tortured by his lack of success and his wife Molly’s decision to leave him for another man. It moves slowly, without the allure of the central adolescent female character that had captured audiences in *Member*. The story instead presents “grotesque” (McClain 22), “uninteresting characters and surprisingly flat writing” (Morrison 72). Though McCullers first conceived of *Square Root* as a play, her tendency to create storylines without the dramatic momentum many critics expected may have proved a challenge. Further, her health had worsened and she was grieving the deaths of both her mother and Reeves, who had committed suicide (and for whom the character Phillip Lovejoy was a clear parallel). McCullers did not insist on the final word with the production as she did with *Member*, and it ultimately suffered from too many collaborators. This resulted in a deviation from her vision of the play (James, *Wunderkind* 136) as it went through “more than a dozen drafts, six or eight by McCullers alone, and a handful of assorted other scripts written in collaboration with her several producers and directors” (Carr, “Novelist Turned” 47). The manuscript was ultimately “carved up beyond recognition” (49). Despite her frustration with *The Square Root of Wonderful*, in her final years McCullers collaborated on a musical version of *The Member of the Wedding* with Mary Rodgers, but she was in poor health at the time, and ill-prepared to write lyrics for a musical, according to Rodgers, who told Carr that “poor Carson died thinking still that her musical would some day be produced” (qtd. in “Novelist Turned” 50). There was a musical version of *Member* that opened on Broadway in 1971, scripted by Theodore Mann and titled *F. Jasmine Addams*, but it was not the script that Rodgers and McCullers had worked on, and it too failed, closing after

a mere 20 performances. Despite the ambivalent experiences she had with theater in her lifetime, I believe McCullers would be pleased to see the proliferation of her work and the continuation of her legacy into the scope of twenty-first-century drama and performance.

In 2002, *Carson McCullers (Historically Inaccurate)*, a play by Sarah Schulman, was produced by Women's Project and Productions in collaboration with Playwrights Horizon. It opened at the Women's Project Theatre at a juncture when "interest in McCullers [was] stronger than ever" (Sommer), a sentiment echoed by the *New York Times*, which claimed that the "play [was] the latest evidence of renewed interest" (Mandell) in McCullers. While the abundance of recent stage engagement with McCullers' life and work might support this claim, unfortunately audiences, fans, critics, and scholars were not quite pleased with Schulman's approach or the final production directed by Marion McClinton. Schulman uses 16 scenes to sketch McCullers' life, focusing first on her early talent for the piano and closing with a deathbed scene, along the way exploring her tumultuous relationship with Reeves; friendships with other artists like Gypsy Rose Lee and Richard Wright; and her art, discussing her works in progress and the adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*, and inserting figures like Ethel Waters and other seemingly random or tangentially related characters. Schulman does not quote from any copyrighted work, so while she draws on some well-known McCullers' quips, such as her comment about her need to return to the South every once in a while to renew her "sense of horror" (Carr, *Lonely Hunter* 313), excerpts from McCullers' texts themselves do not appear, giving Schulman considerable creative space to imagine dialogue and action, which she clearly acknowledges within the parenthetical piece of her title.

In a *New York Times* interview, Schulman discusses having read some of McCullers' texts in her adolescence, but not fully understanding them. When she began to look more deeply at McCullers' life and work, she was "riveted and amazed. She had major depressions, she was chronically ill, she was a terrible alcoholic, she drove her husband to suicide, she was cruel, she was incapable of love—she was a nightmare. But her work is so generous. It is shocking to open her books and realize from the first sentence how brilliant she is" (qtd. in Mandell). This characterization (which in itself, as many familiar with McCullers' life and work would argue, is not quite accurate)⁴ may not bode well for a sensitive portrayal of a complex woman, and indeed, reviewers and audiences seemed to find Schulman's depiction problematic. Schulman goes on: "Floria Lasky, who

was Carson McCullers's lawyer, called up and said she is coming to the play. I know that the first thing out of her mouth is going to be, 'It's historically inaccurate.' She's going to be right, but it's like, 'O.K., we all agree on that.' That's not what it's about. It's emotionally accurate" (qtd. in Mandell). In response to this interview and a review in the *Times*, Carlos Dews, editor of McCullers' unfinished autobiography *Illumination and Nightglare*, wrote a letter to the editor lambasting Schulman's view:

Unfortunately, the representation of McCullers in the play is as emotionally inaccurate as it is historically inaccurate. The negative aspects are not given any redeeming balance, leaving the impression that McCullers was, in Ms. Schulman's words, 'a nightmare.' Ms. Schulman observes that, during McCullers's lifetime, 'mainstream critics dismissed her as morbid and grotesque.' Given Ms. Schulman's characterization of her, audiences could only leave the theater with the mainstream critics' impression.

