

## *introduction*

### **Crossing the Tracks of the Dixie Limited**

#### **Overcoming Anxiety of Influence and Filling in the Blanks**

Suddenly he was conscious of a great rumbling at hand and the train schickalacked up to the station and stopped.

John stared at the panting monster for a terrified moment, then prepared to bolt. But as he wheeled about he saw everybody's eyes upon him and there was laughter on every face. He stopped and faced about. Tried to look unconcerned, but that great eye beneath the cloud-breathing smoke-stack glared and threatened.

Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there will continue to be a Southern novel . . . ?

[SHELBY] FOOTE: It appears so, and it's somewhat regrettable, because I think the Southern novel has run its string. Maybe Faulkner used it up.

Carr, *Kite-Flying and Other Irrational Acts*



Flannery O'Connor's famous statement that "[t]he presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down" (45) reflects the resistance writers felt—particularly southern writers of the generation that followed Faulk-

ner—to being compared with Faulkner; it reflects, as Harold Bloom terms it, their anxiety of influence. More contemporary writers, however, are not so intimidated by the legacy of this giant of southern, American, and modern literature. For example, three of the writers covered in this study—Donald Barthelme, Larry McMurtry, and Pat Conroy—echo Faulkner without reservation. They recast his plots and themes but continue to pursue the issues and examine the characters that intrigued this apparent mentor.

One might argue that one reason Barthelme and McMurtry are not self-conscious about echoing Faulkner is that they feel less likely to be compared to Faulkner than would writers from (or at least writing from) the Deep South. Barthelme was not born in the South, and his literature is hardly “southern”; however, he did grow up and live the majority of his life in Houston, a very “southern” city. McMurtry, though, is from *West* Texas, which is not so often considered part of the South as East Texas is. Still, these two writers are included in this study because of the provocative distinction between how they *employ* Faulkner in their fiction and how the other contemporary writers covered in this study (except Conroy) *revise* Faulkner in theirs. Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Lee Smith, Elizabeth Dewberry, and Tim Gautreaux<sup>1</sup> reveal themselves to be unintimidated by their literary precursor by boldly and unapologetically recasting, revising, even correcting Faulkner’s perception of the people he wrote about.

To some extent not so surprising—and yet more surprising for different reasons—the two other writers to be discussed in chapters to follow, Zora Neale Hurston and Ellen Glasgow, echoed Faulkner, seemingly without trepidation. Since they were contemporaries of Faulkner, perhaps their lack of anxiety about being on the same track as the Dixie Limited was due to Faulkner’s reputation not yet having been so firmly established, his work not yet being considered a defining agent of the South. Glasgow, of course, had been publishing novels long before Faulkner (and critics have been more inclined to show echoes of her work in his than vice versa). Certainly there was not enough time between the publication of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and the publication of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) to argue a case for influence. Indeed, neither Glasgow nor Hurston would have had the time to become as familiar with Faulkner’s works as writers two generations later would—which makes the parallels I examine between their works and Faulkner’s all the more provocative: Hurston simultaneously exploring the same issue of the sterile New South, Glasgow expressing impa-

tience with Faulkner's prototypical character so soon after its inception. Whatever the motivations of these two women writers, they unabashedly explored concerns about the New South similar to Faulkner's but from perspectives quite different.

Patricia Yaeger asks, "How do we reinscribe a literature that keeps repeating stories about race-thinking that everyone knows but no one wants to hear?" (11). She explains "that white southern literature is obsessed with . . . stories that will not go away, that keep repeating themselves endlessly," and she suggests that "black literature about the South contributes to the exorcism of this repetition by ringing these stories backwards" (12).<sup>2</sup> I would suggest that not only black writers but also women writers, white and black, as well as blue-collar southern writers, male and female, are, by repeating familiar plots and recasting familiar characters, retelling the same stories "backwards" and thereby providing new perspectives on southern history.

Examining echoes of Faulkner in works by his contemporaries and by ours draws readers' attention to themes and characterizations in Faulkner's works that had been previously neglected by critics. In his paper for the 1986 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha conference (in an argument that anticipated Toni Morrison's concern about the role of blackness in works by white writers, which she would develop in *Playing in the Dark* [1993]), Noel Polk expressed his perception of the criticism on "Faulkner's general treatment of blacks" as "stuck at considering them simply tragic victims of white oppression, and so symbols, rather than human beings" (149). One might make a similar argument about the criticism on Faulkner's female characters at least until the late twentieth century. My study exposes the Faulknerian *perspective* that, intentionally or not, marginalizes and/or objectifies African-Americans and women, thereby explaining why critics may have difficulty perceiving these characters as subjects in and of themselves rather than as objects of another's perspective.

