

**'MARKING' EXODUS: DEATH AND FUNERALS IN THE RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS
OF CLEMENTINE HUNTER**

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ABSTRACT

LAURA KATHRYN LILLEY: 'Marking' Exodus: Death and Funerals in the Religious
Paintings of Clementine Hunter
(Under the direction of Professor Dorothy H. Verkerk)

Previous scholarship on artist Clementine Hunter of Natchitoches, Louisiana, has been predominantly biographical and stylistic. Through analysis of her religious scenes, I propose that Hunter's paintings concerning death reflect concepts of exodus that have influenced Christianity and its practice since its beginning. Considering specifically Hunter's mid-1970s *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven*, I explore ideas of exodus first through the concept of death as a doorway or transitional space, an association that extends back historically to the Early Christian period. I then link the theme of exodus to the variety of religious influences apparent in Hunter's work, considering especially her depictions of angels, baptisms, and the possible influence of African-American connections between exodus, death, and baptism. These conceptual and historical considerations provide new ways of discussing the complexity of Hunter's work, whether intended by Hunter or not, that place her work in a continuum of religious thought both mainstream and idiosyncratic.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: CLEMENTINE HUNTER

*God puts those pictures in my head and I just puts them on the canvas
like he wants me to.*¹

Clementine Hunter (1886/7-1988), an African-American artist from the Cane River area in central Louisiana, completed her painting *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven* (Figure 1) in the mid-1970s following the death of her adult son Joseph "Frenchie." In this piece, Hunter portrays in the vivid blues, greens, and yellows that characterize nearly all of her work a significant scene of her son's ascension into heaven. She paints her son from the back so that his face is not visible. His arms are raised in the direction he will ascend, and his black hair stands up in a point that indicates his movement in flight, in the fashion typical of Hunter's flying angels in many other of her religious paintings.² A small white church with a steeple occupies the middle ground of the composition; a tree-lined path leads to its door from the left, and to the lower right rest the five graves of the church's cemetery, adorned with small crosses and colorful flowers. A darkly-robed figure holding an open book stands on the path, perhaps a priest reading from a prayer book as Frenchie rises. The sky occupies nearly one third of the scene vertically, its wispy grey, white and yellow clouds suggesting a sunset on the otherwise solid blue

¹Clementine Hunter, quoted in Mildred Hart Bailey, foreword to James L. Wilson, *Clementine Hunter: American Folk Artist* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing, 1998), 9.

²Hunter described the hair of angels in her paintings: "See the angels flying up in the air? That their hair flying up like that. If you flew through the air, your hair would do that, too." Quoted in Mary E. Lyons, *Talking with Tebé: Clementine Hunter, Memory Artist* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 12.

paint. A black and white, oval-shaped opening appears in the clouds slightly to the right of church's steeple tip, indicating Frenchie's near entrance into his heavenly destination.

Hunter was adamant in interviews that her colorful paintings were unstudied inspirations that demanded her faithfulness in immediately "marking" them out; they were visions "put into my mind by God."³ Hunter referred to the process of painting as "marking" to emphasize the dutiful execution of her visions rather than a concern for artistic technique. "I tell my stories by marking pictures,"⁴ she once said, and on another occasion, "I ain't no artist, I'm a painter. I sets things down in paint and that is all there is to it."⁵ Despite Hunter's objection to being called an artist, she became increasingly consumed by the need to paint in the later part of her life. Often working late at night when her housework was finished and as her family slept, she painted a variety of visions that were deeply rooted in the life she experienced or witnessed by day.⁶ Her brightly-colored paintings include work scenes such as cotton-picking, hog-butcherer, and pecan-picking; recreational scenes of evenings at the local honky-tonk and afternoons spent playing cards; and religious scenes of weddings, funerals, wakes, and baptisms.⁷ By the

³Hunter, quoted in Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 16.

⁴Hunter, quoted in Shelby R. Gilley, *Painting by Heart: The Life and Art of Clementine Hunter, Louisiana Folk Artist* (Baton Rouge, La., 2000), 65.

⁵Hunter, quoted in Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 32.

⁶Hunter told this story of her husband's response to her painting compulsion: "I used to keep Emmanuel up at night with my painting. 'Woman,' he said one time, 'if you don't stop painting and get some sleep, you'll go crazy.' 'No,' I said, 'if I don't get this painting out of my head, I'll sure go crazy.'" Quoted in Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 31.

⁷Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 44, classifies Hunter's work into four categories: "Work," "Play," "Religion," and "Other." Anne Hudson Jones, "The Centennial of Clementine Hunter," *Woman's Art Journal* 8 (1987): 23-27, 25, provides five loose categories: scenes of work, recreation, religion, flowers, and abstractions.

time of her death at age 101, Hunter had painted over 5,000 such visions that reflected the various aspects of life in her small plantation community situated on Louisiana's Cane River.

Clemence "Clementine" Reuben Hunter was born to Janvier Reuben and Antoinette Adams in 1886/7 in Cloutierville, Louisiana, on Hidden Hill Plantation, which is believed by some to be the non-fictional plantation that inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁸ Clementine was baptized as an infant in St. John's Catholic Church of Cloutierville.⁹ Her parents sent her to Catholic school as a girl, but she refused to go back after her nun teacher chastised her for bringing a chicken lunch on a Friday.¹⁰ In all her life, Hunter never learned to read or write.¹¹

When Clementine was thirteen years old, her father moved his family to Melrose Plantation south of Natchitoches to work for plantation owner Carmelita "Cammie" Henry.¹² Clementine would spend most of the rest of her years at Melrose picking cotton, keeping house, raising a family, and—eventually, painting. As a young woman at

⁸Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 19.

⁹Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 12.

¹⁰Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 20. Hunter also recalled conflicts with the older children and the white children whose school adjoined her own: "I quit when I just would fight all the time. You see, the white children and the colored children was joining together. They had a fence between us, you know, our school on this side, the white school on that side..." Quoted in Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 14.

¹¹Regarding her inability to read, Hunter remarked, "So I never learned any of the ABCs. And I have made out all right, too. All my life I have had a strong mother-wit, which is better than stuff you learn from books. Leastwise I can say I don't think I missed anything by not getting reading and writing. It's a heap of folks got book learning running out of their ears, but I can't say they is smart people." Quoted in Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 20.

¹²Art Shiver and Tom Whitehead, eds., *Clementine Hunter: The African House Murals* (Natchitoches, Louisiana: Northwestern State University Press Publications, 2005), 16.

Melrose, Clementine had two children with plantation servant Charlie “Cuckoo” Dupré: Joseph “Frenchie” in 1907 and Cora in 1914.¹³ Ten years after Dupré’s death in 1914, she married Melrose wood-chopper Emmanuel Hunter, with whom she gave birth to five more children: Agnes, King, Mary, and two that died at childbirth.¹⁴

Serving Cammie Henry and her family at Melrose until 1970, first as field-hand, then as household maid and cook, Hunter enjoyed contact with dozens of artists and writers who passed through the cultural retreat community established at Melrose under Cammie Henry. Such creative guests included, among many more, writers Lyle Saxon, James Pipes Register, Ada Jack Carver, Alexander Woolcott, and artists Elemore Morgan, Richard Avedon, and Alberta Kinsey, whose abandoned paint tubes may have inspired Hunter’s first painting endeavor.¹⁵ Hunter formed a special friendship with writer and long-time Melrose resident Francois Mignon, who became her foremost supporter, as well as a source of financial assistance, as she discovered and developed her love for painting in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁶

Through the efforts of Mignon and others, Hunter began to gain recognition among art critics and art historians for her bright colors and endearing “primitive” or “folk” style.¹⁷ In 1953, she was featured in *Look* magazine for her ability to capture a

¹³Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 25.

