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### "Truth So Mazed": Faulkner And US Plantation Fiction

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*“Truth so mazed”*  
*Faulkner and US plantation fiction*

*Peter Schmidt*

Reading Faulkner in historical context means resisting the temptation to believe his art is “selfprogenitive,” a key concept stressed in *Go Down, Moses*’ “The Bear.” Any consideration of Faulkner’s literary influences must include antebellum and early New South plantation fiction. Before the Civil War, representations of pastoral economies and harmony among the races played a central role in the Southern counter-attack against Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), the most influential fictional indictment of slavery as a threat to the economic and moral fabric of the United States. After the War, during the era of Jim Crow at home and US colonialism abroad, influential new narratives set on plantations by Southern writers appeared to great acclaim in national magazines like *Scribner’s* and *Harper’s*. The Civil Rights era in the mid-twentieth century eventually transformed our understanding of both Faulkner and plantation fiction – most notably via new interpretive strategies inspired by black studies, feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, and the “global South” turn in US studies. Broadly speaking, the appeal of Southern plantation fiction was once primarily understood as an expression of nostalgia for a pre-modern, rural, and regional past in both economic and social relations, a Southern variant of dialect stories and rural realism that became known in the late nineteenth century as “local color.” Since the 1980s, though, plantation fiction and local color writing have been interpreted as helping to *create* literary modernity,<sup>1</sup> just as colonial/plantation economies were essential to the new wealth of cities. Plantation fiction romances were also powerfully recuperative for post-Civil War audiences. Their plots not only helped readers manage tragedy and loss associated with the Civil War via narratives of reconciliation between northern and Southern characters; they also offered a reassuring model of postslavery race and class relations.

Most recently, the transnational turn in US studies has given us new hypotheses about how a seemingly backward- and inward-looking form shaped a future-oriented, global modernism. The South as a

longstanding “exception” seemed to threaten the core values of American exceptionalism – the view that the United States collectively had a special, God-given destiny to redeem the sins of human history. By the late nineteenth century, however, with the nation’s original sin of slavery supposedly expunged, many argued that the next phase of US industrial capitalism would involve expansion beyond continental North America. Like the South, new US colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific existed in a liminal zone, seeming to be a dangerous yet alluring pre-modern region within the US’s expanded national boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Plantation fiction after the 1880s modeled ways to shoulder the “white man’s burden” at home and abroad, and cultural historians now trace the “global scope of the local,” as Jennifer Rae Greeson has termed it (speaking of local color literature), in much New South literature (*Our South* 259).

Many postwar Southern writers, such as Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, had mixed feelings about global empire, but they agreed that the postslavery United States needed to reaffirm white racial superiority, not to mention proper gender and class boundaries. We increasingly recognize, however, that New South fiction by white and black authors before Faulkner was far more heterogeneous, employing a wide range of narrative modes expressing ambiguity, dissent, doubt, rage, repression, fear, irony, and mourning sometimes encoded within the very tales that seemed most consensus-obsessed when it came to narrating the meanings of race and history.

The two postwar authors before Faulkner who most relished confounding plantation-fiction conventions were Mark Twain and Charles W. Chesnutt, though George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Pauline E. Hopkins, Kate Chopin, and Ellen Glasgow should receive honorable mention. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), Twain’s plot switches a “black” and a “white” baby on a Missouri slave plantation and then gives no easy answer to the question of nature versus nurture – that is, whether raising a child as one race or another will determine its character. If anything is proven by *Pudd’nhead’s* riddling plot, it is that whites and blacks are culturally conjoined twins who remain stubbornly blind to this unsettling truth. Twain’s satire created a powerful precedent for the doubles and racial paradoxes at the stormy center of Faulkner’s work, especially *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).

