

Faulkner, Race, Fidelity*

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They were as close to me as a reflection in the mirror;
I could touch them, but I could not understand them.¹
—Claude Levi-Strauss

Writing in response to Arthur Kinney's essay "Faulkner and Racism" I will both endorse his general position and extend it through readings of texts and characters he did not discuss at length. In the process I will identify some strengths and achievements as well as some limitations in Faulkner's African American portraits.

As Kinney argues, Faulkner is unavoidably a part of his white Southern heritage. He does not openly reject or exile himself from this culture, but chooses to inscribe its stories, myths and dreams, its nightmares, and the many skeletons in its closets. Nor does he fail to inscribe the black South and its interactions with his own culture. Because of the historical and sociological sweep of his fiction from European settlement to the 1940s, Faulkner displays a panorama of peoples, including many Black Americans. He also engages his fictive world with a poignant, often tragic, awareness of the impact of racism on American life. Kinney expresses it this way: "racism spreads contagiously through his works, unavoidably The plain recognition of racism is hardest to bear and yet most necessary to confront" (265). Faulkner's writing not only reproduces the social and political institutions based on racism in the South, it frequently undercuts that racism, demonstrating its corrosive impact on both races.

*Reference: Arthur F. Kinney, "Faulkner and Racism," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 265-78. This response was written with support from a Western Michigan University Faculty Research Grant.

Not only has Faulkner written extensively about African Americans, his racial portraiture and writing about race has attracted a large body of critical studies, some of which I will note.² A number of critics would agree with Arthur Kinney's conclusion that "Faulkner struggled with this culture, and this heritage [of racism and violence against blacks] all his life" (277), and would equally recognize the dues he paid in loss of friendships, including relatives, because of his "outspoken" letters against injustice and for school integration. Yet, while Faulkner's struggle to rise above the racism of his culture and times was commendable (as Kinney puts it "... he never stopped trying" [277]) his achievement was also flawed, in part because of the very racism that shaped and shackled his thinking about race.

Claude Levi-Strauss would perhaps argue that Faulkner's vision of African American life is inevitably flawed by the distortion that occurs when a writer (or an anthropologist) attempts the impossible task of knowing and describing the "Other." After years of painstaking anthropological work at understanding various Brazilian tribal peoples Levi-Strauss concluded it is impossible to "know" very different people, individually or collectively, except by carefully observing differences from one's own culture, which retains a normative relationship to the other. As the writer (like the anthropologist) struggles to understand the peoples he writes about he "is still governed by the attitudes he carried with him."³ We cannot help being the children of our own culture, Levi-Strauss adds, but by struggling to cast off our culture and know another, we finally come to see ourselves and our culture through the "other" as a mirror.

In this context, the beliefs and attitudes Faulkner inherited from his own, rigidly self-defined and defensive white culture and larger Euro-American cultural tradition inevitably shaped and tinted his attitudes toward and portrayals of African American life. Even if he had abandoned his own society to live for a time among black Mississippians, it is inevitable he would still have viewed African Americans across a racial divide. Although a few white writers have "passed" as African American in order to achieve greater verisimilitude, this is not to argue Faulkner should have taken on the work of the field anthropologist or under-cover agent. Rather, let me suggest that Faulkner's writing about

race reveals more about the racial perceptions of his own white society, as seen through the lenses of the "enlightened" artist, than it does about African American society.

Faulkner's black characters were not written purely from personal contact and observation of life in the environs of Jefferson, Mississippi. His intertextuality alludes to and perpetuates well-established myths and stereotypes pertaining to the nature of black identity and culture. As Bernard Bell points out, most of Faulkner's African American characters represent stereotypic categories: the tragic mulatto, the Mammie, the faithful retainer, the rebellious marginal man.⁴ Bell and other African-American critics have also observed that Faulkner's blacks are defined in relationship to his whites, and that they frequently express white, rather than black, cultural values. White life and racial perspectives remain the primary orbit of action and thought for black characters, rather than attention to their own goals and strategies. Faulkner's blacks even live in a proxy relationship to some of his white characters, serving and protecting them, saving their lives if not their souls.

