

Introduction

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When the train carrying Quentin Compson home from Cambridge, Massachusetts to Jefferson, Mississippi comes to a halt at a road crossing in Virginia, Quentin observes out the window an elderly Black man astride “a mule in the middle of the stiff ruts, waiting for the train to move.” “[M]otionless and unimpatient,” man and mule have “that quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of static serenity,” something only thrown into relief by the train that “wound through rushing gaps and along ledges.”¹ *Unimpatient*. Philip Weinstein, in parsing Faulkner’s neologism, suggests that, in its implicit passage from patience through impatience to unimpatience, it expresses “an achieved capacity for moving *with* time rather than against or through it,” and thus figures this elderly Black man as “a monument to a certain temporal sanity.”²

Faulkner would call on the seeming Black capacity for “temporal sanity” and “unimpatience” in the face of progress nearly thirty years after the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* and in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Across the course of 1956, having accepted – or become resigned to – the mantle of professional southerner that seemed to have been thrust upon him, he spoke out repeatedly on desegregation in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*, opining in various public forums, both Black and white, about the momentous events of the day, and he frequently did so by drawing on the diction of time, tempo. In a notorious interview of February 21, 1956, in which he claimed that “if it came to fighting I’d fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes,” Faulkner exhorted Black southerners to “Go slow . . . be patient.” In regard to the white southerner, he urged, “Give him time – don’t force us,” imperatives that echo Ike McCaslin’s “*But not now! Not now!*” in *Go Down, Moses*, and that would resurface in other public statements

We wish to thank warmly Peter Lurie, and John T. Matthews for their invaluable contributions to this volume.

Faulkner delivered that year in the pages of *Life* and *Ebony* magazines.³ In response to his “Letter to the North,” published in *Life* in March 1956, W. E. B. Du Bois invited Faulkner to join him “on the steps of the courthouse where Emmett Till was murdered to talk to the people of that county and of the United States concerning the enforcement of law in this country.”⁴ Faulkner declined, insisting, strangely or perhaps cagily, that there was no substantial difference in their views. In the fall of that same year, James Baldwin offered a rebuke to what appeared to be “the squire of Oxford[’s]” disavowal of the urgency of a Black present and, implicitly, the possibility of a Black future: “the time Faulkner asks for does not exist,” Baldwin wrote; “The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now.”⁵

Underpinning Faulkner’s appeal that time stand still for Black southerners and expand for white southerners is what Michael Hanchard has termed “racial time,” according to which “Unequal relationships between dominant and subordinate groups produce unequal temporal access to institutions, goods, services, resources, power, and knowledge.”⁶ It is thus an experience of time that hinges on *waiting*, one requiring what Julius B. Fleming, Jr. calls “black patience”:

Whether in the barracoon or the dungeon of the slave castle, in the hold of the slave ship or atop the auction block, whether waiting for emancipation or being cautioned to “go slow” in the pursuit of full citizenship, black patience was as pivotal to transatlantic slavery and colonialism as it remains to procuring their afterlives in the wake of emancipation.⁷

If we are to resist Quentin Compson’s impulse to monumentalize what he understands as Black patience, the capacity to wait, then we must reckon with the possibility, as Taylor Hagood encourages us to do in his Afterword to this volume, that Faulkner may very well be “another Confederate monument to be toppled.” Readers, scholars, and students of Faulkner will no doubt have something to offer about Faulkner’s utility today, to our lives, to the methods and interests of a range of disciplines, as we consider a single author who functions, too, as a nodal point for much that exceeds his work.

In the spirit of that inquiry, *The New William Faulkner Studies* reflects and develops important critical moves that have emerged in literary studies across the late twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, at the forefront of which its contributors have appeared; these are moves that also form, for example, the continuing basis of the New Modernist Studies. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz’s field-defining *PMLA* essay, “The New Modernist Studies,” is now more than twenty years old. The terms of the field have significantly shifted since then and, as is the case with almost all

fields of inquiry and schools of thought that are appointed a name, many have publicly wondered about the continuing utility of the term and the intellectual and institutional project it embodies. That important cautiousness notwithstanding, Mao and Walkowitz's remarks on the field's expansion across temporal, spatial, and vertical planes continue to reflect the ways that scholars are pushing the boundaries of modernist inquiry beyond those that defined the field prior to the early 2000s, and these planes are represented in this volume.