Chapter 1 of this book first discusses the correspondence between the plots of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975), which is established in the first chapter of Barthelme's novel when we learn that the title character is being hauled *cross-country* for burial by his sons. Undeniably, this plot echoes the main action of Faulkner's novel, though the parent to be buried in the more recent novel is, in contrast, the father, and the landscape is not distinctly southern (indeed, it is not identifiable as any particular place). These and other differences from the Faulkner

work that Barthelme's novel echoes do not seem to be deliberate. Barthelme is not revising Faulkner; in both novels, the central conflict involves the continued influence of the dead parent upon her/his children. Barthelme employs Faulkner's novel as an objective correlative for the reader, prompting the reader to fill in the postmodern spaces and silences in *The Dead Father*—significantly, in the tradition of early Faulknerian criticism.<sup>3</sup>

The second section of chapter 1 then examines the significance of another *cross-country corpse*, this one in Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* (1985). At the end of this novel, Woodrow Call brings the body of Augustus McCrae back to Texas (from Montana) for burial, thereby also keeping a promise he made to the dying. Much like Faulkner's Addie Bundren, Augustus McCrae solicits this deathbed promise in an attempt to force recognition of himself (Gus)—but also others (particularly Call's son, Newt, and Newt's deceased mother)—upon his partner and friend. Examining these two works together, then, one can also draw a comparison between the Woodrow Call/Newt Dobbs relationship and the Thomas Sutpen/Charles Bon relationship in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, which leads to an analysis of the connection between McMurtry's development of the journey—north, ironically—as an attempt to find paradise and Faulkner's development of the view of the South as a false Eden. While McMurtry has set his novel in the West rather than the South, as with the gender switch that Barthelme effects upon his dead parent, this recasting does not lead to a “re-vision” of Faulkner. Rather, the Faulknerian echo provides an intertext that may be used as a tool toward a fuller understanding of Gus's motivation for soliciting the promise from Call and of the flaws McMurtry ultimately finds in the western idyll.

Chapter 2 is the longest chapter of this study, reflecting the complexity and provocative nature of Ernest Gaines's relationship with Faulkner. In one of the earliest critical studies of Gaines, a 1976 article first published in French (an interesting coincidence, since Faulkner's genius was first recognized by French critics), Michel Fabre recognizes the risk Gaines takes in writing about the South. Somewhat echoing Flannery O'Connor, Fabre writes, “The excellence of the Faulknerian style makes anyone who takes up his challenge look like an imitator.” At the outset of his article on Gaines, Fabre considers how “Faulkner's shadow . . . hovers over every American novelist who writes about the South” and then suggests, “This is perhaps more true for the black novelist because Faulkner spoke of his people with so much depth at times and often with so much compassion that his racial myths are

the most indestructible. They remain an inevitable reference, the insidious point of convergence of new myths raised in response and in criticism" (110).

The chapter on Gaines begins with points of comparison and contrast between the title character of Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Faulkner's black women characters, particularly Dilsey and Clytie, but also his white women characters like Caddy Compson. Gaines has frequently commented upon writing about Jane in her own kitchen (as opposed to, as Gaines puts it, Faulkner writing about Dilsey in *his* kitchen). Jane's role in the novel is certainly more than that of a family servant, but she is still not an *actor* in the novel so much as she is the chronicler, the one who tells the stories of the novel's primary actors. Unlike the novel's heroes, she survives, not so unlike Dilsey and Clytie, in large part for the purpose of telling the heroes' stories. (Of course, Faulkner's women do not have even this much voice.) What this comparison signifies is that while Gaines is concerned in his fiction with removing his African-American male characters from the margins where he perceives Faulkner's African-American characters to be confined, he does still marginalize the women of his novels and short stories. This marginalizing of women is particularly evident, surprisingly, in this novel in which a woman, Jane Pittman, is seemingly central, as well as in other Gaines works discussed in chapter 2, including *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), which is examined in connection with, in particular, the stories of Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

