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Notes on Contributors

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John N. Duvall is professor of English and editor of *Modern Fiction Studies* at Purdue University. He is author of *Faulkner’s Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw, and Unspeakable Communities* (1990) and *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness* (2000), and editor or co-editor of *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies* (2002), *Faulkner and Postmodernism* (2002), and *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo’s White Noise* (2006). He is currently finishing a study of racial figuration in Southern fiction.


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**Donald M. Kartiganer** holds the William Howry Chair in Faulkner Studies at the University of Mississippi. He is the author of *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner’s Novels* (1979), and co-editor of eight collections of critical essays on American literature and Faulkner. He has recently completed a book-length study, “Repetition Forward: The Ways of Modernist Meaning.”

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Thomas L. McHaney is an editor of the 25-volume William Faulkner Manuscripts (1986) and Mosquitoes: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Holograph Manuscript (1997), and author, most recently, of a short biography of Faulkner, a critical guide to The Sound and the Fury, and a history of the Southern Renaissance.
Richard C. Moreland is professor, director of undergraduate studies, and former director of graduate studies in English at Louisiana State University. He is the author of *Faulkner and Modernism: Rereading and Rewriting* (1990) and *Learning from Difference: Teaching Morrison, Twain, Ellison, and Eliot* (1999). He is currently working on questions of learning in modern American literature and culture.


Noel Polk is editor of the *Mississippi Quarterly* and professor of English at Mississippi State University. He has published and lectured widely on William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and other American authors. He has recently completed the editing of all of Faulkner’s novels for the Library of America. Recent books include *Eudora Welty: A Bibliography of Her Work* (1994), *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner* (1996), and *Outside the Southern Myth* (1997).

Owen Robinson is lecturer in US literature at the University of Essex. He is the author of *Creating Yoknapatawpha: Readers and Writers in Faulkner's Fiction* (2006), and, with Richard Gray, has co-edited *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South* (2004). He is currently working on writing centered on New Orleans, as part of the AHRC-funded project American Tropics: Towards a Literary Geography.


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Michael Zeitlin teaches American literature at the University of British Columbia. He has published a number of essays on Faulkner's fiction and is the co-editor, with André Bleikasten and Nicole Moulinoux, of *Méconnaissance, Race, and the Real in Faulkner's Fiction* (2004). He is also co-editor, with Edwin Arnold, of the *Faulkner Journal*. 
I am extremely pleased that so many accomplished and talented contributors agreed to participate in this project, from which I have learned so much about Faulkner, current criticism, and writing. I also want to thank a series of research assistants for their crucial help and advice – Tameka Cage, Elizabeth Cowan, Marla Grupe, Anthony Hoefer, Eric Lundgren, and Alicia Ringuet – as well as the students in my Faulkner seminars in 2004 and 2005, who helped me imagine how so many different ideas might converge in readings and discussions. It has been a pure pleasure to work with Emma Bennett, Karen Jones, Jennifer Hunt, and Astrid Wind at Blackwell, all of whom have been both patient and persistent with me and the other contributors, and I owe a special debt to the skill and good judgment of copy-editor Fiona Sewell. As always, I have also relied on the personal support of Ed, Irv, Wayne, Allison, my parents Joe and Joyce, Gavin, Luke, and Susan.
William Faulkner has received more critical attention than any other American writer, and since the 1980s that critical attention has dramatically changed. At first either ignored or considered scandalous or insufficiently engaged, Faulkner was then long championed by the New Critics for his formal experiments and his focus on apparently universal themes of tradition, community, and individual moral consciousness. Now, however, his writing is more often appreciated for raising unwieldy questions about the legacies of ongoing economic change, historical violence, and intractable social tensions, both within the US South and in related contexts such as urbanization and mass culture in other parts of the US and Europe, plantation economies in the Caribbean, and civil wars and racial codes in Latin America. His readers have also returned to questions of social and aesthetic forms, especially the formation of gnarled cultural consciousness and uneasy critique, both in his subject matter and in his adaptations of existing literary styles and popular culture genres. This dynamically changing state of Faulkner criticism is what this volume proposes to represent.

