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Childless “Fathers,” Native Sons: Mississippi Tribal Histories and Performing the Indian in Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*

WHEN ASKED ONCE ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF HIS NATIVE AMERICAN characters, William Faulkner openly admitted that he “made them up” (Dabney 11). Later he asserted that such characterizations might be accurate strictly because he eschewed research: “I never read any history. . . . I talked to people. If I got it straight it’s because I didn’t worry with other people’s ideas about it” (Cantwell 57). Despite these statements, critics have continually tried—and failed—to tie the Native Americans of Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County to the actual Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes who inhabited Faulkner’s native Mississippi before their expulsion in the 1830s. Duane Gage concludes that “Faulkner’s Indians are not history’s Indians. They are William Faulkner’s Indians, . . . created from fantasy, lore and incidental history to suit the author’s needs” (27). Similarly, Howard Horsford affirms that “the blunt truth is that [Faulkner] shows very little familiarity with early Mississippi history or with the Choctaws and Chickasaws who were its victims” (311).

Thus most scholars have conceded Faulkner’s Native American creations to be unapologetic fictions. These critics appear satisfied with the mere discovery of the author’s erroneousness. They rarely explore the larger ramifications of Faulkner’s inaccurate Native American representations, particularly regarding the muddled folklore that trickled down to local Mississippians. These critics also focus too heavily on the one-dimensional Native Americans of early stories like “Red Leaves” (1930) and “Lo!” (1934).¹ Yet the dignified figures of later fiction, particularly Sam Fathers in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), represent equally broad and perhaps more troubling caricatures. A half-Chickasaw elder and wilderness guide to Yoknapatawpha’s youth, Sam serves a crucial

¹For examples, see Gage, Parker, and Sayre.

role in young Isaac (“Ike”) McCaslin’s miseducation. As a ten-year-old boy in 1878, Ike stands in line to inherit his grandfather’s plantation.² But after learning of his ancestors’ sordid histories, he identifies an alternate birthright as a Native American. Throughout a trilogy of stories within *Go Down, Moses*—“The Old People,” “The Bear,” and “Delta Autumn”—readers observe Ike’s naïve worship of Sam and his performance of presumed Native American traditions, few of which evince any factual validity. Such efforts of “playing Indian” manifested throughout turn-of-the-century America and reveal how white Americans often struggled to confront a modernizing nation. Contrary to previous critics’ assessments, Faulkner seeks to draw readers’ attention to, and not distract notice from, this inherent performativity.

Examining *Go Down, Moses* against anthropological histories of Choctaws and Chickasaws reveals that the novel’s historical inaccuracies—including factual discrepancies in the Mississippi tribes’ languages, oral narratives, relationships with nature, and hunting rituals—ultimately serve to magnify Faulkner’s construction of Sam Fathers as a performative, false Native American. This playacting has severe ramifications for future generations. Young Ike believes he can honor Mississippi history most purely through renouncing his inheritance to his family’s plantation and accessing a Native American past instead. But Ike’s misreading of his spiritual father Sam as a genuine Indian marks his wilderness initiation as a sham and his enactment of inherited Native American traditions as a failure. Faulkner implies that white descendants’ overeagerness to believe such a theatrical version of race constitutes perhaps the most dangerous quality of a South rushing towards modernization in the late nineteenth century. Tragically, this false South becomes the inheritance of those who, as represented by Ike and later his descendants, remain incapable of reading history and irresponsible in trying to preserve it.

Chickasaws, Choctaws, and a Willful Ignorance

Only in the past few decades has ethnographic research filled in the histories of Mississippi’s early Native American tribes. Following France’s devastating defeat of the Natchez tribe in the 1730s, the two remaining tribes—the Chickasaws and the Choctaws—separated across

²Timelines and characters’ ages are taken from Nancy Dew Taylor’s annotations (10, 110, 137).

Mississippi territory (Dabney 7). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, roughly 15,000 Choctaws inhabited the southern part of the state while also holding land in Louisiana. Meanwhile, about 4,000 Chickasaws occupied northern Mississippi, including some near Faulkner's own Lafayette County (Guice 158). Historians have concluded that, despite wars with one another in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Choctaws and the Chickasaws descended from a single group (Swanton 122). Friction between the two tribes in the eighteenth century stemmed from a tug-of-war between European powers, as the Choctaws allied with the French and the Chickasaws with the English in the 1730s (Doyle 28). Once the British won the French and Indian war in 1763, battle alliances between Europeans and Native Americans ceased but trade between the groups expanded (30).

White Americans also began seizing opportunities in the state, discarding much of the egalitarian courtesy that defined the Native Americans' exchange relationships with the French and English. The nascent American government appointed a governor to the Mississippi Territory in August of 1798 and obtained Choctaw land beginning in 1801 with the ceding of nearly two and a half million acres in southwest Mississippi (Guice 159, 167). Under pressure from Andrew Jackson following the War of 1812, more Chickasaws and Choctaws surrendered or sold land through the 1820s. Once Jackson assumed the presidency in 1829, he forced the Choctaws to sign the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in September of the next year. The Chickasaws accepted a similar deal, the Treaty of Pontotoc, in 1832 (Galloway 14). In effect, the agreements displaced most Chickasaws and two-thirds of Choctaws to new land in Oklahoma and beyond, beginning in 1837 (Dabney 6-7; Swanton 122).

