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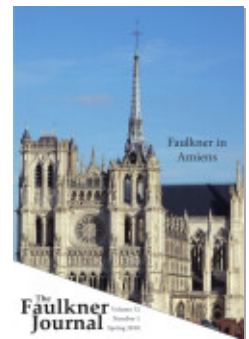
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The Faulkner Journal, Volume 32, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 33-50 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fau.2018.0007>



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Heirs-at-Large: Precarity and Salvage in the Post-Plantation Souths of Faulkner and Jesmyn Ward

John T. Matthews

The new histories of capitalism demonstrate how fully involved the antebellum US South was in an international system of colonial plantation economies, slave-trading, commerce in supplies, the growth of financial institutions like banking and insurance, and numerous other features of modern capital.¹ As a result of such scholarship, we may appreciate anew how minutely Yoknapatawpha manifests fundamental properties of slave capitalism.² I have argued recently that in *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, fresh accounts of plantation economics illuminate historical dimensions of the novel such as the riverboat-mentality of Yoknapatawpha's frontier speculative scene, the impact of the Panic

¹Such scholarship includes Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*; Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*; Beckert and Rockman, *Slavery's Capitalism*; Grandin, *The Empire of Necessity*; Beckert and Desan, *American Capitalism*; Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*; Best, *The Fugitive's Properties*; Armstrong, *The Logic of Slavery*; Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*; and Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*.

The research into the relations of cotton capitalism and slavery published over the last few years by Beckert, Baptist, and Johnson has been understood as exemplifying the "New History of Capitalism," or NHC. Influential as its general claims have become, substantial dispute has developed over a number of the principal conclusions drawn about the cotton plantation regime and the growth of Euro-American capitalism. Complaints focus on the subordination of racism to economic accounts, as well as to alternative explanations to capitalism as the driver for the global expansion of cotton production. For examples of authoritative critiques, see Olmstead and Rhode, Clegg, McCurry, and Hudson. For an argument that recent studies of capitalism and slavery suffer from neglecting earlier historiography on the subject, see Nelson. In his monumental study *Black Marxism*, Robinson includes thorough accounts of earlier black historiography that firmly established the relation between slavery and capitalism, including the foundational work of W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Eric Williams.

A version of this bibliographic footnote appears in my "Slave Capitalism in Faulkner." My thanks to Frédérique Spill, Peter Lurie, and Greg Chase for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

²The fullest analysis of capital in Faulkner's South appears in two books by Godden: *Fictions of Labor* and *An Economy of Complex Words*. For an example of how recent work on global capitalism illuminates Faulkner's fiction, see Jackson.

of 1837 on Sutpen's career, and Goodhue Coldfield's representation of merchants who migrated to the Deep South in hopes of making larger fortunes in slave capitalism, as well as formal elements such as the reflection of capitalist temporalities in Faulknerian narrative time.³ Faulkner's description of the post-Emancipation South suggests how the political, social, legal, and financial institutions that grew to uphold such a system also continued to safeguard the barriers between those who benefited and those whose subjugation was required for the extraction of profit from their labor. The Deep South's post-bellum agrarian economy remained structured by profound disparities between those restored to prosperity and others reduced to precarity.

Like a motherless child

Faulkner's rendering of Southern poverty in *As I Lay Dying* makes Addie's death a metaphor for broader losses suffered by an "expendable" class of Southern poor whites afflicted by the modernization of a racial, capitalist, plantation regime in the twentieth century: losses that included the slipping away of land ownership, reduction to wage labor, the enfeeblement of racial advantage, the weakening of blood ties.⁴ The Bundrens' precarious existence—imaged in Addie's encoffined body tottering over the onrush of a "looping" flood-time in its already belated passage to modernity—exposes the family as bereft of resources in the face of catastrophe (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* 146). Pretending to imagined self-sufficiency, the Bundrens openly reject help they actually depend upon, accepting mules and shovels and hospitality when they're offered, even as they pronounce themselves "beholden" to no one. Clinging to their tattered white privilege, they're triggered by even the tiniest insinuation that they might be indistinguishable from those of color in the Jim Crow South, taking offense at an insult they attribute to an unfamiliar "negro" (229) and recoiling from the blackening of their bodies during their transit to town (224 ff.). In short, poor whites such as the Bundrens, like Wash Jones in an earlier era, deny they are collateral victims of the plantation regime's racial capitalism, a regime now understood to be so globally dominant that it has been called the Plantationocene.⁵ The consequence is that the Bundrens mourn solipsistically for themselves—futilely, regressively—their only aim to disavow their loss, to hide that coffin away.

When the contemporary novelist Jesmyn Ward, one of Faulkner's most explicitly self-avowed literary heirs, sets out to write about another disadvantaged Mississippi family, this one in danger of being left behind

³See "Slave Capitalism in Faulkner."

⁴The scholarship on *As I Lay Dying* as an historical and sociological fable of modernization is voluminous: examples include Willis, O'Donnell, Matthews, and Hubbs.

