Mister: The Drama Of Black Manhood In Faulkner And Morrison

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I wish to begin at what appears to be a certain distance from my topic—"Mister"—by reflecting on what it means to come back to this conference, for the fifth time to be standing on this podium. No one does it for the money, and the weather in August can be downright uncomfortable. Nevertheless, when I arrive, usually a few days before my talk, I find myself helplessly acting out a Faulknerian scenario. Deep in *Go Down, Moses*, I am on the threshold of yet another hunt—male and female this time—wondering who's going to be here, how many familiar faces, how many new ones, whether this will be the year we catch him once and for all. And I say to myself what a laconic Sam Fathers says to the eager Ike McCaslin: "We aint got the dog yet."^1

"We aint got the dog yet": this won't be the year we catch up with, gain possession over, the writer who is both our beloved and our prey. He'll escape once again. However indelibly this year's talks may (or may not) capture Faulkner's meanings, he'll elude our chase; we'll regroup next summer and begin again. Indeed, what would it mean to capture him? Could we ever have the dog that secures a final grasp upon our desired object? Would we want this even if we could achieve it?

We continue to participate in the *Go Down, Moses* hunt, seeking less to capture him than to invoke him, wanting this event in time—a week in August—to partake as well in something that has happened often enough to seem timeless: "the old bear absolved of mortality and himself who shared a little of
it” (GDM 195). As with a love affair, it may be the radiance of encounter rather than penetration or possession that we’re after. Our entries into the beloved’s textual body leave him fabulously unmarked: “forever wilt thou love and she be fair.”

In his name we foregather, and there would be no pursuit if he were not its object, yet this ritual is as much about the hunters as the hunted. He is the unifying occasion in whose name we play out “the best game of all, the best of all breathing and forever the best of all listening, the voices quiet and weighty and deliberate for retrospection and recollection and exactitude. . . . There was always a bottle present” (GDM 184). “We aint got the dog yet.” We don’t want the dog; we would refuse him if we had him. We come for refreshment (in its several senses), we come to encounter rather than to penetrate: a good hunt is one that makes us look forward to the next one next year. The name for this activity, for why I’ve been coming to Oxford in August since 1985, is not possession but identification.

The boundedness of possession (of self and of the other) versus the fluidity of identification (of self with the other): between these two extremes we may begin to conceptualize a more flexible poetics of identity. At the one extreme, identity—one’s own, that of others—is imagined as a possessible property. At the other extreme it is an aleatory, interpenetrable, and frighteningly vulnerable resource. The one is solid, with the strengths and weaknesses that attach to solidity. The other is liquid, with the strengths and weaknesses that attach to liquidity. Treating them both as psychological propensities, Freud distinguishes possession and identification as the desire to have the other versus the desire to be the other. Though he also stresses that “identification . . . is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone’s removal,” he makes it clear that possession accesses the other as object while identification seeks (impossibly) to access the other as subject.² These opening remarks, I hope, no longer seem so distant from my topic, for the terms of possession and identification not only describe our commerce
with Faulkner and each other, but also take me to “Mister: The Drama of Black Manhood in Faulkner and Morrison.”

* * *

Years after the [Civil] war white Southerners sighed with relief when Booker T. Washington received a doctorate. They had too much respect for him to call him “Booker” and could not call any black man “Mr.”; but “Dr. Washington” presented no problem.

—EUGENE D. GENOVESE, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made

Mister: the term articulates two specific moments of racial/gender crisis in Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses and Morrison’s Beloved. More broadly, it puts before us, as in this early twentieth-century white dilemma over how to address Booker T. Washington, a host of racial/gender norms. Descended from “master,” Mister performs as an address of respect. Whatever ironic inflections it may take on notwithstanding, the term acknowledges a sustained distance between self and other, a minimal space surrounding the male designated Mister that keeps him, so to speak, intact within a field of address. Children are not yet Misters, not yet inserted into the social network securely enough to receive this deference. Thus Mr. both betokens male adulthood as achieved insertion within the symbolic order—one can only be Mr. within a larger community of Misters—and simultaneously declares a certain measure of autonomy. To be addressed as Mr. is to be addressed properly, with propriety, with the implication of property. All three of these notions—property, propriety, the proper—are intertwined components of the mastery that stands behind Mister, and they point to those aspects of manhood reserved for the white Master, denied explicitly to the black male slave and implicitly to the black freedman.3

Mister may further imply, I want to argue, a completed negotiation of the Oedipal crisis itself: All Misters are deemed to have passed through the crucible of potentially crippling infantile confusions and to be credentialed as fully individuated
human beings within the social order. They have internalized the father's authority (in the form of the superego), become capable of policing themselves, achieved adult identity. Property or not, Mistresses are assumed to be self-owning and entitled to larger ownership; fathers or not, they may occupy paternal terrain. The refusal of Southern white culture to call Booker T. Washington "Mr." is a refusal to grant him manhood within that culture's registers of property, propriety, and the proper: the potential property of goods and land that define the birthright of white post-Enlightenment males, the propriety of membership within a community of white Mistresses, and the proper (the propre, "one's own") of achieved masculinity itself. These are the larger stakes at issue in the drama of black manhood.

