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William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*: An American Frontier Narrative

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This essay seeks to extend Faulkner's imaginative writings beyond the temporal, spatial and aesthetic parameters of regionalism and modernism, according to which his work has been widely read. In an exemplary reading of his 1942 novel *Go Down, Moses*, I recontextualize Faulkner's fiction in a broader literary and discursive tradition of the US frontier narrative. To draw out the frontier meanings and tropes of *Go Down, Moses*, I examine closely those texts – Faulkner's and others' – that circulate around the major fiction and necessarily exert, I argue, interpretative pressure on it. These more secondary or contiguous texts include Faulkner's screenwriting for two of the great Hollywood Western directors, John Ford and Howard Hawks; his short stories and speeches; James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales; and the political discourse that emerged in response to the democratic crisis of the 1930s. Certain tropes and narratives – to do with colonialism, for example – that have been submerged within the Faulknerian southern narrative of the plantation, begin to surface, to reset the narrative in relation to a national project. Reading Faulkner in this way constructs a critical frame that is both diachronic and transregionalist, and thus contributes to current debates articulated within the revisionary project of new southern studies about the ways in which we think and write anew about the post-South.

In 1952, William Faulkner travelled to Cleveland, Mississippi to address a group of Delta planters and businessmen.[1] In the speech he delivered that day, "he … sounded at first a little like [a] Mississippi farmer,"[2] a descendant, perhaps, of those "tall men" he describes in an earlier eponymous short story; an heir, that is, to the frontier tradition of rugged individualism and the strenuous life. Faulkner in fact laments the loss of these very values in this address, and he holds up as the preferred "old tough durable models" – both real and imagined – Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed, as well as southern

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[1] William Faulkner, "Address to the Delta Council, Cleveland, Mississippi, May 15, 1952," in *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 126–34.

[2] Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 552. Blotner refers to William Faulkner, "The Tall Men," in *idem*, *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 45–62.

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frontiersmen Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. (James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo is notably absent from this list). Faulkner's reference to the heroes of a frontier past is telling, and lays the groundwork for a reading of his major works in a US literary and broader discursive tradition of the frontier. The critical approach I propose here, in an exemplary reading of *Go Down, Moses* within the structures of the myth of the frontier, constructs a frame that draws on frontier and Western narratives. This is a transregionalist model for reading as it draws on tropes and meanings derived from narratives of the US West – and thus goes some way in addressing the ongoing problem in regionalist studies that Douglas Powell identifies in *Critical Regionalism*: "In the study of regionalism in the United States … the various critical and scholarly endeavours have clustered … around the regions themselves … New England Studies, Appalachian Studies, Southern Studies, Western Studies all engage in often-parallel but less-often collaborative projects."[3] As a kind of corrective to this perceived shortcoming, I read the wilderness chapters of *Go Down, Moses* – "The Old People," "The Bear," and "Delta Autumn" – to argue that this allegedly southern narrative, of the establishment of a plantation society, in fact engages with and revises the tropes and credo of the national frontier myth that the narrative's protagonist, planter's son Ike McCaslin, strives to construct and embrace.[4]

Scholarly interest in frontiers has recently emerged within the new southern studies, a result of its interest in borders and their rupture, envisaged as transnationalism and transregionalism in a "post-South."[5] The post-South describes a globalized, postmodern South, one that bursts the seams of an intractable regionalism, to cross regional as well as national borders. Annette Trefzer's recent *Disturbing Indians: The Archaeology of Southern Fiction* is an important new southern studies contribution to critical accounts of frontier narratives, in its analysis of representations of what she calls "the Native American signifier" in works by white writers of the Southern Renaissance.[6] On a slightly different tack, Robert Brinkmeyer, in *Remapping*

[3] Douglas Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 6.

[4] While I limit my recasting of the Faulkner narrative to *Go Down, Moses*, the approach I take here can also draw out those frontier meanings of *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Requiem for a Nun*, at least, that still lie submerged and overlooked.

[5] Lewis P. Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness of America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 268–69. For a discussion of the evolution of this term see Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 42–52.

[6] Annette Trefzer, *Disturbing Indians: The Archaeology of Southern Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

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Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West, observes the way in which contemporary southern writing imaginatively inhabits the West, a phenomenon perhaps best represented by Cormac McCarthy's post-*Suttree* novels.[7] My focus here is on the way in which the southern frontier is imagined and plays out in the work of a southern writer, and this necessarily demands that we think anew about the dominant story of the South as a narrative of the plantation.