The playbill poses the question: "Can a life be created, an identity forged, through prose"? In response, Schulman seems to be attempting to raise questions about the failure of biography to capture history and the nuance of lived experience in explicitly accurate ways, and perhaps, in emphasizing the more "nightmare" qualities of McCullers, meditate on the ways in which we remember people after they have passed, especially those whose art we admire. Yet critics and audiences could not reflect fully on these questions, blinded by Schulman's depiction of McCullers and the "freedom she's granted herself to treat McCullers the way no one should treat a dog" (Finkle). David Finkle claims that the real parenthetical title should be (*Dramaturgically Inept*). The crux of the problem may lie in the lack of attention and respect Schulman demonstrates for McCullers' lived experience as we know it through her own prose, since she draws on no copyrighted material. As one reviewer points out, "the writing of McCullers is of, at most, secondary importance here; it never really appears in the play. Rather, it's Schulman's words that carry the evening, and her own special wit and creativity that see us through the many, many dark spots present in its torturous 130 minutes" (Murray). Unlike *Carson McCullers (Historically Inaccurate)*, the more successful stage engagements with McCullers give precedence to McCullers' own words, and it seems that stronger attention to those words and to the details of McCullers' life would have better served Schulman.

The eventual stage adaptation of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* came to fruition in the hands of one of the most talented and successful

playwrights working today, Rebecca Gilman, who has earned commercial success and critical acclaim for plays such as *Spinning into Butter* (2000), *Boy Gets Girl* (2001) and *The Glory of Living* (2001). Gilman's adaptation effectively captures the lyrical tone of McCullers' novel; draws on direct dialogue and follows the novel's plotline; and for the most part, translates accurately the novel's presentation of the characters. Yet, Gilman made a controversial choice which would dominate discourse surrounding the play: she cast a hearing actor in the role of deaf-mute John Singer and endows him with speech. While he communicates mostly via his notebook and sign language, his voice opens and closes the play. He narrates his childhood history; the special nature of his relationship with his friend Antonapoulos; the conflict in which Antonapoulos is institutionalized by his uncaring cousin; and then in the final scene, his thoughts following his suicide. This monologue is a suicide note of sorts, closure we don't get in the novel, and one that some readers might take comfort in—as one reviewer acknowledges: “before you get your britches in a bunch, ask yourself: Haven't you always wanted to know what was going through John Singer's mind ... especially at the end?” (Bernardo). The 2005 premiere at Atlanta's Alliance Theater opened to strong reviews and little acknowledgement of the casting and speech of Singer, but when it received more attention at the New York Theater Workshop, the production prompted deaf activists to protest that only a deaf actor should have been cast. Criticism was harsh; for instance, Linda Bove, a deaf actress and activist for minority, disabled, and deaf artists, claimed that “a hearing actor playing a deaf character is tantamount to putting a white actor in blackface” (qtd. in Healy).

Gilman justified her artistic choices, pointing out that Singer was taught to speak as a child (qtd. in Healy), and noting that she does draw Singer's words in the final monologue from letters he writes Antonapoulos throughout the novel. She received the criticism well, stating that she was open to considering potential revisions for her play so that a nonspeaking actor could play Singer in future productions (qtd. in Healy), and indeed, in a subsequent production at the Steppenwolf in Chicago, a deaf actor assumed the role. The 2010 published acting edition clarifies in the production note that “Except where indicated, Singer's signing should not be translated for a hearing audience. Singer's direct address at the beginning and end of the play should be voiced by either the actor playing Singer or the actor playing Biff. Or, for those two sections, the text may be projected” (3).

