Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century
FAULKNER AND YOKNAPATAWPHA
2000
This page intentionally left blank
For John Pilkington
Our professor, mentor, and friend
# Contents

Introduction

ROBERT W. HAMBLIN ix

A Note on the Conference xvii

Opening Remarks DONALD M. KARTIGANER xix

The Roster, the Chronicle, and the Critic THERESA M. TOWNER 1

Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century: Boundaries of Meaning, Boundaries of Mississippi MICHAEL KREYLING 14

William Faulkner, Edouard Glissant, and a Creole Poetics of History and Body in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *A Fable* BARBARA LADD 31

Faulkner and Spanish America: Then and Now DEBORAH N. COHN 50

Postcolonial Displacements in Faulkner’s Indian Stories of the 1930s ANNETTE TREFZER 68

Haunting Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner and Traumatic Memory LEIGH ANNE DUCK 89

Faulkner’s Future Tense: A Critique of the Instant and the Continuum PATRICK O’DONNELL 107

Lucas Beauchamp’s Choices KARL F. ZENDER 119
Introduction

With its number of consecutive annual meetings now totaling twenty-seven, the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference sponsored by the University of Mississippi is currently the longest running conference devoted to a single author. And with each successive meeting, as Donald Kartiganer observed in his opening remarks to those attending the 2000 conference, the inevitable question is raised: After all these years, is there anything more to be said about Faulkner and his works?

This question, understandably, is given heightened prominence at the beginning of a new millennium. Thus the organizers of the 2000 conference selected the program topic “Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century.” As the papers included in this volume demonstrate, the presenters at this year’s conference clearly believe there is more to be said about Faulkner, and, in typical Faulknerian fashion, they believe that “more” involves looking backward as well as forward. Interestingly, the ten essays printed here are evenly divided on this score, with the first five representing promising current trends and the second five supplying fresh approaches to long-familiar Faulkner topics.

In the opening essay, “The Roster, the Chronicle, and the Critic,” Theresa M. Towner examines the issue of canonicity. Towner encourages scholars in the twenty-first century to challenge the long-accepted classifications of Faulkner’s characters and works as “major” and “minor.” Towner commends the innovative work of recent psychological, postmodernist, and race/class/gender critics but then faults them for unwisely imitating the earlier agrarians and formalists by limiting their attention to a virtually exclusive group of five novels—The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Light in August, Absalom, Absalom!, and Go Down, Moses—from Faulkner’s so-called major phase, 1929–1942. Citing such typically neglected or undervalued characters as Virgil Beard, Lucy Pate, Labove, Cecilia Farmer, Tobe Sutterfield, Samuel Beauchamp, Hawkshaw, and a plethora of Snopeses (to name only a few of her many examples), Towner calls for a closer examination of “the central marginality or marginal centrality . . . in Faulkner’s novels.” This shift in approach would heighten readers’ awareness of Faulkner’s “ability to populate his fiction with such particularity,” which, according to Towner, is “perhaps the greatest hallmark of his genius.”

Michael Kreyling’s essay, “Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century: Boundaries of Meaning, Boundaries of Mississippi,” considers the interactions of Faulkner’s texts with the ever-evolving political and cultural
INTRODUCTION

scene in his native state. Employing representative photographs of Faulkner that may be taken to symbolize the successive stages of his career, Kreyling traces Faulkner’s ambivalent feelings toward his homeland—from the young bohemian poet and novelist who agrees with H. L. Mencken’s assessment of Mississippi as “The Worst American State,” to the accommodationist Southern American largely created by Malcolm Cowley’s influential The Portable Faulkner, to the Southern liberal enlisted in the civil rights cause by C. Vann Woodward, James Silver, and others, to the Southern apologist who in Intruder in the Dust and a series of essays and personal interviews defends Mississippi against all outsiders. Since Faulkner’s career and literary reputation have been so closely intertwined with Mississippi’s unhappy and convoluted past, what will happen, Kreyling asks, “now that Mississippi has perhaps climbed out of the heart of darkness,” “when the image of Mississippi gradually shades away from ‘state terrorism’ to the relatively innocent and goofy asylum of Robert Altman’s Cookie’s Fortune,” when “tragedy will no longer be a potent metaphor”? One answer to this question, Kreyling asserts, is provided by the Caribbean novelist and critic Edouard Glissant, whose Faulkner, Mississippi (French edition, 1996; English translation, 1999) uproots Faulkner’s work from its native soil and replants it in that other modern South with a tragic past, the postcolonial Caribbean. Kreyling calls Glissant’s Faulkner “King Creole,” the label intentionally suggesting the degree to which Faulkner will perhaps be assimilated into “the global consciousness of the emerging century.”