¹⁴Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 24.

¹⁵For a more complete list of writers and artists who spent time at Melrose Plantation under Cammie Henry and the influence of this atmosphere on Hunter, see Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 22-24. For Hunter’s story about finding Alberta Kinsey’s paints and beginning to paint, see Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 30-33.

¹⁶Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 27.

¹⁷These terms generally refer to styles created by artists with little or no academic artistic training. Many recent art historians have abandoned the terms to avoid negative connotations; they instead

view of the world “as wondrous and newly born as it [appears] to the eyes of children,”¹⁸ and was soon afterwards invited to be the first black artist to exhibit a one-woman show at both Northwestern State College in Natchitoches and the Delgado Museum in New Orleans.¹⁹ Hunter referred to her own heritage as *Creole*,²⁰ probably because her ancestors represented a range of ethnicities from African to Native-American to Irish.²¹ She is most widely recognized, however, as a key African-American figure in twentieth-century self-taught art, referred to by some admirers as “the black Grandma Moses.”²² As her work began gaining popularity several years before the Civil Rights Movement,

favor terms such as *self-taught* or *outsider* art. For the various nuances in ways these terms are used, see Gary Alan Fine, “Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art,” *Theory and Society* 32 (2003): 153-180; Elizabeth Manley Delacruz, “Outside In: Deliberations on American Contemporary Folk Art,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 34 (2000): 77-86, especially 81; and J. Ubricht, “Learning from the Art of Self-Taught Artists,” *Art Education* 53 (2000): 45-49.

¹⁸Charlotte Willard, “Innocence Regained,” *Look* (1957): 103-105.

¹⁹Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 34. Both exhibitions were held in 1955.

²⁰The term *Creole* denotes various meanings for different groups of people in many cultures. For the Creole community of Isle Brevelle on the Cane River in Louisiana, this term historically signified either French or Spanish descent, or French/Spanish mixed with African and/or Native American descent. As an increasing number of Americans moved to the area in the nineteenth century, the term was often used to differentiate between people who had lived there as French/Spanish colonists and the American newcomers. Through the twentieth century and today, the Creole population of Cane River identify themselves by their Catholic faith and some retention of the French language. For further discussion the Creole identity in Louisiana, see “Creoles in the Cane River Region,” Cane River National Heritage Area: A National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service; and H. F. Gregory and Joseph Moran, “We Know Who We Are: An Ethnographic Overview of the Creole Community and Traditions of Isle Brevelle and Cane River, Louisiana,” National Park Service, 1994.

²¹Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 19-20. Hunter’s paternal grandfather was an Irish horse trader on Cane River after the Civil War; her grandmother was a Native American woman called Mé-Mé. Her mother’s parents, Billy Zack and Idole Reuben, were African slaves brought to Louisiana from Virginia.

²²Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 149.

Hunter was not permitted to see her own paintings in the Northwestern exhibit during regular museum hours.²³

Hunter's work received a resurgence of attention in the 1970s when many black artists were being recognized by the art world. Her paintings were displayed in exhibits at the Museum of American Folk Art in New York (September-November 1973), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1976), and in the traveling exhibition beginning at Illinois State University, "Forever Free: An Exhibit of Art by African-American Women, 1862-1980" (1981-82).²⁴ During the last decade of her life, Hunter was called "one of the South's most famous contemporary naïve artists" by Robert Bishop, director of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York,²⁵ she was featured on local and national television,²⁶ and she received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Northwestern State University in 1986.²⁷ Although such promotions achieved much in making Hunter's work known, it is significant that her fame was spread almost exclusively within the category of "folk" or "primitive" art. Gary Alan Fine has argued that self-taught artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have often been recognized by scholars and critics because they fit into categories based on race, gender, or age: "It is their *lack*, rather than their attributes, that defines them. The art of integrated professionals is generically labeled contemporary art. Even though self-taught artists are our

²³Jones, "The Centennial of Clementine Hunter," 26.

²⁴Ibid. For a complete list of permanent collections and exhibitions that have featured Hunter's work, see Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 151-154; and Gilley, *Painting by Heart*, 167-171.

²⁵Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), 184.

²⁶Jones, "The Centennial of Clementine Hunter," 26.

²⁷Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 42.

contemporaries, they are not labeled as such.”²⁸ In this thesis, I demonstrate that Hunter’s work might be approached through methods other than those traditionally used to study or promote artists with little academic training.

Since Hunter’s death in 1988, many of her friends and patrons have contributed to researching her life and publishing her work. James L. Wilson’s 1988 *Clementine Hunter: American Folk Artist*²⁹ and Shelby R. Gilley’s 2001 *Painting by Heart: The Life and Art of Clementine Hunter, Louisiana Folk Artist* are two comprehensive and reflective biographies that include large color prints of many of Hunter’s paintings, as well as quotations from her spoken commentary. Art Shiver and Thomas N. Whitehead’s 2005 *Clementine Hunter: The African House Murals* includes many stories from the artist’s life, as well as documenting her unique mural paintings in Melrose’s African House. Mary E. Lyons’s 1998 *Talking with Tebé: Clementine Hunter, Memory Artist* presents a collection of direct quotations from Hunter taken from magazines, newspapers, and taped interviews, providing an invaluable glimpse into the artist’s own perspectives on her life and artwork. Throughout my analysis, I draw on the above accounts for details regarding Hunter’s life and, when available, her explanations about the scenes in her paintings. I suggest, however, that Hunter’s work can be considered in ways other than strictly biographical or stylistic, keeping in mind that the latter approaches often exclude perspectives based on the compositional qualities and subject matter of the artwork itself.

Through compositional and iconographical analysis of her religious scenes, I suggest that Hunter’s paintings concerning death reflect spiritual themes of exodus that

²⁸Fine, “Crafting Authenticity,” 156, emphasis original to author.

²⁹Key researchers for the book include friends and patrons of Hunter: Thomas N. Whitehead, Mildred Hart Bailey, and Ann Williams Brittain (Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 40).

have influenced Christianity and its practice since the faith's beginning in the first centuries A.D. Considering specifically Hunter's mid-1970s painting *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven* described above, I rely on close examination of the painting itself and its comparison to her other works. In Chapter I, I explore ideas of exodus through the concept of death as a doorway or transitional space, based on theoretical frameworks often used to study elements of Early Christian culture. I suggest in Chapter II that Hunter's understanding of death, as expressed in her paintings, was based on an amalgam of religious beliefs that represent the variety of religious influences in Louisiana during the twentieth century. I link these influences to religious themes of exodus: first through a discussion of angels in the funerary context; and secondly, through consideration of the practice of baptism as it relates to exodus and death. I also discuss the notion of exodus in the experience of African-American slavery and consider its possible influence on Hunter's visually-expressed understanding of death. These conceptual and historical considerations, whether intended by the artist or not, provide new ways for seeing and discussing the complexity of Hunter's work in its religious and historical context, placing her work in a continuum of religious thought that is both mainstream and idiosyncratic.

CHAPTER II: DEATH AS A DOORWAY: EXODUS FROM EARTH INTO HEAVEN

In this chapter, I explore impressions of exodus in Hunter's religious paintings through the historical concept of death as a doorway, or space of transition, between corrupted, sinful life on earth and new, eternal life in heaven. I begin by establishing a context for this concept through a discussion of Early Christian belief and practice and the models of scholarship that have been used for interpreting them. Using these ideas as a framework, I examine *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven* and several of Hunter's other religious paintings to investigate the concept of death as a threshold—or liminal space—that both includes and depends upon the living participants in funeral rituals to achieve safe passage for the dead.