As much as scholars would enjoy reporting that Faulkner reflected some knowledge of these ethnographic and cultural histories, he largely ignored them. Nearly every critic addressing the issue concedes Faulkner's various incongruences and conflations of facts. In a *Faulkner Journal* special issue (18, 2002/2003) devoted exclusively to Faulkner's Native American representations, contributors labeled "Faulkner's Indians" as "demonstrably faulty" (Sayre 34), "an amalgam of received stereotypes and modernist orientalism" (Galloway 13), "historically inaccurate and . . . politically incorrect" (Moore 3), and "nonsense" (Parker 81). In some of his earlier stories, Faulkner appears especially dismissive of historical fact. "Red Leaves" follows a pair of Native

Americans from an unknown tribe as they track down the slave of their recently deceased chief. According to tribal custom, the surviving kin must kill the slave and bury him with his master. Such a tradition, ripe for a sensationalist plot, never existed among the Choctaws or Chickasaws.³ Similarly, Choctaw chiefs Greenwood LeFlore and Pushmataha, inspirations for the Chickasaw chief Weddel in "Lo!" traveled to Washington to renegotiate territorial boundaries as did the character. But neither of the real-life figures staged the comedic story's sit-ins which led to the fictional president's improbable renegeing of land deals. Meanwhile, *Moses's* Sam Fathers, a man of mixed black and Chickasaw bloodlines, contradicts most history about tribal racial attitudes. Despite an influx of African slaves joining their white masters on Chickasaw territory (Doyle 36), both "the Choctaws and Chickasaws . . . insisted on racial purity," and maintained a "deep-seated Indian bias against black miscegenation" (Horsford 314).

These rejections and reimaginings of history no doubt become "troubling" to some critics (Moore 3), but Faulkner never apologized for his inventions. He often failed to differentiate between the tribes and switched characters' affiliations at will. For instance, Faulkner identifies Weddel as a Choctaw chief in "Mountain Victory" (1932) but then switches him to a Chickasaw in "Lo!" (1934). Sam Fathers similarly debuts as a mixed-blood Choctaw in "A Justice" (1931) but later appears as the offspring of a Chickasaw chief and quadroon slave woman in *Go Down, Moses*. Melanie Benson Taylor asserts that "Faulkner couldn't distinguish between a Chickasaw and a Choctaw and didn't care to," and she labels his hybrid characters "'Chickachoctasaw' Indians" (32). Faulkner's comments about his continuity problems appear to confirm Taylor's reading. In one interview, he plainly stated, "The line dividing Chickasaw and Choctaw nations passed near my home; I merely moved a tribe slightly at need. . . . 'A Justice' could have been either [tribe], the reason for [Sam's] being Choctaw was the connection with New Orleans" (Cowley 25-26). Even more telling, Faulkner misstates geography. Scholars have located the line separating the two tribes as anywhere from twenty-five to a hundred miles south of his hometown of Oxford (Dabney 25-26, Aiken 338; see figs. 1 and 2). If readers take Faulkner at his word, he viewed the tribes as downright interchangeable.

³Though, long before the setting of "Red Leaves," the Natchez killed spouses, retainers, and children to bury alongside Sun Kings or Queens (Horsford 318).

Yet Faulkner disregarded actual tribal history not out of ignorance or a lack of interest. Graduating beyond previous critics fixated on accuracy, Taylor writes that like many of "Faulkner's apparent 'mistakes' of fact," his Indians become a "purposeful . . . way of signifying the persistently mobile spirits and implications of these restless Indian ghosts while simultaneously denying them the dignity of realistic, rooted identities" (32). Instead of portraying the Chickasaws or Choctaws as they existed, Faulkner examines the Indian which increasingly seized the public imagination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many Southerners believed that Native Americans had entirely exited the state after their dispossessions. Some Mississippi Choctaws notably remained and either retreated to isolated areas or blended into black or white communities. Yet for nearly two hundred years, according to historians, the Southeast has circulated the myth of the vanishing Indian more so than any other national region (Hobson, McAdams, and Walkiewicz 7). Within this context, Faulkner examines specifically the reasons for and ramifications of playing Indian.

Performing the Native American became popular after several national changes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Shari Huhndorf in *Going Native* and Philip Deloria in *Playing Indian* explain the practice's primary functions. Following the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre in which 300 Lakota men, women, and children were slaughtered, white Americans became more sympathetic to Native Americans. Huhndorf tracks whites who imitated or even lived among Indian tribes, such as J. W. Schultz who left his New England home in the late nineteenth century and became a member of the Blackfoot tribe, marrying a Native woman (19). According to Huhndorf, such efforts provided "self-justifying fantasies that conceal the violence marking European America's origins" (5). Stray whites like Schultz tried but failed to erase the nation's bloody military history via an embrace of Native cultures. Arguably more influential—and more central to Faulkner's work—was the inevitable march of modernization. Deloria cites the Civil War-era incursion of Northern railroads and industrial forces upon the South as a trigger for many whites' curiosity regarding Native America. For white Americans anxious about becoming absorbed within this period's progress, playing the Indian offered an alternate country promising a supposedly genuine identity. As Deloria writes, "Because those seeking authenticity have already defined their own state as

inauthentic, they easily locate authenticity in the figure of an Other. This Other can be coded in terms of time (nostalgia or archaism), place (the small town), or culture (Indianness)” (101). In *Go Down, Moses*, Sam and Ike engage each of these aspects in order to create and inhabit a fictional Native American world opposing modernity.



Fig. 1. Revising an inaccurate sketch map which Faulkner drew himself, critic Charles Aiken locates Faulkner's Oxford—and accordingly much of Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County—as firmly in Chickasaw territory. From Aiken, "Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: A Place in the American South." *Geographical Review* 69.3 (1979): 338. Courtesy of *American Geographical Society*.



Fig. 2. Map of Chickasaw, Choctaw and other tribal territories in 1831 Mississippi, just before the tribal displacements began. From Anthony Finley, *A New General Atlas Comprising a Complete Set of Maps, Representing the Grand Divisions of the Globe* (Philadelphia: Young & Dellker, 1831). 28.