* * *

Property, propriety, the proper: perhaps the greatest of these is property. Before moving forward to the specific resonance of these terms in Faulkner's and Morrison's texts, I want briefly to rehearse the larger American claim for property as a defining attribute of free men. That claim, of course, derives from the European Enlightenment; its best-known source is probably John Locke's "Second Essay Concerning Civil Government" (1690). Seeking (in the wake of a century of religious war) to shore up England's 1688 bloodless revolution, proposing an argument of natural law that would supersede any monarchical constraint upon the subject, Locke writes: "The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of Nature for his rule" (283). Deeper than any covenant imposed by church or king, Locke argues, is our natural, inalienable liberty. This liberty acquires focus and grounding through the concept of property: "Though the earth, and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath
mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property” (287–88). Given these convictions, Locke has no difficulty in assigning to government its foremost purpose: “The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property” (350–51).

It would be hard to overestimate the appeal of this argument to our Founding Fathers. Louis Hartz, seeking to characterize this country’s liberal tradition, calls Locke “America’s philosopher” as he could never have been Europe’s: “When Locke came to America . . . a change appeared. Because the basic feudal oppressions of Europe had not taken root, the fundamental social norm of Locke ceased in large part to look like a norm and began, of all things, to look like a sober description of fact. . . . History was on a lark, out to tease men, not by shattering their dreams, but by fulfilling them with a sort of satiric accuracy.” Our labor, the activation of our own personal resources, the goods we individually gather through such expenditure of energy; these are to be thought of (with a literalism inconceivable in the Old World) as our inalienable property, central to our unfettered identity. British refusal to recognize—through appropriate representation—this American right to property led to a justified war of independence. The individual possession of property is not only what we will go to war to protect, it is also what most securely keeps the peace. “Government, thought the Fathers, is based on property,” Richard Hofstadter writes. “Men who have no property lack the necessary stake in an orderly society to make stable or reliable citizens.” Noah Webster extends this view in a 1787 commentary on the Constitution, seeing in the maintenance of property rights the very basis of freedom:

Wherever we cast our eyes, we see this truth, that property is the basis of power; and this, being established as a cardinal point, directs us to the means of preserving our freedom. Make laws, irrevocable laws in every state, destroying and barring entailments;
leave real estates to revolve from hand to hand, as time and accident may direct; and no family influence can be acquired and established for a series of generations—no man can obtain dominion over a large territory—the laborious and saving, who are generally the best citizens, will possess each his share of property and power, and thus the balance of wealth and power will continue where it is, in the body of the people. A general and tolerably equal distribution of landed property is the whole basis of national freedom. 

If property is proposed as the grounding concept of both peace and freedom, we might begin to note the anxieties and omissions that hedge this claim even in Locke and Webster, and that have bedevilled it ever since. Suppose that each did not possess his share, that property were not spread through “the body of the people . . . [with] tolerably equal distribution,” that one man did take more than he could actually make use of? Suppose he did obtain “dominion over a large territory”? Locke feebly argues that “He was only to look that he used them [the goods that make up his property] before they spoiled, else he took more than his share, and robbed others. And, indeed, it was a foolish thing, as well as dishonest, to hoard up more than he could make use of” (300). But this rejoinder had no more force in 1690 than the following one penned 245 years later and put into the mind of young Thomas Sutpen: “and as for objects, nobody had any more of them than you did because everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep, and only that crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could eat or swap for powder and whiskey.”

But somebody always does have more than you do, and Sutpen stumbles down from the mountain upon a Tidewater drama that sharply subverts Locke: the spectacle of a white man so engorged with property that his power is revealed not in his labor—Locke’s crucial justificatory term—but in his indolence: a man whom others fan and feed, who lords it over “a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins
happened to be and what they happened to own” (AA 179). Here the defects of the property schema leap into visibility. Far from a natural right of every human being, it is always selectively distributed, first to industrious white males who underwrote England’s bloodless revolution of 1688 and our bloody one of 1776, thereafter to white males (even those originating from the Old Bailey) cunning or hungry enough to acquire it. Propertied white men not only may grow greedy for more property, but there are other, gaping omissions on the American scene: poor whites who lack property; women who both lack property and are property; slaves who are nothing but property; their offspring still in search of property. History only seemed to be on a lark, for what beckoned as a manageable fact—the effective accumulation of property—would for many Americans never be more than a dream. Founded on a premise destined to implode from within—to make of class, gender, and race the very factors that will cause the dream of identity-as-property to collapse—American culture comes into being, it seems, as a white male drama with its tragic exclusions already inseparable from its intoxicating promises. Faulkner and Morrison were conceived centuries before they were born. Before turning specifically to Lucas Beauchamp and Paul D, I would like briefly to probe the larger “repercussion” of property and self-ownership in both writers.