Death as a Threshold: A Theoretical Framework

The concept of death as a transitional space between life and eternal life, earth and heaven, is deeply rooted in the history and practice of Christianity. This crossing, or passage, from death to eternal life is made possible for Christians through faith in Christ, who is himself the “door [by which] if any man enter in, he shall be saved.”³⁰ Passage into eternal life through Christ has strong typological and exegetical ties the Old

³⁰John 10, 9. All scriptural references are cited from the Douay-Rheims Bible translation, unless otherwise noted.

Testament account of Israel's Exodus out of Egypt.³¹ Christian teaching holds that in the same way that Moses, then Joshua, led the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea, through the exiled space of the desert, and into the Promised Land of Canaan, Jesus—whose Hebrew name *Jeshua* means “Yahweh is salvation,”³² leads his people through the threshold of earthly death. Jesus himself is the only doorway to eternal life: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father, but by me.”³³ Because Jesus was able to defeat death in his resurrection, Christians follow him to navigate their own passages from death into heaven: “And if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead, dwell in you; he that raised up Jesus Christ from the dead, shall quicken also your mortal bodies, because of his Spirit that dwelleth in you.”³⁴

Further aspects of the concept of death as a threshold and site of spiritual exodus have been theoretically explored by scholars of several academic fields. After introducing some of their insights, I will demonstrate ways that such a framework offers new perspectives through which Hunter's religious paintings might be seen. Several scholars who have analyzed Early Christian understandings of death have drawn on the schema set up by anthropologist Alfred van Gennep. According to van Gennep's schema, the death rituals of many world cultures are characterized by three general stages: separation

³¹See Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 86-98.

³²A. J. Maas, “Origin of the Name of Jesus Christ,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08374x.htm>. See also Matthew 1, 21: “‘And she shall bring forth a son: and thou shalt call his name JESUS. For he shall save his people from their sins.’”

³³John 14, 6.

³⁴Romans 8, 11.

(pre-liminal), transition (*liminal*), and incorporation (post-liminal), each of which stage is marked by certain culturally-specific rituals.³⁵ Van Gennep marks the symbolic importance of doorways, especially in the transitional stage, as the liminal passages between the known and the unknown, the old and the new: “to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world.”³⁶ In this way, conceptual doorways act as passages from the familiar and social world of the living to the mysterious, cosmic realm of the dead.

Historian Frederick Paxton draws on van Gennep’s transitional stage to examine Christian rituals surrounding death, from the Early Medieval period in Europe through the ninth century.³⁷ By analyzing literary sources such as legal texts, letters, liturgical manuscripts, and saints’ biographies, Paxton traces continuities and changes in Christian death rituals to demonstrate ways that Early Christians developed social structures for understanding death. He stresses the importance of the doorway (threshold) motif as central to the context of Christian death, explaining how biblical references in funerary liturgy to Job, Lazarus, and the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt, each describing a passage through the trials of human life into promised deliverance, would have evoked the conceptual liminality of death.³⁸ Psalm 113, for example, was often recited at Christian funerals,³⁹ reminding believers of their promised salvation in God by recalling his

³⁵ Alfred van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 1909, translated by Monica B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, with introduction by Solon T. Kimball (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁷ Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

³⁸ Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 39-40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

protection of the Israelites when they passed through the desert with Moses and his brother Aaron:

The house of Israel hath hoped in the Lord: he is their helper and their protector. The house of Aaron hath hoped in the Lord: he is their helper and their protector. They that fear the Lord hath hoped in the Lord: he is their helper and their protector. The Lord hath been mindful of us, and hath blessed us. He hath blessed the house of Israel: he hath blessed the house of Aaron.⁴⁰

By invoking this Psalm in the funeral context, Christians placed their hope of successful passage from death into new life in the God who had faithfully brought the Israelites out of their Egyptian captivity and into the Promised Land.

Safe passage through death's doorway was further evoked through ritual readings and responses from the book of Job prior to the burial of the dead, which preserved the Old Testament tradition of "the creature's right to remind the Creator of the essential realities of their mutual relationship"⁴¹ and expressed assurance in the salvation of humanity through Christ. This invocation was in many cases followed by this burial antiphon that directly alludes to a threshold, "Open to me the gates of justice and let me enter, for I will confess to the Lord. The Lord's just ones will enter by this gate."⁴²

Art historian Dorothy H. Verkerk discusses the concept of death as a threshold as it is suggested visually by the representations of Job and his wife Sitis on the lower right corner of the front panel on the fourth-century Roman Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus.⁴³

⁴⁰Psalm 113, 17-20.

⁴¹Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 42.

⁴²Ibid., note 92 on page 42.

⁴³Dorothy H. Verkerk, "Job and Sitis: Curious Figures in Early Christian Funerary Art," *Mitteilungun Zur Christlichen Archaologie* 3 (1997): 20-29.

Arguing that the depiction of Job and Sitis evokes such funerary rituals as those mentioned by Paxton, in which the book of Job was read just before the body was lowered into the grave, Verkerk calls Job a “liminal figure, found physically and metaphorically, on the threshold,”⁴⁴ who in funerary art “fulfills that role of separation, of moving between this world and the next; the loss of the earthly body in hope of a heavenly body.”⁴⁵ For the living Christians who mourned the dead, the figure of Job, who was spurned by the rottenness of earthly life and hoped for renewal through God, would have reminded Early Christians of their transition in death from sinful, earthly life into Christ’s promised deliverance. These concepts of liminality and figures on the threshold between life and death have been sustained through centuries of Christian tradition, as Hunter’s paintings demonstrate.

Funerary Rituals in Hunter’s Paintings: A Conditional Liminality

The conceptual liminality of death occurs visually, if not by Hunter’s intention, in *Frenchie Goin’ to Heaven*, where Frenchie has just begun his transitional journey. He has been delivered from the grave and is passing through the air before he will be drawn upward into heaven’s opening above. His upward journey and rising movement are emphasized compositionally: the small vertical crosses of the graveyard, the rising path from the left, the two upright trees, and ultimately the church’s pronounced steeple all

⁴⁴Ibid., 25.

⁴⁵Ibid.

point heavenward, converging in the viewer's imagination near the opening where Frenchie is expected to enter his paradise.

Like Job or Lazarus in Early Christian religious practice and art, Frenchie occupies the transitional space—or threshold—of death, in the moment before his exodus will be completed by his entry into the heavenly Promised Land above. His transition represents what I call a *conditional* liminality, as Hunter seems to imply that proper rituals must be performed to ensure his safe passage. The church in the background and its rising steeple suggest that Frenchie's (and Hunter's) Christian beliefs are the basis and venue for safe passage: Frenchie begins his journey in the church's graveyard and will inevitably fly past the church during his ascent. The presence of the darkly-robed priest also seems to ensure safe passage, the book he holds perhaps opened to the proper prayers for requesting Frenchie's guidance upward.⁴⁶ A similar concept of necessary ritual performance in the funerary context is reflected in some of Hunter's other paintings featuring death ceremonies as their subjects.

Wakes and Funerals: Transition and Reincorporation for Living Participants in Funeral Rites

That the concept of death as a space of liminality was consciously or unconsciously a part of Hunter's imagination is further demonstrated in her paintings of wakes and funerals. Through consideration of a couple of these scenes, I propose that Hunter's funeral and wake scenes, like the critical presence of the church and the priest in *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven*, convey strongly a sense of how important proper ritual

⁴⁶Although Hunter has not been recorded as specifically explaining that this figure is a priest, my supposition that he is such is confirmed by Hunter's friend and patron Tom Whitehead, in discussion with the author, February 2008.

performance is in order for the dead to cross safely into eternal life. In each of these cases, it is significant that rituals are performed not by Frenchie or the other dead figures represented, but by the community of friends, family, and church leaders who gather for such occasions. Similar ritual traditions have been performed by Christian mourners since the faith's beginning stages.