The marginalized roles that the women play in Gaines's work should not necessarily be seen as a flaw, for Gaines is telling the African-American man's story in his fiction. Similarly, then, one might recognize that the marginalized position of African-American men and white and black women in Faulkner's fiction is due to his dominant interest in telling the story of the southern white man. Craig Werner points out that "Faulkner fails to excavate Afro-American history as thoroughly as he excavates Euro-American male history"; therefore, according to Werner, "a new stage of Afro-American response to Faulkner appears to have begun opening. . . . In this stage, Afro-American writers both draw on Faulkner for insight into their own cultural situation and contribute important insights to the excavation which he began" (37). Werner suggests, however, that "[r]ereading Faulkner through the Afro-American responses to his work highlights the fact that his work *is* grounded in social, specifically racial, *realities*" (53; emphasis added). That Faulkner did not, in his fiction, set out to tell the story of the whole South,

for which he has been credited by early literary critics and for which (*presumed*) intention he has been criticized in more recent studies, does not lessen the validity and the value of the story he does tell.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, it seems that Faulkner's primary focus is upon the reactions of the romantic and educated, liberal-minded southern white man to the Old and New South, just as Gaines's primary focus is upon the heroic African-American man's struggle to assert his manhood.

Before moving on to how Faulkner is re-visioned by contemporary women writers and to these writers' less sympathetic treatment of the Faulkner prototype just described, I back up in chapter 3 to examine the connections between *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published the year after this Faulkner novel by Faulkner's own contemporary Zora Neale Hurston. Then, in chapter 4, similar connections are explored between *Absalom, Absalom!* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), published forty years after Hurston's novel. It is interesting to note how both of these African-American women writers have created characters very similar to Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen. With Joe Starks and Macon Dead II, respectively, Hurston and Morrison expose the black man's self-interested concern with his own oppression and his attempt to gain the power and position of the white man—at the expense of the black woman, whose oppression and suffering he either neglects to notice or contributes to (or both). While Faulkner explores the tragic irony of Sutpen, with his poor white roots, modeling his design after the white plantation system under which his own family has been oppressed, Hurston and Morrison examine the deeper irony of a black man striving to achieve the white man's success.

As Faulkner does in *Absalom, Absalom!*, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston reveals the sterilizing nature of the plantation system: Starks rebuilds Eatonville in the fashion of a plantation, with his own home as the big house, his store as the plantation commissary, and the rest of the community positioned—and treated—like the “quarters.” Significantly, children appear only three times in these “quarters.” Furthermore, Hurston's main character, Starks's wife, Janie, remains inexplicably childless and may even, like Thomas Sutpen's son Henry, come home to die (still childless and thus leaving no Starks heir) at the novel's end. In Hurston's novel, however, Joe Starks does not share Thomas Sutpen's concern about having heirs, Starks's God complex having reached the point where he perceives himself invincible. And rather than ending her novel with the bellowing of a retarded, mixed-race represen-

tative of “what the New [South] hath wrought,”<sup>5</sup> Hurston ends with an ambiguous but uplifting image of her female protagonist, whether preparing to die or starting a new life, free from the Old Southern (flawed) ideals of her husband and embracing, instead, love and compassion, which neither Joe Starks nor Thomas Sutpen knew anything about, since their worldviews were formed by a social construct that practiced quite the opposite.

In contrast to Hurston’s novel, which is Janie’s (not Joe’s) story, Morrison casts a man as the central character of *her* exploration of these issues, suggesting, perhaps, that her novel is a *conscious* re-vision of *Absalom, Absalom!* Not surprisingly, even in this novel in which the central character is a man, Morrison (like Hurston) is much more complimentary and/or sympathetic in her depiction of women than is Faulkner (or Gaines). Pilate Dead is perhaps the most heroic character in this Morrison novel; certainly, she is a more reliable narrator than Faulkner’s Rosa Coldfield. And Ruth Dead, while questionably reliable, is more sympathetically developed than Rosa. This difference leads to an analysis of the influence of the authors’ different sexes, rather than races, upon their creations.

In comparison, all three of these authors (Faulkner, Hurston, and Morrison) are distanced from the Old South that they critique as they send their central characters back into it to discover the significance of their families’ pasts to their own lives. Faulkner began writing after returning to the South from his World War I tenure away from it, and the traditional opinion of his genius holds that that time away contributed to his objectivity about the South (in contrast to the earlier generations of southern plantation fiction writers).<sup>6</sup> Of course his point of view is still that of a white man. In contrast, as an African-American woman, the “mule [of the] world” (significantly, a sterile animal), as Janie’s grandmother calls the black woman in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (14), Hurston understood the oppression of the Old South as well as its continued influence upon the New reflected in the African-American man finding more role models among the empowered race (and gender) than among his peers and thus sometimes participating in the oppression of the African-American woman.