⁵Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway discuss their preference for the term "Plantationocene" over "Anthropocene" and "Capitalocene" to designate the era in which humans have been responsible for the industrial remaking of nature.

by twenty-first century America, it is not surprising that she originates her novel as a recasting of *As I Lay Dying*. When Ward first read *As I Lay Dying*, as an aspiring novelist in her mid- twenties, she felt her career might be over before it began: “I thought, oh god, I should just quit. There’s something he’s captured about the south that I can’t even articulate. I recognized it in my bones.”⁶ Realizing later, however, that the black characters in Faulkner’s other works were not “coming alive” to her, she became convinced that reading Faulkner critically would let her imagine what he had not. In rewriting *As I Lay Dying*, a novel tellingly absent of black characters, Ward honors what Faulkner accomplished in depicting her South; but by attending to the lives of poor blacks, she also frames Faulkner’s novel in a way that illuminates the Bundrens’ impoverished responses to the losses they suffer. Ward challenges the entropy of a white family’s narcissistic, historically amnesiac, and isolating self-pity by centering on a different family, one whose deprivation, as black Southerners, descends from the foundational abuse of plantation enslavement—a regime that has continually reinvented itself into the twenty-first century, relentlessly savaging the land, the landless, the penniless, the homeless, the hungry: a new era’s motherless orphans. In a powerful act of rewriting, Ward not only shifts contemporary readers’ attention to the neglected representation of the continuing violence inflicted by racial capitalism on its primary victims of color; she also frames the blindspot in which Faulkner locates *As I Lay Dying* to throw into relief how racism has traditionally obstructed poor whites’ understanding of their own exploitation by a post-plantation South. Ward rewrites Faulkner not simply to provide a black “supplement” to *As I Lay Dying*, but to create an alternative version of the novel—as Ward would have imagined it.⁷ We might say, “La fille devient la mère du père”: The daughter becomes mother of the father.⁸

⁶Jesmyn Ward, “I Wanted to Write about the People of the South.”

⁷For an interpretation of how Ward “repurposes” *As I Lay Dying*, see Moynihan. Moynihan argues that Ward rewrites Faulkner’s novel to “challenge . . . mythologies surrounding the African American family that were circulating when *Salvage the Bones* was composed” (552). Moynihan sees Ward as countering in particular conservative narratives that faulted structurally deficient black families as responsible for their own immiseration. Moynihan shows how Ward instead depicts the force of familial and social cohesiveness in the Batistes and their community, taps into the power of motherhood for producing a future (a potential also present but neglected in *As I Lay Dying*), and suggests the resourcefulness of salvaging in the literal repurposing the Batistes practice. I subscribe to Moynihan’s reading on all counts, while trying to fill in the role of plantation history, the divergent forms of mourning that such a legacy of loss generate in the two novels, as well as the formalization of salvaging as Ward’s aesthetic in *Salvage the Bones*.

For a consonant view of Ward’s re-envisioning of Faulkner’s treatment of race, see Chase; his article focuses on the way *Sing, Unburied, Sing* presents a contemporary South that encompasses a significantly more diverse array of histories, places, and social groups than Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, and uses Ward’s engagement with *As I Lay Dying* in *Salvage the Bones* as a way to set up Ward’s determination in her next novel to challenge even more fully the limitation of racial vision that Chase argues besets Faulkner’s novel: “Ward’s own work becomes a means not just of supplementing [Faulkner’s] legacy but of actually correcting its racial blindspots, offering a kind of redress to the rural Southern communities about which they both have written.”

⁸Like other essays in this issue, mine is based on a talk I presented at the conference “William Faulkner: le père du texte,” at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, September 27–28,

In restaging the personal catastrophe of a mother's loss as the accumulation of historical dispossession, *Salvage the Bones* goes on to propose a different kind of mourning than the Bundrens are capable of. The Batistes work their way through the reflexive denial of loss, the doomed effort to make it go away by refusing to acknowledge it. Ward instead imagines a family reconstituting itself around all they've been deprived of, forming new affective solidarities and social assemblages as the end of the novel dawns. Meanwhile, Ward fashions an aesthetic that transfigures loss reparatively; the novel's prose style itself mourns dispossession by making something new of it. The teenage narrator of *Salvage the Bones* confides almost right away that she gets an "A" in tenth grade English because she correctly answers a question about Faulkner's novel: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?* It takes the rest of the novel to show us what the answer might be.