A Featured Forest Player: Sam's Staged Patrimony

Simply through his presence as half Native American in the Reconstruction South, Sam projects a seemingly mythical aura. In "The Old People," *Moses's* first story featuring Sam and Ike's relationship, readers only view Sam from others' perspectives and never penetrate the character's consciousness. This narrative distance effectively neutralizes Sam, allowing readers to observe the character as constructed solely by the imaginations of locals. Ike's cousin Cass, himself another surrogate father for Ike, explains that Sam "was a wild man. When he was born, all his blood on both sides, except the little white part, knew things that had been tamed out of our blood so long ago that we have not only forgotten them, we have to live together in herds to protect ourselves from our own sources" (124). Adding that Sam was the direct son of a Chickasaw chief, Cass stresses a divide between the Native American and African cultures and the white knowledge of them. Despite his mixed blood, Sam serves as a living Indian legend to the younger generation. He dresses like the black characters and even lives with them, but "he was still the son of that Chickasaw chief and the negroes knew it. And, it seemed to the boy, not only negroes" (126). Ike maps a nobility onto his mentor largely because Sam stands out from the other black characters. In so doing, he unwittingly subjugates black individuals for being less numinous than the local Native Americans. But Ike fetishizes Sam apart from the elder's dissimilarities to his "negro" peers as well. Ike's knowledge of Indian lore remains limited to his own eavesdropping and Cass's legendary descriptions. Hence, he elevates Sam specifically because he lacks factual knowledge about Native American culture.

As the biological son of Chickasaw chief Ikkemotubbe, Sam maintains a supposed regality further perpetuating Ike's exoticization of him. In their recent introduction to *The People Who Stayed* (2010), Geary Hobson, Janet McAdams, and Kathryn Walkiewicz lament that Faulkner's critics rarely have examined his work "with regard to the 'tripartite intercultural' relationships (white-black-Indian) existing in the world of his fictional Yoknapatawpha county" (11). They identify Sam Fathers as a pivotal figure in this respect because he contains bloodlines from each race. As Sam lets others cast him as an imaginary Chickasaw prince, and then willingly performs that role, Faulkner depicts the region's lack of intercultural understanding. Many Southerners like Ike simply assign individuals to different races based on

preconceived notions. Fellow hunter Boon Hogganbeck is also a quarter Native American, but since Boon does not carry royal blood, Ike views him merely as a white man with "the mind of a child" next to Sam: "To the boy at least, the difference was apparent immediately you saw Boon and Sam together" (126, 167). Aware of Sam's status as a chief's son, Ike attributes a spiritual superiority to him, a quality entirely absent in the common mixed-blood Boon. In real-life Choctaw and Chickasaw cultures, social titles passed through marriage to royal sisters, whereas Faulkner "assume[s] that succession in the chief's role was by patrilineal inheritance" (Horsford 315). Faulkner's factual discrepancy produces something much more enticing than historical regurgitation, however. Through conscious or unconscious subversion, Faulkner dramatizes whites' rewriting of Native American culture. Even if the Chickasaws had subscribed to the patrimony that Faulkner implies, Cass and Ike ignore that Ikkemotubbe disowned Sam as prince and they regard their wilderness guide as tribal royalty anyway. As Annette Benert notes, the "tall, squat rather, almost sedentary, flabby-looking" Sam hardly coincides with notions of Native American majesty (182), yet the boys insist on manufacturing and then subscribing to Sam's noble aura.

Cass and Ike also worship Sam's ties to nature, qualities particularly valuable to Southerners nostalgic for their region's past. Yet for all Sam's skill within the wilderness, he never actually hunts; rather, he chooses to bestow his mystical knowledge to a surrogate son, who in turn honors Sam for his unorthodox knowledge. The more Sam acts like a chief, the more Ike believes Sam's authority within Chickasaw culture. As Annette Trefzger states, "At stake in the text is [Sam's] cultural *performance* as an Indian—not as an African American—that makes him valuable to the cultural heritage of white southern men" (175). Sam knows that playing up an African culture would define him only as a disempowered former slave. A Chickasaw identity, by contrast, holds a certain value among white Southerners wary of impending industrialism and looking towards the region's past. Huhndorf writes that as encroaching symbols of technology and industry invaded America, many "created a nostalgia for origins, now embodied in the cultural imagination in the 'primitive'" (14). Accordingly, Sam exploits Native Americans' ties to earth, animal, and spirit—however stereotypical—to offer an ethereal, pre-modern South as an alternate to a Mississippi racing towards modernization. Sam indeed fits the "romantic tradition" (Dabney 123) of the "noble savage of

the nineteenth century" (Trefzer 172). Yet Faulkner allows readers to recognize Ike devolving into a typically romantic misreading of Sam, and, by extension, all Native Americans.

Naively misreading Sam as the mystical Indian of days past, Ike represents a generation of Southern children disconnected from actual history. Faulkner utilizes Sam—and Ike's reception of the elder—to convey the perpetual romanticization of the region's Native Americans. Hoping to discover an entryway into the region's fading Native American culture, Ike often eavesdrops on conversations between Sam and Jobaker, the town's last full-blooded Chickasaw:

Perhaps once a month the boy would find them in Sam's shop—two old men squatting on their heels on the dirt floor, talking in a mixture of negroid English and flat hill dialect and now and then a phrase of that old tongue which as time went on and the boy squatted there too listening, he began to learn. (127-28)

Readers can only understand the scene's impact through Ike's ears. Ike discards the "negroid" English as he listens instead for traces of the Indian "old tongue." In this way, he has already begun to rehearse a dismissal of African history which he will continue later by renouncing his family's plantation. Moreover, by omitting an actual transcription of dialogue between the two men, Faulkner keeps readers from falling for the Chickasaw language's exotic rhythms as Ike does. Instead, he permits readers to remain suspicious of Sam by simultaneously providing them only an objective viewpoint of Ike's unquestioned worship.