The chapters are grouped in five parts. The first part, “Contexts,” emphasizes recent critical attention to various dimensions of the world within which Faulkner’s work is situated – reflecting, exploring, and interrogating that world. The chapters in this part demonstrate how various contexts precede and surround Faulkner’s work, not merely figuring as backdrops or subject matter but thoroughly informing everything that is done, said, heard, or written in his novels and stories. This part begins with Richard Godden’s study of powerfully persistent, underlying economic structures in the US South and slow, faltering changes in the relations between laborers and their masters, debtors, and employers. Grace Elizabeth Hale and Robert Jackson place Faulkner’s work within a history of regional and national thinking about race and civil rights that changed almost as slowly as economic structures, while Anne Goodwyn Jones closely links Faulkner’s life and work with changing “beliefs about gender and sexuality contemporary to both.” Catherine Gunther Kodat shows how Faulkner, like Jean-Luc Godard, struggled with art’s place in a more rapidly shifting twentieth-century world. 

Introduction

Richard C. Moreland
of cinema, pulp fiction, and mass-market commerce. Michael Zeitlin’s focus is yet another context in which Faulkner’s writing has been read and reread, a Western intellectual history dominated by Marx and Freud, and Jay Parini reflects on his own and others’ approaches to Faulkner biography as “historical context of a particular kind.”

Turning from “Contexts” to “Questions,” the second part considers certain common issues, problems, and debates in recent Faulkner criticism somewhat less as aspects of the surrounding world than as questions posed within Faulkner’s fiction. Owen Robinson’s chapter traces how Faulkner’s distortions of language and narrative tend to defamiliarize certain fundamental but unstable constructions of reality, and to implicate his readers in these constructions, both as individual readers and as members of choruses like those represented in the fiction. Barbara Ladd shows Faulkner exploring a more conscious moral imperative articulated by Ralph Ellison – “the necessity for white writers to represent black characters in all their human complexity not only as a way to understand black humanity but as a way for whites to come to understand ‘the broader aspects’ of their own humanity.” John N. Duvall’s chapter considers some of these broader aspects of both race and sexuality in Faulkner’s use of “whiteface” male characters to underscore the “otherness and alienation that result from their fundamental inability to assimilate to the values of their community.” The class dimension of this alienation is emphasized in Julia Leyda’s attention to the ways Faulkner’s fiction challenges “the liberal and paternalist ideas that naturalize and legitimize inequality.” Although such questions of race, gender, sexuality, and class figure throughout the fiction, Arthur F. Kinney demonstrates how thoroughly Faulkner frames them within family relationships that seem to define and haunt his characters. Cheryl Lester’s chapter stresses instead the importance of geography and place, reviewing critical treatments of place in Faulkner to assess “the limits of Faulkner’s hold on his world and its diverse peoples, material life, historical formation, geopolitical location, struggles, and possibilities.” The question addressed by Ted Atkinson is how Faulkner responds to the profound change during his career in the relation between the individual and the state, as the philosophy of liberalism was transformed in the US “from its nineteenth-century roots as a philosophy of individual liberty and laissez-faire economics into a twentieth-century agent for collective identity and decisive federal action.” Lothar Hönnighausen’s topic is the variety of ways the fiction represents violence – in individual cases and in recurring patterns of racial, class, family, and mob violence. In at least one period of his career, according to Sean Latham, Faulkner was engaged with the violent aftermath “not of the Civil War, but of the original colonization of the Americas” as he attempted a post-colonial “perspective skewed not by tragedy but by a liberating impulse to escape the anguish of a South turned hopelessly inward on itself.” Leigh Anne Duck reflects on more intimate versions of anguish and escape in the “often idiosyncratic interactions” in Faulkner’s fiction “between the Southern religious context and individuals’ spiritual perceptions.” Peter Lurie’s chapter traces how Faulkner’s *Light in August* addressed the growing influence of cinema in his time: in permitting the historical traumas of Southern history “to remain traumatized, ‘unhistorical,’ fascinating, Faulkner allows a way to distinguish his novel from narratives of the South, like *Birth of a Nation*, that present
this history so falsely.” And Vincent Allan King discusses Faulkner’s self-conscious relationship with both modernism and the popular culture industry.

