Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film

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If I’m going to finish my crop in this county or finish somebody else’s crop in Parchman county, I would like to know it soon as I can.

—Lucas Beauchamp in Go Down, Moses

Most whites thought of Parchman as a model prison, and the press carried endless stories of its profitable ways [. . .]. William Faulkner lived in Oxford, only eighty miles east of the farm.

—David M. Oshinsky, “Worse Than Slavery”:
Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice

As Imagined by William Faulkner, Yoknapatawpha County was not far from Parchman, with its actual prison well-known for harsh conditions and contracted convict labor, making it bear harsh resemblance to plantation slavery. Along with early-twentieth-century Mississippi judicial practices almost indistinguishable from lynching, race colored criminality as it was both practiced and imagined in the American South. This chapter demonstrates that Sanctuary, Light in August, and Go Down, Moses chart a shift in Faulkner’s sense of the causes of crime and the justice of punishment. All three novels implicate race with violence in a fashion that mirrors the historical record of Southern practice in the first half of the twentieth century. The earlier novels trace crime to individual history and equate judicial decision with lynching; in contrast, Go Down, Moses abandons the
emphasis on personal biography, turning instead to a broader social context, community accountability for the criminal, and sharp distinction between lynching and execution.

My claim of an evolved sense of crime in Faulkner’s writing, then, involves matters of human agency and the sense of its possibility at particular times and places, and thus incorporates psychoanalysis’s emphases on both the individual consciousness and the plural sense of social history. Faulkner himself shifted from emphasizing the former to the latter in his account of forces that shape criminality between his writing of *Sanctuary* and *Light in August* and then *Go Down, Moses* a decade later. While I make some use of the psychoanalytic terminology prevalent during these novels’ writing and reception, I am less interested in interpreting them wholly within a Freudian or Lacanian framework than I am in reading them comparatively as bracketing a change in the writer’s sense of individual autonomy, the retribution for crime, and the social responsibility for punishment. Their respective accounts here are situated with regard to other texts as well, particularly the historical record of lynching and the credence prison officials gave to psychological classification and the individuation of prisoners from 1929 to 1942. The causes of criminality, the sorts of punishment, and the relation between the criminal and society described in those transcripts provide a historical record in tension with the history Faulkner imagines.

Faulkner’s “own little postage stamp of native soil” offers a mythic South at once old and new, fictional and immediately recognizable, a product of the author’s imagination and his history—both his personal experiences and the tensions of cultural difference deeply marking the United States from the 1920s to the 1950s. Nineteen novels and many shorter works in their aggregate produce the fictional county and survey a common landscape over a hundred years. Antediluvian characters with extended and entwined genealogies cultivate relationships among the twelve hundred lively fictions populating the twenty-four hundred square miles of wilderness, farmland, hamlets, and towns. To see what stays the same in Yoknapatawpha and what changes is to mark how Faulkner, his world, and his view of it alter as well. In the passing of time, the writer’s representation of the set of human relations alters, human agency and possibility changing in the steepening shadow of history. It is the work of 1929 to 1942, particularly *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*, that most critics suggest includes Faulkner’s
most significant writing,⁵ a historical period most recognizable as the Great Depression yielding to World War II, when harsh economic and cultural effects were suffered sharply in rural communities. Yoknapatawpha illustrates the poverty, class and race conflicts, transient populations, and rural to urban shifts experienced in the actual South and elsewhere in the country.

Less well-known regarding this time is that it was the period of the greatest number of executions in recent U.S. history. From 1930 to 1942, between 123 and 199 state executions took place each year, the most during any such period. During that time, black men disproportionately received the death penalty in comparison with white men. While the frequency of lynching reached new lows by the 1930s, some historians suggest a correlation of that racial violence to execution practices.⁶ Furthermore, a statistical correlation between lynching and execution has received insufficient notice. Arthur F. Raper's groundbreaking study of lynching in 1933 demonstrates that while the terrorism of lynching rested upon the myth of a black man's rape of a white woman, less than one-sixth of the documented lynchings between 1880 and 1930 involved such accusations.⁷ Exactly the same proportion of state executions of black men between 1930 and 1942 was for the crime of rape, more than eight times the frequency of white men, hinting at a substitution effect between lynching and racial execution; arguably, the latter practice replaced, at least in part, the former.⁸

It was against this historical backdrop of race-based lynching giving way to the relatively frequent state-sanctioned hangings, shootings, and electrocutions that the initial readers of Sanctuary, Light in August, and Go Down, Moses encountered the death sentences of Lee Goodwin, Popeye, Joe Christmas, Rider, and Samuel “Butch” Beau-champ. These five characters split the difference between lynching and execution, but where the practices are separated only hazily in the earlier works (Christmas’s death is both), they are distinguished sharply and are explicitly racial in Go Down, Moses. That transformation culminates in a repudiation of racist lynching, even as Faulkner acknowledges that the turn from mob to jury does not release the society that executes from the responsibility for the condemned.

Noel Polk points out that in Yoknapatawpha’s county seat “the two chief features of Jefferson, Mississippi’s architectural landscape are the courthouse and the jail.”⁹ It is surprising, then, that crime and punishment in Faulkner’s fiction have received so little notice. Just as
Faulkner’s critics have not sufficiently addressed the matter of incarceration and execution, David Guest’s survey of the representation of the death penalty in twentieth-century U.S. literature, *Sentenced to Death*, does not touch on Faulkner. However, *Sanctuary, Light in August*, and *Go Down, Moses* all center on the origins of criminality and its punishment, most particularly when Popeye’s and Christmas’s executions are contrasted with Butch Beauchamp’s at the conclusion of their respective narratives. Those closures differ as personal psychoanalytic history gives way to larger social and genealogical history in creating the criminal. *Sanctuary* and *Light in August* end with the romantic tragedy for which Faulkner is so well-known, where the aesthetic of the language offers the saving grace. In contrast, *Go Down, Moses* closes with a starker vision that stages how criminality is the responsibility of a society defined in the cultural differences of an explicitly democratic Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha.

The three novels offer a changed sense of crime, criminals, causes of criminality, and punishment. The definition of crime and the purposes of punishment have been and remain culturally and historically contingent. Relevant definitions are offered by the American Prison Association, which reaffirmed in 1930 the first of the principles included in its Declaration: that crime “inflicts an injury upon others,” that criminality is determined by “competent courts,” and that punishment is “suffering” designed for the purpose of “reformation.” The condition of criminality is treated through punishment intended to reform, to remake the criminal. However, which acts are considered criminal and the strategies of improvement vary in place and time. For instance, a variety of policy changes in the New Deal era of the 1930s was a culmination of Progressive efforts and addressed the matter of reformation, including education, paid labor, psychological classification and treatment, and parole programs. Such strategies of rehabilitation came under sharp scorn in Faulkner’s own Mississippi, and one newspaper, the *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, claimed in a 1934 editorial that it was “dangerous for society to fall into the error that science can, through a little remodeling, make model citizens of all hardened criminals.” None of these five of Faulkner’s criminals is remodeled; rather than reformed, made anew, they are destroyed in their death sentences. However, their deaths and the paths to those ends are not the same; the changes are criminality’s causes and punishments, and the social responsibility for them.