Hunter described in one interview the order of events surrounding death in her community: "When somebody dies here on Cane River, they wake the body right at the church. Watch it all night, say prayers. Next day they pull the coffin to the grave in a mule cart. Put the coffin in a hole in the ground and ring the church bell."⁴⁷ She expresses these rituals visually in her paintings *Funeral* (Figure 2) and *Wake* (Figure 3), both dated 1955. In *Wake*, Hunter paints friends and family of the dead on various ground levels, surrounding the open coffin in the center of the composition. The figures are dwarfed by the large, brightly-colored arrangements of flowers that also surround the casket on all sides.⁴⁸ The bundles of flowers and vibrant colors reoccur in *Funeral*, where a lively procession of community members follows the casket as it is carried from the church to the round hole at the composition's bottom right. In the background a large figure in a red shirt and red hat busily rings a large bell.

Both paintings show funerary rituals performed by the living friends and families of the deceased person. Unlike Frenchie, these dead figures have not yet begun their journeys across the threshold of the grave and into heaven. According to van Gennep's theory, mourners of the dead are submitted to the stages of separation, transition, and

⁴⁷Hunter, quoted in Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 19.

incorporation along with the dead themselves.⁴⁹ I propose that while the mourners in Hunter's *Wake* are shown in the transitional stage, their prayers and watchfulness necessary to ensure exodus of the dead at the proper time, in *Funeral* they are on the brink of incorporation, described by van Gennep as a time when survivors "emerge from [the transitional stage] through rites of reintegration into society."⁵⁰ In *Wake*, figures are shown in various poses of mourning: one observes the body, others comfort weeping women seated in chairs, and still others seem to hang their heads in prayer or stand soberly aloof. Their pious actions, along with the imposing flowers that seem to form a protective circle around the coffin, serve to ensure protection of the dead person before his or her exodus into eternity.

Hunter's wake scene recalls the Early Christian practice of waking the dead, in which Christians, influenced by the Jewish belief that the soul of the dead hovered around the corpse for three days following death, kept vigil over the body before burying it three days later.⁵¹ During this time, the living participants in funeral rites recited prayers requesting forgiveness for the deceased to facilitate its safe passage into heaven. A prayer by Bishop Serapion, for example, recorded in the mid-fourth century, invokes God on behalf of an unidentified woman:

God, you who have the power of life and death, God of the spirits and lord of all flesh, God, you who kill and make alive, you who lead down to the gate of Hades and lead back up, you who create the spirit of man within and receive and refresh the souls of your saints, you who change and transform and transfigure your creatures, as is right and proper, being yourself

⁴⁹Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 147.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 21.

alone incorruptible, unalterable, and eternal, we beseech you for the repose and rest of this your servant or this your handmaiden: refresh her soul and spirit in green pastures, in chambers of rest with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all your saints; and raise up the body in the day which you have ordained, in accordance with your trustworthy promises, that you may render it also its fitting inheritances in your holy pastures. Remember not her transgressions and sins; cause her going forth to be prepared and blessed; heal the griefs of her relatives with the spirit of consolation; and grant unto us all a good end through your only-begotten Jesus Christ, through whom to you are glory and strength in the Holy Spirit for ever and ever, Amen.⁵²

The bishop's imagery of a God who "lead(s) down to the gate of Hades and leads back up" again evokes a threshold in the context of death as passage. His request that God "remember not her transgressions and sins" is central to his own participation in the ritual, suggesting that without his prayer, God might not forgive the woman. The priest on the pathway in Hunter's *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven* and the mourners in *Wake* reflect a similar idea of transition made possible by the proper ritual actions of living participants. The mourners co-occupy the space of liminality with the deceased they surround in prayer.

In *Funeral*, however, the funeral rites are coming to a close, and the living, seen in colorful, triumphant procession to the gravesite, stand at the brink of reincorporation into the world of society through meals and laughter. Early Christians practiced reintegration rites through celebratory festivals to commemorate the dead, often made

⁵²*Sacramentum Serapionis*, XXX, in Franciscus Xaverius Funk, ed., *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum* (Paderborn: Ferdinandi Schoeningh, 1905), 193-194. Translation by Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 22.

merry with singing, dancing, food, and drink.⁵³ A pamphlet on funerals provided by Cane River's St. Augustine Church reflects a similar reincorporation process in Catholic terms as based on the liturgical guidebook, *The Order of Christian Funerals*:

The funeral meal. Friends and family rarely just disperse from the cemetery or church, but gather together following the services to share memories and enjoy a meal together. This may be at a restaurant, at the parish hall, at the home of the deceased, or at some other convenient location. Sometimes the atmosphere at the funeral dinner may become quite jovial, as family and friends celebrate life eternal in the midst of death.⁵⁴

Through such celebrations, the mourners re-enter the world of the living from the state of liminality they had occupied during the wake and funeral. Hunter described the celebratory nature of funerals in her community: "If anybody had any crying to do, they done that the night before at the wake...And so today everybody puts on his Sunday clothes and rounds up some pretty flowers and so is happy to the grave."⁵⁵ The mourners are in van Gennep's transitional stage during the wake, while in *Funeral* they anticipate reincorporation as they imagine the dead joining the saints in heaven. The participation of the survivors in both paintings seems essential to Hunter's understanding of death as a threshold—the proper rites ensure safe passage for the liminal dead.

⁵³Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 26. For more on the celebratory nature of Early Christian feasts, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁵⁴Kay Lynn Isca, "Catholic Etiquette: Funerals" (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 2004).

⁵⁵Hunter, quoted in Gilley, *Painting by Heart*, 15.

CHAPTER III: DEATH RITUALS IN HUNTER'S EXPERIENCE: AN AMALGAM OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated the ways that several of Hunter's paintings emphasize the importance of proper ritual performance by the living in ensuring the deceased's proper passage from this life to the next through the conceptual threshold of death. While these paintings seem to show Hunter's consistent devotion to religious ritual in general, it is significant that the various beliefs and traditions practiced by Hunter and members of her community were not representative of a single religious or denominational background. In this chapter, I further elaborate my analysis of Hunter's religious paintings by tracing the various religious strands that seem to have influenced her understanding of death in connection with the theme of exodus.

The gamut of Hunter's religious paintings reflects the influence of the various forms of religious beliefs practiced in her community. Her paintings include Catholic wakes, masses, and Crucifixes, Baptist processional baptisms, lively Methodist tent revival meetings, and scenes of red and white angels that reflect a fusion between African ancestral beliefs and Catholicism. I suggest that *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven* embodies elements of various religious influences—Catholic, as well as Protestant and African. In Chapter I, I discussed the priest on the pathway and the ways he represents the Catholic concept of proper ritual performance. In this chapter, I elaborate on Catholic influences and address Protestant and African aspects of the painting, as well, by comparing

Frenchie Goin' to Heaven with Hunter's other paintings through two main concepts: Hunter's understanding of *angels* as liminal figures, and the compositional connection between her scenes of death and Baptist *baptism*. In the latter section, I include a discussion regarding the significance of baptism in historical connection to African-American Emancipation and the theme of biblical Exodus, exploring ways that this cultural memory might have influenced Hunter's religious experience.