Morrison is even more distanced from the Old South than Hurston—not only in time but also in place since she is from the Midwest; however, her perspective on the Old South as an African-American would not likely be romantic even if she were southern herself. Carolyn Denard notes, in her introduction to the 1998 special issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination* de-

voted to Morrison and the South, how “Morrison’s distanced perspective [on] what the South meant to those who left the region . . . has made her treatment [of the South] so valuable” (ii). Morrison therefore sends her characters (like Milkman Dead) south to look around and discover what it and its history means to them. This chapter examines such epistemological issues in *Song of Solomon* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, which are developed as Milkman Dead and Quentin Compson each put together from various narratives the story of a southern family whose troubles began during the South’s slave period. Within this discussion, the chapter explores the roles that Shreve and Guitar play in motivating their respective friends to seek the truth about the central family of his novel.

The analysis of Lee Smith’s Appalachian-set novel *Oral History* (1983) in chapter 5 reveals numerous echoes of techniques, issues, and character types found in several Faulkner novels, including multiple narrators to tell the history of a “cursed” family; romantic (anti)heroes and the (female) manifestations of these men’s romantic heroic ideals; and Old versus New South conflicts. The points of contrast between Smith and Faulkner remind the reader, first of all, that the South is not monolithic. Her novel introduces many readers to Appalachia, a region of the South very different from Faulkner’s mythological, but long perceived as prototypical, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. Other distinctions between the two writers’ works ultimately illuminate what reading *Oral History* intertextually with novels by Faulkner reveals about each author: first, the focus on sexual rather than racial oppression in Smith’s South, in which there are few African-Americans, but also that Faulkner’s fiction does deal with the issue of sexual oppression, though only fairly recently have critics turned their attention to this issue, having for decades concerned themselves almost exclusively with his interest in race relations. Most provocative, Smith’s reincarnation of Faulkner’s Quentin prototype in the character of Richard Burlage illuminates how great a role these would-be knights actually play in the oppression of rather than rescuing of southern ladies. And the parallels one can see between Richard Burlage and Almarine Cantrell—and between Almarine and Thomas Sutpen—reveal the connection between this Faulknerian villain and Faulkner’s prototypical romantic, a man seemingly too weak to be a villain, but villainous in his weakness.

If the period referred to as the Southern Renaissance ended in the 1950s or early 1960s, as J. A. Bryant Jr. suggests in his study of *Twentieth-Century*

*Southern Literature* (6), then southern American literature is currently enjoying a second flowering, one possible reason for which is the willingness of contemporary southern writers like Smith to take other skeletons out of closets and thus tell stories previously untold.<sup>7</sup> Bryant defines “the true legacy of the renaissance” as being “southern writing,” which is, Bryant reports, “alive, if numbers tell us anything, and well, to judge by the vigor and quality of some of the recent work” (7).<sup>8</sup> He points out that the newer writers have “little real knowledge of the older South, the living traces of which were still available to nourish people such as Faulkner” (6), but later in his study, he notes how “in probing the roots of the southern experience [Faulkner] had provided a definition of the South that would enable a new generation of writers to avoid the path of stultifying romanticism and exploitations of local color and begin to create a literature fully representative of the region’s diversity and complexity” (86).

The progression of my study of Faulkner with other southern writers reveals how this legacy of William Faulkner—not serving as *the* voice of the South authorized to define the region but as *a* voice telling about the actual South rather than some romanticized version of it—may be detected in the works of contemporary writers who still deal with the issue of the continued oppression of African-Americans in the South and have begun to deal with the oppression of women as well. Upon collecting the essays for their 1997 volume, *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones determined “that gender in the end may be as important an analytic category for making sense of the South as race itself traditionally has been acknowledged to be.” They point out that the essays in their edited collection repeatedly show that “one can hardly tell . . . where the region’s age-old worries about race and class end and its anxieties about gender begin” (Donaldson and Jones 16).

My study notes a distinction between, for example, Faulkner’s treatment of oppression in his work and its treatment in southern literature by women: that these women writers examine the issue not from the perspective of the sensitive white male aristocrat out of place in and trying to change the social system that would support such oppression but rather from the perspective of the victims of the oppression. In other words, exploration of the violence enacted against these groups is no longer so often an avenue through which to understand the development of a more liberal-minded southern white male—except in the work of writers who follow more directly in Faulkner’s

footsteps. The sixth chapter of this study traces how rape, being such a significant manifestation of women's oppression, has been treated in southern literature, from plantation fiction to several contemporary southern novels in which a rape plays a central role. Chapter 6 examines most thoroughly the novel *Many Things Have Happened since He Died, and Here Are the Highlights* (1990), by Elizabeth Dewberry,<sup>9</sup> as exemplary of contemporary southern women writers' treatment of this violent crime of oppression and then contrasts Dewberry's treatment with Pat Conroy's treatment of rape in *The Prince of Tides* (1986). Conroy's focus on the effect of rape upon his sensitive male character, who not only cannot defend his mother and sister against their rapists but is also raped himself, is reminiscent of Faulkner's concern as he dealt with the rape of Temple Drake in *Sanctuary* (1931)—that is, with his male characters' inability to defend her rather than with her own suffering.