As *I Lay Dying* surprises us in Faulkner's career because it comes between two novels that track the emergence of race as an explicit and central problematic in Faulkner's imaginative project. Eric Sundquist once claimed that without *Light in August* (1932), *The Sound and the Fury* would have remained a minor piece of regional modernist experimentation.⁹ His point is that it was the novelist's direct engagement with race in *Light in August* that made Faulkner Faulkner, and that lets us see in retrospect *The Sound and the Fury*'s elliptical anxieties about it. What remains unexplained in this thesis, however, is the near total absence of race in the intervening *As I Lay Dying*, a novel Sundquist treats apart from this trajectory, as a study in modern disembodiment. The few references to blackness in *As I Lay Dying* seem only to sharpen the story of white decline: the Bundrens reflect the fears of white farmers that they will in effect become black once African American farmers began moving to the Delta in the 1890s, and later to the North in the interwar years, fleeing the extreme violence of Jim Crow and drawn to the promise of better jobs.¹⁰

2019. I wish to thank Prof. Frédérique Spill for organizing the conference and including my paper, and other conferees for their conversation about the topic, including remarks by Ineke Bockting, Aurélie Guillaín, Peter Lurie, and Susan Scott Parrish that helped clarify points of my argument.

⁹Sundquist suggests that "there is reason to believe that without Faulkner's work of the next ten years *The Sound and the Fury* would itself seem a literary curiosity, an eccentric masterpiece of experimental methods and 'modernist' ideas" (p. 3).

¹⁰A few critics have explored how *As I Lay Dying* may be understood as presenting blackness elliptically in order to show resemblances and implied historical continuities between the status of poor white sharecroppers after Reconstruction and antebellum slaves. Baldwin argues that Addie may be seen as unconsciously full of dread at reproducing the violence of the land, that she is haunted by "scenes of unspeakable shame," senses how Yoknapatawpha's "dark land" is marked by slavery, and feels she has been "penetrated by the legacy of ancestral sins" through her intercourse with Anse (208). Waid notes that Addie's violent treatment of her students "comes from the blood-whippings that were a legacy of slavery" and that "her own description of her deeds places her as a sadistic slave mistress" as well as, doubly, "a slave mother or breeder of workers for her idle husband" (83).

The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a

The absence of blacks in *As I Lay Dying*, however, represents more than the sociological reality of black evacuation from hill country communities. Whites in the modern South, like the nation at large, were intent on disavowing slavery, even as they reinvented it. A past rooted in slave capitalism continued to dictate cotton workers' subjugation to large landowners, the monetization and ruination of the land, the commandeering of women's reproduction and family labor, and so on. In *The Hamlet*, the Old Frenchman place is dismantled piecemeal by its builder's poor white "heirs-at-large" (4), settlers from the upper South who hope to make their way as small farmers, most of them doomed to landlessness by Will Varner's usury. Although Faulkner describes how the Frenchman's "dream" has shaped everything from topography to economic relations in the hamlet, his successors acknowledge no connection with the past they have now taken over (4). Faulkner observes that the Frenchman's "slaves had straightened [the river bed] for almost ten miles to keep his land from flooding," and refers to "the skeleton of the tremendous house which his heirs-at-large had been pulling down and chopping up . . . for thirty years" (4). But these unrelated descendants are uninterested in the "foreigner's" name, even his nationality; they have "almost obliterated all trace" of what came before (4). For the hamlet of Frenchman's Bend, the plantation *is* the forgotten. The families of *As I Lay Dying* occupy farm land virtually contiguous with the Old Frenchman place. Faulkner's hand-drawn map shows the Bundrens and Tulls living on either side of the Yoknapatawpha River, close to Frenchman's Bend; every day they must have to ignore a history that's right in front of their faces.¹¹

Faulkner's designation of the Bend's poor white farmers as the Frenchman's "heirs-at-large" captures with historical precision their status as both direct descendants of the plantation past and also plainly disowned ones. Such small landowning farmers not only inherited the region's monoculture economy, with cotton's particular abusiveness of land and racialized labor, as well as the plantation South's delusory white solidarity and patriarchal sex-gender system. They also were dispossessed of their subsistence-level reliance on a lucrative plantation economy in the decades following Reconstruction. By the turn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois observes, the "abolition of American slavery started the transportation of capital from white to black countries where slavery prevailed. . . . The competition of a slave-directed agriculture in the West Indies and South America, in Africa and Asia, eventually ruined the economic efficiency of agriculture in the United States and in Europe and precipitated the modern economic degradation of the white farmer, while it put into

¹¹My thanks to Jay Watson for pointing out the proximity of the Bundrens and Tulls to the Frenchman's Place, as well as the way the Tulls' house figures in *Sanctuary*, when Gowan is told by Lee Goodwin after his accident that it is the closest place with a phone.

the hands of the owners of the machine such a monopoly of raw material that their domination of white labor was more and more complete” (48).¹² Post-plantation farmers like the Bundrens, on the cusp of outright proletarianization, find themselves heirs dispossessed. The antebellum Frenchman’s vague colonial origins only sharpen the irony that his post-bellum legatees become victims of the global exportation of the plantation. How pitilessly ironic is Vardaman’s hunger for plantation-grown tropical bananas. Poor whites get dispossessed when they’re excluded subalterns of the antebellum plantocracy, when they’re weakened competitors with free black tenants after Emancipation, and when they’re abandoned small farm-owners in the post-plantation South—that is, whether they’re Wash Joneses, Ab Snopeses, or Anse Bundrens.