Chapters in the third part focus on the main “Genres and Forms” in which Faulkner found many of these worldly contexts and questions articulated, and the different ways he attempted to reshape these genres and forms in his own writing. His experiments in poetry, drawing, hand-made books, letters, drama, romance, prose sketches and other short fictions, screenplays, essays, and speeches are the subject of this part’s first chapter, by Thomas L. McHaney. Philip Weinstein considers the influence of “some modernist precursors without whose work it is difficult to imagine Faulkner becoming Faulkner,” including Conrad, Freud, Eliot, and Joyce; then he “compares Faulkner’s practice with that of his most compelling peers,” especially Proust, Woolf, Hemingway, and Mann. Susan V. Donaldson places Faulkner at the intersection of older traditions of pastoral, gothic, and the sublime, including a shift “from the erotic sublime to something like a racial sublime,” while Greg Forter sees Faulkner negotiating in different ways “the tension between authorial invention and generic formula” in his engagement with the conventions of the contemporary detective story and the psychological suspense story or roman noir. Hans H. Skei surveys Faulkner’s long career as a writer of short stories, a form he took seriously for both financial and artistic reasons, sometimes easily accepting editors’ suggestions but often also rewriting stories as better stories, as parts of story collections or cycles, or as imported parts or adapted and expanded germs of novels. Noel Polk’s two chapters end this part by considering first Faulkner’s non-fiction writing, not as a guide to his fiction, “but rather as emerging out of a more discursive and public part of his character,” especially his sense of his responsibilities as a citizen, friend, and father. Then Polk reviews the textual record of Faulkner’s writing in the forms of holographs, typescripts, tear-sheets, and galley proofs as another resource for understanding his life and the different public appearances of his work.

Criticism focused on contexts, questions, genres, and forms in the first three parts is combined in the fourth part’s “Sample Readings” of particular works. Donald M. Kartiganer reads As I Lay Dying as a self-reflexive novel of and about compromise, “combining private need with family duty, lyric meditation with narrative action – conceived by a writer who has reached a moment in his career when these conflicting drives have become the terms of his own personal and professional situation.” In John Carlos Rowe’s reading of Absalom, Absalom!, the novel’s narrative unreliability and literary self-consciousness about genres and forms such as lies, fables, chronicles, parables, yarns, odes, epitaphs, gossip, allegory, as well as realism, avant-garde modernism, and postmodern metafiction, raise the question of how these different forms of storytelling serve or disserve the political and moral criticism of social reality. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber’s reading of the Snopes trilogy – The Hamlet, The Town, and The Mansion – combines cultural studies with Lacanian psychoanalysis to help explain how the men in these novels, both collectively and individually, either force, resist, or adapt to cultural change in a stratified society.

The fifth and final part, “After Faulkner,” considers three different legacies of Faulkner’s writing. Timothy P. Caron reviews the critical response to Faulkner from
early and New Critical readings through the theory boom to a new attention to Faulkner’s later writing and a turn toward comparative Faulkner studies. Discussing one of the most important areas of this recent comparative work, Deborah Cohn analyzes Faulkner’s literary influence on Spanish American authors, the political implications of his relationship with Latin America, and the current scholarly interest in “commonalities shared by the South, Latin America, and the Caribbean, including the legacies of slavery and the plantation; cultural mixing and hybridity; and the experience of US colonialism and imperialism.” Finally, Patrick O’Donnell reflects on even broader commonalities suggested by Edouard Glissant’s sense of Faulkner’s “continuity, his ongoing presence in a [postcolonial] world of historical contingency and brutal contact, whose narrative is a multiplicity of conflicting and converging narratives.”