Similarly, Faulkner utilizes the Native American art of storytelling to distance readers further from Sam, even as the oral tradition supposedly brings Ike closer to a presumed Chickasaw past. During their hunting trips, Sam frequently tells Ike stories about his Chickasaw people which produce visceral effects in the young listener:

as he talked about those old times and those dead and vanished men of another race from either that the boy knew, gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boy's present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening, the men who walked through them actually walking in breath and air and casting an actual shadow on the earth they had not quitted. (127)

The rapturous experience so affects Ike that he loses track of time and space, superimposing the past onto the present and imagining himself

among the Native American inhabitants of a lost Mississippi. In effect, Sam reprograms Ike's memory, providing the boy "an inordinate sense of the past" to include a cultural history not his own (Devlin 195). The extent of Sam's cultural knowledge, however, remains unstable. The stories follow "the old days and the People whom he had not had time to ever know and so could not remember" (*Moses* 127). Sam speaks not from his own experiences but rather from various myths that he himself has only heard. This performativity casts a shadow over his narratives, but Ike, eager to discover a new inheritance all his own, "never question[s]" Sam (127). Furthermore, Faulkner once again refrains from revealing Sam's literal words in an attempt to shift readers' focus to the boy's reception. Readers experience only Ike's absorption of a fetishized Indian tongue instead of being able to idealize it themselves.

The storytelling tradition certainly has grounding in historical fact, as oral narrative for centuries proved an essential tool in tribal education. Lacking a written language, Mississippi Chickasaw "elders transmitted traditions, customs, lore, and accumulated knowledge to the young orally and by example" (Gibson 8). Similarly, Choctaws, according to an 1828 account by Reverend Alfred Wright, assembled "the youth and children of their respective towns, and rehearse[d] to them those fabulous stories which embodied all their traditional knowledge, and which had in like manner been communicated to them" (178). Horatio Cushman further describes a Choctaw "Council Fire" scene in which the eldest warriors stood within an inner ring around a fire, the middle-aged ones in a middle ring, and the youngest men in an outer circle. Once the ceremony began, the old warriors

would then in regular succession state to the attentive audience all that had been told them by their fathers, and what they themselves had learned in the experience of an eventful life—the past history of their nation; their vicissitudes and changes; what difficulties they had encountered, and how overcome. (148)⁴

In his depiction of Sam Fathers, Faulkner summons precisely this ceremonial mysticism of Native American storytelling. Whether Faulkner

⁴LeCoeur outlines another form of Choctaw storytelling, in which three separate tellers recite the same story but with different emphases (one on sensory impressions, one on history, and one on comic elements). A fourth teller, who had not experienced the story firsthand as the first three did, would absorb all the narratives and create a definitive version (149-57).

knew of the specific practices of Chickasaws and Choctaws seems beside the point. He utilizes them to highlight Sam's exploitation of Indian stereotypes in order to produce a "spiritual heir" (Duvall 195). According to Wright's and Cushman's descriptions, the oral tradition among Mississippi's Native Americans was a patrilineal one, the basis of most men's stories stemming directly from their fathers' versions. But Sam's separation from his father Ikkemotubbe (aptly nicknamed Doom) severed him from a Chickasaw culture even before the tribe departed westward. Thus Sam seeks to initiate Ike into a Native American society to which Sam never wholly belonged in the first place. Additionally, the fatherless Sam, with no remembrance of his tribal past, has not received anything *directly* from his Chickasaw culture. His dramatization holds no basis in experiential truth. Still, Sam successfully spawns a sought-after son through passing down the stories to Ike. Since Faulkner shuts off readers from listening directly to tales about the "old people," attention again shifts to Ike's valuation of them. In his constant alienation of the reader from Sam, Faulkner prompts readers to judge the character not as a real Indian but merely as Ike's mythic one.

Ike remains transfixed not only by Sam's stories but also by the ambiguous Native American language itself, revealing further his misreading of his Chickasaw mentor. When Sam and Ike see the perhaps imaginary deer at the end of their hunting trip, Sam stands, "his right arm raised at full length, palm-outward, speaking in that tongue which the boy had learned from listening to him and Joe Baker in the blacksmith shop. . . . 'Oleh, Chief,' Sam said. 'Grandfather'" (137). In the context of the Native American language Ike absorbs, the salute translates into a gesture of grandeur. But as Lewis Dabney points out, "the word '*oleh*' has no apparent Indian root" (39). Conversely, he notes that it resembles a word, "ola," from Yoruba, a language spoken in Nigeria and the Spanish Caribbean, meaning "the honorable or respected" or, in some variations, the "most honored one" (40). In "Red Leaves" too, the runaway black slave—not any of the Native American characters—cries out "Olé, grandfather" upon being slashed (335). The phrase, then, likely descends from the "negroid" vernacular that Ike hears Sam speaking earlier and not the Native American tongue that Ike suspects. Failing to separate the two minority groups, Ike plucks an excerpt from black culture and attributes it instead to Chickasaw tradition; he submerges the common non-white group in favor of the

allegedly more mystical one. Also, by converting the spelling of "Jobaker" to "Joe Baker" in this passage, Faulkner implies that Ike views the scene through a fetishized lens; that, despite his initiation, Ike unconsciously retains a white instinct to rewrite other cultures. He misperceives Sam's posturing as a genuine ritual, and, even more disturbingly, mimics it upon seeing a snake later: standing with one hand raised as Sam had stood that afternoon six years ago, . . . speaking the old tongue which Sam had spoken that day without premeditation either: 'Chief,' he said: 'Grandfather'" (245). Imitating the Native American language and finally choosing the English "Chief" while excising Sam's original "Oleh," Ike nods to the lost Chickasaw culture but ultimately smothers it with an Anglo-Saxon translation.