Barbara Ladd also finds Glissant useful in her approach to Faulkner. In “William Faulkner, Edouard Glissant, and a Creole Poetics of History and Body in Absalom, Absalom! and A Fable,” she objects to the traditional view that Faulkner’s works embody only or even primarily “the universalizing Western Historical vision”—derived in part from the philosophical ideas of Hegel—that stresses origin, logical development, and culmination. Against this Euro-American concept Ladd sets a Creole poetics—what Glissant calls “une poétique de la Relation”—that “speaks from the intersection where History confronts and is confronted by the histories of the colonized, the dispossessed, the exiled.” In this lowercase-h history, as opposed to History, cultural mixing, simultaneity, irruption, and becoming—“the composite, the always emergent”—are privileged over essences, chronologies, and logocentric valuing. Thus Creole poetics celebrates place and body, not indefinite space and abstractions. In applying these contrasting views of the historical process to Faulkner’s aesthetic, Ladd argues that such characters as Quentin and Jason Compson, Rosa Coldfield, and Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom! and the Old General in A Fable represent the Western view of his-
tory as an ultimate dead end, whereas Charles Bon, Jim Bond, Tobe Sutterfield, the British runner, and the Quartermaster General represent a creolization that posits hope for survival and future development in its processes of “integration and regeneration.” What all this will bring to Faulkner studies in the next century, Ladd concludes, is “not a threat but a promise,” since “those who resist History in Faulkner do so out of a deep identification of the human with place and body, with directionality as determined by the location and position of the body (and not with the abstraction of a dialectic movement).”

Like Kreyling and Ladd, Deborah Cohn, in “Faulkner and Spanish America: Then and Now,” also examines Faulkner’s relationship to the other American South. She explores the influence of Faulkner upon Spanish American authors from the 1930s to the present, with particular attention to the “Boom” period of the ’60s and ’70s, when Spanish American literature gained international prominence. As Cohn demonstrates, several noteworthy Spanish American authors, including Gabriel García Márquez, José Donoso, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, Juan Carlos Onetti, and Luisa Bombal, have found Faulkner’s characters, themes, and techniques relevant to their own fictional (and in some cases political) purposes. The use of regional materials to express broader, even universal concerns; the emphasis upon a declining aristocratic and patriarchal social order; a lengthy history of conflict, exploitation, and defeat; the tragic experiences resulting from racial tension, marginalization, and poverty; the importance of family and community; the continuance of the past in the present; the numerous experimentations with narrative voice—these are only a few of the significant parallels that Cohn finds between the works of Faulkner and those of Spanish American authors. As Cohn points out, however, the longtime Spanish American recognition and use of Faulkner has only recently created a reciprocal North American response. A further redressing of this critical imbalance, Cohn believes, will continue in the twenty-first century, to the benefit of both Faulkner scholarship and cultural studies, since such reciprocity contributes to “avoiding the creation of new monoliths and exceptionalist myths and, instead, building a hemispheric paradigm that acknowledges both the commonalities and the differences of its constituent regions.”