Chesnutt decisively intervened in plantation fiction’s culture of consensus via his motifs of *passing* and *haunting*. Tales such as “Uncle Wellington’s Wives” and “The Wife of His Youth” are often misread as parables of light-skinned blacks tempted to pass but then choosing their “real”

racial identity. In fact, these stories mourn the passing of the possibility of mixed-race identity in the Jim Crow era – and with it any opportunity for Americans to acknowledge their own mixed histories. "The Passing of Grandison," set during slavery, appears at first to affirm that blacks like Grandison are "good" because they are loyal servants. But the story is an equal-opportunity satire of both white reformers and white conservatives. A rebellious son wants to force Grandison to pass into freedom in Canada – but primarily to win his fiancée's admiration. The tale's concluding twist reveals that Grandison does indeed aspire to freedom – but gained on his own initiative. Racial issues are also trenchantly rendered in Chesnutt's novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Chesnutt began the novel intending to refute white newspaper accounts of a "race riot" in 1898, in which whites overthrew the local elected government and destroyed middle-class black homes and businesses in Wilmington, North Carolina. But in the process of writing he expanded his goals to highlight the manifold ironies haunting the collective amnesia that passes for American memory.

Much has rightly been made in recent criticism of the character who is probably Chesnutt's greatest creation, Julius McAdoo, the freed slave trickster story-teller featured in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899). "Uncle Julius" indeed gives most eloquent voice to the ghosts that haunt plantation fictions of the US South, Old or New. Valuable commodities desired by John, the new northern-born plantation-master – such as scuppernong vines or lumber from an old schoolhouse – are said by Julius to be shadowed by the souls of black folk. John convinces himself that Julius' tales are simply ways to scam him out of property he rightly claims is his, and that any debts he may owe to Julius are easily amortized. John's point of view frames or circumscribes Julius' voice. But John's authority can't stop Julius' "conjure" powers from working. John's wife Annie hesitates to contradict him directly, but her silence, her quoting Julius' ironic and witty remarks, and her own actions open profound interpretive possibilities. The ending of "Po' Sandy," for instance, reveals that Annie has pledged some of her husband's money to support one of Julius' new projects. Chesnutt's dramatic ironies in *The Conjure Woman* – his invocation of the histories that actively haunt, conjure with, and counteract a white patriarch's control of material resources and narrative meaning – anticipate Faulkner's own narrative methods in assuming that "truth" is contested terrain.

Plantation fiction presages another quintessentially Faulknerian moment: the murder of Charles Bon, Thomas Sutpen's mixed-race Haitian son, by his Mississippi-born white offspring, Henry Sutpen in *Absalom*,

*Absalom!* One way to think of *Absalom* is as a fever-dream trying to exhume the causes that led to Bon's murder and its consequences. Two Southern novels published in 1905 by Doubleday Page in New York – Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* – coincidentally both have plots that turn on death and exhumation.<sup>3</sup> In Chesnutt, the novel's hero ignores Jim Crow rules and buries his black servant in his white family's gravesite, only to find the body of his "Uncle Peter" dug up and dumped on his doorstep. This desecration causes Colonel French to abandon his dreams of economic and social reform. The concluding compensation Chesnutt gives his protagonist in the very last sentence of his final published novel (Chesnutt, *Colonel's Dream* 290) pales next to Chesnutt's brutally detailed description of the muddy coffin and opened grave (281–2), which stresses disfiguration, shaming, and silencing, not restitution and consensus.

Dixon's romance of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan also features desecrated bodies – but this time the corpses include a white woman raped by a black man, and the son of the novel's hero, whose shallow grave on a Civil War battlefield is violated by the novel's villain, Austin Stoneman, Dixon's slanderous fictional portrait of an actual Pennsylvania Representative, Thaddeus Stevens, one of the key architects of Reconstruction. The black rapist and Stoneman eventually confess their crimes; Gus is lynched, but Stoneman, surprisingly, forgiven. The two white elders are united in a moment Dixon melodramatically highlights: "The Southerner slipped his arm around the old man's shoulders and began a tender and reverent prayer" (Dixon, *The Clansman* 373). It's not only the graves of white Civil War dead at issue here for Dixon, but also the body of the white South itself, which had to be "redeemed from [the] shame" (374) of federal Reconstruction. For Dixon, only the mystical and military powers of the Klan may restore Anglo-Saxon honor and achieve true North/South unity.