One particular strand in Euro-American thought, cultural primitivism, shaped Faulkner's conception of African Americans and partially accounts for several of his persistent stereotypes. There is a tendency in the white imagination and in white writing about race to thrust into black character aspects of the idea of the primitive, a characteristic Faulkner shares with many other white writers. Cultural primitivism exhibits a tendency to view modernity (whatever the period) as abnormally out of touch with nature, and the values and pace of life that are "natural" to humanity. From this point of view, as elaborately recorded by cultural historians such as Arthur Lovejoy and Lois Whitney, since the dominant (white) culture has corrupted nature and human nature, it will find the models for its salvation and restoration in the lives of the very people it has debased, marginalized, and thus unintentionally insulated from the excesses of its way of life.⁵

In the early decades of the twentieth century white Americans, in growing numbers, divorced themselves from the farms and small towns of their origins. As their new urban lives took on complexities previously unknown, large numbers of neo-urbanites longed for escapes (more

often through art than reality) to a simpler, more "natural" way of life. For a number of white American writers of the early decades of this century blacks and Native Americans served as exemplars of the natural or "primitive," and thus held the antidote for the malaise of civilization. (Cultural primitivism should not be confused with "the savage," a projection of an entirely different complexion, which finds the "other" as the source of one's fears, and thus a justifiable scapegoat for one's fear-driven anger.) Whether their settings were urban "jungles" or the rural South, white writers in the nineteen twenties, at a time when Faulkner was searching for his own viewpoint, tended to portray blacks as cultural primitives. Notable in this vein is the writing of Carl Van Vechten (*Nigger Heaven*), Waldo Frank (*Holiday*), Eugene O'Neill (*The Emperor Jones* and other plays), and Sherwood Anderson (*Dark Laughter*). These texts portray blacks as still close to their African background or the river wetlands of the deep South: a people at home in nature and natural at music and hard labor—as well as by "nature" physically and sexually superior to whites. As complimentary as some of these portraits may appear, the continuous simplification and typing of African American literary subjects severely affects the ability of a dominant society to see "others" with something approaching representational wholeness.

Faulkner expresses his attraction to cultural primitivism this way: "I think that man progresses mechanically and technically much faster than he does spiritually, that there may be something he could substitute for the ruined wilderness, but he hasn't found that."⁶ The tensions between technology and nature, between cultural corruption and spiritual values can be seen as the conflicts that wrack a number of Faulkner's white characters, including Bayard Sartoris, Ike McCaslin, and Horace Benbow. Although Faulkner portrays some whites and Native Americans as primitives, Edmund Volpe believes that for Faulkner the African American "is close to his sources in the natural world. Only a few generations removed from the jungle, his accumulated social heritage has not yet conditioned his responses, choked off his feelings."⁷ The multi-racial character Sam Fathers, in *Go Down, Moses*, who was the grand nephew of an Indian chief but born and bred in slavery, epitomizes these qualities. In "The Bear" Cass Edmonds tells his younger

cousin, Ike McCaslin, that the blood of Sam “knew things that had been tamed out of our blood so long ago that we have not only forgotten them, we have to live together in herds to protect ourselves from our own sources.”⁸ As the discourse in the “Bear” saga develops between the old and an emerging order, between the natural and the industrial, Sam Fathers, who is of black, Indian and white parentage, anchors the argument for the natural, for the possibility of life outside society where harmony between races and with nature is achievable.

Although Faulkner’s earlier black portraits are most stridently stereotyped and shaped by the racism of his culture, as Irving Howe observes, “. . . his sympathies visibly enlarge [as his writing progresses]; but always there is a return to one central image, the image of memory and longing.”⁹ The search for a lost fraternity of black and white is at the center of Faulkner’s racial vision. Thus, as I turn to specific texts and characters, I am mindful of the continuous struggle with racism that Kinney speaks of, but also of Levi-Strauss’s view that it is impossible to “know” the “other”—only possible to more clearly see one’s self and, I would add, to create sympathetic, even if incomplete, perhaps distorted, images of the “other.” I will suggest some of the ways in which Faulkner’s black characters fill some of the absences and gaps he finds in his own cultural memory.