Annette Trefzer is similarly interested in postcolonial theory, but as it applies to Faulkner’s treatment of Native Americans. In “Postcolonial Displacements in Faulkner’s Indian Stories of the 1930s,” Trefzer examines two Faulkner short stories, “Red Leaves” and “LO!,” in relation to the growing interest among literary scholars in the issues and politics of ethnicity. Drawing upon the work of Homi K. Bhabha and others, Trefzer argues that “Faulkner’s Indian texts do not produce mimesis but mim-
and the Hearth.” In a discussion based on both a close reading of the text and a consideration of the social and political implications of the story, Zender seeks to rebut the postmodern critics who claim, first, that the structure of the story is extremely disjointed and contradictory (reflecting Faulkner’s ambivalence) and, second, that the humor and silences of the narrative deflect and trivialize the story’s dramatization of African American oppression by the Southern plantocracy. On the contrary, Zender contends, “The Fire and the Hearth” is a highly integrated text in which both the main comic action and the nearly tragic flashback are unified by the common element of Beauchamp’s heroic actions in defending his dignity and selfhood against the racist attitudes and actions of Zack Edmonds. In Lucas’s separate actions of reclaiming his wife from the white man’s house and, years later, manipulating Zack’s involvement in the court procedures relative to Lucas and Molly’s divorce proceedings, Lucas insists upon and ensures his identity as a “man” instead of a “nigger.” At the same time, according to Zender, Lucas’s acceptance of and accommodations to his white as well as his black ancestry and heritage, instead of being a serious defect in the story, as many postmodernists contend, is actually integral to Lucas’s triumph. Drawing upon his own personal experience in rising from an economically disadvantaged background, the steady if still hindered advance in the American mainstream that blacks and other minority groups have made in recent decades, and the concept of hybridity that plays such a major role in postcolonial discourse, Zender argues that Beauchamp’s summoning of Old Carothers McCaslin (“I needed him and he come and spoke for me”) demonstrates a refusal to view race strictly in terms of binary oppositions and the possibility of achieving success through a racial politics that employs not only confrontation but also negotiation and compromise. What is important to Zender is that Beauchamp achieves his triumph within Faulkner’s text, as well as within the social system that seeks to restrain him. With this argument, what Zender does, in effect, is to deconstruct the deconstructionist approach to “The Fire and the Hearth” and Faulkner’s treatment of race in general, and by so doing he demonstrates still another avenue of interpretation available to Faulkner scholars in the twenty-first century.

Walter Benn Michaels, in “Absalom, Absalom!: The Difference between White Men and White Men,” also further considers Faulkner’s handling of race. In a wide-ranging essay that compares and contrasts Faulkner’s novel with a number of other works, including Stark Young’s So Red the Rose, Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s The Great Meadow, Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind, Thomas Dixon’s The Clansman, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, and George Schuyler’s Black No More, Michaels analyzes the way that Faulkner reconfigures the past as
a retrospective projection of contemporary concerns. Thus, according to Michaels, "Faulkner's Haiti, retrofitting the free to the slave, is an epitome of Absalom, Absalom!, which retrofits the social configurations of Jim Crow to the plantation"; Sutpen's need for slaves is "to set him apart from white white trash, above all from his white-trash self"; and the "'nigger that's going to sleep with your sister' is the bugaboo of Jim Crow, not of slavery." In Michaels's view, in Faulkner's South, and indeed the United States as a whole, racial identification (the obsession with "one drop" of "black blood") subsumes and overpowers all other issues and conflicts—whether slavery, states' rights, class conflict, gender relationships, or biological fact. Faulkner, Michaels claims, is "one of the great metaphysicians of race, able so thoroughly to intertwine it with class, money, and sex that his best novels make a world without race... look figuratively as well as literally pallid." Whether this aspect of Faulkner's art will continue to be relevant in the twenty-first century is an open question, depending, as Michaels notes, on whether the problem of the color line will be as significant to the next century as it was to Faulkner's.