This volume is itself a multiplicity of narratives both conflicting and converging with each other. Most of the conflicts result from the very different questions asked by each contributor. How might Faulkner’s work reflect the history of economic conditions in the US South? Where does his writing fit in the twentieth century’s changing ways of thinking and writing about race, sexuality, Marx, or Freud? How does Faulkner’s fiction itself address these questions, or other questions about class, family, the state, colonization, religion, cinema, or pulp fiction? Comparing Faulkner to other modernist writers produces a different picture than analyzing his adaptations of pastoral, the sublime, or crime fiction. But of course many of the questions asked in different chapters also intersect and overlap in various contributors’ references to some of the same novels, even some of the same incidents in those novels, and different questions converge again in the chapters designated as sample readings. Perhaps this multiplicity of narratives comes together most dramatically in the strong sense throughout this volume that all these questions are parts of an ongoing critical dialogue, a trans-historical, trans-national, trans-cultural, trans-sexual dialogue among different readers learning from and building upon each other’s different readings. In multiplicity, then, and what some of Faulkner’s contemporaries and characters might fear as a kind of miscegenation, this attentive, continuing dialogue suggests a healthy future for Faulkner studies.
PART I

Contexts
Preface: A Labor Parable

The bound man carries in his hands the means to his unbinding, at least according to Hegel (1910: 180–9), whose argument runs as follows: the master, seeking to ensure the independence of his mastery, consigns the slave to chattel status, or that of a thing capable of acting only as a dependent extension of his master’s will. No human, no matter how peculiar the institution which binds him, is without will. Slaves who assume will-less-ness by playing Sambo make a choice in barely possible circumstances: more typically, they adopt the available means of limited resistance – they go slow, sick, silent, or they steal – activities registered as a delay in or reticence over the provision of the master’s goods. Consequently, the master, at the moment of his mastery and in receipt of those goods that amount to his substance, may recognize that those who render him supreme do so with reservation. Furthermore, since the objects through which he represents that mastery to himself derive from labor that is not his own, he needs must at some level know that his authority, the authority in the antebellum South of a labor lord rather than a landlord, depends on the labor of the bound man. Or, as Hegel would have it: “just when the master had effectively achieved lordship, he really finds that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent consciousness but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved” (1910: 184). Such recognition involves him in an impassable contradiction: the lord must extract from his lordship the very materials that define it. Put tersely, he must deny who he is (a man made by slaves) in order to be who he is (a slave-empty, masterful master).

Meanwhile, the bound man, contemplating his hands and the goods that they have made, exists in an equally problematic relation to those objects of labor. Having experienced himself as little more than an extension of his lord’s will (or as a negation, one “whose essence of life is for another” [Hegel 1910: 182]), he too is troubled because he recognizes, in the independent existence of the goods made by him, the negation of his
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own prior negation by the lord: “Shaping and forming the object has . . . the positive significance that the bondsman becomes thereby the author of himself as factually and objectively self existent” (p. 186). Such a moment is uncomfortable in that it requires the slave to experience his hands as both the instruments of his own death (as a dependent self) and of the subsequent manufacture of a nascent, independent, and radical self. “Precisely in labor, where there seems to be some outsider’s mind and ideas involved, the bondsman becomes aware, through his rediscovering of himself by himself, of having and being a mind of his own” (p. 187). Where the master risks his masterful self in the appreciation that the objects of his desire are the products of the slave’s hand, the slave risks his abject self in the consciousness that his labor not only postpones the master’s satisfaction, but also produces an object “that is permanent” and “remains after the master’s desire is gratified” (p. 186). Judith Butler notes that Hegel’s discussion of labor “begins to show how the world of substance becomes . . . the world of the subject” (Butler 1987: 58); though one should add that since slaves are subjects subjected to systemic coercion, they are likely to live in dread of that freedom which the substance of their labor might reveal to them. Nonetheless, within the parable, a parable peculiarly applicable to the slaveholding South, goods and persons radically divide – split on a structural contradiction: that the plantocracy is simultaneously independent (or the world the masters made) and yet dependent (or the world the slaves made). From which it would follow that white should be black; or, more accurately, that white planters are blacks in whiteface.