Faulkner also exploits common notions regarding Native Americans' spiritual relations to the land to demonstrate further Ike's mythologizing of local tribes. Sayre criticizes Faulkner for recycling tropes from romantic literature: "Faulkner also rather one-sidedly emphasizes closeness to Nature. . . . he comes perilously close to another stereotype, that of the Indian without a culture, as a 'child of Nature'" (47). However, Faulkner introduces this cliché only to mock it. For instance, Sam retreats into the forest after Jobaker's death, crawling back into nature's protective womb to commemorate a lost Native American sibling. Smoking his pipe and chanting ambiguous Native hymns, Sam the wilderness mentor emerges as little more than a typecast Indian. Significantly, Ike more often than not glorifies Sam for these characteristics, as Faulkner underscores the boy's superficial reading of his Chickasaw father figure. After Sam recites the stories to Ike, the latter feels that his family's hold over the land "was as trivial and without reality as the now faded and archaic script in the chancery book in Jefferson which allocated it to them and that it was he, the boy, who was the guest here and Sam Fathers' voice the mouthpiece of the host" (127). Despite Sam's questionable credentials, Ike sublimates his own claims to inheritance of the land for Sam's communal philosophy. He defies, futilely, the inevitability of Native American dispossession, foreshadowing his later renunciation of his family's land in "The Bear."

Ike's wilderness initiation—a purportedly age-old Native tradition merging man with earth—serves as the central experience informing his ultimate repudiation. After Ike kills his first buck, Sam marks him with "the hot blood which he had spilled," at which point Ike "ceased to be

a child and became a hunter and a man" (132). In a single moment, Ike is reborn. Delivered into the wild, he assumes a newfound masculinity deriving from past cultures. Ike interprets the event not only as an induction to nature but also as an invitation to a Native American lineage: "Sam Fathers had marked him indeed, not as a mere hunter, but with something Sam had had in his turn of his vanished and forgotten people" (135). This assumed tie to the land, forming a fantastical stratosphere linking man, earth, and beast, defines Ike as a naïve, romantic reader of Native Americans. Even as late as "Delta Autumn," an elderly Ike remembers the day of his first kill and recalls "something running in Sam Fathers' veins which ran in the veins of the buck too" (258). Yet through the absence of a corresponding description in "The Old People," Faulkner implies that Ike originally pictured the scene in another way and now recreates it in retrospect. In either case, Ike's presumption of a Native American kinship with the land and animal life remains problematic. Sayre reminds readers that "Romantic discourses on Indians often emphasize the seamless integration of the Indian individual . . . within the natural environment, in a mystical-religious bond" (37). Ike imports exactly these spiritual energies into his wilderness experiences. But such myths become self-perpetuating. Long after Sam's death, Ike continues to imbue his initiation ceremony with additional details stemming from his supposed Indian code.

Given Sam's tenuous relation to Native American culture, however, Ike's initiation itself proves suspect. The initiation fails specifically because Sam performs the ceremony merely according to legend, based on what he himself must have heard, instead of anything he personally experienced. The ethnographic history also casts doubts on the legitimacy of the blood-marking. Though Dabney locates one account of such an event taking place in South Carolina among small farmers, frontiersmen, and several black slaves accompanying them (125-26), no evidence exists that Mississippi Choctaws or Chickasaws executed anything resembling Sam's branding of Ike.⁵ The ritual becomes especially suspicious within the context of Sam's lacking a genuine cultural memory. In its untested preposterousness, the scene draws

⁵In fact, most Choctaws would not touch their kill after hunting. Instead, a hunter would leave paths for his wife to find the meat and return home; later, she would prepare it for dinner (Searcy 46-47). Meanwhile, Chickasaw children only hunted small game near the villages (Gibson 25).

attention to itself as inherently artificial, a distant idea of Indian tradition instead of a truthful replication.

Sam's death only underscores his status as a false Chickasaw. His falling to the ground simultaneously with the bear Old Ben, that obvious symbol of the wilderness itself, hardly marks any type of long-awaited catharsis. Nor does Sam collapse as a symbol of the old wilderness passing; rather, he dies because he no longer serves a dramaturgical function. Soon after the bear falls, Ike notices Sam "lying motionless on his face in the trampled mud" and moments later speaking "something in that tongue which he and Joe Baker had used to speak together. But he couldn't move" (178). Without the ability even to gesture as a guide and speaking only in disguised dialect, Sam becomes unavailable to Ike in any realistic manner. Faulkner effectively severs the teacher and pupil's relationship at the culmination of the fraudulent hunting ritual and freezes Sam in Ike's memory as a spirit-spouting martyr. The absurdity of the moment reemphasizes the notion that Faulkner values Sam not as an individual but only as a figurehead for Ike's miseducation.⁶

A Babe in the Mississippi Woods: Ike's Reenactments

Besides the damaging influence of Sam's performativity, Ike himself becomes just as complicit in his own failure. By renouncing his inheritance and playing Indian instead, Ike attempts but fails to locate a viable alternate to the modern South. Ike's sad fate leads many critics to sympathize with the character, even parade him as an ethical hero of sorts. In assessing the history of *Moses* criticism, John Peters relates that earlier scholars deemed "Ike's repudiation as positive and generally admired his moral courage" (39).⁷ R. D. Ackerman, for instance, affirms

⁶The aftermath of Sam's death reveals yet another conflation of tribal practices. Boon prepares Sam's resting place above ground, spreading his body on a "platform of freshly cut saplings bound between four posts" (186). As Mississippi historian Elmo Howell first noted, the Chickasaws "buried their dead as soon as possible in the most convenient place. The Choctaws probably furnished the idea for the platform" (524). Horsford confirms that the unorthodox burial "seem[s] but a vague composite of loosely known Indian lore" and "not especially local" at that (318). However, Dabney notes that the platform tomb "is also an African burial for a chief" (151). Though Boon and Ike presume their platform burial a Chickasaw ritual, Faulkner again displays the white heirs' suppression of African culture and embrace of Indian lore instead.

⁷See Peters for an exhaustive summary of the different schools of pro-Ike and anti-Ike criticism since the novel's first appearance.

that once readers see Ike as “metaphorically dead,” then such a revelation leads to “a reawakening of our sense of Ike’s nobility” (557). Another critic states that Ike embodies “the miracle of moral regeneration” (Lewis 323), while one labels him “an honorable man” and “profoundly tragic” (Kinney 250, 251). Even Cleanth Brooks finds him one of Faulkner’s most “touching characters” but wisely warns that “Faulkner has not set him up as a model” (274).