In the final essay in this volume, "Beyond the Edge of the Map: Faulkner, Turner, and the Frontier Line," Robert Hamblin returns to still another familiar Faulkner subject, the frontier. Taking his cue from the maps Faulkner drew of his imaginary county, the "history" of Yoknapatawpha recorded in such works as Requiem for a Nun and "Mississippi," and the political and historical essays and addresses Faulkner produced in the 1950s, Hamblin reexamines Faulkner's recurring interest in "that point in the evolution of culture where wilderness and settlement meet, where nature and landscape are engaged and domesticated." Hamblin finds significant parallels in "The Bear," "Delta Autumn," the "Old Man" section of The Wild Palms, and Faulkner's "Address to the Delta Council" with the "frontier thesis" of Frederick Jackson Turner, noting, among other points, that the disappearance of the big woods in "The Bear" during the 1880s is exactly contemporaneous with Turner's date for the closing of the frontier in American history. For Hamblin, "The Bear," with its setting located within the boundaries of Faulkner's map of Yoknapatawpha, presents "a highly romanticized and humanized view of nature, one that still lies very near to the civilized world," while "Old Man," the principal action of which takes place off the edge of Faulkner's map, symbolically depicts "the ultimate frontier, unexplored and terror-filled, beyond the known world, the place where land and water's end falls away into chaos and darkness." Despite these contrasting views of nature, both Ike McCaslin and the Tall Convict may be taken as types of Turner's American pioneer and frontiersman. "Delta Autumn" and the "Address
to the Delta Council," on the other hand, describe a society much like the one Turner foresaw as resulting from the closure of the frontier. Like Turner, Hamblin argues, Faulkner laments the erosion of regional distinctions and individual values and the rise of national patterns of standardization and collectivism. By placing Faulkner's works alongside Turner's, Hamblin seeks "at least partially to position Faulkner in the mainstream of American literature and history, as opposed to the tributaries of Southern regionalism or European modernism"—which, he suggests, should be another concern of twenty-first century scholars.

Taken as a whole, the essays in this volume demonstrate that Faulkner's works will continue to engage the serious attention of readers and scholars well into the twenty-first century. And this will be so because, as Kartiganer reminded the conferees, "in some remarkable way [Faulkner] caught something about life itself." Indeed he did, and writers who manage to do that seem to have a way of remaining relevant, whatever the century.

Robert W. Hamblin
Southeast Missouri State University
Cape Girardeau, Missouri
an exhibition of the works of Faulkner friends Bern and Franke Keating of Greenville, Mississippi.

A highlight of the conference continued to be the special "Teaching Faulkner" sessions conducted by visiting scholars Arlie Herron, James B. Carothers, Robert W. Hamblin, and Charles A. Peek. Other activities included visits to Faulkner exhibitions sponsored by the Department of Special Collections at the John Davis Williams Library, a walk through Bailey's Woods before the annual picnic at Faulkner's home, Rowan Oak, and parties at Square Books, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Will Lewis, and at Tyler Place hosted by Charles Noyes, Sarah and Allie Smith, and Colby Kullman. The week ended with bus tours of North Mississippi and the Delta.

For the second year, thirty high school teachers, the recipients of fellowships funded by a grant from Saks Incorporated Foundation, on behalf of McRae's, Proffitt's, and Parisian Department Stores, attended the conference. Also attending were an Elderhostel group led by Carolyn Vance Smith and an Interhostel group led by Lynne Geller.

The conference planners are grateful to all the individuals and organizations who support the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference annually. In addition to those mentioned above, we wish to thank Mr. Richard Howorth of Square Books, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, the City of Oxford, and the Oxford Tourism Council.
Opening Remarks

DONALD M. KARTIGANER

Welcome to the Twenty-Seventh Annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference. The theme this year is “Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century.” Our hope is that the conference will open Faulkner to new possibilities as we engage in some creative retrospect, offer new ways of reading Faulkner as well as reexamine some of the traditional ways we have read him. On the one hand, to determine how the very conditions of the new century may have an impact on how we receive Faulkner—that is, how readings may change because the situation and needs of readers change. On the other hand, to continue to respond to the inherent power of the text—assuming there is a power independent of our situation as readers—to try to see what may be there that we have not seen, to that Faulkner that is not so much behind us as out in front, waiting for us to catch up with him.

Glancing through the program and abstracts, you can see some of the directions in which we will be going: a new attention, for example, to Spanish America as the source of a literature not only influenced by Faulkner’s fiction but curiously parallel to it, in both its formal strategies and historical vision, an attention to the culture and history of the Creole in Southern consciousness, as well as to that of the Native American, groups whose presence in Faulkner’s work is both substantial and largely ignored by critics.

