



Delta Down: The Plantationocene in William Faulkner's *Go*

Down, Moses

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Finally, I’d like to express my gratitude to the man, the myth, the legend himself—William Faulkner. I once spent many an afternoon reading and studying in the shade of Rowan Oak, trying to soak in a little inspiration from Oxford’s favorite son. Jokes aside, my alma mater is a reason this dissertation exists. As a bachelor’s student at the University of Mississippi, Faulkner was everywhere. Incoming freshmen pose with his statue in the Square (mine is buried somewhere in my camera roll), the campus is connected to his home by a walking trail through the woods, and his work is required reading.

At graduation, we’re told that “one never graduates from Ole Miss.” Perhaps that is true, as I ended up spending two years of my life researching William Faulkner and immersing myself in Lafayette, ahem, Yoknapatawpha, County from Barcelona, and later Venice. While it feels somewhat ironic to study Faulkner across the Atlantic when I once completed writing assignments in his backyard, it was comforting to have that connection to home through the work.

Abstract

This dissertation examines William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942) through the Plantationocene, a framework that names the exploitation of land and the displacement of people as prerequisites for extraction. Where scholarship has often treated the novel's racial and environmental concerns as competing claims, and its seven parts as separable units, this dissertation argues that the Plantationocene holds the two together, a unity the novel's polyvocality reveals only when read whole. Working through the cycle, it traces how the plantation persists in "Was" and "The Fire and the Hearth" through contested inheritance and kinship, how the Big Woods of the hunting stories have already been long incorporated into the plantation logic rather than a refuge from it, and how the novel's most marginalized sections—part four of "The Bear," "Pantaloon in Black," and the title story—expose what the plantation's persistence costs. *Go Down, Moses*, it concludes, is neither a racial novel nor an environmental one, but a novel that reveals the two were never separate as it demonstrates the different ways the system is still at work.

Key Words: Plantationocene, short story cycle, Southern Gothic, econarratology

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Introduction

William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942) occupies an unusual position in American literary scholarship. It has long been recognized as one of his most prominent novels about race in the post-Civil War South, documenting the fraught interactions of white and Black Southerners across multiple generations of a single Mississippi family. It has also been a point of debate whether it is a novel or a short story collection, with the consensus being that it is a novel made up of short stories, also called a short story cycle. Yet it has also attracted significant attention for its environmental themes, particularly in the hunting trilogy at its center. As Matt Low observes, the novel "ended more as a race book than as an environmental book" (Low 54)—a characterization that, while understandable, poses a false choice. This thesis argues that *Go Down, Moses* is both, and that the Plantationocene provides the framework to reconcile the two. The plantation's legacy in Faulkner's novel is inseparable from its ecological legacy: the same system that exploited people exploited land, and the novel's haunted landscapes bear the traces of both.

As someone raised just an hour-and-a-half drive from Faulkner's Oxford, Mississippi, I know the paradox of the rural American South all too well. Its nature is incredibly beautiful and lush, but it exists amidst widespread environmental destruction, decay, poverty, political corruption, and a dark, complicated history. Faulkner's warnings against deforestation have gone unheeded in the decades following the novel's publication and splintered stumps, sawmills, and log trucks rumbling up and down highways and back roads are a regular sight as even the last of the region's forests are under threat. It felt appropriate, then, to approach his work from an environmental perspective—not instead of a racial one, but alongside it, and through a framework that insists the two cannot be separated.