* * *

Faulkner becomes Faulkner, paradoxically, by finding his way into the drama of radically failed self-ownership. The voices of Benjy and Quentin Compson testify eloquently to the collapse of the American dream of identity-as-property. Rather than the Lockean premise of successful labor, of a thrusting male will that subdues and shapes an estate in its own image—that knows itself through what it possesses—Faulkner gives us the drama of interior dispossession. Caught up within a stream-of-consciousness technique that produces them not as subjects with a coherent project but as cacophonous sites of cultural interference, Benjy and Quentin never do or own anything. Instead,
they are done to, they suffer the consequences of previous cultural designs gone awry: the burden of generations of Compson dysfunction comes to rest upon their ineffectual minds and bodies. "I was trying to say" is the hallmark of Faulknerian voice, and it can find utterance only when a culture’s known forms of saying—of articulating social possibility as an achievable personal project—have failed. Early Faulknerian voice is an unforgettable way of saying No after a host of conventional ways of saying Yes have proved bankrupt.¹¹

Benjy, Quentin, Darl, Joe Christmas: these are the subjectivities the early Faulkner most brilliantly produced; each signals the unavailingness of cultural designs as maps for achievable selfhood. If in Western culture the Oedipal crisis is the ordeal the male child must go through in order to emerge as a candidate for paternity and its perquisites—property, propriety, the proper—then each of these figures remains arrested on the threshold of that journey, dancing around a wound that precedes the Oedipal. Damaged by defective or disappeared mothers, insufficiently birthed into the culture’s symbolic orders (or birthed into the culture’s insufficient symbolic orders), they cannot manage the simplest tasks of self-ownership. Insecurely gendered, incapable of separating internal from external, resolutely untrainable, these boychildren careen across the Faulknerian canvas, revealing fissure and contradiction wherever they touch down. Desiring their mother or their sister or their brother, they are hopelessly enmeshed in incest schemas, and such schemas only deepen as scandal if the sibling turns out to be black as well. Indeed, Faulkner found his way into the ordeal of race through the ordeal of family, and in a certain sense he never ceased to view racial torment as an epiphenomenon of family torment. Incest and miscegenation are the prime motives fueling his narrative, guaranteeing its subversion of Lockean proprieties by contaminating all definitions of the proper. If there is one thing his most memorable characters share, it is the knowledge that they do not possess themselves. Is it too much to say that a fear of contamination—an all but hysterical sensitiv-
ity to odors and touches that have already invaded and deformed before they are even recorded by consciousness—coils at the core of Faulknerian sensibility? Or should we say that this fear of contamination registers simultaneously an impossible (because ideologically taboo) longing—a desire to cross illicit boundaries (incestuous, miscegenous) in which successful transgression could only mean the death of the “proper” subject? At any rate, from Donald Mahan to the reporter in *Pylon* to Chick Mallison, a characteristic male note is to be moved beyond control, overwhelmed: hardly traits on which a fiction committed to the masculine pursuit of identity through attainment of fixed property could be built.

Even if we grant that Faulkner’s work is invested in such a critique of identity-as-property, we might also concede his work’s yearning for achieved selfhood, attained project, the successful maturation of child into property-bearing adult. *Go Down, Moses* manages in its portrait of Ike McCaslin to attend with equal generosity to why he must repudiate and what social price he pays in repudiating. Who better than Faulkner could understand a refusal to take on the guilt attaching to propertied Southern adulthood, even as he shows both that property repudiated remains property someone else will accept and abuse, and that the undeviating pursuit of property could be an epic male undertaking, however disastrous its consequences?

As for Morrison, her texts likewise recognize that while identity as self-contained property might foreclose one’s emotional resources, on the one hand—think of Macon Dead Jr. in *Song of Solomon*—identity as unchecked identification threatens to run rampant over the fragile boundaries of one’s selfhood, on the other. No one who has imagined the damage done to individual identity by the institution of slavery—the attack on sustaining psychic boundaries, the undoing of one’s own self-possession—will discount the power of the freed Baby Suggs’s discovery: “But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, ‘These hands belong to me. These my hands.’ ”

12 Hers to own, to make plans for, take
charge of: the text’s most lyrical passage rehearses Baby Suggs’s sermon of self-ownership, of reclaiming your body from the institution that had controlled it. “Claim” is a term that punctuates Morrison’s text: “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (B 95). The radically unclaimed self—unable to count on its free labor as its own property—is rudderless, a creature of others’ will, what Locke quite deliberately calls a slave.13

Beloved both endorses and provocatively calls into question this model of achieved self-ownership—calls it into question not least because no people who had experienced three centuries of enslavement could afford to envisage their subjectivity in such immaculate terms of self-management. If you had to own yourself to be yourself, and if this model could actually be realized only for a certain class of white males, then what goes on inside the mind and heart of all those others—unpropertied white males, women, slaves—for whom such a definition of who they are is only a mockery of what they are? This is exactly the question I want now to pursue, more deliberately, through Faulkner’s and Morrison’s black males. Unable to be a Mister, how does an unpropertied black male negotiate his manhood? I turn to Lucas Beauchamp in a scene from “The Fire and the Hearth” in Go Down, Moses.