The narratives of all three novels are determined largely by violent
crime, and the commission, discovery, and punishment of those crimes serve as the points of gravity around which Faulkner’s trademark style of narrative loops in whorls until it circles back to tell and retell events that, chronologically, occur before. *Sanctuary* builds in tension until Popeye murders Tommy and rapes Temple Drake, for which Goodwin is accused; Horace Benbow, in defending Goodwin, tracks Temple to a Memphis whorehouse, where Popeye has confined her. Temple falsely accuses Goodwin, who thereafter is lynched, while Popeye vanishes only to reappear and be tried, convicted, and executed because of his tacit admission to a murder he did not actually commit. In *Light in August*, Joe Christmas’s childhood memory of a sexual scene is linked through the racial epithet *nigger* to his ambiguous race. Those associations bind sexuality and racial violence for him until he finally kills Joanna Burden—who has run the gamut from rape victim to lover—and is later indicted and escapes, before finally being shot and castrated by a deputy of the posse.

Chronologically speaking, *Go Down, Moses* begins with Carothers McCaslin’s rape of the slave Eunice and then their daughter, Tomsina, a genealogy extending through that patriarch’s white sons’ pursuit and capture of the escaped slave who is their half brother, which leads to the marriages that perpetuate black and white McCaslins both. Those raced and entwined genealogies provide much of the shape possessed by the baggy monster of a novel. The narrative outline of *Go Down, Moses* is cast in sharper relief in noting its two ends. First, in the penultimate section of “Delta Autumn,” the sins of the father, incest and miscegenation, are renewed in Roth Edmonds’s son borne by his distant relation, she by four generations and he by five removed from Carothers McCaslin, the all-father. The second finish is the execution, in the titular chapter, of Butch, a son four generations after McCaslin, though his is a genealogical dead end. It is also an official death in counterpart to Rider’s lynching at the midpoint of the novel. The narrative ends of Goodwin, Popeye, Christmas, Rider, and Butch are deaths brought about by combinations of criminality, blackness, and sexual violence. Goodwin offers the exception proving the rule, a rare to the point of unique representation of the lynching of a white man in the twentieth century. The crimes and punishments of Christmas, Rider, and Butch Beauchamp link directly to their race, and Goodwin and Christmas are accused of rape, resulting in their sexual mutilation. Lynch mobs kill Goodwin and Rider, in contrast with the judicially sanctioned deaths of Popeye and
Beauchamp. Christmas’s castration and death at the hands of ad hoc
deputy Percy Grimm falls between lynching and execution.

Juries sentence Goodwin, Popeye, Christmas, Rider, and Butch,
or Faulkner describes such verdicts as foregone conclusions. Good-
win’s and Popeye’s respective juries each deliberate just eight minutes
before returning with convictions. For Christmas, the “Grand Jury
was preparing behind locked doors to take the life of a man whom
few of them had ever seen to know.”\(^{12}\) Rider’s lynching is a given
to the deputy sheriff (and deputy narrator) of the second half of
“Pantaloon in Black,” even before the jailbreak, and news of Butch’s
impending execution is carried on the newswire. Indeed, incarcer-
ation in Faulkner’s fiction at first seems anachronistic, as cells, in all
of these cases, serve only to hold prisoners until their punishment,
rather than the confinement serving as the punishment itself.

That is, pre-Revolutionary practices housed prisoners in jails to
await their public and bodily punishment. Enlightenment arguments
offered in Europe by Cesare Becarria and in the United States by
Benjamin Rush shifted bodily punishment at the end of the eight-
teenth century to the containment, concealment, and control of
imprisonment, a shift Foucault famously describes as the shift from
punishment to discipline. But the incarceration in the cases of all five
of these characters is only a brief period before their deaths by execu-
tion or lynching. Regarding these two practices, Faulkner, in his let-
ters—belles and otherwise—does not always significantly differentiate
between the acts of mobs and juries. In a 1931 letter to the Memphis
Commercial-Appeal, for instance, he suggests that “both had a way of
being right.”\(^{13}\) The mutual legitimacy Faulkner offers in that letter is
at odds with the negative view of lynching in his short story “Dry
September,” written the same year, or with Light in August a year later.
The attributed rightness of mob and jury is one that should trouble
readers of Faulkner, but their relation in the South is a matter of
historical record.

The seeming anachronism of punishment in these Faulkner nov-
els as well as Faulkner’s dangerous equation of mob and jury reflect
related matters of criminality and race in early-twentieth-century
punishment in the South in general and Mississippi in particular.
First, the public spectacle of lynching perpetuated the visibility of
officially conducted bodily mutilation and execution that were more
common of eighteenth-century punishment practices continuing
until the Civil War. In addition, branding and other maiming for
both white and black criminals, even for minor crimes, continued in Mississippi decades past the national norm. The overdue revisions to Mississippi’s criminal code in 1835 did not protect slaves, and postbellum racial tensions perpetuated violence against black men and women, particularly with the end of Reconstruction. Lynching decreased by the 1930s, during which time executions ceased being public, and states assumed the responsibility for executions from cities and counties. However, given the identical statistics of lynching and the execution of black men in the case of rape, the latter practice may have perpetuated the practices of the former, contributing to the high rates of execution in Southern states.

The statistical parallel between lynching and official execution is not the only correlation between the two. Law enforcement officials in the South regularly abetted lynch mobs, whether directly, by handing over victims, or indirectly, by providing insufficient protection for prisoners. Such complicity drew national scrutiny after the 1906 lynching of Ed Johnson in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that law enforcement officers had insufficiently protected Johnson. The court initiated the only criminal trial in its history to find the sheriff and two deputies guilty of contempt of court in United States v. Shipp (1909). Still, Congress’s failure to pass the Costigan-Wagner Act in 1935, which would have made such complicity a federal crime, resulted from the opposition of Southern states. The blocking of Costigan-Wagner demonstrates the embedment of lynching in Southern culture in the 1930s, thus establishing the basis for it to inform official execution practices as conducted by state governments. For example, a Mississippi sheriff initially appointed a rape victim’s father as hangman in a 1934 case, a trial where the jury debated all of seven minutes. The eight-minute juries of both Goodwin and Popeye in Sanctuary seem eerily prescient of that incident. The supervisor of the U.S. Probation System in 1930 could address the American Prison Association and “rejoice that their day of activity is 1930, rather than 1830, that vengeance of the state, of retribution, has largely given way to correctional ideals.” However, the APA from 1870 to 1930 largely featured Northeast membership, and those ideals did not necessarily extend to the South, to Faulkner’s Mississippi.