Some approaches we will be hearing about and discussing attend to issues that are hardly new to Faulkner readers, yet they continue to dog us as problems we have yet to resolve adequately: the past; memory; the frontier—and that particular Faulknerian concern that promises to be with us as long as we continue to read him, namely race: the “problem of the twenty-first century,” as the author of one paper puts it, as it has certainly been the problem of the twentieth.

I am occasionally asked—after the decades of books and articles and conferences: is there still something new to say about William Faulkner? I always answer—usually with enthusiasm, but occasionally with a kind of resignation—oh, yes, indeed yes, there is something new to be said.
For two reasons, both of which I have suggested above: One is that while Faulkner's words do not change—although we sometimes have to decide which ones to use, "corrected" or uncorrected texts—readers change, and with their changes readings change, manifesting new concerns, new determinations of what is important, of what it is we most need to know. The second reason has to do with the texts themselves. In a frequently quoted passage Faulkner wrote: "The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life."

If Faulkner is right—and if his words "move" now for us, nearly a half-century after his death, or if they will move for readers in a hundred years—it will not be because somewhere along the line he read Derrida, Foucault, or Kristeva, or because he thought twice (or even once) about new historicism, or postmodernism, or gay studies, or cyberspace. It will be because, in some remarkable way he caught something about life itself. So that, no matter how foreign or far-flung or surprising our reading strategies become, if they are truly relevant they will resonate in Faulkner because in fact he fulfilled the artist's aim. The books are fixed, in a state of arrest, but what is fixed is life, and if we are lucky, and if we read well, it will always be on the brink of moving again.
Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century
FAULKNER AND YOKNAPATAWPHA
2000
This page intentionally left blank
The last thing an author does in the preparation of a scholarly book is to index it, and this usually happens under the intense pressure of a deadline from the publisher. In my case with *Faulkner on the Color Line*, it also happened after two proofreadings of the page proofs under the same deadline; so somewhere in the “Faulkner, William, Characters” section of my index, I promised myself that the next book I wrote would contain no proper names whatsoever. Yet close upon that vow I was struck with a sudden sense of creatorly power—which may only have been the function of blurred vision or the need for a restorative jolt of caffeine: in essence, I, as indexer, got to say for the record who was a character in William Faulkner’s fiction and who, by my omission, was not. This revelation came during some of the pages on *Requiem for a Nun*, the book Faulkner once called “an interesting experiment in form” that also brings Temple Drake and Gowan Stevens together again eight years after the horrific events of *Sanctuary*. A little tentatively, after my entry for “Stevens, Gowan” and before “Stevens, Temple Drake,” I inserted “Stevens, infant daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Gowan.” It felt good to do that. Indexing the child satisfied a sense of injustice I’d always had upon thinking—as Noel Polk did so fruitfully in his book on *Requiem*—that the child murdered by Nancy Mannigoe was, to Faulkner anyway, as real a character as anyone with a proper name regularly appearing in an index. Then I started to think of all of the other Faulkner characters, many not even distinguished by proper names, who are nonetheless real parts of his novels and his world and of our experience of reading both. In fact, his ability to populate his fiction with such particularity strikes me as perhaps the greatest hallmark of his genius.

To illustrate what I mean by such a population, let’s look briefly at how many people are simply there in Faulkner’s books, and who, in the hands of a lesser talent, might not be.