“Are you the husband?” the Chancellor said.
“That’s right,” Lucas said.
“Say sir to the court!” the clerk said. Lucas glanced at the clerk.
“What?” he said. “I dont want no court. I done changed my—”
“Why you uppity—” the clerk began. . . .
“Not now,” Lucas said. “We don’t want no voce. Roth Edmonds knows what I mean.”
“What? Who does?”
“Why, the uppity—” the clerk said. “Your Honor—” Again the Chancellor raised his hand slightly toward the clerk. He still looked at Lucas.
“Mister Roth Edmonds,” Lucas said . . . (GDM 124)

“Are you the husband?” The question resonates in the mind, inasmuch as the deepest crisis Lucas Beauchamp undergoes in
this novel revolves around his status as Molly's husband. If he were Molly's husband as a white man is husband of a white woman, Zack would never have presumed upon Molly as his own property (a presumption the text produces as normative more than as transgressive). And Lucas would never have needed to wonder, "How to God . . . can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife?" (GDM 58) "Please": the word betokens not personal timidity but a structured nonmastery, a pleading with the master to abrogate a right that is his in some way deeper than the law itself. Of course it was until 1865 the law itself: during slavery there were no legal black marriages. Despite the overwhelming reliance of black families upon this ceremony, it was for obvious reasons illegal: in the eyes of the law the offspring of slaves belong to the white master. "Are you the husband?" Earlier in the South he would not have been, and Faulkner saturates this 1940s court scene with Lucas's continued eccentricity to legal norms. We have here a Chancellor, a clerk, a Mister—and Lucas. Each of these white titles conveys entitlement within the social system, and the scandal Faulkner delights in is Lucas's nevertheless insisting on agency. Pressured as to juridical identity, menaced as to courtroom manners, Lucas insinuates his own purpose into the scene: "Roth Edmonds knows what I mean," and Roth does. The price Lucas pays registers not in his checkbook—Edmonds pays court costs—but in that required term of respect he must utter yet can never himself receive from the lips of white men: "Mister."

Faulkner dramatizes Lucas's pursuit of an independent identity as an ongoing struggle with the white Symbolic implicit in "Mister." His origin, announced in "The Bear" as already white-bestowed, "ledgered," is what he seeks to rewrite:

not Lucius Quintus @c @c @c, but Lucas Quintus, not refusing to be called Lucius, because he simply eliminated that word from the name; not denying, declining the name itself, because he used three quarters of it; but simply taking the name and changing, altering it, making it no longer the white man's but his own, by
himself composed, himself selfprogenitive and nominate, by himself ancestored . . . (GDM 269)

We should note the desperate illogic of this premise: how can a man change his name from inherited Lucius to invented Lucas and be imagined as therefore free, self-progenitive, and nominate? The old man, the original Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, dominates Lucas's psychic life; all alterations relate to this white origin. But Lucas strives to relate to it on equal terms—Lucas to Lucius—whereas Isaac's very name places him in a structure of Biblical sonship, his moves limited to support of or withdrawal from the parental narrative.

Lucas, by contrast, would step into the entitlements of that narrative; this requires, however, taking on its originary white male terms. Put starkly, Faulkner redresses Lucas's race and gender marginality—his lack of entitlement, of land, of secured wife—not by immersing him within the living resources of a native black culture, but by phantasmatically aligning him with the authority of his white male soul-mates. Locked in an embrace that harbors this text's deepest yearning, Lucas is dramatized in unforgettable encounter with Zack across the marriage bed and with Old Carothers over the upholding of masculine honor, just as in *Intruder in the Dust* he will be dramatized in charged relation to Chick, his childlike suitor, and to Gavin, his garrulous and frustrated brother. White to black, male to male, each of these pairings figures the bond that Faulkner has invested in, and each represses from view its excluded other: black to black, male to female. "Are you the husband?" is the surface question—are you capable of enforcing your claim to your wife?—but the underlying question is different: "Are you the man?"—can you hold your own with Old Carothers?