An Historical Interlude

The applicability of Hegel’s “Lordship and Bondage” to Faulkner’s major plantation fiction (The Sound and the Fury [1929], Absalom, Absalom! [1936], and Go Down, Moses [1942]) derives from a continuity of labor use within the Southern economy, a continuity bridging the ante- and postbellum periods. Jay Mandle, historian of African American labor, notes that Confederate defeat notwithstanding, black labor in the plantation South remained bound, or more accurately, “not slave, not free” (Mandle 1992: 21–32), during the second half of the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth centuries. As W. E. B. Du Bois put it, after the war, “the slave went free; stood a brief time in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” (1935: 30). The brevity of that free-time under the sun was ensured by a failure of Northern nerve in the matter of land redistribution. When the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 decreed over three million slaves “free,” Lincoln effectively transformed a war into “a social revolution in the South.” The revolution remained “unfinished” (Foner 1988: 7) in large part because 40 acres and a mule, per freedman, were not forthcoming. No matter that ex-slaves might protest, “[t]he property which they hold was nearly all earned by the sweat of our brows” (Foner 1988: 105), Congressional Republicans, while prepared to deprive planters of their illegitimate property in persons, were unprepared to dispossess them of what were held to be their legitimate property rights in land. As Eric Foner observes: “Without
land there could be no economic autonomy, for African American labor would continue
to be subject to exploitation by its former owners” (Foner 1988: 104).
Non-redistribution ensured a protracted stand-off between a labor force on the brink
of translation into a class of free workers, and planters unwilling to transform themselves
into a managerial class; that is, to reconceive themselves as rentiers rather than labor
lords (see Wright 1986: 17–50). Landowners sought prewar levels of control but had to
reorganize production fast or face bankruptcy. “Southern planters emerged from the
Civil War in a state of shock. Their class had been devastated – physically, economically
and psychologically . . . The loss of the planters’ slaves and life savings (to the extent
that they had invested in Confederate Bonds) wiped out the inheritance of generations”
(Foner 1988: 129). Freedmen wanted autonomy but had as a lever only their capacity
to work. Consequently, Northern hopes for the development of wage labor in the South
proved fragile; freedmen were sufficiently “free” to resist gang labor and vagrancy acts,
but lacking capital they were not “free” enough to avoid being bound in yet another
peculiar institution – the institution of sharecropping.
Share wages differ substantially from free wages. The owner contracts to pay his
laborer at the close of the growing season; payment takes the form of a predetermined
share of the crop. Should the yield be low, or the international price of cotton drop, or
the market be glutted, the cropper may not make enough to pay the merchant who
has “furnished” his seed and sustenance on credit for the year – in which case, the
tenant becomes a peon insofar as he is bound to labor to pay the debt (see Wright 1986:
81–123). A study of black tenants in Alabama in 1932 estimated that only 10 percent
received any cash for their year's work, with the remainder “breaking even” or “going
into the hole” (Rony 1971: 159). With labor immobilized by such means, the debt
holder – be he the merchant, or the planter, or both as one – exerts an absolute author-
ity over the laborer. Jonathan Wiener argues that because owners maintained “invol-
untary servitude” as “the special form of Southern wage” from Reconstruction to the
New Deal, they cannot be spoken of as “classical capitalists” (Wiener 1979: 992). Eric
Foner, less emphatic, speaks of the South as “a peculiar hybrid – an improvised colonial
economy integrated into the capitalist market place yet with its own distinctive system
of repressive labor relations” (Foner 1988: 596). Mandle specifies the distinction, arguing
that “the plantation mode of production” (turning on labor “confinement”) is a better
analytic device for interpreting postbellum economic underdevelopment and racial eti-
quette than “the capitalist mode of production” (Mandle 1992: 23). He emphasizes how
much of capitalism was missing from the South, at least until the early forties. The
South was not a free labor market, nor did “bourgeois individualism” (shadowed by
“merit” and “universalist principle”) carry much weight in a region where “subordina-
tion and paternalism typify relations between white and black” (Mandle 1992: 67).
Because the laborer could not realize his “wage” until he cashed in his crop (what
Gerald Janes called “the long pay”; quoted by Mandle 1992: 21), he was bound to the
land for at least a year, during which time the landlord sought unlimited power over
the productive energies of the cropper and his family, or, in the words of Charles
Johnson, writing in 1934, the planter “demands an unquestioning obedience to his
managerial intelligence . . . the right to dictate and control every stage of cultivation; [he] cannot and does not tolerate the suggestion of independent status” (Johnson 1966: 127). What Johnson misses is that this level of “policing” also ensured that the knower knew little else, thereby rendering himself liable to the damaging insight that he depended upon his dependents.