It has been the vertical plane to which Faulkner studies has perhaps tended most, and which is exemplified in John T. Matthews' insight in 1986 that Faulkner's work interrogates "aspects of mass art in an age of mechanical reproduction."⁸ In the wake of important scholarship such as Bruce Kawin's *Faulkner and Film* (1977) and Peter Lurie's *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination* (2004) in which Lurie considers the idea of film in Faulkner's work, scholars such as ourselves, Julian Murphet, Stefan Solomon, and Mark Steven, among others, have likewise become interested in the ways in which a specifically visual culture informs Faulkner's work. In his chapter for this volume, Solomon approaches the visual encounter of Faulkner's writing from yet a different angle again: he examines the various ways "the Yoknapatawpha fiction has found its way to different screen media," including digital media, in the context of what he calls Faulkner's "cinematic globetrotting."

The vertical expansion of Faulkner scholarship also includes considerations of the mass circulation of his fiction in popular print. John N. Duvall's chapter, "Faulkner and Print Culture," exceeds the more familiar story of modernism's entanglements with the little magazines. Duvall instead considers the way modes of circulation in the "big magazines," as Donal Harris has it, as well as an emerging reprint culture, shaped Faulkner's career, and did so both within and beyond the borders of the United States, such that there developed, for example, "a strong, long-standing tradition of Faulkner criticism in France."⁹ Importantly, and as we have begun to indicate, both Duvall and Solomon place Faulkner's writings in conversation with writers, thinkers, and filmmakers from around the world, an approach that contributes to a more general expansiveness across both spatial and temporal planes in Faulkner studies of the twenty-first century. Such scholarship has the effect of extracting Faulkner from, or extending, his modernist moment to consider his career and writings along a temporal arc that stretches back at least as far as the nineteenth century and to his own earliest works, and forward to the work of a number of twenty-first-century Black writers.

Sebastien Fanzun's chapter, "Faulkner and Formalism," which opens Approaches, the first part of *The New William Faulkner Studies*, is suggestive here in its return to the study of form, arguably at once the most nebulous and definitive critical approach to Faulkner. Through a careful narrativization of the ways that form and formalism proper have been central to key turns in the history of Faulkner criticism, Fanzun shows that because of the particular kind of writer Faulkner was – both profoundly concerned with the materiality of history and among the most formally experimental of the twentieth century – one way of understanding the dialectical progression of Faulkner criticism is as a grappling with that irreducible duality. What he finds in the recent scholarship about Faulkner's form is that "Rather than echoing New Criticism, [it] reverberate[s] with a different formalism: Russian Formalism, and its concept of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization)." This is an intriguing turn, and it is characteristic of the way, as we have said, Faulkner studies has expanded its spatiotemporal reach over the past twenty years or so, and in that process has attended to several of his narratives that have received relatively scant attention, and alongside authors under-read in English departments. This is a critical move likely most evident in, while certainly not exclusive to, the work of those scholars who have more explicitly pursued Faulkner's writings and career in the context of global literatures and on the world stage. This kind of approach is represented in several of the chapters collected in this volume. In "Faulkner and Modernist Gothic," Dolores Flores-Silva and Keith Cartwright ponder what they term the "gulfs of gothic modernity" to point to the gap in a longstanding approach – the gothic – to Faulkner's work, and to the direction we would now do well to take. Sharing with Eric Gary Anderson, Hagood and Daniel Cross Turner, the editors of *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature* (2015), an impatience with "threadbare tropes of 'the Southern Gothic,'" Flores-Silva and Cartwright bear Faulkner – and an "undead" Yoknapatawpha County – across the Gulf of Mexico and the Rio Grande to discover the way his writings not only register the literatures of Mexico, but register these as something strikingly familiar.¹⁰ Jenna Grace Sciuto, in "[T]he critic must leave the Western hemisphere": Faulkner and World Literature," extends the important work of Flores-Silva and Cartwright and others on the hemispheric Faulkner to other parts of the globe – West Africa, and areas of Asia and the Middle East – and does so, significantly, by drawing on "theoretical work beyond the Western hemisphere" to uncover affinities

between his work and, for example, that of Guinean author Tierno Monémbo.