Thus when Lucas makes his way through Zack's challenge to his manhood by a ritual encounter of honor-bound moves, advantages offered first by one and then by the other and accepted by neither, the enemy cherished even as he is pursued (all of this enacted over the wife-empty bridal bed)—when
Lucas terminates this love scene to his own satisfaction, he thinks: "Old Carothers . . . I needed him and he come and spoke for me" (GDM 57). This suturing moment locates Lucas's self-possession within the fantasy of a white male structure of subjectivity. He becomes himself by being spoken/spoken for by Old Carothers. Defiantly risking his own life and Zack's, Lucas answers—as no one else in Go Down, Moses does answer—the old man's original challenge. That challenge was shaped, precisely, by the American property-model: simply to take all you wanted and could get, to bend your will to no man's rejoinder, to map the world and name its creatures as though you were indeed your own ancestor and all others your progeny or property. Go Down, Moses eloquently testifies to the inhumanity of this project, but perhaps we have overlooked the text's covert longing for it nevertheless. Old Carothers, Du Homme, Sam Fathers, Old Ben, Lion: these impenetrable male icons brook no quarter, absorb no insult. Figures of imaginary wholeness, they are archaic or marginal within the realm of the ongoing social—a solution at one level that is a collapse at another. Is there any doubt that Lucas reincarnates these figures when he silences Roth by saying: "'I'm the man here'" (GDM 116)? In my reading, Intruder in the Dust continues this phantasmatic project, suturing Lucas into a monument of fixed manhood, a phallus without the complications of interiority, pure, immovable, impervious: imprisoned in the social yet unbroken in the imaginary. It is as though, by 1948, the only Man Faulkner could envisage among the puling boys and men he gazed upon—the only figure beyond social cooptation and therefore capable of genuine self-possession—would have to be black, immolated, and unconquerable. I turn to Paul D in Beloved.

"Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was . . ." Paul D stopped and squeezed his left hand with his right. He held it that way long enough for it and the world to quiet down and let him go on.
Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub." (B 72)

Like Faulkner's totem animals that radiate an imaginary integrity, Mister impresses Paul D as immovably centered, and therefore free. Even eaten, Mister stays what he is, remains intact, a feat beyond Paul D's capacity. Paul D has lost his proper, his own; owned and invaded by Schoolteacher, he has been remade into a being he can no longer subjectify as himself. Why has his identity project failed and how does Morrison propose its recovery?

We begin again with names. Garner named them all, bestowing both their names and their manhood. Others' slaves were treated as boys; Garner's were trained as men:

"Beg to differ, Garner. Ain't no nigger men."
"Not if you scared, they ain't." Garner's smile was wide. "But if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too."
"I wouldn't have no nigger men around my wife."

It was the reaction Garner loved and waited for. "Neither would I," he said. "Neither would I," and there was always a pause before the neighbor . . . got the meaning. Then a fierce argument, sometimes a fight, and Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men. (B 11)

Garner performs exactly the definition of manhood he pretends to offer his slaves: the maintenance of physical integrity, the capacity to make good on your word, to prove it through bodily prowess. White manhood is the maintaining of self-possession, the adequation of one's behavior to one's will, the ability to patrol one's property—one's self at all times, one's wife in this instance—and guarantee that she remains one's own. The fights break out over just this, the other men's realization that Garner has insulted their capacity to patrol their wives in the presence
of nigger men, not boys. A "real Kentuckian" looks remarkably like Old Carothers: he makes people do his bidding, assigns their names and object-status in relation to his subject-control, remains inalterably himself.

Paul D's crisis stems from his having been trained to believe himself such a man. Choices had been made available to him, he was never forced. Rather, he had subjectified the proffered model, assented to the hailing, imagined himself in charge of himself. Only later, after Morrison has exposed him to the full brunt of slavery, does Paul D see that on this model he can never be a man: the black experience of slavery simply disallows the equation of male identity with male will. In Genovese's words, "The slaveholders deprived black men of the role of provider; refused to dignify their marriages or legitimize their issue; compelled them to submit to physical abuse in the presence of their women and children; made them choose between remaining silent while their wives and daughters were raped or seduced and risking death." The list continues. Paul D's experience of such impotence is harrowing.

The text produces him as a man invaded, treated like an abusable woman. Things are put into male slaves: a bit in their mouths, a penis in their mouths, irons upon their legs. If manhood means self-ownership, Paul D is owned by others, raped repeatedly. He ceases to be a single entity: his body shakes uncontrollably (as Temple Drake's does after her rape in Sanctuary). He becomes a site of overrun boundaries: "Paul D thought he was screaming; his mouth was open and there was this loud throat-splitting sound—but it may have been somebody else. Then he thought he was crying. Something was running down his cheeks. He lifted his hands to wipe away the tears and saw dark brown slime" (B 110). Liquids pour out of him, over him, into him; his own, those of others, those of nature. Out of control, venting without knowing it just as Sethe's urine breaks without her consent, Paul D undergoes a self-undoing that grotesquely reverses the Oedipal crisis. Rather than struggle with taboo desires and succeed in imposing a
boundary upon them—a boundary enabling eventual entry into language, individuation, manhood, paternity, and property—Paul D reverts, under such pressure, to a chaotic, prehuman economy of liquids. At the extreme, when a male slave is confronted with the utter incapacity of his will to affect his reality, forced to watch impotently while his wife is beaten and milked, he becomes—like Halle—simultaneously not-male and insane (his identity no longer his own), a creature smeared in butter, undone by a liquid economy erasing all boundaries, disfiguring a face and a mind once male.