The events involving Bon's murder in Faulkner's *Absalom* reproduce neither Chesnutt's nor Dixon's plots. Bon obviously is not a black servant, nor is he a white son and heir. His corpse is metaphorically, not literally, exhumed. It's doubtful Faulkner knew Chesnutt's work, and what Faulkner thought of Dixon is unrecorded, though we know that as a school-boy Faulkner received a gift copy of *The Clansman* and saw a theatrical performance of that best-selling novel in Oxford in 1908, just a month or so after a lynching there.<sup>4</sup> *Light in August* contravenes and *Absalom* abjures Dixon's plot resolutions, but Faulkner remains possessed, as were Twain, Chesnutt, and Dixon, with how the un-buried past haunts the living.

Faulkner's dangerous move in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses* (1942) was to read popular plantation-fiction plots as *defense mechanisms*. (Sigmund Freud's daughter Anna popularized the term in *Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* [1936].<sup>5</sup>) Narratives of revenge or reconciliation became tales warped by the forces of repression, transference, and resistance. Self-divided protagonists disastrously impose a singular vision onto the labyrinth of history – the race purity and aristocratic standing signified by Sutpen's 100 acres in *Absalom*, for instance, or Ike McCaslin's attempt to repudiate the past in "The Bear." In each of these cases, the protagonist becomes embroiled in counter-narratives that cannot be controlled. *Absalom* undoes repression with eros, an erotic attraction to what is denied or abused, whereas Isaac McCaslin of *Go Down, Moses* – the least driven by eros of all of Faulkner's major characters – tries to track and expunge the lies of history as if he were stalking a bear in the woods. If Sutpen's goal is to rewrite his own past, Ike's goal is even more ambitious: to free himself from what (in a different context) James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus called "the nightmare of history."

Thomas Sutpen's epic scheme to join the white planter class in Mississippi collapses when his "black" Haitian-born son Charles Bon shows up demanding recognition from the father and the right to marry Judith Sutpen, his unacknowledged half-sister, and then is murdered at the gates to the plantation by his half-brother Henry. Early in the novel, when Judith and Henry are young children, their father stages a wrestling match in the plantation stables to demonstrate to his son his physical as well as mental racial superiority as a patriarch. Sutpen is victorious, yet his intended initiation of Henry into whiteness – what Rosa Coldfield, this section's narrator, somewhat archly calls a "spectacle . . . toward the retention of supremacy, domination" (21) – goes drastically wrong in ways that foreshadow the doom of Sutpen's entire project. Henry gets physically sick from the scene's violence, while his sister Judith – who wasn't even supposed to be present – is stimulated by both her father's and his slave's sweat- and blood-slick bodies in the firelight. The final image of the chapter stresses not just Judith's attraction to the "caged snake" (21) of her father's manhood, but also the erotic ambiguity of Sutpen racial identity (at least as it is imagined by Rosa): "I was not there to see the two Sutpen faces this time – once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her – looking down" (22). Judith's later sexual attraction to Charles Bon is caused not just by rebellion against her father or Charles' handsome air of worldly sophistication, but also because of the charge instilled in Judith by this primal scene at the climax of *Absalom*'s first chapter. *Absalom* thus replaces the gendered white-supremacist

romance conventions of plantation fiction with a narrative driven by the eros of racial mixture. But not just that: Rosa's sexual obsession with the story she tells is feverishly denied even as it is being narrated. Rosa sees with Judith's eyes, but in her retelling of the primal scene she tries mightily to identify with Sutpen's wife Ellen's outrage, not Judith's gaze. The psychological complexities here contain *Absalom* in microcosm, rewriting plots meant to reaffirm "proper" race, class, and gender boundaries as repressed erotic transgression, transference, and introjection.