My point is that the blackness that begins to appear on Bundren bodies late in *As I Lay Dying* is the stigmata of a history that they refuse to avow, but that has made them both complicit racial beneficiaries as well as collateral class casualties of the deadly dispossessions slave capitalism was predicated upon. When the traces of their structural blackness do finally surface from the condition of near-obliteration, the Bundrens reflexively disavow the sort of identification that would lead to mourning the dead black and red bodies that were and are the inheritance of slavery, a legacy that all those who occupy the racialized premises of subsequent national prosperity and inequity continue to profit from as its more prosperous heirs-at-large. When Ward describes Faulkner’s limitations in depicting non-white characters, she chooses her words more precisely than I indicated earlier: “when I read *Absalom, Absalom!* and saw all these *Creole* characters on the page, I thought, oh, these aren’t—I have problems with the ways these characters are coming alive on the page. They aren’t coming alive like the [white] characters; these characters feel flat to me” (“I Wanted to Write,” emphasis added). In using the term “Creole” Ward is pointing to the mixed race of many of Faulkner’s “black” characters, offspring of colonial interbreeding between French, Spanish, Anglo-American, African, and Indigenous populations, all the expendable “debris” of plantation capitalism.¹³

Precarity

Ward’s black Mississippi Gulf Coast family has been reduced nearly to the status of bare life by the unabated abuses of racial capitalism, which by

¹²Robinson quotes the larger passage from *Black Reconstruction* in which these lines appear in the course of his examination of Du Bois’s intellectual trajectory from more orthodox western Marxism to black radicalism. Du Bois, as quoted in Robinson, p. 229.

¹³“Creole” commonly refers to those born of settlers in European colonies, “native-born.” The term also came to be used more narrowly in Louisiana for mixed descendants of African slaves, Native Americans, and whites. Ward herself belatedly discovered that she has a significant degree of Native American ancestry. In “Cracking the Code” Ward describes the complexity of the designation “Creole” in coastal Mississippi, where she grew up, as well as the surprise of a genetic test that reported she is nearly one-quarter Native American.

2011 has structured a neoliberal state that fails to provide the poor even minimal education, medical care, viable shelter, or social welfare services.¹⁴ The Batiste family lives in a shack teetering over a depression they call The Pit. They exist by hunting small game, shoplifting, stealing from better-off white neighbors; Ward pictures their precarity as feral bare survival, locating the family in a place called Bois Sauvage. Ward wants us to see the continuities between Faulkner's ruined white northern hill farmers in the 1920s and her black coastal foragers in the 2000s. As has been well-remarked, the characters of the Bundrens and Batistes line up suggestively: a recently lost mother mourned by a feckless father, children who include a practical-minded older brother, another who is a ferocious protector of a prized animal, a third an uncomprehending seven-year-old, and a pregnant teenage daughter. The Bundrens' victimization by the Great Flood of 1927 prefigures the Batistes' efforts to survive Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Both so-called natural disasters are, of course, products of Southern commercial designs—decades of straightening the Mississippi River and building a levee system in the case of the Great Flood; similar mal-construction of flood protection around New Orleans and the Gulf Coast shore exacerbating Katrina. Both disasters were worsened by legacies of plundering the land. In *As I Lay Dying*, Vernon Tull has sold timbering rights, the resulting deforestation at scale contributing to the unprecedented flooding of the Mississippi; similarly, Esch's grandfather allowed "white men" to dig for clay on the tract of land the family owned, until Papa Joseph "stopped selling earth for money" when he realizes he's turning his property into an empty hole (*Salvage* 14). One of the first things Esch observes about her coastal community's vulnerability to hurricanes is how each storm "pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou" (4). The capitalist premises of the plantation regime continue to blight the region's subsequent history—the desecration and eventual destruction of the land finally recognized as something lost forever, a casualty of extractive capitalism, positioning many of its most vulnerable in states of precarity.

Mourning

Salvage the Bones, like *As I Lay Dying*, metaphorizes the conditions of precarity in the death of a mother—as the loss of a felt original state of sustenance, protection, and security. Mourning organizes the discourses of some of the most destructive crises we presently face, many of them anticipated in Faulkner's novels and reflected in Ward's: *the deadliness of plutocratic capitalism*, especially in state militarized and racialized forms, the mourning over which urges an ethics of personal acknowledgment; *the deadli-*

¹⁴See Melamed on racial capitalism.

ness of racial violence—an ongoing legacy of plantation slavery as lethal violence against commandeered bodies, the mourning for which inspires a politics of racial justice; *the deadliness of environmental savaging*, the loss of habitat, species, life-ways, natural beauty—the mourning for which has awakened a global politics of environmental justice. Obviously, I cannot examine here the trope of mourning shared by all such discourses, but I do wish to suggest how we can see its importance for the inter-related losses represented by Addie and Mama Batiste. The novels represent contrasting responses to such losses, Ward rewriting Faulkner in order to imagine with her black survivors a reparative moment of new social and aesthetic assemblages as the transfiguration of loss and the beginning of new life, with Faulkner showing the Bundrens doomed to a repetitive disavowal that inexorably returns them to whence they came. For Ward, an aesthetics of mourning becomes a way for style itself to perform acts of salvage and repurposing; art enacts a commitment to mourning as the transformation of loss into the imagining of new amalgams, new possibilities.