Angels: Figures on the Threshold

Hunter's decision to depict Frenchie as an angel—with a white robe and pointed, wind-blown hair is reflected in some of her other paintings of the dead and further demonstrates her belief in an in-between existence before the soul of the deceased reaches its final destination. In *Angels* (1980; Figure 4), for example, Hunter paints three figures in red robes among a host of white-robed angels, all flying against the blue background of the sky. She explained the distinction between the figures: "That's the angels. I call them [in red] the devils. That's what I say it is. They fly around to try to gain their soul."⁵⁶ Hunter presents a notion that the dead do not always reach their heavenly destination, but are sometimes sustained indefinitely on the threshold between the living and the dead. This concept reflects similar elements of Early Christian practice that, influenced by pagan mystery cults that stressed initiation as prevention against evil

⁵⁶Hunter, quoted in Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 122.

forces, provided safety for the dead against demons that might hinder heavenly entry, as well as protection of the living from the deceased's restless spirit.⁵⁷

Hunter's red angels therefore reflect what van Gennep calls the "dangerous dead," who want to abide again with the living, "and since they cannot..., they behave like hostile strangers toward it."⁵⁸ She paints Frenchie as a white, good angel, and heaven opens up to receive him; still, he has not yet been incorporated and thus remains on the threshold of life and death. Since Hunter painted this scene immediately following Frenchie's death, perhaps she created it to assure herself of his safe passage, suggesting in paint that his journey would indeed be successful.

In biblical Christian teaching (Catholic and Protestant alike), believers do not become angels after their death. Associations between angels and the afterlife have a long history, though, both in the Bible and in colloquial understanding. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, Jesus explains resurrection to a group of Sadducees by teaching that believers after death are "equal to the angels, and are the children of God, being children of the resurrection."⁵⁹ Here resurrected souls are not in essence angels, but are *like* them in heavenly glory. The involvement of angels, although they do not represent transformations of the dead souls themselves, is also reflected in the oldest Latin ritual for death and burial, the Roman *Ordo Defunctorum*, which includes an antiphon likening the dead soul's journey and resurrection to the story of Lazarus:

Aid him, saints of God; run to meet him, angels of the Lord—you who receive his soul, you who offer him to the sight of the most high. May

⁵⁷Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 20.

⁵⁸Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 160.

⁵⁹Luke 20, 36.

Christ who created you receive you and may the angels lead you to the bosom of Abraham. May a chorus of angels receive you and may you have eternal rest with Lazarus the poor man.⁶⁰

Here the angels play the role of hastening the deceased from earth to the heavenly realm, where his resurrection will be completed in Christ. A prayer suggested for funerals in the 1966 *Book of Catholic Liturgy*, likely used (or similar to that used) for Catholic funerals in Hunter's community, also invokes angels to perform such a role alongside a call to remember the story of Lazarus:

Priest: Come to his aid, O saints of God;
People: Hasten up to meet him, angels of the Lord;
taking up his soul,
presenting it in the sight of the Most High.
Priest: Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord;
and let perpetual light shine upon him.
People: Presenting his soul in the sight of the Most High...
Priest: Let us pray. Father in heaven, your son wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. Please feel sorrow with those who mourn and comfort them with your love. Give them confidence in your care and let them realize that all things work together for good in those who love God. We ask this through Christ our Lord.
People: Amen.⁶¹

This prayer shows the way that the Catholic Church has maintained through centuries the association of angels with the dead soul's liminal space between life and death, a theme that Hunter seems to interpret in her paintings as the souls' angelic transformation before entering paradise.

The way Hunter describes angels as flying around to "try to gain their soul" might also be connected to African religious beliefs in ancestral spirits, introduced to Louisiana

⁶⁰Damien Sicard, *La Liturgie de la Mort dans L'église Latine des Origines à la Réforme Carolingienne* (Münster Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1978), 2-33. Translation by Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 40.

⁶¹*The Book of Catholic Worship*. Washington, 1966, 764.

and the rest of the American South by African slaves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Slaves taken from western and central Africa during these centuries underwent what Jessie Gaston Mulira calls a “double acculturation process,”⁶² where various ethnic groups who were forced to locate in regions of the South encountered both the religious influences of one another’s beliefs and those of western traditions.⁶³ In south Louisiana, this process led to the formation of the Voodoo religion, which combined many elements of African beliefs with Catholicism.⁶⁴ In her essay about the African Gullah religion, a similarly-rooted system of beliefs to Voodoo, Margaret Washington Creel explains the African idea that souls roamed the earth after death: “Some Gullahs believed that good spirits went straight to heaven, but most seemed to think that even these spirits remained on earth, close to the place of their burial.”⁶⁵ The Gullah religion also distinguished between those that “died good” and “died bad,” which determined the quality of their afterlife existence.⁶⁶ Such ancestral beliefs, retained in the Cane River community by descendants of African slaves, are reflected by Hunter’s composition of intermixed white angels and red devils. Hunter even implied in one explanation that both types of angels were necessary for a sense of spiritual balance: “I even paints a few of the

⁶²Jessie Gaston Mulira, “The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 34-68, 35.

⁶³For further discussion of African influences in Louisiana, see Charles E. Siler, “A Commentary: African Cultural Retentions in Louisiana,” Louisiana Division of the Arts, 1999, http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/afri_cult_retent.html.

⁶⁴Mulira, “The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans,” 45.

⁶⁵Margaret Washington Creel, “Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Joseph E. Holloway (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990): 69-97, 86.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

bad angels in there sometimes, just to keep them good angels straight.”⁶⁷ Frenchie, however, is clearly “goin’ to heaven,” and will not linger on earth. His passage, as I suggested above, is guided upward by the church steeple in the background and the proper performance of Catholic liturgy by the priest. Frenchie’s angelic nature therefore suggests that Hunter’s religious beliefs were influenced by a unique combination of these Christian and African ideas.

Hunter spoke of her own desire to become an angel when she died when reflecting on the inevitability of death: “People just a-dying. They sure going fast, I can tell you that. A burying most every day. But you going when your time come. Long as it don’t come, you ain’t going! When I die, I hope I will be an angel. *I’m going to try hard to be one. Try hard.*”⁶⁸ Hunter’s strong work ethic seemed to offer her comfort throughout life when the world appeared unexplainable.⁶⁹ Her comments and paintings alike suggest that Hunter held fast to the idea that if the right steps were followed, things would turn out all right: if life was properly lived on earth, if the dead were waked properly, and if the appropriate funeral rites were performed, then the dead could fly as angels peacefully up to heaven. When asked in an interview what she did with the money she earned from her paintings, Hunter responded: “Bought that mausoleum over there. I bought my own casket, too. I went and picked out what I want. It’s a nice one. Kinda

⁶⁷Hunter, quoted in Gilley, *Painting by Heart*, 83.

⁶⁸Hunter, quoted in Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 19, emphasis mine.

⁶⁹Besides her intention quoted above to “try hard to be [an angel]”, Hunter commented on the value of work in general: “Work, I tell you what work will do. Work will keep you from beggin’, get you something to eat, and some clothes. But if you sit down and don’t work, don’t do nothing, everything you want, ask somebody else for it—uh uh. I’m sure glad I wasn’t raised like that. No my mama and daddy raised us to work, and my daddy used to work until it look like he generally had no sense.” Quoted in Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 117.

gold lookin' with a heap of angels on it. It cost about \$3000 or \$2000.”⁷⁰ Hunter wished to mark her own death by the proper burial preparations, hoping her own journey would be accompanied by a “heap” of fellow angels.