The pity proves justifiable but the admiration less so. If Ike’s arc becomes defined by pathos, his own colonialist desires for a Native American reincarnation of himself are to blame. In retrospect, Ike has been overeager from the start. Recognizing the echoes between the opening images of “The Old People”—“At first there was nothing. There was the faint, cold, steady rain, the gray and constant light of the late November dawn. . . . Then the buck was there” (121)—and those of “Genesis,” Barbara Ladd keenly notes that “Ike’s desire for transcendence is apparent on the very first page” (49). Faulkner’s description melding Ike’s vision with the biblical birth of the natural world foreshadows a god-like autonomy on Ike’s part to recreate himself. He in fact wills himself into Sam’s culture and then enacts whatever counterfeit notions of it that he fosters. Ike defaults specifically in this latter conversion from a passive to an active subject who must continue Sam’s dubious traditions as he dubiously understands them. Far from a helpless heir to the Native American wilderness, Ike actively wishes for a new birth and surrogate father. The initiation into the woods resembles a baptism of sorts, as Ike wipes clean his white ancestors’ assumption of the land and starts anew: “It seemed to him that at the age of ten he was witnessing his own birth” (143). His delivery into the heart of the wilderness provides him not only a new father in Sam but also an entire family of teeming forest life which he must preserve as Sam would.

Ike applies his newfound spirituality and supposed Chickasaw consciousness to his experiences in the big woods. When he encounters a forest stand, he constructs a story tying his present experience to presumptive Indian ones from the past. He perceives “the same loneliness through which frail and timorous man had merely passed without altering it, leaving no mark nor scar, which looked exactly as it must have looked when the first ancestor of Sam Fathers’ Chickasaw predecessors crept into it and looked about him” (148). In an attempt to revive the effect of Sam’s stories and erase time between a virgin land

past and a colonized present, Ike now recites imagined histories to himself. Moreover, he casts himself as the heir of the unknown Chickasaw ancestor via his initiation as Sam's spiritual son. Ike forges his own experiences and Sam's stories into a parallel universe of memory, narrative, and fantasy. Rewriting both his and Sam's lineage, he envelops the wilderness into his own Indian-inspired origin story. He labels the "summer, and fall, and snow . . . mother and father both to the old man born of a Negro slave and a Chickasaw chief who had been his spirit's father if any had" (242), and then imagines himself married to a woman later, but "still the woods would be his mistress and his wife" (242). In the absence of biological parents, Ike reconceives his family as an interconnected kinship of nature's tokens.

Yet this idealization only exposes further Ike's decidedly white conceptions of Native land, as he sinks deeper into the forest of his own imagination. If readers accept Sam as a performer of Native American culture, then Ike partakes in a mythmaking activity based on false myth itself. Ike reads not genuine Native American spirituality into the land but rather a white representation of it, ironically descending from the part-Chickasaw Sam. Each time Ike tries to incorporate himself into the natural world, Faulkner overrides the scene with irony. Lines like "If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself . . . was his alma mater" emerge as forced comparisons between the whites' modernized world and the Native American wilderness (154). As Ike continues to attempt to draw such analogies, he has not surrendered to nature but rather keeps one foot firmly in the colonialist outer world. Furthermore, Ike equates his supposed Chickasaw heritage with genuine Mississippi history, and he falsely believes he can reinstall the old Indian order. Huhndorf warns that white performers of Native American culture often make such mistakes: "While those who go native frequently claim benevolence toward Native peoples, they reaffirm white dominance by making some (usually distorted) vision of Native life subservient to the needs of the colonizing culture" (5). By rewinding to a pre-plantation, pre-occupied South, Ike ignores and, in effect, erases the region's histories of slavery and Indian dispossession. He dismisses the conflicts with whites that Chickasaws endured earlier in the century and thus whitewashes over a crucial historical chapter.

Ike remains not entirely unconscious of his own affectations, a quality which compromises his planned retreat from modern society. At one point in "The Bear," he becomes temporarily aware of his own role-play within the supposedly transformative Indian woods: "It seemed to him that something, he didn't know what, was beginning; had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. . . . He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even just to see it too" (166). Faulkner highlights a current of theatricality, of inherent falseness, running through Ike's forest experiences. The novice Ike attempts here not only to tell himself a myth about the wilderness but to climb into it, becoming simultaneously reader and subject, spectator and lead actor. Despite this self-cognizance, the boy plays the Indian because the character presumably offers a method of escape in the postbellum South. His efforts corresponded to real-life programs, albeit not in Mississippi. Deloria cites how New England boys' camps promoted primitivist identities in the 1880s, the same decade of Ike's teenage years (101-02). In 1901, author Ernest Thompson Seton instituted the Connecticut-based Woodcraft Indians, an organization in which youths circulated old Indian tales, constructed tribal costumes, and formed fake tribes such as the Sinaways (96). Yet Deloria specifies that all these "antimodern campers played the primitive authentic against modernity's inauthenticity in order to devise a better modern" and to be more "prepared for the pressures of school and society" (102). By contrast, Ike uses performance to seek a permanent flight from the modern world. He remains fated to fail, however, because he understands only white-inflected codes of nativism.