A mood of mourning pervades our present, with soaring daily death counts tolling losses inflicted by a multitude of historical and continuing abuses of the earth and its living inhabitants. We might see these losses as related effects of the Plantationocene, understood at its broadest (that is, encompassing the Capitalocene, the Anthropocene, and so on). In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, her book about the condition of perpetual war to which the US committed itself following 9/11, Judith Butler observes that Americans largely refuse to avow the violence perpetrated abroad in their name. She finds the media too often complicit with government sanctions against representing the horrific damage done to individual bodies and the scale of carnage inflicted on “collateral” victims. Injury, she points out, is sustained elsewhere but remains unrepresented at home; losses, sacrifices are extracted not from ourselves, but from others, from our proxies and enemy-casualties. In an era of perpetual war, Butler argues, “a national melancholia, understood as a disavowed mourning, follows upon the erasure from public representations of the names, images, and narratives of those the US has killed” (xiv). Often such an erasure is based, says Butler, on the “racial differential that undergirds all culturally viable definitions of the human” (33). Butler understands such violent militarism as the instrument of neoliberal capitalism, which refuses to address, or even admit, its massive destructiveness. What enables such unfeeling violence is the refusal to recognize the precarity of all human life, the fragility of existence that one’s victim ought to reflect back to their victimizer. Such a self-as-other confrontation would establish a logic of ethical regard that, for Butler, can be figured in the ethics of the other’s face, a site of potential recognition, reflection, individuality. And as such, it is an ethics that does not remain content with mere picturing, but longs for exchange, for discourse.

Butler's remark about "the racial differential" operative in defining the human ("humans" as perpetrators of violence distinguished from their less-than-human victims) summons up the racial dispossession of the Plantationocene, losses mourned by generations of its survivors. Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that slavery amounted to no less than centuries of robbery for people of color; this is both the basis of his argument on behalf of financial reparations for slavery, as well as the ruling premise of his recent novel, *The Water Dancer*. In that work Coates figures the losses of bondage in the motherlessness of his protagonist, a fugitive-turned-emancipation raider. As an orphaned slave boy, Hiram Walker recalls Frederick Douglass, whose separation in infancy from his own mother represents the ultimate cruelty of slavery. Coates renders the trauma of the lost mother sharply by endowing the child with a photographic memory, the only exception to which is that he cannot picture her. The trope of open theft likewise informs Edward Baptist's accusation that slavery *was* America's crime story, while Achille Mbembe observes that "the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a 'home' loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status" (21). Claudia Rankine entitles her contribution to Ward's collection of essays about contemporary racial violence "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning." Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the African Slave Route*: "If ruin was my sole inheritance and the only certainty the impossibility of recovering the stories of the enslaved, did this make my history tantamount to mourning? Or worse, was it a melancholia I would never be able to overcome?" (16). The lawless killing of black people by officers of the law, embodied at this moment in the US by the horrific murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the surge of public grief and protest against it, strengthens the bond between mourning and politics. Explaining why she joined a protest march this June in Manhattan, Constance Malcolm, a woman whose son, Ramarley Graham, had been killed in police custody in 2012, said, "I'm tired of crying. We need our voices to be heard" (*New York Times*). Regard for black lives today occasions not only ceaseless vigilance, but perpetual vigil. Looking to the future is inseparable from mourning for the past.

In *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, co-editor Ashlee Consulo writes that during her work on the impact of climate change on the health and welfare of Inuit people in Labrador, she was at one point overwhelmed by her own "guilt for my complicit involvement in structures contributing to anthropogenic climate change" (xv). She was "bereft"—"adrift in waves of sadness, grief, loss, and pain"—and realized that it "was related to ecological loss." Consulo comes to appreciate how necessary it is "to feel the full depth of loss, of grief, of despair, at that loss of non-human bodies" too (xvii). Sharing such feeling with other researchers and members of the Inuit community eventually converts mourning into something positive: "My grief almost became my happiness, my moti-

vation" (xvii). Consulo's experience confirms for her Derrida's assertion that "there is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning" (Derrida 61, as quoted in Consulo 12). In his own contribution to *Mourning Nature*, Sebastian Braun illustrates the sort of thinking that finds mourning a common ground for inspiring ethical responses to related forms of dispossessive damage: citing Judith Butler, Braun notes that "I see clear structural similarities between her argument on the results of military actions and the way we deal with our environments" (Braun 81).