Hunter’s impressions of the relationship between angels and the afterlife demonstrate the unique blend of various religious influences with which she seems to have been familiar. Her conception of adult baptisms furthers this religious fusion by introducing influence from the Baptist community on Cane River. I propose that Hunter’s depiction of adult baptism is closely related to themes of death and exodus, a symbolic connection established since Early Christianity and especially in the experience of African-American perceptions of Emancipation.

Baptism: Exodus from Sin into Salvation

The theme of baptism as it relates to Christian death is perhaps not recognized or intended by Hunter herself in *Frenchie Goin’ to Heaven*, but comparison of this and other funeral scenes and with her paintings of baptisms allows for some interesting interpretations. These scenes, like those of angels discussed above, demonstrate that a variety of beliefs and practices, rather than those of a single religion or denomination, influenced Hunter’s perception of life, death, and the world around her.

As mentioned above, Hunter was baptized as an infant into the Catholic Church in 1887; she was never baptized by immersion as an adult. She would, however, regularly

⁷⁰Hunter, quoted in Gilley, *Painting by Heart*, 16. The mausoleum that Hunter refers to is located in the cemetery of St. Augustine Catholic Church, just across the river from Melrose. Some community members that I spoke to expressed doubt in Hunter’s claim to have purchased her own cemetery space in the Catholic graveyard.

and joyfully witness her Baptist neighbors process from their church down to the Cane River for baptism.⁷¹ Hunter commented on several occasions that baptism was her favorite subject to paint: “What I love is a baptism, because I watched them people go down in the water a-many, a-many, a-many a time.”⁷² Hunter seems to separate herself from active participation in the ritual by calling the Baptist baptismal candidates “them people,” even while her love for the scene suggests its influence on her beliefs. Hunter participates as the viewer of the scene; her repeated encounters with baptism stir her to “mark” the ritual in painting over and over again. In *Baptism* (Figure 5), for example, painted in 1950, Hunter depicts figures in white robes following ministers in procession from the church to the river, where the ministers dip each candidate in the water as onlookers watch from the banks.⁷³ The composition of the painting strongly resembles that of the funeral scene discussed in Chapter I: both feature a ritualistic procession from the church to a site of burial—one physical and the other symbolic. Also in both, brightly-dressed bystanders witness the ritual events, seemingly celebrating the two transitional rites of passage.

The historical connection between baptism, death, and themes of exodus, rooted in Christianity since the faith’s early beginning, adds significance to this similarity. The apostle Paul makes the connection between baptism and Israel’s Exodus under Moses in I Corinthians: “For I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that our fathers were all under

⁷¹Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 12-13, 27.

⁷²Hunter, quoted in Gilley, *Painting by Heart*, 85; see also Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 27.

⁷³For discussion of the significance of baptism rituals in the American South, see Samuel S. Hill, “Southern Religion and the Southern Religious,” in John B. Boles, ed., *Autobiographical Reflections on Southern Religious History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 1-16.

the cloud, and all passed through the sea. And all in Moses were *baptized* in the cloud, and in the sea.”⁷⁴ As the Israelites’ passage through water marked freedom from Egyptian slavery, passing through the waters of baptism marked for Christians their freedom in Christ from sin and death. The practice of Early Christian baptism also offered important associations with death as a transitional rite. Paul wrote in Romans that Christians who are “baptized in Christ Jesus, are baptized in his death. For we are buried together with him by baptism into death; that as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life.”⁷⁵ Just as death signified an exodus from mortal life on earth into eternal life in heaven, baptism marked a transition from life lived in the sinful flesh to life made new in Christ.⁷⁶ In his fourth-century sermon about baptism, the Bishop of Milan further expresses this connection: “it is not earth which washes, but water. So it is that the font is a kind of grave.”⁷⁷ In this way baptism could be seen as a kind of first death—to sin through Christ—before physical death brought eternal life in heaven.

The compositions for Hunter’s baptism paintings are remarkably similar to the compositions for *Frenchie Goin’ to Heaven*, as well as to her scenes depicting funerals,

⁷⁴I Corinthians 10, 1-2, emphasis mine.

⁷⁵Romans 6, 3-4.

⁷⁶Verkerk, “*The Font is a Kind of Grave: Remembrance in the Via Latina Catacombs*,” in *Memory and the Medieval Tomb*, edited by Elizabeth Valdez del Alamo and Carol Stamatis Pendergast (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 157-171, discusses the important Christian analogies between baptism, Exodus, and death as they are visually revealed in the fourth-century Via Latina catacomb paintings and the sixth-century Ashburnham Pentateuch. She suggests that both portray visual references to baptism within Exodus scenes as a reminder of Christ’s promise of guidance through death’s passageway.

⁷⁷*De sacramentis* 19, in Edward Yarnold, trans., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century* (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1972), 117.

which I discussed above. In *Baptizing*, a white church rests in the middle-right of the composition and opens to a path that curves down and to the viewer's left, just like the churches in *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven* and *Funeral*. The featured event of all three scenes is identically located in the lower right corner of the paintings, where either a living baptismal candidate, a hole dug for a coffin, or the angelic body of Frenchie is depicted. All three figures occupy spaces of exodus and liminality: the baptized in the water between his/her life of sin and life with Christ, the deceased in the coffin between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and Frenchie between death and eternal life. Like the Early Christian analogy between baptism and death, Hunter's baptism scenes are compositionally reminiscent of the relationship between the burial of the sinful nature beneath the baptismal waters, followed by resurrection into new life with Christ, and the physical burial of the body in expectation of its glorious restoration through Christ in eternity.

Exodus in the Experience of African-American Emancipation

The interrelated associations between death, baptism, and exodus assumed particular meaning in the consciousness of African-American slaves, who often drew simultaneously on Christian (generally Protestant) and African beliefs in the context of striving for freedom. Like the elements of African religion passed on from slaves to their nineteenth- and twentieth-century descendants, these themes likely remained important in the collective memory of the African-Americans in Hunter's community.

Scripture referencing the Israelites' Exodus through the Red Sea was often quoted at Protestant religious meetings of slaves in the American South, the biblical crossing symbolizing the threshold between captivity and freedom.⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 11, 31 is one example: "For you shall pass over the Jordan, to possess the land, which the Lord your God will give you, that you may have it and possess it."⁷⁹ American slaves who participated in these meetings looked to the God who had delivered Israel through the waters and into freedom for their own emancipation. Biblical literature scholar Northrop Frye discusses the important symbolism of the Israelite Exodus to oppressed peoples through the many centuries of Jewish and Christian faith, citing this slave spiritual from the African-American experience:

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go.⁸⁰

Similar allusions to the Israelite Exodus appear in American literature about slavery. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe employs the concept of crossing the river in her description of an emotional religious meeting in Uncle Tom's house: "...as they sung, some laughed, and some cried, and some clapped hands, or shook hands rejoicingly with each other, as if they had fairly *gained the other side of the river*."⁸¹ Stowe later

⁷⁸Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, and Contexts: Criticisms*, 1852, edited by Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994), 25, note 5.

⁷⁹Deuteronomy 11, 31.

⁸⁰Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego, Cal.: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1982), 49.

⁸¹Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 25, emphasis mine.

climactically emphasizes the symbolism of the river in a vivid description of the slave Eliza's escape from Kentucky across the Ohio River:

With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake [of ice];—stumbling—leaping—slipping—springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone—her stockings cut from her feet—while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.⁸²

When asked by his master to explain what happened to Eliza after the incident took place, the slave Sam explained that “she’s clar ‘cross Jordan. As a body may say, in the land of Canaan.”⁸³ Eliza had safely gained the Promised Land; by crossing the waters, she was free.