What this means for Faulkner’s fiction is a reappraisal of distinctions between lynching and execution, and a treatment of the sensational and violently retributive cases of Goodwin, Popeye, and
Christmas as less exceptional than representative. Goodwin’s conviction in *Sanctuary* includes District Attorney Eustace Graham’s closing argument in court in favor of lynching, to which Goodwin’s defender, Horace Benbow, objects and which the judge sustains; in the end, the townspeople have their will done. In like fashion, Percy Grimm is at once deputy and knife-wielding mob member. The blurring between the punishments, coupled with Faulkner’s 1931 letter to the Memphis paper equating juries and mobs, offers them a mutual legitimacy in his writing of the early 1930s, an equation that Faulkner no longer found tenable a decade later. In place of a lawyer’s argument for lynching in court or a deputy castrating a criminal, there is a sharp divorce between mob violence and jurisprudential decision in *Go Down, Moses*, between the tragedy of Rider’s lynching in “Pantaloon in Black,” offered in an ironic register at the novel’s center, and Butch’s execution at the end.

The shared narrative closures of jurisprudential decision and consequent violent deaths among these novels suggest their comparison, but the most interest lies in the differences among their criminals, their origins and executions, and the difference those differences make. Also, with regard to race, the virtual equation of black masculinity with criminality—an equation by no means Faulkner’s alone and one of the most pernicious in U.S. history—is not effaced in the later work, but their relationship is more complicated than in the earlier novels. Indeed, with its setting, which spans from 1840 to 1940, *Go Down, Moses* implies in its narrative trajectory that twentieth-century incarceration is the inexorable conclusion of slavery and of jim crow thereafter, and that it is thus an explicitly racial practice. While more of *Sanctuary* likely takes place in jail than any other of Faulkner’s novels, possibly surpassed only by *Intruder in the Dust*, imprisonment in *Sanctuary* serves more as a gothic set piece rather than a culminating thematic force, as it does in *Go Down, Moses*. The latter novel, with its sprawling historical setting and at times only tenuously linked characters, has as one of its most central narrative drives the critical representation of the enslavement and imprisonment of its black characters. Tomey’s Turl as a slave in “Was” gives way to Lucas Beauchamp, who twice considers reaping cotton not on the Edmondse’s plantation but in the prison fields of Parchman Farm, followed by Rider and his incarceration and lynching; the novel concludes with Butch Beauchamp and his seemingly inevitable execution. Faulkner breaks from the bleak certainty of that narrative trajectory in the final coda,
when the white male business community takes financial responsibility for Butch’s funeral and the entire town of Jefferson assembles to witness his return.

“This Modern Trend” of Crime—and Psychoanalysis

To return to *Sanctuary*, the first of the novels for which crime and punishment are so crucial: Faulkner’s depiction of Popeye’s impotence and the symbolic substitution of his sexuality take on explicitly Freudian implications numerous times, not the least of which is Temple stealing his pistol or repeatedly calling him “daddy.” Indeed, their sexual relationship, such as it is, mediated by Red though orchestrated by Popeye, at times seems not only derivative from but also a parody of Freudian myths of erotic neuroses. With Popeye’s whinnying like a horse in his voyeurism, he is a gelding to go alongside the Rat Man, the Wolf Man, and the rest of the mythological zoo of sexual disorders. Psychoanalytic readings are pervasive in the criticism of *Sanctuary* and in accounts of Popeye, Temple, and Horace and Narcissa Benbow. Given the name of the last, Freud’s accounts of narcissism, the repeated motif of mirrors throughout the novel, and Lacan’s claim of mirroring in identity formation, it is not difficult to see why psychoanalysis has proven so pervasive.

However, most relevant to the matter of criminality and causality at hand is the coda that takes place in the final chapter, the trial, after Goodwin’s lynching. Popeye’s arrest for killing a policeman, when he was instead shooting Red, immediately gives way to his unremembered infancy: his mother’s courtship, marriage, abandonment, and disease; Popeye’s own near murder as an infant; his sickness, curtailed sexual development, and homicidal tendencies even as a child. Framed as it is between his arrest and trial seven pages later, it is difficult not to read that curt life story as an explanatory cause, what Guest describes as a diagnostic biography and what prison officials at the time sought in a case record, retroactively tracing crime to early biography: “A case record should reveal a man’s very soul,” the criminal type determined in “the individual’s life history.” In the case of Popeye, the coda offers a causal narrative for the crime he actually committed (the murder of Red) to balance his execution for the crime of which he is innocent (the murder of the policeman).
Chapter 2

Faulkner claims in the introduction to the 1932 Modern Library edition of *Sanctuary* that his mercenary writing process for the novel deliberately catered to his imagined audience, “what a person in Mississippi would believe to be current trends.” Among those “current trends” Faulkner sought to exploit are criminality and its psychological cause. The pulp detective fiction of the 1920s as well as films such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* (1929) and *Murder!* (1930) may have been some of the crime fiction Faulkner surveyed, and he was not the only one viewing that cultural landscape. APA President George C. Erksine began his presidential address of the 1929 annual congress by pointing out the centrality of crime in the cultural imagination: “The morning paper, the table of contents of the current magazines, a casual glance at the shelves of any book store [. . .] all bear witness to this modern trend.” Erksine’s “modern trend” of the pervasiveness of criminality’s representation was likely one of the several “current trends” to which Faulkner refers; psychological analysis is another. Erksine closes his address with an emphasis on the necessity of psychologically profiling criminals, and five of the forty-two papers presented during the general session of the 1929 conference focus specifically on psychological approaches to criminology with an emphasis on childhood experience.

The approaches endorsed by the APA less resemble Freudian emphases on the unconscious and sexuality than they do the individual personality development described by Alfred Adler, who split from Freud and his approach in 1907. One indicator of that association appears in the discussion following a paper, given at the 1930 APA congress, that treats criminality largely as a psychological disorder, prompting an anxious questioner to suggest that the profiling described in that presentation might give a prisoner “a real inferiority complex.” That complex is a misreading of Adler’s theory of self-assertion, though that slip, as well as the confusion between Adler’s and Freud’s approaches, was common at the time. A 1925 *New York Times* article archly suggests that the psychological disorders “Freudians attribute to repressed sex impulse, Adler attributes to a deficiency in the mechanism of self-assertion to the ‘inferiority complex,’ which today is on the tongue of thousands who have no idea of what they are talking about.”

So “a person in Mississippi,” or the larger audience that Faulkner knew, believed, and hoped to gain, might have difficulty sorting between schools of psychoanalysis that developed through the late
1920s, notably with the publication of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Adler’s *The Case of Miss R: The Interpretation of a Life Story* (1929)\(^{27}\) in the years immediately preceding the release of *Sanctuary*. Psychoanalysis as part of the texture of culture at the time thus informs the diagnostic narrative Faulkner offers, and Popeye’s seems particularly Freudian. The character’s infancy and impotence are a sum of the primacy of preconscious sexual development and anatomy as destiny, the two Freudian maxims of psychoanalytic subject formation. The explanation of Popeye’s criminality narratively follows the crime, much as psychoanalysis retroactively locates original cause as secreted in unconscious memory. Still, given the almost tacked-on nature of Popeye’s biographical vignette, it seems possible to read it as Faulkner’s capitulation to a model of behavior he did not believe, but for which he did not have an alternative. Not until *Go Down, Moses* would he develop a social and cultural genealogy for subject formation as an alternative to a repressed personal history based largely on sexuality.