The novella "The Bear" in *Go Down, Moses*, written in the same decade as *Absalom* but published in final form in 1942, challenges plantation fiction differently, though it too features a patriarch's erotic attraction to both blackness and violent domination. Originally conceived as an epic story of a bear hunt in which its boy hero, Ike McCaslin, under the tutelage of Sam Fathers learns how Nature may redeem fallen human history, "The Bear" in its expanded form contains Part 4, a different kind of quest. Ike investigates the ledgers chronicling his own family's plantation history, reading between the lines to discover silenced stories about the McCaslins and their slaves. But if Nature and Sam Fathers inspire Ike to see if time's losses and the sins of history may be "repudiated denied and free" (269), those dusty ledgers turn out to be a formidable antagonist. Ike hopes to cleanse himself of the evil he discovers – his grandfather Carothers McCaslin's rape of slaves, including his own daughter, and his father's and uncle's compounded complicity in many other injustices – but Faulkner's narrative shows Ike to be tragically deluded.

The keyword in "The Bear" signifying time's tragic form is "mazed": Faulkner's novella, like *Absalom*, "mazes" any straightforward truth or linear heroic narrative. "[T]he whole plantation in its mazed and intricate entirety," the narrator calls it after Ike asserts his inheritance is so cursed that he must renounce it (284). History itself is so tangled and misunderstood that Ike's cousin McCaslin invents a special verb to describe the mess: "Buck and Buddy to fumble-heed that truth so mazed for them" (269). Ike hopes he can buy forgiveness for his grandfather's sins the way one pays down debts, "amortizing" them with cash to Carothers' remaining black kin as Ike executes the old man's will. But even as Ike carries out his plan he realizes its futility. The money won't teach its recipients to use well their freedom; indeed it commodifies human relations just as slavery did. As Ike imagines it, Carothers' will was "flinging almost contemptuously, as he might a cast-off hat or pair of shoes, the thousand dollars. . . . *So I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger*" (258). Like Sutpen, Carothers refuses to acknowledge his son.

The yellowed plantation ledgers from slavery time and afterwards in "The Bear" emphasize white power in an unusual way: instead of the "tedious recording filling this page of wages day by day and food and clothing charged against [McCaslin blacks]" (257), they selectively record births and deaths and other life events, as if these too were property transactions. Faulkner juxtaposes the neat linearity of the ledger entries with a spot on the flooring next to the desk in the plantation office: "the scuffed patch on the floor where two decades of heavy shoes had stood while the white man at the desk added and multiplied and subtracted" (279). For Ike, these anonymous inscriptions rubbed into the wood mark the unredeemable, silent, and continuous expression of black suffering.<sup>6</sup> Such marks and the lives they imperfectly represent can never be fully amortized; they are history's tragic maze in physical form, forever canceling Ike's attempts to be a Christ-like figure. This "scuffed patch" also excoriates plantation fiction's lies about slavery and postslavery planter regimes treating blacks as part "of the family," as their "white man's burden."

Like *Absalom*, "The Bear" embodies mazed truth in both the micro and macro levels of its storytelling, from the gnarled, spiraling syntax of its sentences to its overall concatenated structure. Ike's wilderness training from Sam Fathers convinces him that time is redeemable if the right ritual can be found. Death may even be undone and time reversed, as in this magnificent excerpt from Ike's meditation at Sam's and Lion's grave in "The Bear," Part 5:

. . . quitting the knoll which was no abode of the dead because there was no death, not Lion and not Sam: not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part . . . dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one (313)

In Ike's invocation here, identities are not separate but part of an eternal cycle, and the hunt that killed Old Ben the bear replays itself eternally, *reversing* time's losses, including the bear's dismemberment and Lion's disemboweling, while the heroic ritual of the chase continues on in its own "immutable progression," forever a part of Nature's rhythms of rebirth. Even a twist of tobacco, a new bandanna handkerchief, and peppermint candy – Ike's graveside offerings honoring Sam – are "translated" (313) from store-bought commodities into a sacred gift economy where there is no death, only transformation.