Catherine Gunther Kodat's chapter, "Faulkner After Morrison," continues the important project – also undertaken by Kodat elsewhere, and by Lisa Hinrichsen herein – of considering the reciprocal relationship of Faulkner and African American literatures. Kodat structures this significant history in terms of Before Toni Morrison and After Toni Morrison, with Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* marking the transition that "opened a new chapter" in this relationship. Black authors After Morrison, such as Jesmyn Ward, Natasha Trethewey, and Kiese Laymon, among others, find in Faulkner's work what Kodat terms a "lumber room" of raw material." We could say – after Julie Beth Napolin – that Faulkner's writings *resonate* across and with space and time. Indeed, Napolin's chapter, "Faulkner's Acoustics, or Minor Sound," which surveys and advances one of the more recent approaches to Faulkner's work, finds that "resonance," a concept she borrows from Wai Chee Dimock and Jean-Luc Nancy, enables her to read – indeed, listen to – the reverberations of Faulknerian history through and across his opus. Resonance figures the ripples, the "*watery echo*" – to use Quentin Compson's description in *Absalom, Absalom!* of a pebble's ripples across the river's surface – of the relations among Faulkner's writings and others' such that "Faulkner" exceeds his place and moment, as so many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate – even as he was, as Jay Watson has observed, so "exquisitely attuned" to his place and moment.¹¹

The chapters gathered in Part II, Cultures, likewise straddle geographies and epochs. Together they draw out Faulkner's engagements with cultures of gender and sexuality, and of race and ethnicity – all complex networks in which Faulkner moved, wrote, and collaborated, and in which his texts circulate. In his examination of Faulkner's career-long interest in queerness, Alexander Howard, in "Queering Faulkner: Content, Structure, Failure," provides an overview of Faulkner scholarship concerned with queerness, queer theory, and queer formalism before turning to read Faulkner's relatively neglected, early quasi-Symbolist poetry from these perspectives. He concludes his chapter by reconsidering the "failure" of Faulkner's similarly neglected final novel, *A Fable*, in particular to consider how recent advances in queer theory pertaining to the idea of failure can equip readers with a critical means to rethink the aesthetic merits of Faulkner's late literary output. In "Faulkner and Women," Lisa Hinrichsen draws on the history of feminist criticism as she surveys a wide variety of scholarship that reads the figure of "woman" in

Faulkner's writings in relation to critical race theory, transnationalism, ecocriticism, disability studies, and queer and trans theories. In her closing argument, Hinrichsen finds that Faulkner's fiction reveals "woman" as a category that contains myriad cultures of difference and freedom, and, in that way, it offers an imaginative space to both comprehend and resist dominant forms of patriarchal privilege.

While it may be the case, as Eric Gary Anderson notes in "A Shape to Fill a Lack': Faulkner and Indigenous Studies," that "Faulkner rarely centers on Indigenous people in his fictions," and "Indigenous studies has had little to say" about Faulkner, Indigenous Studies as a *method* is able to "frame interpretations of environmentally complex writing such as Faulkner's." Accordingly, Anderson places "Faulkner in Indigenous critical frameworks and brings Indigenous studies perspectives, keywords, pre-occupations, and methodologies to bear on Faulkner studies." And he does so by turning to a text – *As I Lay Dying* – that makes no reference to Indigenous cultures, peoples, or sites, but whose very reticence, Anderson argues, demonstrates how Indigenous studies illuminates the figure of indigeneity in Faulkner as it is itself a spectral absence, pointing up the political and cultural blindnesses of Faulkner's characters and Faulkner himself. In "On Thingification: Faulkner and Afropessimism," Joanna Davis-McElligatt attends to similar forms of blindness and absence as she wonders, "If Faulkner had no interest in Black futures, and therefore no stake in shaping Black presents or coming to grips with Black pasts, what could a reading of his work possibly have to say about Blackness and Black futures?" Rather than attempting to "work around Faulkner's antiblackness," Davis-McElligatt instead contends with the narrative occlusions it effects. Reading his fiction through the lens of Afropessimism, Davis-McElligatt both names Blackness in Faulkner as a constitutive absence with no imagined political future and finds "radical potential" in Faulkner's figures of fugitivity, such as *Go Down, Moses's* Tomey's Turl.

The final part of our volume, *Interfaces*, sheds additional light on the ways the political and economic conditions of our own moment shift Faulkner's fiction into new configurations of meaning, frequently clustered around and emerging out of a series of interfaces at which Faulkner's writings encounter a range of media and technologies. Arguably one of the thorniest, most perplexing interfaces at which Faulkner and his work are located – especially subsequent to his awards of the Nobel Prize, Pulitzer Prize, and National Book Award, and in the context of his frequently inflammatory contributions to commentary about *Brown v. Board* – is that of public and private. As Eurie Dahn has recently

observed, even as Faulkner “took on an increasingly public role, he raged against the breaches of his private life.”¹² This is the predicament, and the broader scholarship concerning which, Robert Jackson thinks through in “William Faulkner, Public Intellectual,” his chapter about this “famously private man” and, as Kodat has elsewhere observed, “one of America’s first Cold War cultural celebrities.”¹³