Ward shows us the death of Mama as a loss that exposes the fragility of life and the vulnerability of the precariat. One moving memory of her mother that Esch retains is a vignette in which Mama joins her husband and his male friends to fish; she reels in the only shark caught that day, then prepares it expertly for the family dinner. Mama can manage "cooked and et" in ways no Bundren can; and she's also a mother who is *not* a fish but one who fishes (85). We might characterize the Batiste family's way of mourning mother as a form of *introjection*, a psychological process that moves outward to the lost object and invests it with libidinal significance, that allows the lost object to be mourned as absent but transformed.¹⁵ This is what Esch and her family end up doing. From the outset of her narrative, Esch encounters the memory of her mother in her everyday activities. Mama has been absorbed by, transformed into her daughter: when Esch begins her search for breakfast eggs one morning, she immediately remembers that "Mama taught me how to find eggs" (22):

. . . I can't remember exactly how I followed Mama because her skin was dark as the reaching oak trees . . . I could hardly see her, and she moved and it looked like the woods moved, like a wind was running past the trees. . . . I imagine Mama walking in front of me, turning to smile or whistle at me to get me to walk faster, her teeth white in the gloom (22).

Such evocations of Mama are shared collectively by her grieving children. Skeetah takes one of China's diseased puppies into the woods, meaning to kill it. Manny suggests he shoot it, but Skeetah asks his siblings if they "remember how Mama used to kill the chickens" (51). Randall describes in detail how she would wring the bird's neck after putting her hand over its face. Esch writes, "I don't really remember Mama killing the chickens so clear, but when Randall says it, I see it, and I think I remember it" (52). Esch tries to get Skeetah to recall how Mama described the violence of hurricane Camille: Skeetah laments, though, that he "can't remember her

¹⁵See Torok on introjection vs. incorporation as a function of mourning vs. melancholia. Cheng attempts to recuperate mourning as the nucleus of political determination, of converting grief to grievance. See especially pp. 95–97 for her discussion of introjection and incorporation.

voice. . . . I know the exact words she said, can see us sitting there by her lap, but all I can hear is my voice saying it, not hers" (221). Esch thinks, "I want to say that I know her voice. I want to open my mouth and have her voice slide out of me like an impression, to speak Mama alive for him as I hear her. But I can't" (221). Such near-life forms of mourning, the introjection of the departed's presence into those who grieve, constitutes the transfigurative mourning of survivors.

The Batistes learn to move from melancholic disavowal toward such reparative mourning. Skeetah himself initially gets locked into fetishistic attachment to China, something that performs the classic function of fetishization to disavow and substitute for what has been lost: China is life-giver, she is death; China is what has been destroyed, she is the destroyer. China lets Skeetah re-embody mother, refuse abandonment, deny loss. Yet when he realizes Esch will drown in the passage to safety during the family's escape from their attic, he lets China and the puppies go; they disappear into the flood waters as he clutches Esch's slipping body. Junior, his life the issue of his mother's death, compulsively misses what he never knew: his tic of digging holes and smoothing away the traces symptomizes the knowledge of wounding as its own erasure. His lack of affect makes Esch wonder "if Junior remembers anything, or if his head is like a colander, and the memories of who bottle-fed him, who licked his tears, who mothered him, squeeze through the metal like water to run down that drain, and only leave the present day, his sand holes" (91-2). Yet when Junior witnesses the bloodshed of the dogfight between China and Kilo, a "mother" and "father" savaging each other, his body is convulsed with sympathetic horror: "Junior shakes a beat to Kilo's keening, and it is a song" (176). Esch listens for such transmutations of loss, for the creation that may accompany grief. Even her father, whose bereavement for his wife takes the form of a shrine to her, survives melancholic denial and evolves during the hurricane. Following the storm, Papa newly defers to his children, especially the mother-to-be Esch. He acknowledges his daughter's needs, her bearing of new life, his own shameful behavior. After he says "I'm sorry," Esch has a vision:

Daddy is rubbing his pocket with his good hand. I hear the crinkle of plastic. For a moment, Mama is there next to him on the sofa, her arm laid across his lap while she palms his knee, which is how she sat with him when they watched TV together. I wonder if that is phantom pain, and if Daddy will feel his missing fingers the way we feel mama, present in the absence. (247)

Esch emerges into a future that will convert her mother's loss into her own communally embraced and supported maternity, into new family assemblages altogether ("This baby got plenty of Daddys," one of her friends

assures the unwed teenager when she worries her child will have none). Esch's mourning turns her mother into a memory who will stay with her unalaid, who can be remembered as an actor in her own narratives, who remains a resource to be salvaged by Esch.