In Faulkner’s early novels, notably *Soldier’s Pay*, *The Unvanquished*, and *Sartoris*, one finds many thin, facile stereotypes of blacks, as Arthur Kinney also observed. Racial slurs and derisively comic figures are numerous, but notable also is an implied discourse between southern white hegemony and marginalized black “primitivism.” *Sartoris* (1929), (*Flags in the Dust*, 1974) is a threshold novel that develops this and other themes appearing in Faulkner’s later fiction: the disintegration of white aristocracy, the clash of traditional and post-war values, and alienation of culture from nature. The novel tells of the return of young Bayard Sartoris from the First World War, and his unsuccessful attempts to become a Sartoris and a civilian again. Racked by combat nightmares, and grieving for his brother who died in combat, Bayard tests his own mortality again and again through alcohol, wild horses, and fast cars. His presence in an otherwise placid landscape is cyclonic—upsetting wagons, shattering the heavy silence, finally overturning his roadster

in a creek bottom. Bayard is rescued by John Henry, a young black man, who carries him up the bank to his wagon. The trip back into town on the mule wagon is torturous to Bayard's broken ribs. John Henry holds his hat in front of Bayard's face to shield him from the sun, a scene with echoes of Blake's "The Little Black Boy" in *Songs of Innocence*. Bayard's head rests on Henry's knees, as the black man holds him, trying to make the trip bearable. Scenes like this one prompted Irving Howe's observation about "memory and longing." Whenever the white man stumbles, the myth of the cultural primitive suggests, a faithful black servant, strong and capable, stands ready to intervene.

It is a reasonable conjecture that Faulkner chose the name "John Henry" to evoke association with the black folk hero. The legendary John Henry was a "natural man," according to various ballads, who battled and defeated a steam drill that threatened his job and those of other black workers on the "C & O Line."

It is an interesting parallel, since Faulkner frequently juxtaposes black men and machines as if they were naturally opposed forces. Like John Henry, Faulkner's blacks are frequently presented as "natural men," but there are some important differences. The John Henry of ballad and song is acutely aware of the threat of industrialization to his job and livelihood. Not only is he cognizant of the forces at work about him, he attempts to alter them by competing with the steam drill—a context that takes his life, even though he beats the machine.

The contrasting function of Faulkner's John Henry is also discernible: he stands as antithesis to the effects of war, the military and domestic machinery of violence, the disintegration of traditional Southern values: he saves the white boy from the wrecked technology of his society, and shields him from the harsh patriarchal sun.

Although *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) was published the same year as *Sartoris*, it shines light-years beyond *Sartoris* in every respect, including its handling of black portraits. Faulkner's principal black character here is Dilsey Gibson, mother of three children, who has been a faithful domestic servant and "Mammie" to the white Compson family for thirty years. Like John Henry in *Sartoris*, she serves and assists white people, but there is a depth and individuality to her character far beyond her counterparts in the earlier novels. Faulkner shows here, and as a

recurring theme in most of his writing that follows, an interest in black life as a counterforce to the decadence of his white plantation families.

Dilsey is, as Irving Howe politely expresses it, an example of "how a gifted artist can salvage significant images of life from the most familiar notions" (123). In her study of *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, Diane Roberts discusses the social politics of the Aunt Jemima figure. (The reference is to the famous portrait of a black Mammie in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.) Roberts observes that traditional southern writing depicts the white plantation mistress as a figure on a pedestal, but also as a figure without a body, thus incapable of either giving birth to or raising children. Against this "absence under the hoopskirt" Roberts reminds us that the Mammy's body is loudly immediate. "The exaggerated breasts of the Mammy provide milk; she prepares food, bathes, comforts, and instructs the white children . . ." ¹⁰

Although Dilsey performs all the tasks expected of the stereotypic Mammy, Faulkner reconstructs the conventional image of the ample female frame and protruding breasts. In his own words, "she had been a big woman once . . ." but with years of hard work she was so diminished that only "the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin. . . ." Yet as Faulkner adorns Dilsey's bag of bones for Easter service, in a purple silk dress and "maroon velvet cape" her spare frame gains a regal dignity. With these variations on the conventional image Dilsey is neither a jelly-quivering and chuckling caricature nor is she laughable.