Fallen human history proves more recalcitrant. "The Bear" doesn't end with Ike safely transported into sacred time. After Ike's encounter with a



snake, an avatar of Sam Fathers' spirit, his equilibrium is invaded by the sound of Boon hammering on a broken gun so he can slaughter squirrels trapped in a gum tree. Boon's hoarse screams are ironically juxtaposed with the stealthy silence of legal contracts bequeathing to lumber corporations the right to divide and log the wilderness Ike so reveres. "Dont touch a one of them! They're mine!" (315) could be the logging company's credo, not just Boon's. Sam's tracking and hunting skills passed down to Ike may have proven invaluable in the forest and in Ike's quest to decode the hidden meanings buried in his family's ledgers. Yet in those plantation records Ike encounters a form of time that can neither be amortized – safely paid down and made past – nor cleansed through sacred ritual. Instead, Ike encounters time fallen and mazed, stubbornly entangling all involved. As Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (73).

Faulkner's prose not only often muddles past, present, and future; it also frequently represents an action through a kind of demonic gerund verb – always continuing and compounding itself, with no easily identifiable points where an event can be said to have begun, much less concluded. (Look at how the movement of Ike "quitting" the grave knoll is represented in the previous indented quotation, for instance.) Such constructions destabilize the nouns that would be subjects in a sentence, just as the forces of history influence human identities in unknowable ways and render them unstable, divided, opaque. Even a purported "master" can be displaced as his sentence's sovereign subject by his slaves. Such a grammatical slave rebellion occurs in what is perhaps the most Faulknerian sentence in "The Bear," which runs in Part 4 from page 250 to many pages thereafter (it depends how you count). The sentence begins trying to chronicle the actions of Ike's father and uncle, Buck and Buddy McCaslin, as recreated in Ike's imagination based on his scrutiny of the ledger data. Soon there is trouble: the sentence's subject noun, "the twins" (i.e., Buck and Buddy), is dislodged in the syntax by their "property," a long list of McCaslin slaves, "Roscius and Phoebe and Thucydides and Eunice," down to "the anomaly calling itself Percival Brownlee" (252). This list of myriad subject nouns is then itself pushed aside for a *three-page-long parenthesis* unpacking the "single page" (252) of the plantation ledger that is one source, along with family stories, for the information we are reading. This parenthesis samples and annotates ledger entries by Buck and Buddy written in the same italics used for Ike's inner thoughts. It does not conclude until the middle of page 254, after which we finally get the sentence's primary verb and then another long clause modifying both that verb and the sentence's

subject nouns: "... took substance and even a sort of shadowy life with their passions and complexities too as page followed page and year year; all there, ... tragedy which ... could never be amortized" (254). The subjects who take on substance and life here in Ike's imagination are the McCaslin slaves and their free descendants, wresting agency away from their masters and, we might even say, breaking the bounds of the parenthesis in which they were enclosed. Yet even as this lengthy sentence displaces white male power, it surely also simultaneously entangles whites and blacks in eternal struggle.