Though Faulkner expands the sophistication of character in *Light in August* compared to *Sanctuary*, Christmas’s crime and thus his subsequent execution, like Popeye’s, has an explanatory narrative, an original cause in the primal scene. Whereas Popeye’s arrest triggers his Freudian coda, the return to Christmas’s childhood occurs immediately after he begins walking to the house of Joanna Burden, where he will kill her. The recollection of the primal scene, written through with the obligatory guilt, even opens with a fair description of the operation of a Freudian unconscious: “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than collects, longer than knowing even wonders. Knows remembers believes.”\(^{28}\) That introduction gives way directly to the description of the orphanage, the setting of both his theft of toothpaste and his observation of the dietitian and Charlie’s sexual encounter, the origin of Christmas’s guilt, guilt which is subsequently tied to Christmas’s race when the dietitian names him “nigger bastard” to end the scene.\(^{29}\) That moment is easily read as simultaneously one of birth and one of entry into the social (symbolic) order, albeit an order of violence, sexuality, and racism. Upon Christmas’s declaration, “here I am”—his first speech offered as a child—to interrupt their intercourse, the dietitian drags him “violently out of his vomit” to name him.

That moment lays the basis for the subsequent hundred-plus pages accounting for Christmas’s battles with that misplaced guilt, not the
shorthand diagnostic biography of Popeye, but one still chronicling both his youth and his crucial violent acts: first, beating the black prostitute in the shed, and second, felling his father. The first stages again the primal scene, and in case readers miss the association of sexual maneuvers in the dark, Faulkner provides Christmas’s recollection in that shed upon seeing the woman—“There was something in him trying to get out, like when he had used to think of toothpaste.” Whatever Christmas knows, remembers, or believes of sex is bound with that originary moment, his entry to a raced and gendered symbolic that names him “nigger bastard,” and links sex with blackness and violence. That first criminal violence against women rises with Bobbie, escalates further with another prostitute beaten nearly to death, and culminates in the murder of Joanna Burden.

Like the personal history that scripts the beginning of Popeye’s criminality and narratively appears as the basis for his end, Christmas’s origins direct him to his death, though the strictly Freudian structure of the former gives way in the latter to one best understood through a combination of Freud and Lacan. His witness of the primal scene enters him into the symbolic order, the “here I am” of linguistic participation in a world beyond himself. Those Lacanian associations increase when he strikes the adopted parent McEachern at the dance hall. The oedipal violence of vanquishing the father ceases to be entirely literal and shifts to the symbolic. In assailing the elder McEachern with the chair, Christmas commits the “Shalt Not,” striking down the literal father, a scene Faulkner casts in the terms of the name-of-the-father in gesturing to the Ten Commandments. Light in August later repeats the scene of railing against the Father, down to the detail of wielding furniture, when Christmas suspends his own ambiguous escape to interrupt a revival hymnal to preach blasphemy from the pulpit, brandishing a bench leg. Whereas Popeye’s criminal psyche seems not entirely satisfactory—but either the best Faulkner could offer or what he considered his audience to expect—Christmas offers a much more complex figure in terms of his violence and its constituent causes. Still, a symbolic narrative larger than the self collapses back to the individual, the personal guilt of witnessing the primal scene. Faulkner returns to that admission for the adult Christmas, when he stops running and says to himself, “Here I am.” The recognition of self surrenders to consequence, and its verbatim repetition links the two moments, tracing his punishment back through his personal history to his emergent consciousness.
Christmas’s history is personal, its deployment determined, a chain of events tracking back through dysfunctional and racial sexual relationships, to an abusive father, to an unpunished theft of toothpaste. In that originary moment Faulkner seems again to almost parody a psychoanalytic subject, a psyche unable to abandon the burden of unconscious guilt. That sense of self is entirely singular, determined by the circumstances shaping Christmas’s character, the rich description taking place largely between the definition of the unconscious—“Memory believes before knowing remembers”—and Bobbie’s “that will do,” which halts Christmas’s beating, a command half-heard as he fades into unconsciousness.\(^{34}\) I am not suggesting that the development of Christmas’s character takes place outside of history, for the racing and gendering of the sexual violence that are the beginning and the end of his criminality are matters of social difference and its powerful inscription. Instead, it is a matter of emphasis on the relationship between subject and history—in effect, the location of agency. One of Light in August’s many narrators, Gavin Stevens, describes one of its other storytellers, Christmas’s grandmother Mrs. Hines, as narrating in terms that “had already been written and worded for her.”\(^{35}\) Stevens describes Christmas’s criminality in a similarly determined manner, criminality defined by his incarceration, itself built from “whatever crimes had molded him and shaped him and left him at last high and dry in a barred cell.”\(^{36}\) According to Stevens, the criminal is what events have made him.

These are two different sorts of determination, one of scripted events as foregone conclusions, the other as the sort of naturalism Richard Wright would employ eight years later in Native Son, a comparison Eric J. Sundquist makes as well in Faulkner: The House Divided. That sort of naturalist determination of criminality is also expressed by Howard A. McDonnell a year after the publication of Wright’s novel. McDonnell, a state representative in 1941, suggested in a speech in the Mississippi House of Representatives that “crime and criminals are the natural results of a given cause.”\(^{37}\) Still, regardless of whether narrative events are treated as scripted (“written and worded”) or as determined by environmental conditions, both sharply curtail agency. Such agency, or personal choice in a given circumstance, regularly serves as the axis between the determining forces of heredity and environment at the 1929 and 1930 APA conferences.\(^{38}\) However, what those forces of heredity and environment might be, specifically, remains unspoken in the discussions, and the question of
race is not raised. Indeed, the proceedings of the annual congress from 1929 to 1932 never substantively mention race, and a census of prisoners provided in the 1929 report makes no mention of it either.\footnote{39}

The history not recorded there is imagined in Faulkner’s writing. For Christmas, the fundamental indeterminate determination is racial difference, and blackness in the novel is regularly associated with criminality. At one point in \textit{Light in August}, the accusation of blackness is worse than that of murder. When Lucas Burch/Brown tells the marshal that Christmas is “a nigger,” the officer responds, “You had better be careful what you are saying if it is a white man you are talking about [. . . ] I don’t care if he is a murderer or not.”\footnote{40} To the sheriff, being called a “nigger” is imagined as worse than being a murderer. Such logic reads in reverse as well, that to be black is to be automatically a criminal, the ruthless irrational logic of racism in early-twentieth-century Mississippi. One white told a visitor in 1908, “When there is a row, we feel like killing a nigger whether he has done anything or not.”\footnote{41} Punishment does not actually require a crime when blackness and criminality are not separable in the cultural imagination of the early-twentieth-century South. To the townspeople of Jefferson, the two compound one another. Hearing of Burden’s death, they “believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too” (emphasis added).\footnote{42} Like the description of Christmas’s unconscious, which “knows remembers believes” half-truths of Christmas’s race and original sin, the town is of one mind and “knew, believed, and hoped” murder to be explicitly racial and sexualized.