To read William Faulkner – southerner, Mississippian, modernist, gentleman farmer (more William Gilmore Simms's natural aristocrat, admittedly, than tall man) and Hollywood scriptwriter – as a writer of American frontier narratives means to read him in a national tradition that reaches at least as far back as Cooper and Simms, and one that also includes Old Southwest humorists such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet and Thomas Bangs Thorpe. It also means to situate his writing not only transregionally but also diachronically. That is to say, in weaving together both antebellum and World War II-era narratives, my reading of Faulkner's imaginative writing enters debates about regionalism, an approach frequently formulated in terms of temporal rather than spatial commonalities.[8] Faulkner's South, rather, emerges out of a tradition that crosses both temporal and regional boundaries or frontiers. It is particularly surprising that little scholarly attention has been paid to the close and informative literary relationship of Cooper and Faulkner. Lewis Dabney, in *The Indians of Yoknapatawpha*, while drawing some connections between these two writers and Melville and Twain, in the end claims, however, that "Faulkner's predecessors lack the patriarchal southern tradition, and their nineteenth-century assumptions about progress and civilization limit their piety towards the past of man."[9] Although it is doubtful that Faulkner's imaginative writings do in fact reveal piety of this kind, the point Dabney makes about nineteenth-century assumptions is a good one. Nonetheless, there are significant similarities

[7] Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr., *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2000).

[8] In regionalist discourse, the regionalism of the 1880s and early 1890s, for example, is figured discretely from the 1920s "new regionalism." See Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Amy Kaplan, "Nation, Region and Empire," in Emory Elliott, ed., *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) for accounts of 1890s regionalism; and Robert Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920–1945* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) for an account of 1920s and 1930s regionalism.

[9] Lewis M. Dabney, *The Indians of Yoknapatawpha* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 121.

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between Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), and *Go Down, Moses*, particularly in their closely aligned portrayals of the inhabitants of the wilderness, to which I will return.

The approach to reading Faulkner I propose here invites a reconsideration of what is involved in reading his imaginative writings outside the more common critical parameters of the aesthetic, historical and regional contexts of modernism and the South as it sets up a productive dialogue with the broader category of frontier narratives. To better contextualize Faulkner's frontier narratives, in particular *Go Down, Moses*, I draw attention to his Hollywood writings (which he undertook during the very period during which the cinematic western was experiencing something of a rebirth and during which he was writing *Go Down, Moses*); two short stories, "The Tall Men" and "Golden Land"; his Delta Council address; Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*; and as the political discourse that emerged in response to the democratic crisis of the 1930s. Situating his 1942 novel side by side with these other frontier-orientated texts, which circulate around and exert pressure on his major fiction, resuscitates a narrative of the frontier that lies submerged in the southern narrative of the plantation.

Frontier images and rhetoric, the lineage of which can be directly traced back to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, moved to the forefront of US culture and politics during the 1930s, when Faulkner was writing the stories that came to make up *Go Down, Moses*. Turner both identified and explained US exceptionalism in terms of the transcontinental westward movement, which enabled the establishment of US democracy and provided a national "safety valve"; that is, a real place where conflict could be endlessly deferred, as well as a symbolic space where the nation could rearrange itself, could work itself out culturally, socially and politically, in order to create "America."[10] Jessica Adams argues that Turner's frontier thesis (which she describes as a "melting pot for whites") placed the frontier specifically in opposition to the conflict between North and South: "Drawing attention away from slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction as defining factors in US society, Turner simplified western history to reflect 'free' open spaces more representative of democratic ideals."[11] Inserting Faulkner's frontier narratives into this literary and broader cultural tradition of the frontier might not only turn our attention back to the still

[10] Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 31–60.

[11] Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 113–14.

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pressing issues that Adams notes, but might also complicate the myth of the frontier as it is embodied in the narrative of the West. For surely the issues from which Turner allegedly averted the national gaze are also fundamental to the experiences and forms of western places and their cultural narratives.

Of course, a return to the myth and symbol school of American studies, which the revival of the frontier myth here might signal, risks a return to a restatement of US exceptionalism, something that is particularly at odds with a project of this kind, which seeks to displace mythologies around national and regional identities. However, my redeployment of the myth of the frontier within the framework of the new southern studies and the new western history ensures that a close eye is kept on the complexities that structured the real places (not imagined spaces) of frontier regions, whether down South or out West – complexities to do with racial, gendered, economic and environmental violence. The critical encounter of the Faulknerian narrative of the South and the national narrative of the frontier propels the region onto the national stage, and thus refuses to exempt the South from the violence of nation formation, just as it refuses to extricate the nation from the urgencies of race slavery and its legacy of black and white trauma. The frontier, then, remains a compelling figure in textual studies, but not as a means to revive some kind of essential American identity. Rather, as a figure of borders, transformations, dynamism and crossings, the figure of the frontier can better dramatize those negotiations and compromises that underpin the formation of the nation and its citizens.