Also significantly distinct from Pat Conroy's continuation of Faulkner's tendency to focus on a sensitive but impotent white male is the manifestation of this character found in the fiction examined in chapter 7 of, first, Faulkner's contemporary Ellen Glasgow, who as a female member of the aristocracy seems impatient with this perception of the white man as a victim, and then, in an interesting juxtaposition established by a similar Faulkner echo, our contemporary Tim Gautreaux, who writes of the not-so-empowered blue-collar men of Louisiana. Like Faulkner (and Conroy), Gautreaux tends to put his male protagonists in a position of having to go to the aid of some damsel in distress—but Gautreaux's men tend to *act* rather than worry; certainly they do not overthink the situation to the point of talking themselves out of helping or into believing there is nothing they can do. Ironically, these male protagonists come from much less privileged social positions than Quentin Compson, Horace Benbow, Isaac McCaslin, or Gavin Stevens.

After backing up historically once again to trace the frustration with the empowered but impotent prototype of Faulkner's fiction, which can be detected in Glasgow's development of General Archbald in *The Sheltered Life* (1932),<sup>10</sup> the concluding chapter of this study then examines Gautreaux's unlikely (sometimes seemingly anti)heroes who emerge out of the perhaps most marginalized, certainly most denigrated social group in Faulkner's fiction, "poor white trash." Faulkner may have shown how some members of this group—like Flem Snopes—escaped their economic oppression, but still he portrayed not only Flem Snopes but also the Bundrens, and even such more likeable but not much more positively developed characters as Lena Grove,

as “trash” whose rising influence would result in the manifestation of H. L. Mencken’s worst predictions for the New South in his infamous essay “The Sahara of the Bozart.”<sup>11</sup> “Poor white *trash*” can certainly be found in Gautreaux’s work, but so can decent men who hold down blue-collar jobs and earn the respect of their fellow citizens, rich and poor. And these men *act* upon situations about which the Quentin Compsons and David Archbalds only fret. The contrast illustrates Matthew Guinn’s thesis about contemporary writers of “poor white” rather than genteel ancestry: “Writing from the almost unprecedented perspective of southern poor whites speaking for themselves, these authors expose the dark underside of an ostensibly genteel culture” (xiii).<sup>12</sup>

Flannery O’Connor prefaced her Faulkner/Dixie Limited analogy with the warning, “When there are many writers all employing the same idiom, all looking out on more or less the same social scene, the individual writer will have to be more than ever careful that he isn’t just doing badly what has already been done to completion” (45). Although O’Connor seems here to be suggesting that the South “has already been [written] to completion” by Faulkner, Michael Kreyling points out the significance in the diction chosen for her metaphor for him—the Dixie *Limited* (not the Dixie Special, as she is sometimes misquoted, according to Kreyling): “She chose ‘limited’ to shoulder some room in the southern literary space dominated by ‘Faulkner’ and by critics who had named him the Major figure, legitimizing a cultural sovereignty, southern literature, over which they (the critics) claimed ministerial status” (128). As most of the writers of my study do in their fiction, I challenge in my examination of their work the view of Faulkner as representing the whole South in his writings. These writers are not intimidated by the “shadow . . . stain . . . mark” (one’s choice of descriptor depending on one’s perspective) of the writings of William Faulkner (Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* 111–12). They recognize that his legacy is largely in his telling southern stories that either had not yet been told at all or had not yet been told from the perspective he provided. Furthermore, they recognize that *the* southern story remains incomplete as long as there are perspectives not yet given voice or attention. My study recognizes and explores the significant contributions to telling more of southern his- and her-story of Glasgow, Hurston, Gaines, Morrison, Smith, and others like them, including Dewberry and Gautreaux.<sup>13</sup> In spite of Flannery O’Connor’s warning against doing so, the writers in this list have courageously driven their mules and wagons onto the

track with the Dixie Limited, and they are catching up to him. Of the writers covered in this study, only Glasgow and McMurtry have produced the volume of work that Faulkner did in his lifetime, but what the other writers have produced is certainly measuring up to, even in some areas (particularly in their perspective on the central concerns of women and African-Americans) surpassing, Faulkner's achievements.