This critique of the Oedipal seems as profoundly Morrison's intention as the re-imagining of the Oedipal seems Faulkner's. As the grounding norm of white society, the Oedipal stabilizes patriarchy itself. It does so by providing Western culture's central paradigm for justifying the male child's endurance of (rather than rebellion against) libidinal repression imposed by authority: justified because in time that child will achieve the individuation of centered selfhood, will take on the structural position of the vacated father, and will inherit his authority and his possessions. To become properly oneself, to move from infantile polymorphous perversity to adult conventionality, is to discipline desire and to enter the genealogical field of property-descent. Morrison shows that this gender economy—geared to the patriarchal notions of propriety, property, and the proper—must be reconceived if it is to nourish disenfranchised black subjectivity. Beloved contributes in a number of ways to just such a reconception.

There is, first, the tension between loving small and loving large. Morrison's commitment to the Margaret Garner materials radiates from a slave woman's refusal to love small. A sentimental writer would have exonerated such large love, a lesser writer would have criticized it: Morrison explores both its cost and its necessity. She shows that for black slaves to love large is to enact an identification that risks insanity when the loved ones are abused: "He saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies" (B 66). At
the same time Morrison shows us that Paul D’s heart cannot be confined within that rusted tin can. So long as he believes this, Paul D is on the run, unwilling to invest his feelings where he cannot, manlike, maintain his will. Indeed, his initial indictment of Sethe—“You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (B 165)—follows from a sense of manhood in which the proper still reigns: her behavior is hers to patrol, there is a right and a wrong choice, she has made the wrong one.

Our judicial system is founded in certain ways on such distinctions; its notions of right and wrong are largely calibrated according to the male criterion of self-responsibility before the law. We are assumed individually responsible for patrolling our territory, maintaining our proper/property. Beloved recurrently undermines this model, perhaps most eloquently in those intense passages in part 2 where we cannot responsibly assign utterance to speaker, say what belongs to whom. This collapse of boundaries is writ with equal power in Sethe’s act itself—“This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began” (B 164)—an act in which self and world are inextricably intertwined. The murder of the child explodes the boundaries without which there can be no proper itself: it is her act and yet not hers, her fault and yet not her fault. The weight of an entire institution—the institution of slavery—must be brought to bear, if we would understand how a mother might kill a child out of love and be both right and wrong in doing so. If the law is useless for sorting this out, if the law incites to violence rather than to self-possession, if the law proposes no credible paternal model for normative behavior, how is Oedipus to oversee our maturation by laying down and legitimizing our categories of gender difference? Paul D eventually comes to see—in washing Sethe’s feet rather than counting them, in nursing rather than judging—that male and female are massively interdependent realms, and that a black man cannot sustain a model of white manhood. As Hortense Spillers puts it, “the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the
female is within itself.”21 This female-within-male calls into question gender categories in ways that go beyond the ken of all impenetrable Misters.

*  *  *  

I would close speculatively. Both writers know—how could they not?—that the central damage done by slavery to black manhood was to cripple individual agency. Unable to equate self with will, black men were wounded in their own proper, their capacity to own themselves, to become full-fledged Misters. “A man without force,” Frederick Douglass had written as early as 1855, “is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted that it cannot honor a helpless man, although it can pity him; and even that it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise.”22 The blow dealt by such impotence to the pride that sustains identity fuels Faulkner’s intricate exploration of Lucas Beauchamp and accounts for Intruder in the Dust’s suturing of Lucas’s authority. Morrison, by contrast, does not so much restore Paul D’s manhood as reconceive it. The reconception calls into question the Oedipal economy of the achieved proper itself.

In her work—especially her theoretical work—we find, foregrounded, what we may be learning to recognize in Faulkner’s as well (though against the grain), that identity of every sort is differential rather than “properly” achieved. Self-owning is rarely innocent. Men too often know who they are, they ratify their self-image, through repudiating the other: they are not women, they are not blacks. “I aint a nigger,” little Jason says in “That Evening Sun.”23 In this casual paradigm we see the fantasy of a pure identity being constituted by a juxtaposition against contaminating others. Morrison powerfully explicates the drama, acted out in countless scenes in American history, in which the meaning of white freedom requires for its salient unfolding an immovable black silhouette. I quote from Playing in the Dark:

The need to establish difference stemmed not only from the Old World but from a difference in the New. What was distinctive in
the New was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some non-Americans. The distinguishing features of the non-Americans were their slave status, their social status—and their color.

It is conceivable that the first would have self-destructed in a variety of ways had it not been for the last. These slaves, unlike many others in the world’s history, were visible to a fault. And they had inherited, among other things, a long history on the meaning of color. It was not simply that this slave population had a distinctive color; it was that this color “meant” something. That meaning had been named and deployed by scholars from at least the moment, in the eighteenth century, when other and sometimes the same scholars started to investigate both the natural history and the inalienable rights of man—that is to say, human freedom.24

Here we return to Locke and the Enlightenment with a darker awareness that freedom and unfreedom, like male and female, white and black, are inextricably interdependent terms—that selfhood as achieved property plays itself out differentially, against a backdrop of dispossession. “Before slavery,” Orlando Patterson argues, “people simply could not have conceived of the thing we call freedom.”25 Surely it is because Faulkner’s characters so yearn for self-sufficiency that his texts dramatize their discovery of internal rupture—their incapacity to maintain identity as a self-patrolled property—as a tragic burden. To be rudely ejected from the sanctuary of one’s imaginary self-possession is to be involuntarily invaded by others, to be othered:

But after that I seemed to see them [black people] for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross. I saw all the little babies
that would ever be in the world, the ones not yet even born—a long line of them with their arms spread, on the black crosses.  