In the years leading up to and through the Depression and outbreak of World War II, the myth of the frontier was deployed by various historians and politicians to garner support for their respective positions on the contemporary social, political and economic scene.[12] "Rough Rider" Teddy Roosevelt's progressivist frontier myth, for example, extolled unchecked

[12] See, for example, Charles A. Beard, "The Myth of Rugged Individualism," *Harper's Magazine*, Dec. 1931, 13–22. Although not strictly speaking engaging with frontier mythology, the Nashville Agrarians' 1930 *I'll Take My Stand* undeniably formed a significant and influential part of a broader discursive return to the land. See Robert Jackson's chapter on Faulkner for a discussion of the similarities and, perhaps more importantly, the differences between Faulkner's and the Agrarians' vision, in Robert Jackson, *Seeking the Region in American Literature and Culture: Modernity, Dissidence, Innovation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005). For comprehensive accounts of frontier rhetoric during this period see David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); and Ted Atkinson, *Faulkner and the Great Depression: Aesthetics, Ideology, and Cultural Politics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

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individualism.[13] The onset of the Depression in turn gave rise to the kind of closed-frontier rhetoric that Franklin D. Roosevelt used in his Commonwealth Club speech in September 1932, to justify proposed government regulation and a greater emphasis on social cohesion and cooperation.[14] Roosevelt's speech responds to the significance that Turner, in 1893, conceded to the declaration of the superintendent of the Census in 1890 that there was no longer a frontier, for "the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line."[15] According to this particular narrative, with the apparent closing of the frontier went the nation's safety valve. Roosevelt put it this way: "We were reaching our last frontier [at the turn of the century]; there was no more free land and our industrial combinations had become great uncontrolled and irresponsible units of power within the state." The nation was now unwisely

> steering a steady course toward economic oligarchy … Clearly, all this calls for a re-appraisal of values … The day of the great promoter or the financial Titan, to whom we granted anything if only he would build, or develop, is over … The day of enlightened administration has come … not to hamper individualism but to protect it.[16]

Roosevelt's speech is fascinating, not least for the way in which he envisages the economic, social and political crisis in terms of the frontier myth. And within this framework he comes very close to attacking dearly and long-held concepts constitutive of the US polity and national identity, such as rugged individualism and the associated creed of the self-made man, concepts fundamental to both Jeffersonian and Jacksonian models of US democracy. Not surprisingly perhaps, President Hoover responded almost immediately, with his declaration that there were indeed still many frontiers to conquer – in "thought [and] research" – but these might only be "conquered and applied to human service by sustaining free men, free in spirit, free to enterprise, for such men alone discover the new continents of science and social thought and push back their frontiers."[17]

Many of Faulkner's writings enter an intense and ultimately unresolved struggle with these vying interpretations and expressions of US identity – economic, social and political – so frequently articulated in terms of the

[13] "Progressivist" is Slotkin's category, which he sets up in opposition to the so-called "populist" frontier myth of Turner. See Slotkin, 22–26.

[14] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Commonwealth Club Address," American Rhetoric: Online Speech Bank <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrcommonwealth.htm>.

[15] Quoted in Turner.

[16] Roosevelt.

[17] Quoted in Wrobel, 138–39.

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frontier throughout this era. Indeed, several of his texts respond specifically to the kind of closed-frontier rhetoric deployed by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his Commonwealth Club speech. In his Delta Council address, Faulkner rails against what he deems "emasculating" "charity," that is, federal government welfare policies; he evokes the Jeffersonian ideals associated with the strenuous life, and laments contemporary forgetfulness of the responsibility of every individual to make his own way: "by his own efforts and sweat, he could gain dignity and independence, owing nothing to no man."[18] His 1941 short story "The Tall Men" in some ways rehearses the Delta Council speech, in its narration of the resistance of tall men to New Deal agricultural policies, allegedly dictating what a "man" can and cannot do. Similarly, "Delta Autumn," the last section of the Ike narrative in *Go Down, Moses*, engages directly with a New Deal politics that would seem to threaten any frontier code of ethics.[19] Once more seemingly pre-empting Faulkner's own performance before the Delta Council, Ike's cousin, Roth Edmonds, attacks big government, which he blames for having "[h]alf the people on public dole that wont work and half that couldn't work even if they would … The country full of people to tell a man how he cant raise his own cotton whether he will or wont."[20] The narrative here, inflected with a critique of the kind of closed-frontier rhetoric in which Roosevelt engaged, and perhaps reflective of the physically exhausted frontier of the Dust Bowl, suggests that the values assumed in the New Deal's vision of the US – or lack of them, as Roth might have it – undermine the tenability, the meetness, of the sort of frontier code that Ike strives to embody, making him something of an anachronism.

The 1930s rhetoric and imagery of the frontier certainly animate texts like the Delta Council speech, "The Tall Men" and "Delta Autumn." Moreover, Faulkner – who played "Indian" games as a boy and enjoyed the frontier narratives of Cooper and the westerns of Broncho Billy Anderson,[21] and whose library at Rowan Oak contained several literary westerns[22] – also

[18] Faulkner, "Address to the Delta Council," 131–32.

[19] Robert Brinkmeyer also makes this argument in "Faulkner and the Democratic Crisis," in Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and Ideology: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1992* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 70–94.

[20] William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 323. Further references will appear parenthetically in the text as *GDM*.

[21] Murray C. Falkner, "Cowboys, Indians, and a Flying Machine," in *idem*, *The Falkners of Mississippi: A Memoir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 17, 49–61.