As Ike reads between the lines of the ledger entries, he finds not emerging free agency for slaves and ex-slaves but a repressed history of rape, suicide, and incest – leading him to the conclusion that his family and the South itself is cursed and that all he can do is to try to renounce this inheritance. Ike's impossible hope to extricate himself from white guilt is partly inspired by Sam Fathers' vision of redeeming Nature. But Ike is also motivated by another, surprising source – one of the heirs of Carothers' guilt money, Lucas Beauchamp. Lucas stages his own version of a lexical slave rebellion, literally appropriating a white master's power to rewrite his own history. He was originally named Lucius but he altered its spelling while proudly keeping all of the other family names: his full name is Lucas Quintus Carothers McCaslin Beauchamp. In Part 4, Ike *imagines* Lucas in 1874, after Buck and Buddy have both died, inserting his new name into the McCaslin ledgers and even (ironically?) using Buck and Buddy's writerly voice. This event is the opposite of the silent patch of scuffed flooring: Lucas here signifies that *he* is the sole living direct male heir of the old patriarchs. In Ike's words, "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, as, for all the old ledgers recorded to the contrary, old Carothers himself was" (269). Lucas gives Ike the powerful hope that he too can repudiate sin-filled McCaslin history. Yet Lucas in life hardly provides a model of responsible freedom, and the project of self-generation that Ike imagines for Lucas repeats rather than negates some of the failings of Lucas' father. Ike's attempts to leap free from family trauma also fail. The tragedy of "The Bear" is that financial transactions cannot free Ike from guilt-debt, nor can he or Lucas uncoil themselves from Carothers' legacy simply by claiming authorship of their own lives.

The ironies or contradictions attending Ike's and Lucas' actions bedevil Faulkner's authorial project as well. The genius of "The Bear" exists in highlighting such a paradox, not repressing it. Far from being

selfprogenitive, the narrative voice of Faulkner's novella finds itself recycling old assumptions and plotlines – not just those of Faulkner's white plantation fiction predecessors, but also those of historians like William Archibald Dunning, who, in the 1890s and after as Jim Crow segregation was being instituted throughout the South, wrote accounts of the War and Reconstruction to justify new forms of white rule as a model for the nation and its new imperial colonies.<sup>7</sup> Faulkner's distinctive fictional "voice" is profoundly *intertextual*, not autonomous or singular.

The narrator of "The Bear," particularly in Part 4, for instance, doesn't just shift between McCaslin Edmonds' and Ike's words as they debate how to understand history. At particularly tension-filled moments it also subtly morphs into an unpredictable and ideologically loaded third-person voice. Mixed with Ike's (and Faulkner's) progressive views of the South's sins and need for atonement lurk many narrative memes recycled from earlier writings by whites reinterpreting the War and Reconstruction to demonstrate the tough benevolence of white rule. Ike paints a picture of heroic plantation mistresses that could have been lifted directly out of antebellum defenses of slavery as more humane than northern wage-based capitalism: "wives and daughters at least made soups and jellies for [slaves] when they were sick and carried the trays through the mud and the winter too into the stinking cabins and sat in the stinking cabins and kept fires going until crises came and passed" (273). A few pages later, Faulkner bestows third-person narrative authority onto familiar representations of Reconstruction as "that dark corrupt and bloody time" (276). Newly freed blacks are "those upon whom freedom and equality had been dumped overnight and without warning or preparation or any training in how to employ it or even just endure it and who misused it not as children would nor yet because they had been so long in bondage . . . but misused it as human beings always misuse freedom" (277). Black illiteracy making Reconstruction government a farce – a claim common to anti-Reconstruction articles, cartoons, and fiction, as Eric Foner has shown<sup>8</sup> – is validated as truth via this same narrative voice, particularly in the portrait of an ex-slave not so subtly named Sickymo who became a United States marshal in Jefferson and "signed his official papers with a crude cross" (279). Faulkner's narrator even suggests that Ku Klux Klan lynching parties were primarily composed of descendants of *Union Army* quartermasters and contractors who stayed after the War but soon were "engaged in a fierce economic competition of small sloven farms with the black men they were supposed to have freed" (277). True, there are some details in this Faulknerian panorama that would be at home in pro-Reconstruction literature, such as the novels of Albion

Tourgée depicting terrorist acts against postwar reforms: "men shot dead in polling booths with the still wet pen in one hand and the unblotted ballot in the other" (278–9). But immediately after this particular detail in "The Bear" we get the clichéd portrait of Sickymo as an emblem of Reconstruction's folly. (Compare the negative representations of Reconstruction in Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* [1938].) Faulkner's various narrators in "The Bear" are thus full of ideological and rhetorical detritus from the US past even while they borrow Biblical rhetoric to give voice to Ike McCaslin's yearning to escape it all.