The speaker is Joanna in *Light in August*, but the burden she carries here is more generally Faulknerian. It is the awareness that those of us who are white are both orphaned and multiply possessed, both abandoned and penetrated by our parents and by the larger culture’s unwanted arrangements. Women not only show men that they are, satisfyingly, men, but women also live within men uninvited, disturbing the propriety of male norms. And blacks, because of what those of us who are white did to them in the South before we were even born, will forever live inside us, owed a reparation beyond our capacity to repress or repay. Insofar as the property model of identity may nevertheless operate in Faulkner’s work—requiring the other’s disenfranchisement to know itself as free—it does so outside the comforts of innocence, in the form of an overdetermined and internalized debt, an accumulating cultural mortgage—a property with insurmountable liens upon it—one of those checks we somehow co-signed before exiting from our mother’s womb and which will be called in for cashing any day now.

Morrison, by contrast, seems to register the penetrability of identity as both burden and promise. Whites may know themselves as not-black, yes, but her best work goes past this oppositional frame, opening into a complex embrace of the mutuality that funds all identity. Identity as patrolled property too easily slips into figurative ossification of self or literal enslavement of others. *Beloved* shows, instead, the irresistible need to live in others, to know self through identificatory investment in others. You could be reduced to insanity by the damage done to your loved ones, but you could also survive disaster by identifying—as Sethe does in her flight to freedom—with those beings who came from your body but who are not you. They call to that in you that exceeds you, that is not your property to patrol. Sethe’s breasts are not her own; they and the milk they carry link her to her offspring. The text’s most
terrifying image is of white boys enclosing those breasts as their own property. What is for Faulkner our human tragedy—that we are never our own, are always trying to say, always inadequate to and in excess of ourselves—is for Morrison our human possibility.

NOTES

1. Others have said it too. Jim Carrothers said it to me at the American Literature Association in San Diego (June 1994) when I brought up the Go Down, Moses analogy for our ritual regrouping to discuss Faulkner. This and subsequent citations are from Go Down, Moses (New York: Vintage International, 1990).

2. Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921), in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 18:105. In the 7th chapter of this text, Freud undertakes his fullest exploration of the dynamic of “identification,” which he generalizes as “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person” (105). This tie may or may not be libidinal, and it can later occur significantly among members of a group who share “an important emotional common quality . . . [which] lies in the nature of the tie with the leader” (108). This last description seems clearly to implicate the odd bonding—affectional and rivalrous—that unites scholars mutually attached to a single author: like Faulknerians.

Laplanche and Pontalis characterize Freudian “Identification” as the “psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property, or attitude of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified” (The Language of Psycho-Analysis, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith [New York: Norton, 1973]. 205). Such transformative dynamics may well be the core psychic resource enabling subject-other interaction, in both life and literature. It is therefore fascinating that Freud has, on the whole, so little to say about “identification,” and one may speculate that Freud’s own anxiety about “identification”—e.g., his sustained silence about Nietzsche’s influence, his neurotic response to Jung’s brilliance, his insistence on his own priority—is pertinent to his reticence. Freud’s insistence on the successful negotiation of the Oedipal complex as achieved individuation may shed light on why he only late in his career considered the radically “unindividuated” condition of the pre-Oedipal. Jim Swan speculates that, for Freud, “Maturity (that is, masculine maturity) means being well-defended against one’s past, which amounts to the same thing as having a strong capacity for resisting identification. . . . In effect, Freud’s picture of maturity is of a man driven to outrun . . . identification with the body of his mother, the original unity of mother and infant” (“Mater and Nanny: Freud’s Two Mothers and the Discovery of the Oedipus Complex,” American Imago 31 [1974]: 9–10).

“Transference” may seem to be a rough synonym for “identification,” but Freudian analysis differentiates sharply between them. Rather than relating transference to that larger and continuing intersubjective process whereby one invests another with one’s own psychic structures—or becomes oneself reshaped by the perceived structures of the other—Freudians understand transference as primitive, neurotically charged, and more narrowly enacted within the psychoanalytic encounter itself. “For psycho-analysis,” Laplanche and Pontalis write, transference is blindly projective, “a process of actualization of unconscious wishes. Transference uses specific objects and operates in the framework of a specific relationship established with these objects. Its context par excellence is the analytic situation. . . . Classically, the transference is acknowledged to
be the terrain on which all the basic problems of a given analysis play themselves out” (455). Since the interactive model of identity that I am pursuing in this essay is potentially reciprocal and enabling, I shall speak more of “identification” than of “transference.”