[22] For example, Owen Wister's *Lin McLean* and Walter van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*. See Bart H. Welling, "Faulkner's Library Revisited," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 52 (1999), 365–421; and Joseph Blotner, *William Faulkner's Library: A Catalogue*

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wrote narratives that draw directly on western meanings and include western narratives of origin.[23] The short story "Golden Land," published in 1935 during Faulkner's Hollywood years,[24] focusses on the corruption of the Ewing family who hail from frontier Nebraska and now live in the Far West: Los Angeles. "Golden Land" configures the West and the Far West not only in different spatial but also in different temporal and moral terms: the nineteenth-century frontier hamlet of Ewing comprises "sod-roofed dugouts on the immense desolation of the plains" (702) and its stoic frontiersmen, like Ewing and the "tall men" of the eponymous story, and in a clear foreshadowing of Thomas Sutpen, have about them an "aura [that] alone had increased, growing into the proportions of a giant who at some irrevocable yet recent time had engaged barehanded in some titanic struggle with the pitiless earth and endured it and in a sense conquered" (712). Meanwhile, the twentieth-century Far West of "Golden Land," with which this frontier Nebraska West is nostalgically and very pointedly contrasted, resembles the Los Angeles of Nathanael West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*, a degraded West of Hollywood starlets and fakery. Both the elegiac tone and the central concern of "Golden Land" – an impossible longing for the restitution of an idealized frontier past – will be repeated several years later, in *Go Down, Moses*.

Faulkner's other western writings include the 1934 dialogued treatment "Sutter's Gold" that he wrote for Howard Hawks, based on Blaise Cendrars's California Gold Rush novel *L'Or*, and the two 1937 treatments for *Drums along the Mohawk* that he adapted from Walter D. Edmonds's novel of the same name for John Ford.[25] Faulkner's professional and personal involvement with two of the great Hollywood western directors must form a

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(Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1964). While there are not any clear or direct lines of influence between these popular westerns and Faulkner's texts, there are some common themes: *Lin McLean* laments the passing of the frontier, which is on the way out at the time of the novel's setting, and van Tilburg Clark's novel depicts the moral ambiguities from which the West, like the East, was not immune.

[23] Faulkner gives Joanna Burden a western heritage in *Light in August*.

[24] William Faulkner, "Golden Land," in *idem*, *Collected Stories*, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[25] "Sutter's Gold," MSS 1404; Howard Hawks Collection, 1925–1970; Arts and Communications, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University (treatment, July 1934, 108 pp.). "Drums along the Mohawk," 15 March 1937, reproduced in George Sidney, "Faulkner in Hollywood: A Study of His Career as a Scenarist," dissertation, New Mexico, 1960, 113–51. "Drums along the Mohawk," MSS 55704, Huntington Library, dialogued treatment, 3 July 1937, 238 pp. Both Faulkner and Hawks were taken off the *Sutter's Gold* project, and although Ford's *Drums along the Mohawk* was released, Faulkner remains uncredited.

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further important imaginative and critical structure within which to read texts like *Go Down, Moses*. Both directors produced their major westerns during Faulkner's years in Hollywood: Hawks directed *The Outlaw*, *Red River* and *The Big Sky*; and Ford, *Stagecoach*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *My Darling Clementine*, *Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Wagon Master*, *Rio Grande* and *The Searchers*. Faulkner and Hawks established a close friendship from the moment the director brought "Turnabout" to the screen in 1932, and together they fished and hunted, and worked on the story for *The Land of the Pharaohs* (1955), a film that Faulkner described as another *Red River*, referring to Hawks's acclaimed 1948 western.[26] Faulkner's awareness of frontier meanings is also suggested in his script for *The Tarnished Angels* (dir. Douglas Sirk, 1958), which he adapted from *Pylon*. In this film the heroine carries a copy of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, which surely functions as a metaphor for her own, as well as the text's, longing for a western innocence, and recalls Ike's similar longing.[27]

Faulkner's work on Ford's Revolutionary-era western, *Drums along the Mohawk*, is particularly pertinent for a repositioning of *Go Down, Moses* as a frontier narrative. He wrote both the novel and the treatment in the period following the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act, which, as its name suggests, granted citizenship to Native Americans. Trefzer claims that the political and cultural debates in response to government policies regarding Native Americans at this time, including the 1924 Act, inform Faulkner's literary representations of Native Americans:

> Faulkner imagines a white–Indian connection crucial to articulations of American national identity … Native Americans as "native" *Americans* are crucial for the articulation of national self-definition and the need to locate indigenous roots in the South and elsewhere as the United States is heading into World War II.[28]

Interestingly, in both of Faulkner's "Drums along the Mohawk" treatments, there is no "connection" between the white man and the Indian, and thus the latter plays no part in the formation of a national identity. The encounter in the wilderness is portrayed, rather, in terms of colonial conquest only. As Trefzer has argued in her reading of another Revolutionary-era frontier narrative written during the same period – Caroline Gordon's 1941 *Green Centuries* – the Revolution marked that historical moment in which Native Americans became the enemies of the American nation since

[26] Bruce Kawin, "A Faulkner Filmography," *Film Quarterly*, 30 (1977), 12–21.