Olin P. Moyd, black pastor, theologian, and Civil Rights activist argues that black Christian theology retained the relationship between earthly liberation and death well into the twentieth century: “Black hope has always had two foci. One is set upon the destination of deliverance from human-made shackles in this world, and the other, like that ship at sea which may pass many islands, is set on the destination of the mainland of eternity...”⁸⁴ Interestingly, Moyd connects earthly emancipation and freedom gained through death using the imagery of a passage by water, again underscoring the symbolic interrelation of death, exodus, and passage through water. Although I cannot but speculate, it seems likely that the association of emancipation and crossing by water, so prevalent in the philosophy of religious slaves and passed down to their descendents,

⁸²Ibid., 52.

⁸³Ibid., 62.

⁸⁴Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1979), 226.

could have influenced Hunter's love for painting her joyous scenes of baptism in the mid-twentieth century.

The possibility of such influence is further supported by the symbolic association between exodus and death especially emphasized in the experience of American slavery. Many slave teachings, spirituals, and prayers often implied a double meaning for the symbolic gateway represented by the theme of exodus—freedom from slavery through emancipation on one hand, and on the other, freedom from earthly life through death.⁸⁵

The spiritual “Bound for the Promised Land” is an example:

I am bound for the promised land
I am bound for the promised land
Oh, who will come and go with me,
I am bound for the promised land.⁸⁶

For the slaves who sang this spiritual, the Promised Land represented freedom from slavery, but also freedom from earthly toil and corruption. In light of this hope, many slaves strove to look beyond their earthly oppression to a passage into heavenly freedom. One slave woman explained: “De harder me cross bear down here de better I go to tek me place in dat Happy Land where all is ‘joicin, an’ when I git dere, I want de Lord to say, ‘Ophelia...come an’ rest wid de elect ob de Lord!’”⁸⁷ Death for Ophelia represented a gateway from labor and oppression into a “Happy Land” of rest with her God.

This theme of liberation through death was likely passed down to the African-American descendants of slaves in Hunter's community. In such a light, Frenchie's

⁸⁵See C. Kurt Dewhurst, Betty MacDowell, and Marsha MacDowell, *Religious Folk Art in America: Reflections of Faith* (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1983), 47.

⁸⁶Cited in Elizabeth Ammons, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, and Contexts: Criticisms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 25, note 5.

⁸⁷*Southern Christian Advocate*, 7 July 1843, South Carolina Folklore Project 1655, D-4-27, W.P.A. Collection, South Caroliniana Library, (Columbia: University of South Carolina).

exodus from the grave and entry into heaven might reflect a cultural memory of the hopes of many slaves such as Ophelia quoted above, who hopefully anticipated new life beyond the threshold of death. Likewise, the brightly-dressed, flower-bearing participants of the funeral procession in *Funeral* seem not to mourn, but rather to celebrate the deceased's emancipation and exodus from the demands of earthly life into eternal rest.

I have suggested that Hunter's religious paintings reflect her interest the variety of beliefs and practices she likely encountered in her community, rather than adhering strictly to any one group. Vignettes from her life lend further support to this idea, although such instances are often difficult to separate from legend. Hunter, as mentioned above, was baptized as an infant into the Catholic Church, received her short education from Catholic nuns, and is buried at Isle Brevelle's St. Augustine Catholic Church.⁸⁸ Thomas Whitehead recalls that despite her Catholic affiliation, Hunter often mentioned her love for the singing that took place in the Baptist church.⁸⁹ A journal entry written by Francois Mignon in 1944 relates another instance of Hunter's experience with multiple religious practices that deals directly with her perception of death rituals. He describes the wake of Hunter's husband Emmanuel:

I passed by Clemence's house where the wake was in full flower. Her face betrayed nothing of her feelings when others sobbed a little. Her husband was laid out in the front room...Having administered Extreme Unction, the Catholics thought they had the situation well in hand, but when Clemence learned that they wouldn't say anything in the Church, but merely bury Emmanuel in the graveyard, she put her foot down. Accordingly at ten this morning, the Baptists at St. Matthews will take over. So runs Cane River current.⁹⁰

⁸⁸Lyons, *Talking with Tebé*, 12-13; Gilley, *Painting by Heart*, 21.

⁸⁹Shiver and Whitehead, *Clementine Hunter: The African House Murals*, 17.

⁹⁰Francois Mignon, 23 August 1944, cited in Wilson, *Clementine Hunter*, 130.

Familiar with the Baptist practice of having the preacher speak a few words about the dead at the funeral, Hunter decided despite her Catholic affiliation that this custom was as necessary to preparing her husband properly for his passage to heaven as the Catholic practices of wakes and extreme unction.⁹¹

As Mignon's comment on the "Cane River current" implies, the religious atmosphere of central-northwest Louisiana was the result of a history of many religious influences. His tongue-in-cheek reference to the river's current is perhaps not far off: the area's unique blend of religious thought is partially the result of its topographical history. Since its establishment as a French fort by Louis Juchereau de St. Denis in 1714 until the 1830s, Natchitoches had been the northernmost town in Louisiana navigable by river. Situated this way, the settlement became a kind of religious frontier during the nineteenth century, influenced by its proximity to both Catholic and African traditions from south Louisiana and the Protestant influx to its north. In the 1830s, after the clearance of a giant log jam north of Natchitoches, the Red River changed its course to go around the town. Dams were built to separate the old river from its new location, leaving behind an ox-bow now called Cane River Lake. More isolated as the community now became from the river and its industries, the area became a site for a confluence of religions whose traditions could develop and overlap in unique ways. The religious atmosphere during Hunter's lifetime was therefore a distinctive intersection between: French Catholicism, practiced devoutly by the Creole community since Louisiana's French and Spanish period; magical

⁹¹It is also interesting that the wake was in held at Hunter's house rather than the church, a circumstance which seems to demonstrate further her devoted observance of ritual, even if not in strict adherence to denominational specifics.

beliefs inherited by parts of the African-American community from ancestors brought to Louisiana as slaves since the 1700s; and Baptist and Methodist Protestantism, which expanded in the state during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to an influx of German and Anglo-American immigrants. As was the case across much of the American South, the Baptist and Methodist movements had an especially great impact among African-American communities.⁹²

Hunter's religious paintings, as well as the biographical vignettes described above, suggest that she occupied a kind of in-between space among the various religious influences in the Cane River community. With her African heritage, Catholic affiliation (on at least some level), and expressed interest in Protestant practices such as baptism and singing, it comes as no surprise that Hunter chose to express elements and blends of this variety of influences, both in practice and painting.

⁹²For further discussion of the history and influence of religion in Louisiana, see W.A. Poe, "Religion and Education in North Louisiana, 1800-1865," in *North Louisiana: Essays on the Region and Its History*, vol. 1, edited by B. H. Gilley (Ruston, La.: McGinty Trust Fund Publications, 1984); Bennett H. Wall, ed., *Louisiana: A History*. 4th ed., with contributions by Light Townsend Cummins, et al. (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2002), 53-54, 81-82, 179-180; and Gary B. Mills, "The Faith of Their Fathers," in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History*, vol. 19, *Religion in Louisiana* (Lafayette, La.: Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Louisiana, 2004), 176-191.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

I proposed in the previous chapters that Hunter's religious paintings go beyond merely exhibiting a self-taught style and capturing the unique essence of bygone days in her Cane River community. Her work does achieve these purposes, as critics, collectors, and Hunter's friends and mentors have fully demonstrated. I have suggested that Hunter's paintings can also be examined critically, that the questions art historians ask of "high art" can be also be applied to these colorful paintings by a small-town woman from Louisiana with no formal artistic training.