Byron Snopes survived Ben Wasson’s editing of *Flags in the Dust* as it
became Sartoris in the first Yoknapatawpha novel; in both, of course, he writes anonymous love letters to Narcissa Benbow. That Narcissa keeps these letters with her underwear suggests the barely suppressed and dangerous erotic side of Narcissa's character; she will marry Bayard Sartoris partly because she had a crush on his twin brother and partly because Byron has already stirred her up and made her susceptible to Bayard's violent sexuality. Major players all, but Virgil Beard, the means by which Byron's letters remain anonymous, also made the transition from Flags to Sartoris, and for a while the boy has the distinction of out-Snopesing Byron with blackmail: "It's funny that air gun don't come on," he says, "I reckon I better tell papa to go to the post office and ask 'em if it got lost. . . . I remember ever' one of them letters. I bet I could sit down and write 'em all again. I bet I could." In The Sound and the Fury, no exigencies of plot or characterization require the presence of the three little boys Quentin meets on the bridge, who "talked about what they would do with twenty-five dollars. They all talked at once, their voices insistent and contradictory and impatient, making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words." (They also tell Quentin he can find out the time from the clock in the "unitarial steeple" [119].) The soda jerk Skeet McGowan gives Dewey Dell the "cure" for her problem in As I Lay Dying, but if all Faulkner needed were someone to show up Dewey Dell's ignorance in sexual matters, he had that in Lafe, who seduced her by picking cotton into her sack. Skeet's presence in the text is pure lagniappe: giving Dewey Dell the first part of her cure, he says, "I took a graduated glass and kind of turned my back to her and picked out a bottle that looked all right, because a man that would keep poison setting around in an unlabelled bottle ought to be in jail, anyway." Likewise, there is no real reason for the shy Lucy Pate to be Jack Houston's wife in The Hamlet, or for Houston's dog to be his avenging angel, or for Labove to play football and send his old cleats back home. Nor does the English sentry in A Fable have to know anything about horses, never mind spend a good part of his life on the lam in the American South with a three-legged one; and why, by the way, is the French architect French?

Of course, the function of any "minor" character is to illuminate and amplify the "major" characters and themes of a given work of fiction. Deacon, Uncle Job, and the boys on the bridge tell us volumes about Quentin and Jason Compson; the racehorse demonstrates that men can and do act honorably on the basis of emotional attachments, even though such action might be doomed; Labove plays football the same grimly violent way that he courts Eula Varner one day in his schoolroom. In Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner comments indirectly about the creation of
all fictions when he has Quentin and Shreve reinvent the Sutpen story: "it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere." Quentin and Shreve no more "exist anywhere" than the Sutpens themselves, no more than the lawyer Shreve invents in his "turn," no more than their vision of Charles Bon's home in New Orleans: "that drawing room of baroque and fusty magnificence which Shreve had invented and which was probably true enough, while the Haiti-born daughter of the French sugar planter and the woman who Sutpen's first father-in-law had told him was a Spaniard . . . whom Shreve and Quentin had likewise invented and which was likewise probably true enough" (268, emphasis added). With Faulkner, of course, not the critic, rested the original power to say who his characters are; and having accepted the responsibility to make them "true enough" to suit him—or, as he put it once, to make them "stand up on [their] hind legs and cast a shadow"—he solved the paradox inherent in making imaginative reality. All of the minor characters running around in his pages cast any number of shadows, and as we read him in the twenty-first century, I think we should look carefully at those shades and their concerns, no less present and real for being small.

I would maintain further that it is the responsibility of the Faulkner scholar in the twenty-first century to look at how our own critical protocols determine the status of characters and their concerns—and, by extension, our assessment of Faulkner's achievement. At the distance of some fifty years, it is easy to see how the agrarians and the New Critics adopted Faulkner to their political ends; it has been less easy to see how the same kind of adoption has plagued recent critics interested in psychology, postmodernism, or cultural issues of race, class, and gender. André Bleikasten opened this conference in 1992 by excoriating the practitioners of that "new holy trinity of American critics" in part for their failure to read Faulkner closely: "focusing on form is now frowned upon as a deplorable concession to formalism. And to some, even 'close reading' of the text has become suspicious. Thus [Wesley and Barbara Morris] contend that 'out of respect for the text' one should 'refuse to read it closely,' which is like saying that out of respect for a Haydn quartet one should refuse to listen to it." Significant to my purposes in this paper, Bleikasten also argued that Faulkner's "great novels all attempt to dismantle the language of the tribe. . . . In breaking through these fictions, Faulkner discovered their horrendous costs, the waste, the madness, the injustice, the suffering, and came to listen to the marginalized voices of