That framework is the Plantationocene, a term coined by scholar Donna Haraway in 2015 and further developed in the 2022 collective volume *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth*, whose editors define it as “the planetary impacts of the exploitation of natural resources, monoculture expansion, and forcible labor” (Edwards 105). As Haraway describes it, the Plantationocene predates the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene: it directs attention to the systematic relocation of generative units, i.e. plants, animals, and people, as a prerequisite for extraction, a logic that begins long before the industrial revolution and continues to shape landscapes and populations long after formal slavery ends (Haraway 24). In Mississippi, the plantation system was replaced by sharecropping, a structure in which white landowners continued to benefit from the exploitation of African Americans while the land continued to bear the cost. For Elizabeth Russ, the plantation does not simply disappear after emancipation—it becomes a narrative mode, “the crucial narrative mode” of the postslavery American South, the Caribbean, and Brazil, subsuming the Gothic itself (Kreyling 233). Its legacy stretches back to the displacement and erasure of Native populations, leaving landscapes and people permanently altered.

What makes *Go Down, Moses* distinctive within this framework is that Faulkner routes the Plantationocene primarily through kinship and inheritance rather than through land cultivation alone. The Plantationocene focuses on what the exploitation of land and the relocation of labor looks like materially. Faulkner is interested in what it produces genealogically: the denied bloodlines, the contested claims, the inheritances that cannot be acknowledged because of race. The questions of kinship that permeate the novel only exist because of the legacy of the plantation. As Jennifer Smith argues in her chapter examining *Go Down, Moses* as a short story cycle, the novel’s structure reflects this cyclical logic: “the actions and attitudes of the past repeat one hundred years later,” and Isaac McCaslin’s grand act of renouncing his inheritance of the family

plantation is, in the end, an act of doing nothing (Smith 137). The title itself references this: Moses had to go down into slavery to be delivered, and the novel's characters are still waiting for that deliverance.

Faulkner's setting in *Go Down, Moses*, functions, as Smith describes it, as "a series of concentric circles that become entangled because of an embattled construction of Southern identity," with the McCaslin farm at the center, his fictional Yoknapatawpha County surrounding it, the South encircling that, and the nation beyond (Smith 122). Read through a Plantationocene lens, this nested geography situates the novel within the ongoing legacy of the plantation at every scale, through different characters and different time periods. The novel's landscapes are not backdrops. They are, as Sivils argues of the Southern Gothic more broadly, "dynamic and even anthropomorphized" entities inseparable from the human histories inscribed on them (Sivils 83), revealing "a cyclical trauma, in which artefacts of injustice are buried, unearthed, mourned and reborn, so as to haunt humanity anew" (Sivils 89). As Dolores Flores-Silva and Keith Cartwright write of *Go Down, Moses* specifically, "the posthumous presences go beyond human remains to include animals, forests, the land itself" (Flores-Silva 43). The dead in this novel are not only human. In *Go Down, Moses*, the inheritance of the McCaslin family and the inheritance of the land are the same: fragmentation and loss.

This is the terrain of the Southern Gothic—and its modernist form. The Gothic has always been, as Allan Lloyd-Smith summarizes it, "about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit" (Corstorphine 112). The Southern Gothic intensifies this: as Sivils argues, by chaining the trauma of racial oppression to the land itself, Southern Gothic writers ensured that those anxieties exceeded their regional context, haunting the national culture as much as the local

one (Sivils 89). But Faulkner's Gothic does not contain its hauntings in a space apart. In traditional Gothic, as Flores-Silva and Cartwright observe, the borders between the haunted and the habitable were relatively stable; the specter inhabited the castle, the attic, the wilderness, spaces set apart from ordinary social life. In modernist Gothic, and especially in Faulkner, "there is no such containment" (Flores-Silva 38). The haunted and the habitable are the same space. *Go Down, Moses* is, in their words, "the book in which the haunting curse is at its most expansive and dispersed" (Flores-Silva 41), dispersed across landscapes, bloodlines, generations, and the novel's own fractured form as a novel made up of short stories.