Esch's transfiguration of her lost mother into memorial prose formalizes the reparative work of mourning in the novel. Her recollection of Mama catching the baby shark prompts a description of her mother sitting solitary on the shore, apart from her husband and his friends:

Mostly she just sat with a fishing pole braced between her legs. She was the one that caught a baby shark; it was the same color as the water, as long as her arm, and strong. Daddy tried to take the pole from her and she wouldn't let him. His friends laughed, tried to get her to give it to them, but she held it in both hands and walked the shark up and down the oyster-shelled sand, in the biting marsh grass, under and out from the bridge. She walked it tired, her arms big and round, strong under the woman fat. She coaxed it to death. And when it gave up, she hauled it in and let out a laugh that swooped up into the sky with the pelicans and flew away, wind-ready and wide as their wings. She cooked it in butter that night, soaked it in buttermilk, to take the wild out of it. When we ate it, it was tender, sea salty, and had no bones. (85)

Esch recalls the gentle but firm determination of her mother not to surrender the yield of her labor, not to submit to men but to hold her own. Her strategy for conquest is to wait out greater strength, to coax her adversary to death. Her power is apparent, even if it lives below the surface of her skin, and when she succeeds in her task, Mama lets out an exultant cry of surprised laughter—glee at herself, a private emotion that sails far above, takes flight on the whisper of the alliterative “away”/”wind”/”wide”/”wings,” a *sortie*, and so a kind of theft of herself too. The baby is bathed in luxurious excess by this mother, for her own children—steeped in buttermilk and butter—a ritual that transforms death into love, loss into maternal provision.

The precarity of Esch's daily foraging for food, shelter, and tools gets re-enacted and translated in a prose style that grasps what's at hand and repurposes it as expressively startling, apt, beautiful. The struggle is incessant, a marvel of emergence. Notice how Esch tries to find a way to describe how her father humiliates the children for alleged misdeeds by grabbing them and hurling them to the ground: “So that we sprawl like toddlers learning to walk” (105). There's barely a difference between tenor and vehicle here, the “like” so thin as hardly to matter: to be thrown to the ground is like . . . falling to the ground. Papa's infantilizing abuse of his children gets conveyed in a nearly tautological figure, and yet the simile

does allow another meaning to materialize: to be knocked down is not the same as to fall, to be pushed down not the same as to practice standing on your own. Esch resorts unflaggingly to the barren world she knows to make it furnish her store of figures: a dog “growling to a bark like a shovel dragged along asphalt wearing away to stones” (78–9); Esch’s curvaceous rival for Manny’s affections “all dips and swells like a badly rutted road worn smooth by the rain” (144); the dazzlingly white pit bull China “the cold, cloudy heart in a cube of ice” (158). Such an aesthetic transforms an impoverished mundane into something that transcends its material reality without forgetting the conditions of want, of dispossession that dictate it.

As the author of her own story, and no less as a reader of Faulkner, Esch embraces the textual status of her self-composition. She consciously constructs her experiences through the narratives of Medea—explicitly as they are related on the printed page in Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*. Esch keeps that text in play throughout her narrative, once actually quoting from it; she not only processes her feelings and the events of her life through another’s story, she also, perhaps even more profoundly, understands her life as something *written*, something she is composing. It is Hamilton’s authorized version of the myth that Esch applies to herself, an identification that signifies more than just the wish for the might of a female warrior. Esch falls asleep on her arm and notices her “hair has marked cursive I can’t read into my skin” (37); Manny drops a lit cigarillo; “it smokes a pencil thread and then smothers in the sand” (95); a dog “twists like a question mark” (165), a page later a dogfight spectator “claps in exclamation marks” (165). The immanence of textual transfiguration propels Esch’s aesthetic, one that conjures extravagance out of precarity, memory out of loss, something made out of something mourned.

Conversely, in *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner’s signature style remains a private strain within the characters’ interior monologues—his exceptional flights of language extraneous to their speech even as it renders their sensibilities. Whatever capacity for intimate communion between character and reader Faulkner’s medium possesses, the characters remain encased to each other, reduced as they often are to speaking in fumbling sentences, partial exchanges, recourse to magical wordless telepathy. Even the previous barrier between Dewey Dell and Darl elicits only rage at violation from her and the taunt of invasion from him. The novel’s stylistic bravura remains a private matter, a way of being for each character that does not let them bond. The Bundrens, Sinéad Moynihan observes, are “atomized” (557). Such a language of solitary bereavement registers grief melancholically, but does not enable transformative mourning. Like Cash’s coffin, it bears a corpse without remembering the dead. Motherless herself, Addie’s monologue exhibits the blank space of suppressed memory, her personal experience also bearing the unrecognized historical traces of the plantation world that bore her, just as an unremarked agrarian past delivers to

Anse “a house and a good farm” (171). Addie’s imagery displaces a Southern culture of corporeal violence, with bodies “dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching” (172), like nightmarishly disguised victims of lynching; the savage violence against indigenes and slaves on the Bundrens’ native ground surfaces in the unintelligible “dark voicelessness” of the “terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land” (174); and Addie’s own natal posthumousness is dictated by the heartless vacuity of her lot as farm laborer and bearer of children (the purpose of life getting ready to stay dead a long time, her father tells her, a pronouncement that makes her “hate my father for having ever planted me” [170]).