Crucial to the town’s unconscious, then, is the fantasy of a black man’s rape of a white woman, an imagined event that inextricably binds lynching and execution even as it conceals the historical actuality of white male slave owners raping black women. \textit{Light in August} reveals the former while leaving the latter unspoken, and so it largely remains in Faulkner’s writing until \textit{Absalom, Absalom!} and to a far greater extent in \textit{Go Down, Moses}. \textit{Light in August} sees the imagined unity in blood vengeance fulfilled in Christmas’s execution on Grimm’s terms, directly hailing that fantasy: “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell.” It is toward this end that Christmas walks with an inevitability pervasive in the novel.\footnote{43}

He leaves the scene of Burden’s murder, “moving from his feet upward as death moves,” and thereafter sees, according to Stevens,
"an incipient executioner everywhere he look[s]." Given how any passersby might join a lynch mob, Christmas very well might see in any face a potential executioner. He perceives his position as held in tension between acted upon and acting ("Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something") before Burden’s death, and walks as if surrounded by executioners thereafter, but the killing is not the crux. Directly before the death drive of walking toward execution, he thinks, “I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo.” In fine modernist fashion, he is a circle enclosed on the outside. By race, deed, and name, he is the simultaneous capitulation and resistance to what other people have called him: “nigger,” Christian, McEachern. He repudiates the name of the father even as he assumes the implacable ruthless violence that defines his adopted parent, the aggression that colors his sexual behavior. In the last instance, he returns to the beginning, as circles do, in the repetition of “here I am” that binds the commission of murder with the originary moment, in which the perceived crime of toothpaste theft remains inextricable from the observation of the primal scene.

Like the issue of his race, Christmas’s death as lynching or execution maintains the ambiguity, the resolute tension of both-and. Rather than strictly the fulfillment of either the death wish of the condemned or the capricious cruelty of an omnipotent opponent, Christmas’s execution ends for him—if not for the community—the play of tensions, of ambiguities of character and action. The uncertainty of his blackness and parenthood occupy the central ambiguity of a character encased in nonabsolutes. Is he black or white? Was Joanna’s death murder or self-defense? Is his death an execution or a lynching? For Faulkner too there is that unknowability, the complex and contradictory senses of race, crime, and justice. Nowhere is that “is–is not” of the riven self made more clear than in the writer’s equation of lynch mobs with juries in his belief that both “have a way of being right” from the letter cited earlier and printed a year before *Light in August*.

There is no such rightness in Christmas’s death and mutilation, committed with sufficient savagery to see one would-be executioner vomit, another circular return at the character’s death to the vomit of his primal scene. Faulkner offers the violence as tragic, then transcendent, in the dying Christmas, a romantic assumption wherein the character ascends bodily into the community’s memory:
[Christmas] seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. Again from the town, deadened a little by its walls, the scream of the siren mounted toward its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing.\textsuperscript{46}

Christmas’s end in \textit{Light in August} is the first of its three closures, the other two being those of the Reverend Hightower and Lena Grove. The ironic romanticism of contest with a sportive God of Christmas’s last pages turns to the linguistic redemption of romantic style. The nameless, omniscient narrator foretells the future, knows the townspeople’s memories, present and future, “for ever and ever.” Christmas’s ghost somehow looms in Jefferson’s shared memory, forever harmless, calm, and somehow victorious. My repeated “somehow” draws attention to the indefinite quality of this description, the “seemed,” the three-times-repeated “whatever” of valleys, streams, and children in a town whose courthouses, churches, and jails disappear in this imagined future of natural and transcendental imagery: “streams of old age” where time is a river in which one might fish. The indefinite description makes that future history as inevitable, impotent, and all too late as the siren’s scream, which is “unbelievable” and fades to silence. The possibility for romantic redemption is worn-out, but it lacks a substitute. Similarly exhausted but without alternative is a psychoanalytic model of character, the cause of criminality and its attendant incarceration and execution in \textit{Sanctuary} and \textit{Light in August}.

\textbf{Invoking Jefferson’s “Corporate Limit”}

Ten years later, in \textit{Go Down, Moses}, Faulkner repudiated that model of criminality and, by extension, subject formation. There are similarities across the characterizations of Popeye, Christmas, and Beauchamp, who as criminals all play the role of the stereotypical gangster, the hardman. In \textit{Sentenced to Death}, Guest describes the characterization of the “hardened convict, or criminal ‘hardman’ [ . . . ] a cold-blooded,
unpredictable, and violent persona.” They are the definitive masculine traits of invulnerability, mastery, and activity. Christmas reproduces Popeye’s gangster caricature nearly to the last detail, with his sloping hat and drooping cigarette, his casual violence and more casual crime of selling liquor, and the rumors of business with a gun in Memphis. In *Go Down, Moses*, Butch is literally hard, his face “impenetrable,” his hair “lacquered” and head “bronze,” his name “Butch” a parody of masculinity, and he answers the census-taker question about what will happen to his corpse with the words of the hardman: “What will that matter to me?” The hardman does not resist his death sentence but, according to Guest, “accepts it and seems to welcome death.”

Like Christmas, Butch plays the hardman. However, their means of each becoming that way differs dramatically between the novels. Instead of personal history as the first cause of criminality—the sum of determining forces embodied in a single life but nevertheless traceable to an originating moment—Faulkner creates a larger social frame, history as the tracing backward of genealogy. Whereas Quentin Compson cuts his psychology class in *The Sound and the Fury* in order to play his own analysand in the talking cure of stream of consciousness narrative, the schooling offered by Cass and Ike at the heart of “The Bear” is history. They read the records of the ledgers to envision and revise a narrative of their family and, by extension, the South. *Go Down, Moses* ends as the original text of *Sanctuary* opens; in the drafts prior to its final publication, *Sanctuary* began with a black man accused of murder awaiting his execution. Butch, like Popeye, is condemned for the murder of a policeman. Popeye offers no defense, and Butch does not offer much of one either, though what he says of himself is at least true of Popeye: “It was another guy killed the cop.” The substitution of accusation for actuality in the case of Popeye is a sheer unknown for Butch, for readers are never sure whether Butch did in fact kill anyone. That ambiguity features in Christmas’s crime as well, as his murder of Burden is at least partly self-defense. Nevertheless, while their respective narratives leave undecided, or at least problematic, the question of agency in the commission of crime, all three characters are named as criminals in courts, which the APA’s first principle defines as separate from the commission of crime.