Ike's hunting rituals become central to his endeavors of Indian imitation. Choctaws and Chickasaws maintained close relationships with the land via hunting, but, for his purposes, Faulkner focuses only on the mythological aspects of these experiences. Both tribes carried reputations for superior hunting skills, Cushman praising the Chickasaws for being "unerring marksmen with the rifle and capable of enduring seemingly incredible fatigue" (434), while "the Choctaw hunter was famous as a strategist when hunting alone in the woods" and for "imitating the cries of the various animals of the forest" (138). Their exploits frequently reappeared in tribal narratives as well. Many Chickasaw myths revolved around "encounters with nature, especially with animals" (Gibson 17), and Choctaw stories related hunters' "adventures, the perils they had

encountered, and the number of deer they had killed" (Watkins 70). In *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner mines these latter aspects of the hunt—how storytelling elevates these kills into transcendent experiences. Ike's initiation into the wilderness via his acceptance of the deer's blood represents the most obvious example. After the ceremony, Ike himself reads what he believes to be a kinship between Native Americans and the natural world. He codes his hunt of the bear, the next supposed wilderness test, with a spiritual significance: "It seemed to him that he could see them, the two of them, shadowy in the limbo from which time emerged and became time: the old bear absolved of mortality and himself who shared a little of it" (149). His prophecy of encountering the bear in a storied present, sharing a heartbeat with the symbolic forest creature, displays his need to cast himself in a fabled Indian narrative.

As thorough a storyteller as he becomes internally, however, Ike fails to bestow his oral heritage unto others. This botched enactment of Sam's principles becomes most apparent in the trilogy's second story, "The Bear," set when the boy Ike has grown into a man of twenty-one. In the story's fourth part, he reads about his grandfather Carothers's rapes of both the Mississippi land and his part-black daughter Tomasina (herself the product of Carothers's impregnating his slave Eunice). When attempting to share these findings with Cass, Ike's stilted delivery signifies his own verbal impotence: "Let me talk now. I'm trying to explain to the head of my family something which I have got to do which I don't quite understand myself, not in justification of it but to explain it if I can" (213). In trying to narrate the history of the McCaslin family, Ike wants to reclaim the oral patrimony he received from Sam. But Ike stutters because, unlike Sam's earlier bestowal of the "old people" tales to himself, Ike miscasts Cass as his father and not his son. He avoids passing down stories to someone who can adopt their values, attempting instead to pass them up to someone who cannot understand their immediacy. Stephen Ross claims that "Ike must supplement his oral heritage with experience of the written word," adding that "The ledgers are brilliantly conceived as symbolic of *both* Ike's oral heritage and his maturing powers as a reader" (165). However, Ike cannot adapt his reading knowledge into verbal productivity. Unlike Sam's stories which merge the past and present, the printed letters in the ledger bear the mark of history, and Ike cannot reproduce history's urgency while reciting them orally to Cass in present time. His faulty translations point

toward his failure not only as a son but also as a Native American heir. Though he renounces his property inheritance and the printed word itself for the communal land and oral tradition of a Chickasaw culture, he fails to notice the growing inefficacy of the spoken word in an increasingly modern world.

“Uncle Ike” and the Modern South

“Delta Autumn” reveals a seventy-three-year-old Ike in 1940 attempting and failing to preserve a mythological wilderness. Industrialism has devastated the forests, and Ike cannot successfully share any knowledge or traditions. By recasting the child Isaac now as the ubiquitous “Uncle Ike,” Faulkner confirms the character’s inability to bear children of his own. Ike serves as father figure to a group of young hunters, but when he tries to recite a story about the former woods, he meets only derision: “A while ago Henry Wyatt there said how there used to be more game here. There was. So much that we even killed does. I seem to remember Will Legate mentioning that too—’ Someone laughed, a single guffaw, stillborn” (256). As opposed to young Isaac, who never interrupted Sam during his storytelling sessions, the new generation lacks deference both to the oral tradition and to nature’s past. “Delta Autumn” concludes as Ike’s nephew Roth Edmonds kills what he perceives as a deer, but Ike identifies as a doe. Roth renders the symbol of the past’s plentiful forest immobile forever. With that shot, Faulkner announces the end of the Native American wilderness and, in effect, declares the insignificance of Ike’s renunciation. Even Faulkner admitted that Ike should have done “more than just repudiate. He should have been more affirmative” (Ross 162). Faulkner finally displays the inefficacy of Native American culture, particularly the oral rituals at its center, within the modern white world. No longer can Ike, even with his optimistic inclinations towards myth, read anything but ruin into the vanishing woods.

By rejecting the land instead of protecting it against encroaching modernization in the South, Ike commits the most damaging sin of all. Upon Ike’s twilight return to the woods, the landscape has transformed entirely from its last appearance. The rumblings of a lumber company beginning “to cut the timber” (234) in “The Bear” give way to a nearly extinct woodland in “Delta Autumn”: “The paths made by deer and bear became roads and then highways, with towns in turn springing up along

them and along the rivers Tallahatchie and Sunflower which joined and became the Yazoo, the River of the Dead of the Choctaws" (250-51).⁸ The symbolic animals of Ike's initiation displaced, the Native Americans represented by river names (and tribes remembered merely for their members' collective deaths), Ike's spiritual inheritance has disappeared. Ike rejects his family's plantation in order to honor the Native American concept of communal earth, a notion he still subscribes to in old age:

it was his land, although he had never owned a foot of it. He had never wanted to, not even after he saw plain its ultimate doom, watching it retreat year by year before the onslaught of axe and saw and log-lines and then dynamite and tractor plows, because it belonged to no man. It belonged to all. (261)

His stubborn adherence to supposed Native American codes of shared land prevents him from claiming ownership over any part of the Mississippi woods. If he had accepted the land intended for him, he could have shielded at least a small plot from industrial forces. Yet in surrendering it to Roth's grandfather and thus eventually Roth, Ike's repudiation becomes "a dodging of responsibility" (Brooks 273). In his efforts to avoid replicating his grandfather's mishandling of Native land, Ike simply stands back while others do it instead. Even the Chickasaws did not strictly adhere to the value of the shared earth that Ike posits. As the twenty-one-year-old Ike exclaims about his family's property, "I can't repudiate it. . . . because it was never Grandfather's to bequeath them to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never old Ikkemotubbe's to sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation" (189). Thus Ike insists on reenacting a Native American land code long after Ikkemotubbe and Ike's ancestors have already violated it. Ultimately, Ike's disavowal of his inheritance has no lasting impact. His playing Indian does not impede industrialism, nor does it offer him any geographical barrier against modernity's forces.