3. The OED gives twenty-three different definitions for “master” as a noun. Most of them circulate around the notion of control over something (or someone) else, and the seventh definition is typical: “One who has the power to control, use, or dispose of something at will.” As early as the sixteenth century, British children in well-off families were addressed by servants as “master” or “young master.” (The OED’s twenty-second definition identifies “master” as “the usual prefix to the names of a young gentlemen not considered old enough to be entitled to be called Mr.”) Remove the constitutive relation between possessor and person/thing/concept being possessed, and the term loses its conceptual core. (The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971], 2: 1738.)

4. It should be clear that I am describing in an ideal or normative fashion the frame of assumptions that attach to “Mister.” Actual usage varies enormously, yet the normative frame (diminished since the Civil Rights activity of the 1950s and 1960s but not eradicated) affects that usage.


9. Pangle (among others) notes this problem: “Locke’s conception of the natural law of property . . . imposes no effective, intrinsic restriction on acquisitiveness” (161). Indeed, this abuse remains unavoidable so long as inventive labor remains, in Locke’s world view, a primary good. Subscribing to an Enlightenment project that has its source paradoxically in both Bacon and Genesis, Locke sees the scientific progress of civilization as founded on a limitless transformation of the brute, natural world. In Pangle’s words, “The sum of Locke’s message, then, is this: so barren is nature, so difficult is it for mankind to wrest from nature’s materials a comfortable existence, that there is no ascertainable limit to the necessary growth in the productivity of human labor” (166).


11. I have developed this argument more fully in Faulkner’s Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 82–109. For a rigorous classification of the different registers of Faulknerian voice, see Stephen Ross, Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).


13. Locke writes: “But there is another sort of servants which by a peculiar name we call slaves, who being captives taken in a just war are, by the right of Nature, subjected to the absolute dominion and arbitrary power of their masters. These men having, as I
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say, forfeited their lives and, with it their liberties, and lost their estates, and being in the state of slavery, not capable of any property, cannot in that state be considered as any part of civil society, the chief end whereof is the preservation of property" (322-23). Locke's justificatory phrase—"taken in a just war"—may have made sense within an Athenian frame, but its impertinence to the American scene was not lost on eighteenth-century Americans. According to Bailyn, "The contrast between what political leaders in the colonies sought for themselves and what they imposed on, or at least tolerated in, others became too glaring to be ignored and could not be lightened by appeals to the Lockean justification of slavery as the favorable fate of people who "by some act that deserves death" had forfeited their lives and had been spared by the generosity of their captors. The reality of plantation life was too harsh for such fictions" (235).

14. Herbert Gutman's The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (New York: Pantheon, 1976) establishes in detail the cultural reality of black marriage during a period in which it did not legally exist. He warns against a confusion of the two realms of "law and culture" (52).

15. For a fuller reading of Lucas's overdetermined relationship to Old Carothers, see Faulkner's Subject, 64-81.

16. Deborah Sitter comments on Paul D's model of manhood in related terms: "Although Sixo is his [Paul D's] model of a manly man, the qualities Paul D associates with manliness originate in the dominant culture of the white slaveholder Mr. Garner. These qualities include strength, courage, and endurance—all of which Sixo possesses—but they are directed toward maximizing the power of the individual to dominate weaker beings" ("The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in Beloved," African-American Review 26 [1992]: 24).


18. See Carolyn Porter's reading of Absalom, Absalom!'s diagnostic engagement with the patriarchy/Oedipal ("[Un]making the Father: Absalom, Absalom!," in The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner, ed. Philip M. Weinstein [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 168-96). Porter argues that Absalom most disturbingly reveals what carnage occurs not when, as Bleikasten and others claim, the father fails, but rather when, in classic patriarchal fashion, he succeeds. By the time of Intruder in the Dust, I argue, Faulkner was seeking to dignify Lucas by immersing him within an Oedipal structure as phantasmatically intact as it was materially nonexistent (no actual father: no land, no goods, no descent—except at the level of the spirit).


24. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1993), 48-49. A few pages earlier in the same essay, Morrison draws on Bernard Bailyn’s *Voyagers to the West* to develop her most haunting vignette of American freedom enacted upon the body of the black slaves. Silhouetted by figures of unfreedom over whom he has (and exercises) absolute control, William Dunbar of Scotland systematically beats his American slave and then thinks of himself as somehow magically transformed within the new American landscape: “Once he has moved into that [new] position, he is resurrected as a new man, a distinctive man—a different man. And whatever his social status in London, in the New World he is a gentleman. More gentle, more man. The site of his transformation is within rawness; he is back-grounded by savagery” (*PD* 44).


27. It does not detract from Morrison’s remarkable imagination to note that the mutuality she represents occurs less between whites and blacks than among blacks themselves—and most memorably among black women. Yet Paul D shows a similar resourcefulness in his capacity to enter the subjectivity of those other chain-bound slaves in Alfred, Georgia. Their effective mutuality transforms that chain from bind to bond, and they escape enslavement the only way they can: together.