[27] Kawin. Merrill Maguire Skaggs's recent study *Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007) compellingly argues that Cather's and Faulkner's writings participate in a critical dialogue.

[28] Trefzer, *Disturbing Indians*, 176; original emphasis.

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they were "an obstacle to westward expansion," epitomized by their frequent siding with the British in battle.[29] In the "Drums" treatments, the Indian has nothing at all to teach the white man, and thus must be either assimilated, as is the Christianized Oneida Blue Back, or destroyed, in the case of the hostile Senecas, in order that the establishment of a new white American identity might occur in place of, not in tandem with, Native America, a dynamic poignantly evoked in the snuffing out of the Six Nations' council fire.[30]

The portrayal of the Indian figure in the Ike narrative of *Go Down, Moses*, however, has more in common with Cooper's *The Deerslayer* than with the treatment Faulkner wrote for Ford. The Indian is almost synonymous with the wilderness in both *Go Down, Moses* and Cooper's novel, in the way in which he serves one sole purpose: to enable the initiation of the white man. In both texts, the wilderness is portrayed almost literally as the white frontiersman's school, a potent source of knowledge that provides an alternative to race-inflected southern, or in Natty's case, Christian, forms of knowledge and mythology. Natty tells Judith Hutter that his

> edication has been altogether in the woods; the only book I read, or care about reading, is the one which God has opened afore all his creatur's in the noble forests, broad lakes, rolling rivers, blue skies, and the winds and tempests, and sunshine and other glorious marvels of the land! This book I can read, and I find it full of wisdom and knowledge.[31]

Cooper's narrative continues the metaphor of the wilderness as a book that extols the truth, "which God has printed with his own hand, in the sky, and the woods, and the rivers, and the springs" (*Deerslayer* 418). The wilderness is thus figured as a place of superior morality and spirituality, unlike the wilderness in Faulkner's "Drums along the Mohawk," which not only harbours "savages," but also hampers the march of progress. In "The Bear," just as Natty received his "edication" from the Delawares and the natural world (*Deerslayer* 469), if "Sam Fathers had been [Ike's] mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness … was his college and the old male bear itself … was his alma mater" (*GDM* 202). It is only when Ike strips himself of all temporal and spatial connectors – his watch and compass – to step out of history and into myth, embodied in the wilderness, that he finally and really sees for the first time the bear, Old Ben,

[29] Ibid., 88.

[30] "Drums along the Mohawk," 3 July 1937, 65.

[31] James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer: or, the First War-Path* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 418. Further references to this text will appear parenthetically in the text as *Deerslayer*.

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and all that that overstuffed signifier represents (*GDM* 200–1). So absorbing is Faulkner's depiction of the wilderness as a kind of Cooperian school, in fact, that to read, all of a sudden, that Ike has "to be back in school on Monday" takes the reader by surprise, and rather rudely and abruptly hauls us out of the wilderness and the world of myth, back into the mundane. Faulkner's conjuring up of the frontier – its tropes and inhabitants – is certainly spellbinding.

Cooper's Natty Bumppo is initiated into manhood with his first slaying of a Mingo warrior. The text transforms this warrior, nominally at least, into a wild animal, for he is known as Le Loup Cervier; that is, the Lynx. The young Ike McCaslin is initiated into manhood in "The Old People" when he shoots dead his first buck. What is of greater significance, however, is that the initiation of these youthful frontiersmen, each of whom is described respectively as a "novitiate," is essentially enabled by the figure of the Indian (*GDM* 187; *Deerslayer* 116): Chingachgook, the Delaware, and Sam Fathers, the Chickasaw. Fathers is partially – and thus, according to the one-drop law, legally – black.[32] However, his important function in the narrative is as an Indian. Bruce Johnson puts it this way: "Sam is subjected to the discriminatory gaze of the colonizing white culture, which both denigrates his 'negro blood' (*GDM* 123) – Sam's mother was 'a quadroon slave woman' (*GDM* 123) – and idealizes his 'red'."[33] In fact, Faulkner takes great pains to distinguish Fathers from the other African Americans in the narrative:

> White man's work, when Sam did work. Because he did nothing else: farmed no allotted acres of his own, as the other ex-slaves of old Carothers McCaslin did, performed no field-work for daily wages as the younger and newer negroes did … For although Sam lived among the negroes … and dressed like them and talked like them and even went with them to the negro church now and then, he was still the son of that Chickasaw chief and the negroes knew it. And, it seemed to the boy [Ike], not only negroes. (*GDM* 163)

Being part black also means that Fathers is exempt from the guilt that hangs over his landowning and slave-owning father, Ikkemotubbe; he is thus "taintless."