Dilsey's character grows in wisdom and stature as the day progresses. She oversees the dressing and departure for church of her own two children and Benjamin Compson, age thirty-three, who suffers from Downs Syndrome. Her daughter, Frony, objects to bringing Benjy to their church, because there are "folks talkin." The opinion has been expressed among certain of Jefferson's whites that even a "white idiot" is too good for a black church. Dilsey replies, "Den you send um [presumably whites] to me. Tell em the good Lord don't keer whether he smart or not. Don't nobody but white trash keer dat."¹¹ Naturally, this is said in confidence to Frony, but it does display the strength of Dilsey's love, her fidelity, and the sharp independence of her tongue,

as it reveals Faulkner's experiment at projecting discourse within a black family.

The Easter service in the black community church provides a rare occasion for Faulkner to demonstrate his recognition of a separate African American speech and culture. Most readers and critics have praised Faulkner's rendition of Reverend Shegog's Easter Sunday sermon. By the end of the service Dilsey is deeply moved, rigidly and quietly crying. The sermon has relieved some of her burden and given her renewed cause for hope. As she leaves church, tears streaming down her face, Dilsey says to her daughter, "I've seed the first en de last," and a moment later repeats the trope that shapes her day, "I seed the beginnin, and now I sees de ending" (316). Dilsey's alpha and omega vision, repeated later in the day, has been widely interpreted: the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the life and death of the Compson family, the struggle from slavery, through oppression, to a hoped-for freedom. Dilsey has been freed from the derisive Mammy stereotype; her dress, her words and Easter deeds elevate her, but having had her vision, she must also resume her work in the kitchen trenches at the Compson household. As Diane Roberts comments, "Dilsey endures, but she does not triumph" (64). She cannot change her circumstances, yet she is not trivialized: she has a life in the black community independent of the Compsons, whom she is incapable of salvaging. Despite Faulkner's hints of an independent life, Dilsey retains her fidelity to the Compson family. Thus, despite her independence from key elements of the Mammy stereotype, Faulkner situates Dilsey, and most of his black characters, within a white tradition which assumes that African American life is defined by willing service and fidelity to white society.

As Dilsey organizes and serves the disintegrating Compson family, Sam Fathers (in *Go Down, Moses*) presides faithfully over the white-owned and equally threatened wilderness lands of Yoknapatawapha. Throughout his fiction Faulkner shows a tenderness for the dream of nurturing relationships between African American adults and white children. In the relationship between the aged Sam Fathers (who is of mixed parentage) and young Ike McCaslin, heir of the McCaslin plantation, Faulkner combines two powerful themes: the brotherhood of white and non-white, and the equally-longed-for reunion of the white

man with the primordial wilderness. Faulkner explores here the possibilities for a parental relationship between the parentless white boy and a black man old enough to be his grandfather, who teaches Ike skills and values that come as much from Ike's own race, gender and class as from Sam's Indian and black experience.

Sam is waiting at the threshold of the wilderness on the day of Ike's first trip to the Big Bottom. Faulkner captures that unforgettable sense of the big woods—"great, brooding, seemingly limitless"—as Ike approaches it for the first time. Soon he is sitting in the wagon with Sam, "the two of them wrapped in the damp, warm, Negro-rank quilt while the wilderness closed behind his entrance as it had opened momentarily to accept him."¹² From this November hunt until Sam's last, nine years later, he initiates the white boy in the ways and rituals of hunting and woodsmanship.

The most memorable moment in the relationship of Sam and Ike occurs when Sam, serving as Faulkner's wilderness priest, baptizes Ike with the blood of the boy's first-killed buck, dipping "his hands in the hot smoking blood" and then wiping them "back and forth across the boy's face" (164). The ceremony is that of Ike's confirmation into the wilderness.