For all its descriptive power, Faulkner’s aesthetic in *As I Lay Dying* is devoted to heartbreakingly moving elaborations of melancholic impasse, of mourning that cannot move on. In the great early novels from *The Sound and the Fury* through *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner surveys his South’s moribund attachments to a life-world that is setting before their eyes, or, perhaps more accurately, that has already set but remains an after-image of a sun gone down: plantocrats like the Compsons and Sutpens; attendant classes like the Benbows; poor white farmers like the Bundrens. The affective form that the loss of such life-worlds takes for Faulkner’s prominent families is melancholy: denial, the refusal to admit loss, the insistence on keeping hold of what’s missing by acting as if what’s gone is not, fetishistic substitution that embodies the logic of recognition-as-disavowal, the incorporation of the dead into the living body as inert object (Caddy the family’s dead member; Addie’s corpse a dead weight; dying limbs still attached like Cash’s rather than “living” phantoms like Batiste’s). Ward’s project involves imagining what a future might look like once the past is in fact dead, even if it’s never past—a way to be “present in the absence.”¹⁶

The Bundrens never do mourn Addie. They watch her die, they pack her in a box, they put her in the ground. Darl claims he has no mother, Dewey Dell has no time to mourn hers. The family’s actions conform more closely to the process of *incorporation*, in which the lost object is taken into the self, to be hidden away as it was, an encrypted dead object that denies loss through silencing, or disavows it through fetishized substitutes: Jewel’s horse, Cash’s graphophone, even the simulacrum of a replacement Mrs. Bundren—and of course Vardaman’s fish, ashamed at being exposed dead to everyone’s eyes, yearning to be hidden away in the earth. The Bundrens

¹⁶Moynihan argues that in “both novels, motherhood is put forth as an ambivalent and compromised form of power that combats the relegation of the maternal body to that of literal . . . waste” (561); she detects in Addie’s resistance to disintegration “the power of motherhood, even after death.” Edwards develops a related idea by reading Addie’s decomposition not as a process whose value lies in its resistance to a return to the material, but as a state that affirms the materiality of the body as waste, as matter, and so constitutes corpse-power: the basis of an alternative post-human epistemology that might serve as a resource to counter the toxicities of humanist social and environmental practices of domination. See especially Chapter One, “Inhuman Remains: The Production and Decomposition of the Human in William Faulkner’s South,” pp. 35–76.

feel loss, but mourn only in denying it. Anse and his neighbors gather in the yard at Addie's funeral without entering the service; they're absent in their presence. It is no wonder that Anse's face reminds Darl of a "monstrous burlesque of all bereavement" done by a "savage caricaturist" (78). The women's "voices come out of the air, flowing together and on in the sad, comforting tunes. When they cease it's like they hadn't gone away" (91): such mourning floats free of the departed, lingering only atmospherically. The Bundrens' melancholic mourning reflects their own morbidity; their historically determined "misfortune" makes them all but cadavers themselves. The South's racial conditioning has isolated them from their black coevals, and their poor man's white narcissism dictates the Bundrens' racial blindness—emblematically in Jewel's blind rage. The difference between disavowed and transfigurative mourning—mourning for the whole constellation of setbacks and forms of dispossession that maternal death measures—suggests that the Bundrens have mis-laid the departed. In effect, they've misidentified the object of loss as their own misfortune, when in fact the historical genealogy that reduces the status of poor white farmers to precarity descends from racial capitalism. They can't tell who's in the box, just as they never realize how even alive Addie has been lying dying. Poor whites fantasize that they are mourning themselves as the socially dead, but the violence responsible for their immiseration is of earlier origin, and they cannot see that they are heirs-at-large to the very slave economy that both raised them over blacks and reduced them to shared poverty. The Bundrens' journey evokes that of all those slaves forced across dangerous watery passage, encrypted in death vessels lost in floods, bearing the stigmata of blackening wounds on backs, of appendages rotting away in savage confinement, of black voices misheard. That is, the traces of plantation capitalism's mortalities, I am arguing, actually do show up as the unmourned maternal in *As I Lay Dying*. But such "debris" of slave capitalism goes unrecognized, it does not amount to the status of a memory, just as Addie's disposal does not amount to a funeral rite. It would be by mourning the lethality of the plantation past that poor white Americans might see that they are not the whole story, that Faulkner's resentful white precariat are collateral damage to the atrocity that is racial capitalism. Mourning the Southern past cannot remain a matter only of unappeased white loss, Faulkner shows, tragic and heart-hurting as it is, but must become, as Ward imagines, a matter of transfigurative mourning for the plantation savaging of all those men who reaped, and were in turn reaped. It is the lost Creole mother, in effect, who would have invited such an actual working through, a national reckoning with, a regional disaster, precisely the sort Ward offers in her recasting of *As I Lay Dying*, a book she does indeed salvage—down to *its* bones.

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