The novels themselves cannot fully resolve that uncertainty, as the moments of the crimes do not appear in the narrative; with regard to punishment, only Christmas’s death takes place in the story.
narration of Popeye’s execution stops just short of his actual death, as
the sheriff opens the trapdoor of the hanging scaffold, and the descrip-
tion does not as closely approach Butch’s end. Readers encounter
him in his cell the day before his execution and then afterward, as
his casket arrives in Jefferson. Most important, though, is the lack of
an explanatory personal history for Butch’s criminality. The explana-
tion of biography offered for Popeye and Christmas lacks a parallel
in the case of Butch, one end of the McCaslin genealogy. Like Edgar
Allan Poe’s Fortunato, Beauchamp arrives only to be sealed away
behind walls, to his death, for reasons obscure and unavailable. The
little that readers do know of Beauchamp’s past they know through
District Attorney Stevens’s remembered reading of the “papers of that
business,” the authoritative discourse that scripts the condemned man
as “some seed not only violent but dangerous and bad.”
However, that narrative explanation is not the only one available, and the reader
possesses the preceding episodes of the novel, also “papers of that
business,” which offer a competing narrative, an entire other dis-
course. That narrative, with its chronicle of miscegenation and sexual
violence, of tangled or misplaced desires, writes a history of character
thematically similar to Christmas’s: raced and gendered violence shap-
ing the acts that make the criminal, the prisoner. However, Butch’s
story is different in terms of scope, and he is claimed by a social body
extending beyond his own skin.
I am highlighting distinctions of individual and social subjects
and their histories as well as distinctions between atomistic and social
senses of selfhood, because the process of individuation is one means
by which institutional forces such as incarceration function. Discus-
sions at the annual APA meetings were rife with the aim of indi-
vidualization: “We must learn to individualize”; “Throughout our
prisons we need individualization.”
That repeated imperative seems most often to refer to treating prisoners either, in humanist fashion,
as unique individuals, or, in line with Adler, as the products of their
respective personal histories. However, there is a less-favorable read-
ing available that more closely resembles the Foucauldian prisoner,
the disciplined subject. Individuals and the means of their produc-
tion are framed in two specific claims made at the APA conference
at moments contemporaneous to the publications of Light in August
and Go Down, Moses. One member, Maud Ballington Booth, was
in 1932 a sufficiently prominent Volunteer of America and member
of the APA to the extent that she received a standing ovation in
introducing another speaker later in the conference, and years later had a service award named in her honor. In her presentation, “Individualization in Prisons,” she describes the means of making prisoners into individuals in terms of work and emotion. They should perform hard labor, she argues, to earn personal, congratulatory attention from wardens and officers. She suggests that the discipline of such work and its rote affective response will transform convicts into soldiers, prepared so that upon leaving prison, “they go out into the world and they take up that burden and they fight that battle.” Recognition as reward purposed to further good works sutures the rhetoric of hailed individuality—Althusser’s “hey, you there!”—to the Victorian hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers,” made popular as a marching tune in the early twentieth century.

Ten years after Booth’s speech, the rhetoric of war became tenuous in the context of actual overseas battles, and required revision. The 1942 APA conference proceedings include much commentary on the role of the prison system in wartime. One lecture in particular focuses on military service and the psychopathology of criminality and determines that some released, paroled, or even current prisoners may be drafted for military service—such as is the case of Lee Goodwin’s service in World War I in Sanctuary. However, the contention is that those with long records of even minor criminality must not serve. Even if such a person has only a single and minor conviction, a long arrest record (even without conviction) demonstrates “a wholly undesirable fellow,” a psychopath, discipline problem, or gangster. Given that a record of arrest rather than conviction determines the nature of such a prisoner, the truth of guilt is legislated not by the judicial system but, rather, by the police, the prison board, and the Selective Service. Such a practice is the sort Foucault critiques in his analysis of a prison system that continues surveillance of released prisoners and “pursues as a ‘delinquent’ someone who has acquitted himself as an offender.” The surveillance of records thus produces the psychopath and gangster through the selective reading of criminal history. The armed forces cannot draft such a man, because he already is a soldier, one at war with the United States.

For governing bodies to interpret criminals as being at war with the United States effectively legitimizes violence against them. One defining principle of a nation-state is its right to the enactment of violence; such is the legality of war. Imprisonment—the forcible incarceration of a citizen or a population—demonstrates one means
by which a nation-state wages war on its own people, and execution demonstrates the most severe expression of that war. Isolating inmates demonstrates the military strategy of defeat in detail, where an army beset by a superior number isolates one component of that force to develop localized superiority. There is a race-based precedent for this dating back to the eighteenth century, when Boston Selectmen proclaimed, “If more than two Indians, Negroes or Mulatto servants or slaves were to be found in the streets or highways [. . .] every one so found shall be punished at the House of Correction.” The eighteenth-century ruling is one of white racist hysteria manifesting itself in the refusal to allow (even to the extent of criminalizing) any social body distinct from its own whiteness.

The military metaphor of divide and conquer seems particularly apt in the case of incarceration, given the understanding that defeat in detail, when applied to prisons, presumes at some level the superior numbers of criminals—which is true inside prisons, where there are proportionally fewer correctional officers and administration. In the South of the early twentieth century, those numbers were similarly disproportionate, and Faulkner’s account of Yoknapatawpha County’s population as “Whites, 6298; Negroes, 9313,” in the map included in the first edition of Absalom, Absalom!, speaks to actual population disparities in Mississippi. Jim crow–era laws, through such ill-defined “crimes” as mischief and loitering, effectively criminalized blackness. Criminalization and incarceration therefore function as a strategy of racial containment; individuation demonstrates the fullest extent of that detail, and execution is the grimmest defeat. Prisons defeat in detail through isolation, producing individuals in order to overcome them, and the death penalty does so absolutely. Such individuation, then, favors biographical first causes and the personal histories of Popeye and Christmas.

Go Down, Moses, however, presents a different case. Instead of a personal story as diagnostic biography, a social and genealogical history is the only explanation readers have for Butch’s criminality and execution. At one point in Light in August, Gavin Stevens suggests that Christmas literally embodies the conflict of black blood and white blood. The conflict between black and white blood ending in Butch is staged not in his singular body, but in the sequence of battles perpetuated through the book—the incest and miscegenation that make the book and Butch (the text and the character both) end in death row and the return to Jefferson. The contests of black and white
blood begin with Carothers McCaslin’s presumed rape of Eunice and their daughter, Tomasina, and continue in her son, Tomey’s Turl, fleeing from his half brothers and dealing the cards to Hubert Beauchamp. The blood feud carries on in Lucas’s violent physical contest with Zack and battle of wits with Roth thereafter, the same Roth who sees Butch leave Jefferson. Butch lacks a personal diagnostic biography, but his genealogy locates him as having emerged from a history of racial violence.

At first glance, Christmas and Butch, their deaths, and the histories that precede them all seem quite different. Readers have substantial access to Christmas’s thoughts, actions, and perceptions leading up to his crime and following it, and we have a fairly clear sense of Joanna Burden’s death. Beauchamp remains a cipher, his story brief, the murdered policeman unknown, and Butch’s own culpability for the crime far less known than Christmas’s. Also, Faulkner renders Christmas’s execution at the hands of a single rogue deputy in horrific detail, while the scene of Beauchamp’s death by anonymous penitentiary officials is textually absent. Christmas’s personal history, which much of the novel comprises, offers the forces of race, childhood experience, and circumstance to shape the hand that holds the razor. Since we know virtually nothing of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp’s narrative, it is neither Sanctuary’s brief interlude of Freudian coda nor Light in August’s lengthier description of Christmas’s upbringing, but the acts of generations scripting his end. However, despite the differences between the streams of action that lead to the executions, and to the wake that follows each, Faulkner includes textual cues that suggest and even demand a paired reading, particularly in the dual appearances of District Attorney Gavin Stevens.