Whether one views Johnson’s “tradition of dependence” (Johnson 1966: 104) as the result of a distinctive system of production or as the remnant of an archaic regime, it is clear that “dependency” was both all pervasive and much disputed within the agricultural South from Redemption to the New Deal. I would reiterate that dependency cuts two ways, though tacitly: that is to say, within such a regime, the white landowning class, owing their substance to black labor, are in essence black. The same claim could not be made of capitalist employers, that is, that they are in essence their workers, since under wage labor, employer–employee relations are “partial” in that the wage payer pays for, and assumes power over, only the working part of the workers’ day. In contradistinction, the notion of dependency grows out of what Mark Tushnett calls the “total relations” of slavery – relations between binder and bound that extend to the whole life of the slave or tenant, and to the whole life of the master or landlord (Tushnett 1981: 6). The co-dependence of the white landowning Southern class and black labor must be denied, though during the teens and early twenties shifting demographic patterns ensured that black did not rest quite so quiet and easy within white. As portions of the tenantry mobilized, so structures enforcing dependency necessarily relaxed: in Jay Mandle’s terms, “dependency” weakened toward “deference” as economic circumstances indicated that the bound black body might just unbind (1978: 71–83).

Where the properties of the selfhood of the owning class – from face, to skin, to sex, to land – are determined by the laboring other, any looseness of the other threatens that self’s best parts. In Joel Williamson’s terms, commenting on disruptions within the legacy of Southern black–white relations in the first half of the twentieth century, for white to release black may involve the declaration, “I’m not going to be me anymore”:

Southern white identity . . . was intimately bound up with the Southern white image of the Negro, however unreal that image might have been. To let that image go, to see black people as people, was a precarious and exceedingly dangerous venture that exposed the individual to alienation from his natal culture and the loss of his sense of self. (Williamson 1984: 499)

At which point figures for demographic change condition the corporeality – the face, sex, skin, and land – of an owning class as it negotiates the retention within itself of that which has made it what it is, the increasingly unsettled body of African American labor.

If the extended counter-revolution of the planter class from 1865 may be thought to involve the retention of the black within the white, US entry into the Great War finally triggered a long-deferred whitening of whiteness by way of steady out-migration. What
has become known as the Great Migration involved many migrations into Southern towns as well as into Northern cities. But always the migrants moved away from rural lands. The rate of drift depended on the readiness of Northern capital to draw low-cost labor out of the South. For as long as European immigration served Northeastern labor needs, the planters retained their entrapped workforce. World War I cut the labor supply to the North, with a consequent and drastic increase in out-migration from the South. Between 1916 and 1919, half a million blacks left the region, and Mississippi recorded its first-ever decline in black population (Litwack 1998: 487). During the twenties, Mississippi alone lost over 14 percent of its black males aged between 15 and 34 – that is, ready to move and employable: the figure gains in dimension with the recognition that in 1910 over 10 percent of American blacks were Mississippians. Neil McMillen, historian of African American Mississippi, notes of the wartime phase of the great migration: “To the reader who followed early local press accounts of this mass movement, it surely seemed that an entire people were abandoning the state for the packing houses and steel mills of Chicago, Detroit and St Louis as fast as the railroad could carry them” (McMillen 1989: 262). Rates of abandonment slowed during the twenties and thirties, though migration figures remained consistent with those recorded during the 1910s, that is, at levels higher than in any previous decade. Creative rejection of that economy in daily practice might involve a considered refusal of deference, or taking the time to go to the railhead to find a copy of the Chicago Defender: but most typically it turned on the idea of motion – “a persistent and overriding theme in [Southern black] conversations (as in their songs) was movement away from where they were living and working, if not always towards a clearly defined destination” (Litwack 1998: 482). Motion remained for the majority conceptual, in that the depression, with its attendant news of the immiseration of urban blacks, ensured that Northern capital no longer needed to draw on the Southern labor reserve. In effect the breakdown of the plantation economy stalled, though the influx of federal funds, associated with the New Deal, set in place a capitalization of the Southern owning class, which allowed a new regime of accumulation to emerge.