Fathers is, then, according to the structure of frontier mythology, the ideal person to enable Ike's initiation, as Chingachgook enables Natty's. Fathers "taught the boy the woods, to hunt, when to shoot and when not to shoot,

[32] Jobaker is the only full-blooded Indian in the novel, but he promptly dies after appearing only very briefly, in "The Old People."

[33] Bruce G. Johnson, "Indigenous Doom: Colonial Mimicry in Faulkner's Indian Tales," *Faulkner Journal*, 18 (2002–3), 101–28.

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when to kill and when not to kill, and better, what to do with it afterward," and he had been "training [Ike] all his life some day to dedicate himself" to "the exigencies of maturing," symbolized in Fathers's anointing of the young Ike with the blood of his first slain buck. "Sam Fathers set me free," Ike later declares (*GDM* 164, 167, 158, 286).

The relationship between the white man and the Native American, and its resultant (white) American identity, reenact the frontier process of the white man becoming what Richard Slotkin terms the white Indian: the new American.[34] The encounter of Fathers and Ike, then, is not a tale of the Indian becoming American, in the assimilationist terms of, for example, the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act and the "Drums along the Mohawk" treatments, but rather a tale of the white southerner becoming American. The white southern frontiersman embraces, in an act of appropriation, the racial other and, rather intriguingly, in the process of becoming American, embodies the very threats to racial purity. The Ike narrative, then, absorbs *The Deerslayer* in the particular way that the figure of the Indian provides the white man with alternative mythologies and "gifts," as Natty would have it, enabling him to become this white Indian, the new American. The Ike narrative also directs us back to Turner's frontier thesis, according to which the frontier is that space where the continent's immigrants were Americanized. This particular structure of the frontier myth is overwhelmingly "melancholy":[35] Fathers's work done, he can "just quit." And, because he is "barren," he leaves no heirs (*GDM* 237, 159).

It is at this point tempting to read the encounter of Ike McCaslin and Sam Fathers in terms of the (needless to say) troubling trope of the Vanishing American, a Last Mohican, a trope that Fiedler has pondered at length in *The Return of the Vanishing American* and which appears in the work of writers as diverse as Cooper, Zane Grey (*The Vanishing American*, 1922) and Cormac McCarthy (*All the Pretty Horses*, 1992). Sam Fathers, the narrative's "Indian signifier," not only vanishes at the moment of Ike's initiation. While he appears as a Choctaw in an earlier story, "A Justice," in this later narrative he is a Chickasaw. This is a significant alteration, for while the Chickasaw may have survived only in place names in Mississippi in Faulkner's lifetime, "the Choctaws are very much alive in Oklahoma and in Mississippi, where belatedly the federal government set up a reservation from 1918–1944, overlapping the years when Faulkner thought up Yoknapatawpha, with its

[34] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973).
[35] Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (London: Paladin, 1972), 119.

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Indian name, and wrote his Indian stories."[36] The shift from Choctaw to Chickasaw, from "A Justice" to *Go Down, Moses*, thus transforms Fathers from a real historical presence into a myth,[37] into the Vanishing American, to enable the arrival of Ike McCaslin, frontiersman, white Indian, new American.

Perhaps an even greater problem with this well-travelled reading of Sam Fathers is that it overlooks the fact that he is not just Chickasaw (or even Choctaw), but black too, and also white: a creolized combination of all three, the son of a Chickasaw chief and a quadroon slave. And this matters, particularly in the context of a miscegenation-anxious South. While Fathers may function in the narrative as a signifier of Native America, I also want to read him more literally, as the site of the black–Indian encounter.[38] In fact, he might just be the descendant of Cooper's raven-haired Cora Munro, the mixed-race descendant of a West Indian slave, and Uncas, the last of the Mohicans, in the novel of that name. While anxiety over miscegenation is resolved in *The Last of the Mohicans*, in Magua's slaying of both Cora and Uncas before they might consummate their relationship, the creole Fathers intervenes in this frontier narrative as the legacy of the race-mixing denied or excised in Cooper's novel over one hundred years earlier.[39]

Sam Fathers's Chickasaw name is Had-Two-Fathers, referring to Ikkemotubbe who conceived him, and then to the slave to whom he, Ikkemotubbe, married off Fathers's slave mother. To read Fathers as the black Indian means to dislodge the black–white axis that is pivotal to the southern narrative and that generally dominates southern studies;[40] it flags an alternative historical encounter as well as racialized mayhem or creolization that is fundamental to the story of the South. In *Faulkner, Mississippi*, Edouard Glissant writes that "Sam Fathers is Black and Indian because he must epitomize multiple aspects of the same fault"; that is, the annulment of

[36] Robert Dale Parker, "Red Slippers and Cottonmouth Anxieties: White Anxieties in Faulkner's Indian Stories," in Gene M. Moore, ed., "Faulkner's Indians," a special issue of *Faulkner Journal*, 18, 1–2 (2002–3), 81–100, 87.

[37] Dabney, *The Indians of Yoknapatawpha*, 29.