My inquiries have been concerned with both the continuity and idiosyncrasy of religious beliefs and rites of passage, especially those pertaining to death. I argued in Chapter I that Hunter's *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven*, considered with her other paintings concerning death, reflects an association of death with doorways or thresholds as an exodus from earthly life into a heavenly eternity—a concept rooted deeply in the teachings and practice of Early Christianity. Frenchie is shown passing through the threshold of death towards heaven's opening, his exodus aided by the prayers of the priest nearby. Hunter's paintings of funerals and wakes further demonstrate the importance she places on proper ritual performance by the living participants in death rites, showing their shared involvement in the deceased's successful exodus from death into eternal life.

In the second chapter I expanded the analogy of death as exodus by exploring the variety of religious traditions that seems to have influenced Hunter's paintings, suggesting that her work represents ancient religious traditions through the unique contemporary context of the beliefs practiced in her community. I proposed that Hunter's perception of angels suggests a blend of Catholic associations with African ancestral beliefs, while her paintings of baptism processions show her interest in Protestant (Baptist) customs, as well. The associations between death, exodus, and baptism in the context and cultural memory of African-American Emancipation provide further grounds for speculation regarding Hunter's understanding of religion and death. Familiar with this confluence of religious practices, Hunter demonstrates in her paintings a conceptually intermingled interpretation of death that is unified by a notion of exodus.

Studying Hunter's art through this framework offers a new perspective on her work that, in conjunction with the perspectives explored by those interested in style and biographical inquiries, creates an opportunity for a more interdisciplinary approach to the field of outsider art. Elizabeth Manley Delacruz explains the changes in scholarly attitude towards folk art through the twentieth century, showing that while some are reluctant to study such works with the same criticism as those created by trained artists, others are eager to explore the "art-historical, anthropological, and folklorist interests in forms, functions, and personal histories in particular times and places, along with formalist aesthetic interests in innovation, design, and universal human themes and qualities."⁹³ In this vein, I offer a theoretical approach to Hunter's work that might enrich and complement the stylistic and biographical modes of inquiry. A similar cross-historical, cross-cultural approach might be extended to analyze works of other artists traditionally

⁹³Delacruz, "Outside In," 84.

labeled as self-taught, such as the religious stela of Raymond Coins (North Carolina; 1904-1998),⁹⁴ the apocryphal paintings of Sister Gertrude Morgan (New Orleans; 1900-1980),⁹⁵ or the carved funerary doors of Herbert Singleton (New Orleans; 1945-2007),⁹⁶ to suggest only a few.

Museum curators and art historians, especially since the 1970s, have increasingly featured outsider artists and made their work the subject of study.⁹⁷ Still, these exhibitions and scholarly inquiries are often limited by methods of analysis and explanation based on the works' categorization as folk, outsider, or self-taught art versus academic or "high" art. I am not suggesting that the designation of these categories is completely useless, as this helps distinguish between different types of technique and training. Nor do I suggest that the traditional methods used for studying these categories

⁹⁴See Gail Andrews Trechsel, ed., *Pictured in My Mind: Contemporary American Self-Taught Art from the Collection of Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen*, with contributions by Roger Cardinal, et al. (Jackson: Birmingham Museum of Art, University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 38-45.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 140-145.

⁹⁶See Lynne E. Spriggs, Joanne Cubbs, and Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Let It Shine: Self-Taught Art from the T. Marshall Hahn Collection*, with catalogue by Susan Mitchell Crawley and photography by Peter Harholdt (Atlanta: High Museum of Art / Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001), 136.

⁹⁷Examples of museum catalogues and scholarly publications featuring self-taught art and artists include, to name only a few: Bishop, *Folk Painters of America*; Ian M. G. Quimby, and Scott T. Swank, *Perspectives on American Folk Art* (New York: Norton, 1980); Dewhurst, MacDowell, and MacDowell, *Religious Folk Art in America: Reflections of Faith*; Jay Johnson, and William C. Ketchum, Jr., *American Folk Art of the Twentieth Century*, with foreword by Robert Bishop (New York: Rizzoli, 1983); *Art in the American South: 1733-1989: Selections from the Roger Houston Ogden Collection*, exhibition organized by Herman Mhire, catalogue essay by Paul Grootkerk (Lafayette, La.: University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1993); Trechsel, *Pictured in My Mind*; *Myth, Memory and Imagination: Universal Themes in the Life and Culture of the American South: Selections from the Collection of Julia J. Norrell* (Columbia: McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina, 1999); Everette A. James, *Essays in Folk Art* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Professional Press, 2000); Spriggs, Cubbs, and Hartigan, *Let It Shine*; Carol Crown, *Coming Home! Self-Taught Artists, the Bible and the American South*, with contributions by Erika Doss, et al., (Memphis, Tenn.: Art Museum of the University of Memphis / Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

are obsolete or outmoded. Such methods, however, need not be exclusive to their conventional categories. But juxtapositions and comparative analyses of various types of works can highlight meaningful continuities and idiosyncrasies that might otherwise go unnoticed. This examination of Clementine Hunter's religious paintings has demonstrated that a theoretical approach used by scholars to examine ancient or "high" works of Christian art can signify simultaneously the resonance of Hunter's work with a long history of Christian themes and its place among the unique circumstances of religious faith in twentieth-century Louisiana's Cane River community.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Clemetine Hunter; *Frenchie Goin' to Heaven*; mid-1970s; oil on board; Collection of Thomas N. Whitehead.



Figure 2. Clementine Hunter; *Wake*; ca. 1950; oil on paperboard; Collection of Jack and Ann Brittain and children.

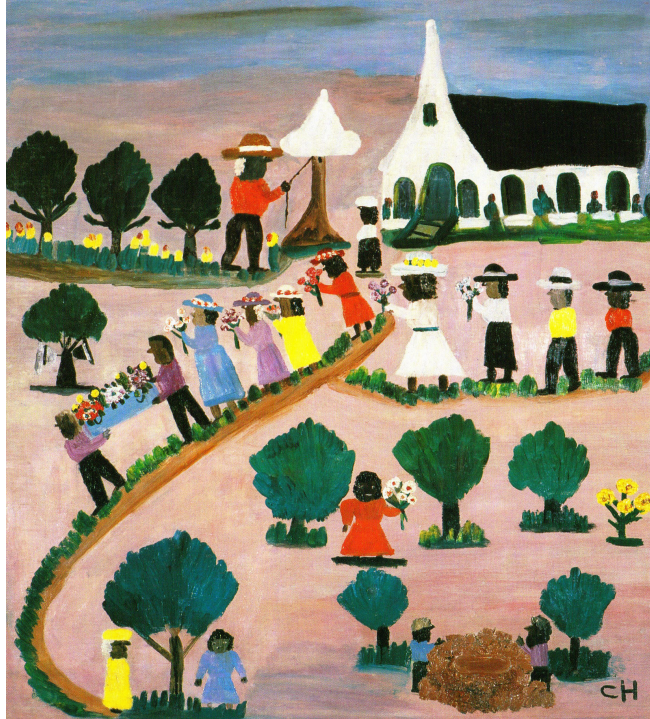


Figure 3. Clementine Hunter; *Funeral*; 1950; oil on paperboard; Collection of Jack and Ann Brittain and children.



Figure 4. Clementine Hunter; *Angels*; ca. 1980; oil on paperboard; Collection of Thomas N. Whitehead.



Figure 5. Clementine Hunter; *Baptizing*; 1950; oil on paperboard; Collection of John C. Guillet.

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