Sentimental plantation fiction about the South became popular because it gave a powerful new spin to American exceptionalism, that discourse whereby trials and suffering were converted into tests to be passed in order to reaffirm God's favor and America's special role in redeeming world history. Many of Faulkner's characters are deeply invested in exceptionalist rhetoric too, as when Ike in "The Bear" invokes "that whole hopeful continent dedicated as a refuge and sanctuary of liberty and freedom from what you [McCaslin] called the old world's worthless evening" (271). Even while calling the South cursed, Ike assumes that repudiation and atonement will somehow return fallen American history to sacred time, just as he believes the truly American self claims the right to rewrite history and become "selfprogenitive," "by himself composed." Yet the very texture of Faulkner's sentences and the structure of his fictions obviate such dreams. Ike's and McCaslin's language – and Faulkner's as well – remains weighed down by the ledgers and discourses of a past that is not past, haunted by the unspeakable black suffering it yearns to render as either payable debt or something redeemable by a single heroic white man's gesture.

The somber point here is not just that Faulkner's narrative lends its authority to familiar anti-Reconstruction clichés, but that Faulkner's (and Ike's) fondness for the discourses marketed by American exceptionalism and plantation fiction are *mazed*. Instead of simply being reaffirmed, the "facts" and narrative frames that pass for such history are placed in a vertiginous space on Faulkner's pages where they are subjected to questioning, interpolation, and revision. The true "context" of Faulkner's plantation fiction legacy is thus neither *outside* of Faulkner's texts, safely part of his and our literary past, nor definitively atoned for *within* his texts' present action. *Context* and *history* in Faulkner function like his gerund verbs: they enact ongoing traumas occurring on continuously contested terrain.

In mazing the past while repeating it with a difference, Faulkner opened the boundaries of the US South and its history to redefinition and transformation – a shift that proved far more subversive than any claim to

“redeem” it. We can thus, as we do today, place Faulkner in conversation with all those who trace the shadows plantation slavery’s history casts onto our present: Gabriel García Márquez and Édouard Glissant,<sup>9</sup> for instance, but see also the other essays in this volume and, for cogent assessments of an “invented South” in US memory, scholars such as Lott, Kreyling, Hale, McPherson, Duck, Greeson, Romine, Ring, and Porter.<sup>10</sup> A younger generation of cultural historians, such as Amy Clukey, locate Faulkner in the context of the plantation/urban nexus in Ireland, the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere, including figures as diverse as Ellen Glasgow, James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen, W. Somerset Maugham, Mulk Raj Anand, Liam O’Flaherty, Arna Bontemps, Eric Walrond, Jean Rhys, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Carlos Bulosan.

## NOTES

- 1 See Lucinda H. MacKethan, “Plantation Fiction, 1865–1900,” in *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 209–18; Jeremy Wells, *Romances of the White Man’s Burden: Race, Empire, and the Plantation in American Literature, 1880–1936* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011); Amy Clukey, *Plantation Modernism: Transatlantic Anglophone Fiction, 1890–1950* (book manuscript in progress).
- 2 Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (eds.), *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Peter Schmidt, *Sitting in Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865–1920* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008); Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Natalie J. Ring, *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880–1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Wells, *Romances of the White Man’s Burden*.
- 3 Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Colonel’s Dream* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1905); Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman; An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1905).
- 4 Joseph L. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 20, 33; Philip M. Weinstein, *Becoming Faulkner: The Art and Life of William Faulkner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 46; Joel Williamson, *Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 162.
- 5 Anna Freud, *Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense: The Writings of Anna Freud*, revised edition, 2 vols. (Madison, CN: International Universities Press, 1984), vol. II.

- 6 For more on throwaway bodies and the unnamed abject in southern fiction, see Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930–1990* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).
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