In 1933, responding to a world market for cotton glutted with twelve and a half million unsold bales, the federal government (by way of the Agricultural Adjustment Act) offered Southern landowners between $7 and $20 an acre (depending on estimated yield) to plow their crops under. Fifty-three percent of the South’s cotton acreage went out of production. Since a sharecropper, cropping on a half-the-crop agreement, would by rights receive half the federal payment for the sacrifice of his acres, it paid the landowner not to sign sharecropping contracts for the following year. Instead, he might hire the same cropper on a wage, pay him to plow the crop under, and reap the entire subsidy himself. Between 1933 and 1940 the Southern tenantry declined by more than 25 percent, while the number of hired laborers increased, though not proportionately, since landowners might simply evict any unnecessary “dependents,” enclosing their farms to produce larger units, more viable for mechanized agriculture: “The first stage of the consolidation of the plantations was the wholesale eviction of tenants of all classes, especially sharecroppers. The process was protracted but it seems to have been underway
all over the South by 1934, the first full crop year following the creation of the AAA' (Kirby 1987: 64). Eviction, enclosure, and drastically increased tenant mobility were the visible marks of this structural change, as sharecroppers (bound by debt) were made over into cash workers, “free” to be under- or unemployed in a region where dependency was slowly ousted by autonomy as a cultural dominant.

From Subsemantics Toward Semantics: Three Phases of Labor Withdrawal

Phase I: Hiding

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the Compson household, founded on plantation wealth, comes apart. The father drinks; the mother sickens, and the children are variously given to idiocy, suicide, promiscuity, and commerce. Yet, from the perspective of 1929, the house coheres; at least to the point at which a rotting gutter, or a black boy practicing on a musical saw in the cellar, are symbolic indices rather than structural factors. Coherence, albeit precarious, depends upon the domestic labor of Dilsey and her extended black family. That family also has its flaws: Versh, Dilsey’s eldest son, departs for Memphis, intimating the force of Neil McMillen’s observation that the “dark journey” of diaspora seldom involved a single, one-way trip, but instead featured regional stages . . . maybe from Jefferson to Memphis, and so, via New Orleans, to St Louis or Chicago. Similarly restless, Dilsey’s daughter Frony’s youngest son, Luster, longs to go to the circus – ever an image of mobile modernity for Southern writing. Nonetheless, according to Faulkner’s 1945 “Appendix: Compson, 1699–1945,” Dilsey, her family, and her white dependents “endured,” at least in 1929.

I would suggest that the Compson house retains its form despite dilapidation not simply because Dilsey works to exhaustion, but because the male children of the household continue to perceive themselves through the substantiating and disguised body of the black worker: that is to say, without the recovery within themselves of intimations of the bound man’s displaced presence, they, to echo Williamson, would come apart, ceasing to be what they are – the failing inheritors of an archaic regime of accumulation, founded on coerced labor. My claims are large and abstract: my evidence, constrained by space, will necessarily be narrow and concrete: “concrete” in Brecht’s sense of that term, for whom an attribution of “concreteness” involves the recognition that the reality of things and persons is simply the coming to materiality of “causal complexes,” whose determinants (of class, race, gender . . .), however various, are in the last instance subject to motivation by patterns of labor (Brecht et al. 1980: 82).

The first of my evidential contractions involves taking Quentin Compson to stand for his brothers in the matter of a shared habit of mind; the second identifies that habit of mind (perceived finally as an ur-structure, generative of the three fraternal monologues), through close attention to the subsemantics of a single passage – Quentin’s recovery of an incident at the branch, in 1909, when he and Caddy (his sister), came
close to engaging in incest. Prior to the analysis, the context: on June 2, 1910, the date of the Quentin section, Quentin drowns himself in the Charles River, his freshman year at Harvard having been paid for by the sale of ex-plantation land. His preparations for suicide (letters, clocks, tram trips, and a purchase of flirions) decorate his abiding preoccupation with his sister's virginity and its loss – central to which concern would seem to be his own trial for the abduction of a speechless Italian child, who adopts him during his preparatory location-scouting journey to the river Charles. Tried in an ad hoc country court, on the outskirts of Boston, for “meditated criminal assault” (Faulkner 1987: 85) on the sister of an Italian immigrant, Quentin is fined six dollars. The justice accounts precisely for the sum – one dollar to Julio for “taking him away from his work” (p. 87); five dollars to the marshal for his two-hour pursuit. Apprehended for child molestation, Quentin receives a fine for theft of labor time. Incest, since the Italian girl is emphatically a “sister” and has been critically understood to replicate Caddy, and labor, albeit Northern industrial labor, are therefore tacitly aligned within the six dollars. I shall return to the silent co-presence of desire and labor within split signs later.