Stevens appears at the close of each novel as a sort of psychopomp, shepherd of the dead and arranger of funerals. In each case, he negotiates with the condemned men’s grandmothers to make sense of the raced deaths of their grandsons. In Light in August, Stevens is the “District Attorney, a Harvard graduate, a Phi Beta Kappa: a tall, loosejointed man with a constant cob pipe, with an untidy mop of irongray hair, wearing always loose and unpressed dark gray clothes.”59 Clearly Faulkner has his mind on that description when he writes the attorney ten years later in Go Down, Moses as having “a wild shock of prematurely white hair,” “a thin, intelligent, unstable face, a rumpled linen suit [ . . . ] Phi Beta Kappa, Harvard, Ph.D.”60 In the earlier novel, the lawyer imagines Christmas’s end for his friend
the professor, a proxy for readers of the novel. He plays the role
Shreve makes axiomatic for Faulkner’s most acclaimed work, the “let
me play a while now,” toward which so many scholars have ges-
tured as the crux of Faulkner’s most involved narratives, the hinge
of meaning making where various audiences, including readers, share
in narration.

Part of Stevens’s play in the narrative is a lengthy account of
Christmas’s vexed escape attempt, which the attorney describes in
terms of competing black and white blood. Faulkner critic Jay Watson
indicts that racializing as “at best shaky, at worst racist and absurd.”
However, Stevens undercuts his narrative authority with regard to
what the grandmother, Mrs. Hines, might have told Christmas before
his doomed escape, when he admits, “But of course I don’t know
what she told him. I don’t believe that any man could reconstruct that
scene.” Not any single narrator in *Light in August* can tell the story,
but a decade later, several might. Narrative reconstruction is method
and topic of that central section of “The Bear,” where Cass and Ike
mirror Shreve and Quentin, retelling not only much of the narrative
to that point, but also the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The Gavin Stevens at the end of *Go Down, Moses* does not tell
the story of Butch, whom he knows, remembers, and believes to be a
“bad seed”; he does not because he cannot. Instead of assuming the
role of narrator for a story not his own, as does the deputy who
tells Rider’s story but remains unmoved by it, Stevens is less narra-
tor than actor at the end, less unmoved than constantly in motion
through Jefferson’s square, from his office to that of the newspaper
editor, back to his office, back to the newspaper, then from “store to
store and office to office about the square,” then to Miss Worsham’s.
Stevens is no analysand on a couch, but a man of two minds out in
the city, believing Butch a “bad seed” but offering time and money
for his return. Stevens has added to Worsham’s twenty-five dollars
what change he collects from the businesses in the square and nearly
two hundred dollars out of his and the editor’s pockets to buy Butch’s
passage back to Jefferson.

That return figures differently to those who bring him back, and
not only in terms of money. To his grandmother, Molly Worsham
Beauchamp, Butch operates in symbolic, biblical terms—Benjamin
sold by pharaoh; to Stevens, Butch is the responsibility of a white,
middle-class community. While first convinced that the death that
has not happened yet can be ignored or concealed, Stevens, at the
unmade bequest of a woman he barely knows, ends up footing much of the bill—in labor, time, and money—for bringing the body back to Jefferson. His act is an acknowledgment of half-understood responsibility. In *Light in August*, Christmas bears a personal guilt, which sets him to self-destructive behavior such as taking the braggart Lucas as his partner in the moonshine operation or confronting the black parishioners. *Go Down, Moses*, in contrast, features a social responsibility in Stevens’s work to have the town bring home its own, funds gathered as coins in a door-to-door mission to retrieve a man described in Stevens’s own words as “a dead nigger” but acknowledged in his effort as a native son of Jefferson.66

Stevens’s concluding actions and their result demonstrate a far richer model of community than the singular town whose memory Christmas is to haunt. Beauchamp does not vanish into memory but returns to become materially present in town, as the funeral procession circles the twin bastions of the New South, the “Confederate monument and the courthouse,”67 to bury him just outside it. The sign passed—“Jefferson. Corporate Limit”—marks Butch’s return to the social body, his life and death to be recorded in the public voice of the local newspaper at Molly’s demand. Butch’s relationship with the social sphere, then, represents a different sort from that of Christmas, the mixed-race criminal of a decade before. Faulkner offers Christmas’s isolated individuality in terms of an atomistic self, and the location of that self—“Here I am”—is an acceptance of punishment. Elsewhere in *Light in August*, Byron Bunch describes that self-declaration as “I-Am,” “the relinquishment of which is usually death.”68 Ten years later, in *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner’s Beauchamp is claimed by a wider social system that acknowledges his body as part of a “We-Are” when he returns to the town’s corporate body, the simultaneity of collective and singular that is Jefferson. In *Light in August*, Jefferson as a town often has a single and typically white point of view. Of Bunch’s Saturday work, “the town itself or that part of it which remembers or thinks about him, believe that he does it for the overtime.”69 That unified point of view appears again at Christmas’s death and assumption to memory, when Jefferson knows, remembers, and believes as one mind.

The differences between this conclusion and the one of *Go Down, Moses* are tremendous. Jefferson’s town square in the latter novel is not that a priori monolith, but is divided far more deeply. Stevens must call on the town’s members individually in his breathless request for
funeral funds: “It’s to bring a dead nigger home. It’s for Miss Worsham. Never mind about a paper to sign; just give me a dollar. Or a half a dollar then. Or a quarter then.”\textsuperscript{70} Like Lucas facing Zack in the novel’s episode “The Fire and the Hearth,” Gavin is going to do something, then other people are going to do something, and then it will all end, and be all right.

Of course, it will not be all right. History is not corrected so easily; accounts are not so simply set in balance. However, Stevens succeeds in some regard when he hails townspeople, calling on them with his rote speech for donation without writ petition or receipt, a sort of Progressive activist. What he gains offsets his and the editor’s personal expenditure, but the change largely gathers the crowd itself, the body of people to receive the casket, a reception narrated not as one unified memory or a single opinion, but as a crowd described in the differences of those who come to watch. They are “the number of people, Negroes and whites both.” They are the “idle white men and youths and small boys and probably half a hundred Negroes, men and women too.” They are those “who had given Stevens the dollars and half-dollars and quarters and the ones who had not.”\textsuperscript{71} No longer a monolith, Jefferson is now black and white, young and old, men and women, jobless and workers and businessmen, an audience made of their differences of race, age, gender, and class that nevertheless, however briefly, becomes one crowd of watchers to witness the history that Molly demands be recorded. It is no request she makes of the editor, but a command: “You put hit in de paper. All of hit.”\textsuperscript{72} Where Christmas somehow enters an imaginary, unconscious memory of a singular town, Butch’s staged return before an audience and entry into the records of history are conceived and midwifed, bought and paid for by four people working and paying together, the four who ride behind the body: Molly Beauchamp, Miss Worsham, the newspaper editor, and Stevens.