Aside from the controversy concerning Singer's speech, there were many positive reviews which called it "an eloquent, unsentimental and ineffably sad tapestry" (Zoglin), a play that "[succeeds] in capturing the essence of McCullers' book" (Feldberg). As for the criticisms, as in the case of McCullers' other plays, *Heart's* failures may have been partly due to the difficulty of translating to the stage a style or story that is not driven by dramatic movement, but, in this particular case, the inner workings of the character's minds. Like young Mick Kelly's "inside room" (McCullers, *Heart* 138), the inner worlds of the characters in the novel are so complex that while critics praised the actors' performances, they felt that "the poetry inside them is left unarticulated," resulting in an overall "respectful but lifeless stage version" that is merely "a surface sketch of the book, one that fails to communicate any of its emotional substance. It's a mere blueprint of a cathedral, not the majestic building itself" (Isherwood, "Wounded Souls"). Reviews reflected the general challenges that McCullers' work has consistently presented for dramatic translation: ultimately claiming that it is a "sprawling story" (Bernardo), "not an easy novel to dramatize" (Jones), and "a story for the page and not the stage" (Windman). Despite these challenges, Gilman is deferential and faithful to McCullers' vision, and even when she deviates (as with the choices surrounding Singer), she does so with reason and attention to the text. Ultimately, she is effective in translating to stage the novel's themes of loneliness and isolation, ones that may well ring truer today in different form, as one reviewer notes: "In big cities and small towns, individuals pursue specific goals or languish in despair, often with their heads attached to a pair of earbuds or necks permanently bent toward a cell phone. *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* takes place two decades before Steve Jobs was even born, but its portrait of lost souls yearning to connect but never succeeding for very long is achingly relevant today" (Whalen).

While Gilman's adaptation presented a rather traditional take on McCullers' work, in 2011, singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega, best known for her 1980s hits "Tom's Diner" and "Luka," channeled McCullers in an innovative musical-narrative hybrid piece "Carson McCullers Talks About Love," which ran for a month at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theater in New York. As a teenager Vega was drawn to McCullers when she came across her biography in the library and felt a connection to her, thinking that, "Her face looked like photographs of myself as a young girl" (Light AR6). Later, while studying at Barnard College, Vega adapted several of McCullers' short stories to song and ultimately devised a one-act play

based on these songs for her undergraduate thesis (Light AR6; Kelley 1). Thus she had been working on versions of what ultimately became “Carson McCullers Talks About Love” for a number of years, finally first trying out her solo production for an audience in February 2011 at the Carson McCullers Interdisciplinary Conference and 94th Birthday Celebration sponsored by Columbus State in Columbus, Georgia, McCullers’ hometown. The Rattlestick production was directed by Kay Matschullat, featured music co-written with *Spring Awakening* composer Duncan Sheik, and Vega performed with the accompaniment of Joe Iconis, on piano and offering occasional dialogue, and Andy Stack on guitar and other instruments. The 90-minute show features 14 songs, highlighting the major parts of McCullers’ biography through narrative and music. Vega begins the show by recalling the influence that McCullers had on her as a 17-year-old, when, “Somehow at that moment I felt she picked me out, tapped me on the shoulder and had things to say to me.” Many critics do comment on the physical resemblance between Vega and McCullers, whose persona Vega takes on in this transitional moment, through wiping make-up from her face, and donning a cigarette and page-boy wig.

McCullers’ biography is explored through songs like “New York is My Destination,” which explores the awe McCullers had for the northern city she journeyed to at age 17 with dreams of studying at Juilliard and taking writing courses at Columbia, then later returned to after she achieved literary success. Also included is “Song of Annemarie (Terror, Pity, Love),” a ballad to the Swiss heiress Annemarie Schwarzenbach for whom McCullers developed a mostly unrequited infatuation, and “The We of Me,” words *The Member of the Wedding’s* Frankie Addams uses to imagine the unachievable union she wishes to share with her brother and his bride, and one echoed in many of McCullers’ own relationships and love triangles. The narrative and lyrics are in some cases creative, yet generally grounded in real details related to McCullers’ work and life. For instance, this stanza from the song “Harper Lee,” a comical piece in which McCullers compares herself and other artists in a proud, taunting way: “Virginia Woolf, she leaves me cold./ I recognize the genius, but I’m twice as bold./ I have more to say than Hemingway./ Lord knows, compared to Faulkner,/I say it in a better way.” She once did say that Harper Lee was “poaching on my literary preserves” (Carr, *Lonely Hunter* 433), and Vega explains that the reference to Woolf comes from a lecture McCullers gave at the 92nd Street Y with Tennessee Williams (Kelley 2–3). McCullers did make those remarks about Hemingway and Faulkner