The remaining chapters in this section of our volume address the convergence of Faulkner’s fiction with technologies of the screen, war, and extraction. Solomon concludes his chapter, “Faulkner and Screen Culture,” by reminding us that because of “the unprecedented proliferation of screens in everyday culture . . . Faulkner’s work is now just as likely to be read on a screen as it is on a page.” What might this mean in terms of the ways we read, write about, and, at least as importantly, teach Faulkner today? Michael Zeitlin’s “Faulkner and Modern War” returns to the subject of war as this intersects with and emerges in Faulkner’s fiction. Importantly, Zeitlin’s focus is on twentieth-century war – its battles and matériel – rather than the more oft-studied war in Faulkner studies: the Civil War. As does Howard in his chapter here, Zeitlin concludes with a consideration of *A Fable*, to ponder its antimilitarism, and the way such a posture or attitude complicates what we know of Faulkner’s private thoughts about war and his own vexed and, to his mind, inadequate participation in it.

The final chapter in this section is Jay Watson’s “Fossil-Fuel Faulkner: Energy and Modernity in the US South,” which carves out an as-yet unacknowledged interface with which both the Faulkner family biography and Faulkner’s work are deeply imbricated: extractive technologies and industries. Here, Watson draws on the field of the energy humanities to illuminate the terms in which Faulkner’s fiction engages with and is reflective of the emergence of new modalities of energy, at the levels of both form and theme. One upshot of Watson’s reading of Faulkner alongside the energy humanities is that it reminds us of Yoknapatawpha’s – and, more generally, the South’s – long-term and sustained engagements with various forms of modernity, even if these occurred along a trajectory of uneven development. Matthews in *Hidden in Plain Sight: Slave Capitalism in Poe, Hawthorne, and Joel Chandler Harris* (2020) and historian Edward Baptist in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014), among others, have offered similar insights in the context of “slave capitalism,” of race slavery’s very underwriting of global capitalism. The South, Faulkner’s South, was never “exceptional,” a reticent bystander, to

modernity, then, but rather an engine-room for it – or, as Watson here argues, “modernity’s basement.” Our volume concludes with Hagood’s sobering Afterword, in which he lingers over Faulkner’s rather neglected – and odd – 1937 story “Afternoon of a Cow,” which he wrote, as he recalled in a letter to his agent, Harold Ober, “one afternoon when I felt rotten with a terrible hangover, with no thought of publication.”¹⁴ Hagood approaches this madcap tale with “a sensibility shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic” and the mass public reckoning with “systemic racism” as a means to negotiate – and to continue negotiating – Faulkner’s complex and difficult legacy.

The New William Faulkner Studies testifies to the multitudes contained within “Faulkner”: the great number of fields, concerns, and methodologies his work continues to stimulate, explicitly and otherwise. We only wish the volume were capacious enough to acknowledge more of these: for example, the recent biographical criticism of Phillip Gordon, Michael Gorra and Carl Rollyson; the important work of the Digital Yoknapatawpha project, which continues to map out all corners of the Faulknerian universe with extraordinary meticulousness, attesting to the rich and abiding affordances of the digital humanities; disability studies approaches, for example, in the work of Michael Bérubé, Stephanie Larson, and Hagood; the posthuman, for example, in the work of Erin Edwards in *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (2018); and the ordinary-language-philosophical approaches to Faulkner as represented in the important essays of Gregory Chase.¹⁵ More of course remains to be discovered. Faulkner wrote to Malcolm Cowley in 1946 that *The Sound and the Fury* is “still alive after 15 years, and being still alive is growing, changing.”¹⁶ The chapters collected here, and the work of the past twenty years or so, including that not included here, remind us that this is so of his opus generally.