⁸Prewitt confirms that lumber companies from the North began buying land around the 1880s, sometimes for as cheap as a dollar per acre (200). Studying Mississippi's logging industry, and particularly the Delta area depicted in *Moses*, Saikku asserts that Mississippi accounted for twenty-five percent of the hardwood lumber cut in the United States between 1900 and 1920. Turn-of-the-century machinery advances led to nearly sixty percent of the Delta forest's disappearance by 1932. By the beginning of the 1930s, species including the red wolf, the cougar, and—most important within the context of *Moses*—the black bear were completely extinct in the area (542-47).

In this presumably final trip to the wilderness, Ike's mind becomes an amalgamation of fantasy and memory, dream and reality, as his contradictory instincts finally arrest him. Resting in his tent the first night, he recalls his initiation, complete with Sam's instructions: "Now. Shoot quick and shoot slow" (259). Ike once again utilizes the wilderness, or whatever remains of it, as a vessel to merge temporalities. If, as Ronald Schleifer says, "The hunt for Isaac is a means of escaping time" and "a method of engaging the past" (112, 119), then the woods still offer him this gateway. But Ike also remembers his renouncement of Carothers's "wrong and shame" as an act that he carried out "for his son" who, readers now learn, never is conceived (*Moses* 259). While Ike accesses the past, an entire lifetime of experience leaks into his consciousness. For every time he dreams about his initiation as an Indian son, he finds another memory of "the last time he ever saw [his wife's] naked body" (259). Each time he remembers that first buck, "smoke-colored out of nothing, magnificent with speed" (258), he meets a vision of the Jefferson house where "he had had a wife and lived with her and lost her" (259). He counters every memory of his own origin with a remembrance of his own inability to reproduce. As successful as he was a child of the wilderness, he is as much a failure as a father outside of it. Against the disappearing forest and his own lack of fertility, he can only wander between the two realms without an identity or a legacy. He remains at once the Native American retreating into the wilderness and the carpenter relying on the system to chop the trees down. Whether Ike becomes a white man performing the Indian or an Indian masquerading as white, he belongs, in alternating memories, to both worlds but wholly to neither.

Instead of attempting to fuse his forest lessons with the increasing pragmatism of an America beyond the trees, Ike nestles further into the recesses of his own imagination. By the time of his appearance in "Delta Autumn," Ike no longer can shift at will within time but rather remains trapped in his own memory; he cannot move freely in space but is limited to the small patch of woods still remaining. Soon he can no longer discern reality from Sam's fictions: "the boy even at almost eighty would never be able to distinguish certainly between what he had seen and what had been told him" (215-16). The speculative oral history surpasses his own memory, his own capacity to see the wilderness objectively. From listening to those old stories, all the way through his

initiation and retelling them to himself over the past seventy years, he merely imitates Native culture while believing himself a true Indian heir.

Faulkner suggests that Ike's tragedy lies partly in his ignorance of the Native Americans who remained in Mississippi after their dispossession. Historians estimate that for every eight Native Americans who left the Southeastern states after the Removal, as many as one to two stayed (Hobson, McAdams, and Walkiewicz 6). Some like the Choctaws quickly isolated themselves and avoided interacting with other races that discriminated against them.⁹ Yet most others—some willingly and others less so—were "remade" into either white or black and absorbed into the respective racial communities (8). Ike performs the opposite process. The white heir attempts to crawl into a Native American race that has largely dispersed and camouflaged itself after the Civil War. Living among and largely associated with blacks, the half-Native Sam serves as a prime example of such acculturation. In childhood, however, Ike ignores this history in plain view. Then, in adulthood, he becomes a self-exiled tribe of one, removing himself from many of the region's actual Native Americans living among whites and blacks. Several tribes were ultimately able to re-emerge as organized communities, but not in Uncle Ike's space or time. For instance, federal recognition was granted to the Chickasaws in Oklahoma and to the Mississippi Band of Choctaws in 1978 (St. Jean 2, Satz 23-24). So as the elderly Uncle Ike mines the remnant woods in 1940 and attempts to re-perform his initiation into Indian culture, he faces a modern South still hiding those actual Native Americans left behind.

In 1945, upon the end of World War II and three years after Faulkner published *Go Down, Moses*, the Mississippi forests were repopulated with deer, culminating in a count of nearly 20,000 in 1947 (Prewitt

⁹In the fourteenth article of The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (1830), the federal government offered Choctaws an alternative to removal. Tribe members could stay in Mississippi if they agreed to become state citizens and to register with government liaison William Ward, who would provide them individual sections of land. However, Ward often failed in his duties, and others "lost their land when Mississippi citizens threatened them with arrest, whipped them, and drove them out of their homes" (Osburn 34). By the 1840s, remaining Choctaws formed small communities in east-central Mississippi and on the Gulf Coast and spoke only their language (35). For more on the Mississippi Choctaws from the period of removal to the present, see Mould xxiii-xxiv.

215-16). Ostensibly, the gesture appeared to offer renewed hope for someone like the fictional Ike to return to the Native American Eden of his childhood. But since the state's Game and Fish Commission led the charge, the deer returned to the forests only so hunters could wipe out the population again. The predominantly white hunters manufactured a premodern past in order to wrench it beyond the present and into a modernized future. Once again, they performed the occupation of Native Americans' land and the subsequent expulsion of any natural order embedded in it. Ike too constructs an artificial notion of the wilderness based on his own mythical reading of the woods and an Indian past. But in contrast to the modern gamers, he wants to stay there. Long after new memories of his personal failures in civilization have superseded the illusions of his childhood, he returns each year hoping to resurrect his myths. By the end, huddled up, his "blanket once more drawn to his chin, his crossed hands once more weightless on his breast in the empty tent" (269), Ike is more ready to die a fake Indian than live a new Mississippi hunter. Nearly sixty-five years later, he only wants to make his Sam Fathers proud.

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