Despite his "presence" in "The Bear" Sam remains a private, elusive character; we know even less about his private life and thoughts than we do about Dilsey's. Ike McCaslin searches desperately for meaning in Sam's stoic face and laconic instructions. By the conclusion of Part III Sam Fathers and his fierce hunting dog, Lion, are dead, as is old Ben, the great bear that has been the iconic centerpiece of the ritualized hunt for as long as Sam or any of the patrician hunters can remember. With these three deaths Faulkner's romance of the wilderness comes to an abrupt and shocking conclusion. Born in slavery and retained as a faithful servant of the McCaslin family, Sam served family needs and the noble plantation values of the Old South beyond call or expectation: inculcating those virtues that "touch the heart—honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love" (119). Faulkner invests in this former slave and wilderness hunter—a sacred trust to instruct the next generation of white males, not in his values, but in the plantation values of the Old South which he knows perhaps better than any other, unless

it is that enigmatic black member of the McCaslin family, Lucas Beauchamp. Ironically, Faulkner insulates Sam Fathers from reality and change, and Ike is left to discover on his own the "stain" of miscegenation on his own family, and the impending death of the great woods of Yoknapatawpha to commercial lumbering and development. Because of Sam's identity and complex roles in "The Bear" and in Faulkner's ideology (as father, teacher, and wilderness priest), he remains ignorant of the historical forces at work about him.

Lucas Beauchamp, who appears in both *Go Down, Moses* and *Intruder in the Dust* is generally considered Faulkner's most complete and most successful black character. Unlike Dilsey and Sam, Lucas expresses a full range of emotional responses from bitterness to humor, from self-satisfaction to arrogance and hubris. He refuses to humble himself and submit to white customs and expectations. His pride, it could be argued, comes primarily from patrimony, since his white grandfather was L. Q. C. McCaslin, one of the patriarchs of Jefferson. A comprehensive study of Lucas would have to look at several stories from *Go Down, Moses* as well as his prominent role in *Intruder*. In "The Fire and the Hearth" we see Lucas as a young man who refuses to be appropriately submissive. He fights as an equal with his white cousin Zack Edmonds, whom he suspects of adultery with his wife. Lucas fights for his pride and marital rights, knowing full well that he will be lynched if he kills his cousin. In one of Faulkner's most poignant scenes depicting black life, Lucas confronts Zack and demands the return of his wife, Mollie. "I'm a nigger," Lucas tells his cousin, "but I'm a man too. . . . I'm going to take her back" (47). He adds, tellingly, "You thought that because I am a nigger I wouldn't even mind." (53). By risking his life Lucas achieves a fair degree of autonomy and becomes, as much as his circumstances will allow, to use Frederick Douglass's term, his "own master." The significance of this scene should not be overshadowed; rarely does Faulkner authorize a black character to act in his own interest, rather than as a faithful servant to white values and wishes.

In *Intruder in the Dust* (1959) Lucas has become an island unto himself, identifying with neither the black nor the white community of Yoknapatawpha. Nonetheless, he is unalterably connected to both: he has inherited land and three thousand dollars from the McCaslin estate,

yet he is considered a black by white society and the law. Quite willing to ignore this racial reality, he reinvents himself: independent, prideful, contemptuous of all others. Part of the process of rejecting his racial background and patrimony required that he rename himself, which he did in a way that echoes Faulkner's own change of name for independence from his family. Faulkner changed the spelling of his name from Falkner; Lucas Beauchamp was born Lucius Quentus Carothers McCaslin Beauchamp. By establishing Lucas's independence from both races Faulkner avoids the perhaps impossible task of depicting the complexities of black society. Nonetheless, as Richard King puts it, "Faulkner's creation of Lucas was artistically and morally daring for a white writer, Southerner or not."¹³