[38] On the subject of black–Indian studies, see James Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian–Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); as well as Jack Forbes, ed, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Black–Red Peoples* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[39] I am indebted to the anonymous *Journal of American Studies* reader for encouraging me to read Cora, Uncas and Sam Fathers in this way.

[40] Eric Gary Anderson and Melanie Benson are undertaking important work in the field of the Native South. See, for example, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 60, 1 (2006–7), a recent special issue on American Indian Literatures and Cultures in the South.

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or complete disregard for legitimacy and family lineage, which breed stability and with which the southern narrative is so obsessed.[41] Fathers is crucially, then, a figure of instability, a figure difficult to contain textually, historically and critically. The black–Indian body – the very site of the formation of the Republic – returns us to the moment of colonization and its trauma; that is, to the wound at the heart of the nation. Fathers's multiracialized body must be subsumed within the signifier of the Indian, so that the romance of the white–Indian encounter might be played out nationally and textually in order that the Native American might be subsumed by the native American – or, to put this the other way around, in order that the European might become American, indeed *native* American. To read Sam Fathers as (at least) a black Indian throws up obstacles along the American's path to stability; further, it registers the presence of Native Americans in the "national drama" of slavery, as both slaves and slave-owners. As Tiya Miles has made clear, slavery in the Americas was not just a matter of black and white, but a triangulated abomination of Europeans, indigenous Americans and Africans.[42]

It is absolutely crucial, then, to note that Faulkner's narrative has Ike embrace Fathers not as white-black, or as black Indian, or as a creolized combination, but as Indian. Only then can he fully function as the Indian signifier central to Faulkner's mythopoesis, to his narrative of origins. Faulkner's retelling of deep-southern plantation history here as a frontier history in part functions, perhaps, to displace, and even release, the white American from the perplexity of black–white racism in this native/Native American fantasy. Walter Benn Michaels has argued that the combined appearance of the Immigration Act and the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924 "participated in a recasting of American citizenship, changing it from a status that could be achieved through one's own actions (immigrating, becoming 'civilized,' getting 'naturalized') to a status that could better be understood as inherited."[43] Arguably, it is this conception of American citizenship – as heritage – that animates Ike's encounter with Fathers. The Ike narrative,

[41] Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 74.

[42] Tiya Miles, "Uncle Tom was an Indian: Tracing the Red in Black Slavery" in Brooks, 138. Miles reminds us that Native Americans were the first slaves in the Americas: in Brazil, and in both the Spanish-ruled Southwest and the English Jamestown settlement, Native Americans were pressed into labour; in 1676 the colonists in Virginia legalized the enslavement of Native Americans. See ibid., 140.

[43] Michael Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press), 32. Of course, anxieties around citizenship – authentic native Americanness – arose once more during World War II; that is, at the time of the publication of *Go Down, Moses*, particularly in response to American Japanese, Italian and German communities.

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then, tells of the transformation of the white southerner into what he has ironically always been: a native American. The southern narrative stands in for, as it narrates, "a whole land in miniature" (*GDM* 280).

Reading *Go Down, Moses* within the framing narrative of the frontier puts the slave on the frontier and the Indian down South. The novel's revisionary impulse is further sustained in the way in which Ike imagines the establishment of the nation in Section Four of "The Bear." Here, he describes "a new world where a nation of people could be founded in humility and pity and sufferance and pride of one to another" (*GDM* 247), and he envisages the westwards movement that founded the nation in terms of its function as a national safety valve: he imagines lying "illimitable that whole hopeful continent dedicated as a refuge and sanctuary of liberty and freedom from what you called the old world's worthless evening," the inhabitants of which were "already looking to the Pacific coast" (*GDM* 271, 274). In its registering of a New World promise squandered by backward-looking "New England mechanics," as well as by the western speculators and bankers – "wildcat manipulators" – who brought trains and industry into the wilderness (*GDM* 271, 274), the narrative operates within a national framework and thus once more constructs a South that is part of a much broader US mythology. Crucially, while Faulkner's narrative depicts a South fallen under the curse of Ham, "tainted by what Grandfather and his kind, his fathers, had brought into the new land" – rightly given much critical attention – the Ike story reveals an older wound at the very heart of the founding narrative of America, a wound that not even Emancipation can heal (*GDM* 254, 267): colonial entrepreneurialism. It is here that the Ike narrative begins to offer a critique of the frontier as the central cultural and historic narrative underpinning, explaining and justifying US exceptionalism, in particular its embrace of the trope of the "fresh, green breast of the new world" that structures Ike's desire.[44] The land has always been cursed, even before the institution of slavery and the destruction of the environment. Both Europeans and the original inhabitants – Chickasaw Indians such as Sam Fathers's father – bought and sold land although it was never theirs to sell, and then bought and sold slaves. (Old Ikkemotubbe even sold his own son into slavery).