The continuing critical consideration of writers such as William Faulkner is indeed often justified on the grounds of relevance: Faulkner is “still relevant,” the story might go, despite his contradictory politics, despite the sociopolitical blind spots of his fiction, despite the changing terrain of academic and intellectual life both inside and outside the academy. But that argument for relevance feels frailer than ever, since the intractable fact of Faulkner’s status as a dead white southerner with slave-owning ancestry whose fiction has held a privileged place in the canon of “great authors” sits ever more uncomfortably with the terms of a contemporary academic life such as our own, which, partly – though certainly not exclusively – by way of the so-called “method wars” spurred

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by the 2015 publication of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, is emphatically, if not heatedly, reflecting upon its own institutional blind spots, centering questions of academic conduct and what forms of intellectual sociality and professional practices we want to discourage or help foster. Recent work, too, by Bérubé, Judith Butler, Hank Reichman, and Joan Wallach Scott evinces the urgency surrounding the social and political valences of academic expression right now and how that expression is informed, both productively and destructively, by "extramural" standards thought in many cases to be different than intramural ones. Further still, books such as Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (2019) index the increased sense of responsibility – especially given the defensive posture of the university, and the humanities in particular, vis-à-vis the public in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis – to rethink the very structures and affects of academic knowledge-production, which, according to Fitzpatrick, disproportionately reward professional competition so fierce and individualistic as to lead the public to believe that the academic humanities are fundamentally about fostering skepticism, not just of texts but also of our peers. And finally, the revelation of systematic gender inequities and sexual harassment by the academic wing of #MeToo, the pressing recognition of persisting racial and gender inequalities in hiring and citational practices, as well as the collapse of the academic job market resulting in the explosion of contingent labor, have made ever more salient the ethical, or unethical, implications of our discursive and embodied choices within academic spheres, the spatial coordinates of which, as Bérubé points out, are shifting now more than ever. Where is Faulkner in this importantly new phase of academic life? Why study him?

Indeed, to rationalize a volume-length assessment of the past, present, and future of Faulkner studies on the basis of a typical argument for Faulkner's so-called relevance feels wrongheaded to us, not just because the rhetoric of relevance so often works in service of the neoliberal imperative to numericize or otherwise measure and thus justify the work of the humanities. More pressingly still, and by extension, it feels misplaced to argue for the continued study of Faulkner on the basis of relevance because that same neoliberal rhetoric is too often the banner under which the shibboleth of the Western literary canon – and the forms of academic life it underpins – get defended and sustained, a political project this volume is distinctively not invested in protecting. We would thus argue for the relevance of Faulkner only in the strictest and most literal sense of the term: that his fiction – the racial, sexual, historical, and political traumas it

chronicles both in its content and sedimented in its form – pertains to, and has direct bearing on, our time, these times. It is striking, for instance, that a number of women authors of color – Morrison and Ward, Monique Truong and Claudia Rankine – keep Faulkner in dialogue. In her 2016 *New Yorker* dispatch, “Making America White Again,” Morrison turned to *Absalom, Absalom!* to understand white terror over racial hybridity in connection with Trump’s election: “In ‘Absalom, Absalom,’ incest is less of a taboo for an upper-class Southern family,”¹⁷ Morrison writes, “than acknowledging the one drop of black blood that would clearly soil the family line. Rather than lose its ‘whiteness’ (once again),” she concludes, “the family chooses murder.” And Rankine’s 2016 poem “Sound and Fury,” which grapples with contemporary white supremacy by way of a thinly veiled invocation of Jason Compson, likewise suggests the broader extent to which Faulkner’s fiction offers a deep literary history within which to contextualize some of today’s most bewildering political and racial atrocities; his fiction exposes the roots of these atrocities in the deepest and darkest of the Western world’s past. Jason’s hatred of racial and ethnic minorities – his sense that if it weren’t for the “_____s” and those “Jews” from New York, then the legacy of his family’s slave-owning past and his current socio-economic circumstances would not be so endangered – provide not a different, but simply an earlier instantiation of the white nativist narrative of racial victimization reverberating in the repeated chants of “Jews Will Not Replace Us. You Will Not Replace Us” in the streets of 2017 Charlottesville.¹⁸ What is more, the logic of white supremacy and its entanglements in working-class disenfranchisement find one of its most potent expressions in Faulkner’s fiction. *Absalom, Absalom!* is exemplary in its depiction of the missed opportunity on the part of the white working poor to create meaningful bonds of solidarity with enslaved Black people to topple, together, the capitalist structures of power and production that subjugated them both under the antebellum southern plantocracy and its afterlives. Thomas Sutpen’s response to feeling humiliated at the front door of the big house of the plantation on whose grounds he and his family live, for instance, was not to see a version of himself in the Black butler telling him to use the back door – a recognition that could have allowed him to forge with enslaved men and women a revolutionary singleness of purpose capable of destroying the politico-economic structure of the plantation that held the young Sutpen, too, in a form of subjugation. Hailed too powerfully by the ideology of white supremacy, his response, instead, is to become the most dominant member of that structure – the slave owner – thus perpetuating the capitalistic structures of racialized violence and servitude that were only transformed