As Richard King also observes, the basic relationship between Lucas and the white community "falls on a dialectic between gifts and exchanges for services among equals" (241). The dialectic is initiated when Lucas pulls a young white boy, Chick Mallison, from the icy waters of a winter creek, gives him a change of clothes and a meal, and an intimate view of a black household. The opening scene suggests the beginning of another black pastoral, in which a "Sam Fathers" will guide and instruct his young charge. But Faulkner slips out of this convention almost immediately by having Chick offer to pay seventy cents for the service Lucas rendered. When Lucas brusquely rejects the money Chick departs in humiliation. What follows is a series of gifts and exchanges between the two, as each tries to assert his superiority. Later, when Lucas is wrongly accused of murdering a white man, he calls on Chick, commissions him to form a digging party and exhume a grave to prove his innocence. Chick has no choice but accept an opportunity to save the black man who saved his life, and in so doing an opportunity to close out his awkward indebtedness. The relationship between Lucas and Chick Mallison and the detection scenes are adroitly handled, but regrettably they are diminished by lawyer Gavin Stevens's paternalistic pronouncements on the future of race relations in the South.

Chick Mallison and his Uncle Gavin are eventually successful in their collaborative efforts to free Lucas. In a brilliant coda, Lucas refuses to accept as a gift the lawyer's legal services. After several offers and refusals, Gavin charges a penny, which Lucas pays. Still discontent with

an even exchange, Lucas gives one final demand and the novel's last words: "my receipt." Thus Lucas gets virtually the first words ("Come on to my house") and the last, both declarative demands on whites. Yet, the world Lucas defends is a narrow and self-centered superiority dependent upon his white inheritance rather than his African American identity. He may have assisted in the racial education of a white boy, but, like Sam Fathers before him, he is not an agent for change nor does he anticipate the civil rights revolution that would erupt less than a decade later, even in Mississippi.

Arthur Kinney observes that Faulkner's racism is ". . . profoundly subtle and profoundly deep, and wholly unintended." Although Kinney is speaking specifically about Faulkner's portrait of Dilsey ("her glory is to serve"), his comment equally applies to Sam Fathers, and Nancy Mannigoe (in *Sanctuary* and *Requiem for a Nun*). They find purpose and fulfillment in relation to the fading aristocracy they have so faithfully served. The racism inherent in these portraits is subtle yet runs deeply, for it betrays a creative consciousness that labors to imagine interior dialogue, or discourse outside white society.

Superior writers succeed at rising above propaganda and stereotype; their portraits, even of minor figures, stretch toward the revelation of character uniqueness. Successful characters are fictional human beings who emerge from their pages to exist with independence from their creators. Upon rare occasion (Dilsey's Easter Sunday morning, Lucas in "The Fire and the Hearth," and occasionally in *Intruder*) Faulkner succeeds at breathing such independent life into his African American characters. Claude Levi-Strauss's observation bears repeating here: no matter how hard even the trained anthropologist struggles to become a neutral observer of another society, his ethnography is "still governed by the attitudes he carried with him." The stylistic merits of Faulkner's cross-racial portraits notwithstanding, his considerable achievement as a writer about race comes instead from his representation of Southern white perceptions of African American life.

NOTES

¹As quoted in Eugenio Donato, "Triste Tropiques: The Endless Journey," *MLN* 81 (1966) 174.

²See also Thadious M. Davis, *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and The Southern Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983); Doreen Fowler and Ann Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and Race: Faulkner and Yoknapatawapha, 1986* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986); Seymour Gross and John Hardy, eds., *Images of the Negro in American Literature* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1972); John Cooley, *Savages and Naturals: Black Portraits by White Writers in Modern American Literature* (Newark: The U of Delaware P, 1982).

³Donato 172.

⁴"William Faulkner's Shining Star: Lucas Beauchamp as a Marginal Man," *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The McCaslin Family*, ed. Arthur Kinney (Boston: Hall, 1990).

⁵See Arthur Lovejoy's foreword to Lois Whitney's *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1935).

⁶Frederick L. Gwyn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1959) 68.

⁷*A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner* (New York: Farrar, 1964) 27.

⁸(New York: Random, 1947) 167.

⁹*William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (New York; Random, 1954) 134.

¹⁰(Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1994) 42.

¹¹(New York: Random, 1929) 307.

¹²(New York: Random, 1942) 195.

¹³"Lucas Beauchamp and William Faulkner: Blood Brothers," *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, ed. Kinney 234.