So while Faulkner's narrative locates the destruction of native peoples and cultures, as well as the introduction of slavery, at the heart of a national narrative, one in which the South plays an active role, it also includes in its vision the system of capitalism that has betrayed New World promise. From the text's opening story, "Was," in which Uncles Buck and Buddy gamble

[44] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1990), 171.

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for human beings – two slaves and a white woman – the southern frontier is conceived in terms of a marketplace. In "The Bear," Ike laments the way in which the plantation system demanded that the wilderness be cleared and that the slaves "in their sweat scratched the surface of it … in order to grow something … which could be translated back to money" (*GDM* 244). Of course, in this southern context, even freedom has its monetary value: the McCaslin ledgers record those slaves who bought their way to freedom; in "Delta Autumn," black bodies are again the object of financial transaction, as Roth Edmonds, using the old man Ike as a go-between, attempts to buy off his unnamed black mistress and their child.

The wound at the heart of the southern narrative is a frontier, and thus a national, legacy, expressed in capitalist terms of ownership and possession. As Dabney claims, Faulkner is working out frontier democracy in *Go Down, Moses* in terms of land ownership.[45] Within the parameters of *Go Down, Moses*, there has never been a prelapsarian New World from which "America" could invent itself; the text's representation of the frontier-as-marketplace is a cynical rendition of the pioneering entrepreneurialism that must destroy the very code of ethics and ways of life enabling its establishment in the first place.

The image in *Go Down, Moses* that perhaps best encapsulates this process of the annihilation of the very forms that enabled the nation's founding – the wilderness, the Indian and the frontiersman – is, not very originally perhaps, the train. Early on in the Ike narrative, the bear's path of destruction through the woods is figured as "the ruthless and irresistible deliberation of a locomotive" (*GDM* 185), making way, in a sense, for the literal trains that will later cross the wilderness in Section Five of "The Bear" and, even more dramatically, in "Delta Autumn." In the mythopoesis of the US West, the train is of course a dual symbol – of progress and civilization on one hand, and of environmental destruction, monopoly capitalism and even genocide on the other. The train in Faulkner's narrative is also compared with (rather ironically, at this point of the narrative) "a small dingy harmless snake"; meanwhile, the Old People are also associated with the snake (just as Chingachgook's name translates as Great Serpent) at the moment the elderly Ike hails a snake as "Chief … Grandfather" (*GDM* 304, 315). The text, in a really fascinating, revisionary manoeuvre, and through the strangely conjoined images of snake, train and Indian, underscores the very real racial and economic violence – and the way these are necessarily intertwined – that, as the new western history has also revealed, was a defining feature of frontier activity.

[45] Dabney, 22.

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In a similarly critical manoeuvre, the activity and trope of the hunt, central to the whole of *Go Down, Moses* and to the genre of frontier writing more broadly, which is ideally meant to evince the admirable qualities of the frontier associated with rugged individualism and so forth, itself becomes a site of this painful myth-revision. As many scholars have noted, the hunt of the text's opening story, "Was," involves the tracking down of a slave and thus straightaway "aligns the hunt theme with the issues raised by race and slavery."[46] This means that by the time we get to the hunt in "The Bear," which is meant to enact Ike's initiation into the wilderness – effectively a ritual of citizenship – "the pure and untainted hunt has long since been displaced and usurped by the impure and tainted hunt depicted in 'Was.'"[47] To similar effect, Roth Edmonds's "coon-hunting" in "Delta Autumn" encourages a retrospective reading of the idealized ritual of the hunt in "The Bear"; the hunters' camp is yet another site for the repetition of the accursed South, as the ancient McCaslin family sin of miscegenation combined with incest is repeated by Roth. Faulkner's practice of "revisionary repetition" – "repetition with a significant, critical difference"[48] – constructs time and history as circular, something that is anathema to frontier mythology, which instead conceives of time as relentlessly linear in its progressiveness, and which upholds a casting off of the past and a lusty embrace of the future.

Recasting *Go Down, Moses* as an American frontier narrative, by situating it within a range of texts, from the antebellum period through to the early 1940s, unearths or rereads certain diachronic – as well as spatial – tropes and narratives that have been submerged in the Faulknerian southern narrative, a narrative that has functioned as the privileged founding narrative of a plantation society. New southern studies scholars such as Trefzer, Eric Gary Anderson and Melanie Benson, in their respective work on the presence of Native Americans in white southern writing and on southern Native American writing, have certainly paved the way to thinking the South anew. To reposition the Faulkner narrative – to graft it onto the frontier – reorients the narrative in relation to a national project while simultaneously re-imagining the story of the South beyond the southern narrative.

[46] Carolyn Porter, *William Faulkner: Lives and Legacies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 144.

[47] Ibid., 158.

[48] Richard C. Moreland, "Compulsive and Revisionary Repetition: 'Barn Burning' and the Craft of Writing Difference," in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and the Craft of Fiction: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1987* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 49–50. See also Kartiganer: "retelling is the core of Faulkner's practice." Donald Kartiganer, "Faulkner's Art of Repetition," in Fowler and Abadie, 22.

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