The conversation at the branch (my focal passage) directly follows not the trial, but Quentin’s subsequent beating by Gerald Bland. The two events may be understood as forming a linked frame. Released from a court in which his Southern familial tragedy, concerning a sister’s honor, has been rerun as Northern farce, Quentin comes close to seeing double: himself (a “Galahad,” if “half baked” [p. 67]) within Julio (a migrant worker); Caddy (what W. J. Cash calls “the lily-pure maid” [Cash 1971: 89]) as a “dirty” Italian girl; sexual soiling extending into coal-dust; a hymen lost as expenditure of labor-time. Yet, invited to doubt the coherence, desirability, or relevance of his own subject position, Quentin reverts singularly to type. He strikes Bland over the matter of “sisters” (p. 101) and is knocked semi-conscious. At which point the reader encounters an abrupt tonal transition from opacity to transparency. Direct report conceals what Eric Sundquist and Richard Gray have characterized, respectively, as “chaotic first-person effusions” (Sundquist 1983: 12) or “intensely claustrophobic prose” of “an almost impenetrable nature” (Gray 1986: 211). On which grounds it might be argued Bland’s punch levels Quentin physically and intellectually, disarming those habits of perception through which he has previously preserved a version of himself. If so, culturally impaired, Quentin does not “recall” the incident of his attempted incest at the branch; rather, he finds it for the first time, discovering a very different brother and sister, and becoming, in effect, the revisionist historian of his own pathologies, and of those of his class insofar as they turn on incest and the hymen. I run ahead of myself, providing the conclusions to a reading without the reading. But, prior to an offer of evidence, I should add that having traced patterns of desire, I shall seek to discern, within the subsemantics of those desires, the whispered presence of African American labor, as that labor structures a cultural erotics founded on the sister’s hymen.

The evidence: Quentin comes to the branch in order to call his sister a whore. Instead they talk, and motives emerge; the brother is physically jealous of Dalton Ames and wishes to take his place. Impotence prevents him and provokes the substitution of a childish suicide pact for the sexual act about which he knows so little:
I held the point of the knife at her throat
it won’t take but a second just a second then I can do mine
I can do mine then
all right can you do yours by yourself
yes the blades long enough Benjy’s in bed by now
yes
it won’t take but a second Ill try not to hurt
all right
will you close your eyes
no like this you’ll have to push it harder
touch your hand to it (p. 92)

One detail is particularly revealing; Caddy, ever practical, asks if Quentin will be able
to cut his own throat. Quentin’s reply involves an apparent non sequitur: “yes the blades
long enough Benjy’s in bed by now.” Several elements are involved: Quentin invokes his
resentment of Benjy, who slept with Caddy until he was 13; fears of sexual inadequacy,
tied up with the innuendo that all idiots are sexual giants; and a glimmer of self-
recognition. The evocation of Benjy’s howl has been one of Quentin’s customary ways
of voicing his own confusion, and that all-obscuring noise is now silent. The knife, like
the howl, is a substitute. Like the howl, the knife falls away.

don’t cry poor Quentin
but I couldn’t stop she held my head against her damp hard breast I could hear
her heart going firm and slow now not hammering and the water gurgling
among the willows in the dark and waves of honeysuckle coming up the air
my arm and shoulder were twisted under me
what is it what are you doing
her muscles gathered I sat up
its my knife I dropped it
she sat up
what time is it
I don’t know
she rose to her feet I fumbled along the ground (pp. 92–3)

Lulled by Caddy’s firm, slow heart, Quentin rests. The startling disjunction between
the smell of honeysuckle and a cramped arm can be simply explained as an interval of
sleep; Caddy’s sudden “what time is it” may indicate an interrupted stillness. I propose
that Quentin’s sexual response energizes this scene, that sleep relieves him of guilt and
restores his potency, and that he wakes with an erection. Caddy [reacts] in a way that
balances between objection and response:

what are you doing
her muscles gathered