I do not mean to suggest that Butch’s funeral and the audience for that return are the saving grace of \textit{Go Down, Moses}, its relief, a reparation or absolution of racial injustice, letting anyone off the hook. Faulkner describes the editor and the attorney in an ironic register, as “the designated paladin of justice and truth and right” and “the Heidelberg Ph.D.,” respectively.\textsuperscript{73} Their acceptance of responsibility is constantly forced upon them, directed by others—“other” in terms of race and gender—such as Molly Beauchamp and Miss Worsham. Stevens agrees to account for Butch’s death, to become responsible
in a manner that does not level the balance but acknowledges the existence of a racial debt.

Many critics have missed this. Erik Dussere compares the ledgers in the fourth section of “The Bear” in Go Down, Moses with Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987) and Sula (1982) to draw excellent points regarding the challenge to and impossibility of balancing the historical debt of slavery. However, by restricting his reading of Go Down, Moses entirely to “The Bear”—a common misreading of the novel—he misses the role Butch’s return plays. Phillip Weinstein, rather than ignoring him entirely, reads Butch as “not there” and at some level Faulkner’s failure. Similarly, Eric Sundquist suggests Go Down, Moses would be better off without Butch, a consequence of the aforementioned common misreading of the text as primarily or only Isaac McCaslin’s story. In Sundquist’s survey of Faulkner’s writing from 1929 to 1942 and in a landmark critique, an early component of the more historically and culturally nuanced approaches developed in Americanist study through the 1980s and 1990s, he suggests that Go Down, Moses would be improved if it ended with “Delta Autumn.”

I am not suggesting that Butch is the novel’s focal point, a move akin to Thadious M. Davis’s gambit in Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses (2003) of treating Tomey’s Turl as the main character of the novel. However, reading him as “not there” or wishing him gone misreads what I am suggesting is one of the dominant narrative trajectories that structure the novel, which is not a novel of Aristotelian accord of time and place, or one of organic unity and fulfilling the modernist emphasis on the external world interpreted by any particular consciousness. Instead, the framework for the novel is a patchwork history, disjointed and barely held together by the struggle for its making and telling, its span over a century, narratively suturing slavery to Jim Crow and lynching, to racial incarceration and execution. The fictional Northern court convicts Butch and sends him to death; however, the townspeople of Jefferson assemble as a court of public opinion present for his (and their) judgment. Lynching demonstrates the complete equation of courts of public opinion with judicial process in the execution of mob “justice”—such is the case in these novels for Goodwin, Christmas, and Rider. Go Down, Moses, in its final pages, presents a different resolution, in which Faulkner, through his proxy Stevens, painstakingly recalls the body of Butch and brings together a public to witness the return.
The analysis of Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, in particular, occupies a chapter of this book precisely because of that previously unremarked but crucial strand of narrative coherence. The cultural history the novel charts and its link of slavery to jim crow–era lynching and to incarceration provide an organizing principle, as they suggest a decisive response to the question critics have raised since the book’s publication as to whether it even has a discernible structure. Furthermore, to expect from the novel a conventional narrative gravitating around a main character has led many to misread Isaac McCaslin as the novel’s protagonist, irrespective of his absence from many of its episodes and conflicts. Doing so mistakenly places white masculinity at the center of history, even though much of the novel’s power develops through a black family’s resistance to both marginalization and various practices of racial control.

*Go Down, Moses* offers, in that last instance, a thick description of how history is staged in a community made up of the tension between singular and plural, a collective of individuals called together, however briefly. *Light in August* relies on an exhausted rhetoric of redemption to imagine social unity at Christmas’s death in the first of its three closures. *Sanctuary* does not even offer that much in its two endings, the first of which is the nearly parodic account of Popeye’s execution, when Popeye’s curt scaffold request for the sheriff to fix his hair receives the reply, “I’ll fix it for you,” as the trapdoor opens. That death sentence also precedes flights of language, though the turn to Temple seems not redemption but indictment. She departs with her father from a “gray day, a gray summer, a gray year” into dissolution, and in the final line into “the embrace of the season of rain and death.” *Go Down, Moses* does not rely on either strategy: the exhausted and unbelievable siren over Christmas’s assumption to collective memory, or the ironic dissonance of execution quips juxtaposed with Temple’s fading into a Baudelairean vignette in three anapests and an iamb. In contrast, Faulkner offers the two finales of the titular “Go Down, Moses” in the register of simple, circumstantial description, Butch stripped and shaved before his execution, and Stevens commenting that he has been away from his office these past two days.

Still, it is not Stevens’s last words but Butch’s final sentence that
grows richer in a reappraisal of the final section of the novel—“What will that matter to me?” In the atomistic terms of the hardman, it will not matter at all, for the death of the self is the end of history. However, it does not end there, because Butch does not end there. Stevens thinks it ends—“it’s all over and done and finished”—when Molly Beauchamp sees her grandson “come home right.”\textsuperscript{780} That echo of Lucas seems as unlikely to resolve finally the racial and filial tensions of Lucas’s own thoughts as he faces Zack: “He will do something and then I will do something and it will be all over.”\textsuperscript{81} Butch’s death and homecoming are recorded in the paper, written down, but that cannot finish the matter completely. As the ledger section of “The Bear” emphasizes, and what the novel’s reworking of Faulkner’s previous themes of criminality and human agency demonstrates, what is written down allows for its own reading and rewriting.

It has become something of an accepted practice to read Faulkner as writing a sort of Southern history in Yoknapatawpha County. Toni Morrison, whose own work, like Faulkner’s, shows a deep commitment to telling history, suggests that her investment in reading Faulkner and his “subjects had something to do with my desire to find out something about this country and that artistic articulation of its past that was not available in history.”\textsuperscript{82} In \textit{Go Down, Moses}, in particular, that history and its writing simultaneously remain personal and extend into a broader cultural frame. Michael Grimwood does well in treating Faulkner’s final version of \textit{Go Down, Moses} as the author’s redress for his negative stereotyping of blackness in some of the stories that, in their aggregate, served as an early draft of the novel.\textsuperscript{83}

However, there is a larger history and broader acknowledgment the novel makes. A provocative passage from \textit{Intruder in the Dust} proclaims that “not courthouses nor even churches but jails were the true records of a county’s, a community’s history,” and the Gavin Stevens of \textit{Requiem for a Nun} similarly locates “the history of a community” as being written in “the walls of the jail.”\textsuperscript{84} Those later novels demonstrate the racial expectation of criminality, as Lucas Beauchamp spends most of \textit{Intruder in the Dust} anticipating a lynch mob motivated because he refuses to “be a nigger,” and Nancy Mannigoe is termed ten times over a “nigger dope-fiend whore” or variations thereof.\textsuperscript{85} It is in \textit{Go Down, Moses} that Faulkner offers his first and fullest account of the historical process criminalizing blackness, where social history in large part defined by race shapes human agency, from Butch’s
presumed criminality to the community that sees the executed criminal return home. In Faulkner’s South, there are painful connections between lynching and execution, and between slavery and imprisonment. These too need to be put in the paper—so that, like Molly Beauchamp, we know where to look.