Faulkner scholarship has increasingly engaged with his ecological concerns. When the Thirtieth Annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference centered on Faulkner's ecology in 2003, scholars including François Pitavy, Philip Weinstein, Joseph Uργο, and Ann Fisher-Wirth began to examine his work through an ecocritical lens. More recently, Zachary Vernon has reinvigorated these discussions by incorporating frameworks such as plant studies. Yet fewer studies have examined how Faulkner's narrative form itself shapes the novel's ecological concerns, or approached *Go Down, Moses* as an interconnected whole rather than extracting "The Bear" as a standalone environmental text, or focusing on the Ike-centered stories. This thesis seeks to bridge that gap.

To do so, it draws on ecopoetics and econarratology alongside the Plantationocene framework. Cheryll Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as a field that centers the Earth in literary analysis, exploring how literature interacts with the physical environment (Campos xi). Ecopoetics extends this by attending to figurative language, metaphor, and poetic form. As Scott Knickerbocker argues, echoing Neil Evernden, "environmentalism without aesthetics is merely regional planning" (Knickerbocker 3): it is aesthetic experience that ultimately moves people.

Econarratology, defined as “the paired consideration of material environments and their representations and narrative forms of understanding” (James 1), examines how narrative elements like time, perspective, characterization, and structure shape our understanding of the environment. Together, these frameworks allow me to approach *Go Down, Moses* as a text where meaning emerges not just through content but through the way the story is told. The novel’s fragmented structure, its shifting perspectives, and even its unreliable archives in “The Bear” are not formal quirks but ecological and ethical arguments.

This thesis is organized into three chapters, each examining a different dimension of the Plantationocene in *Go Down, Moses*. Together they argue that the plantation is not a nostalgic historical period the novel mourns but a structure it traces across every landscape the novel inhabits—the farm, the wilderness, and the spaces in between.

The first chapter, “The Old Haughty Ancestral Pride,” examines the novel’s two opening stories, “Was” and “The Fire and the Hearth,” which are the only stories principally set on the McCaslin plantation itself. Through the darkly comedic courtships of “Was” and the gold fever and moonshining of “The Fire and the Hearth,” Faulkner establishes the plantation not as a backdrop but as an active system still organizing kinship, inheritance, and racial power in the post-slavery South. The chapter focuses on the novel’s multiple protagonists, particularly the competing claims of Ike McCaslin and Lucas Beauchamp as McCaslin heirs, to argue that the plantation’s legacy manifests most visibly not in land use but in the contested and denied systems of inheritance that structure every relationship in the novel.

The second chapter, “Most of That Was Gone Now”, turns to the hunting trilogy—“The Old People,” “The Bear,” and “Delta Autumn”—which has most often been read in isolation as an example of Faulkner’s environmental fiction. These stories follow Isaac McCaslin’s coming-of-

age in the Big Woods and his mythmaking around the wilderness as a sacred, timeless space separate from the plantation's sins. This chapter argues against that separation. The wilderness of *Go Down, Moses* was never outside the Plantationocene: it was owned, worked with slave labor, sold for timber, and converted into farmland within a single lifetime. Ike's tragedy is not that the wilderness disappears but that he cannot recognize it was never the refuge he imagined. His "not yet," or rather the deferral of moral responsibility into an indefinite future, is inseparable from his inability to see the wilderness and the plantation as part of the same system.

The third chapter, "Pharaoh Got Him," examines three sections of the novel most frequently treated as peripheral: part four of "The Bear," "Pantaloon in Black," and the final story, "Go Down, Moses." This chapter argues that their apparent outlier status is precisely what makes them essential. It is in these sections, where the family saga falls away and the mythmaking stops, that the Plantationocene becomes most legible. Part four of "The Bear" returns from the wilderness to the plantation as Ike reads the family ledgers, a fragmented, selective archive that mirrors the novel's own formal strategies. "Pantaloon in Black" shows the Plantationocene in its most immediate and violent form, following Rider, a Black tenant with no McCaslin connection and no claim to any landscape, through a story that ends in lynching and offers no nostalgic haze. The final story brings Lucas and Mollie's grandson home from a Chicago prison in a casket, making visible what Ike's deferral costs: not in the abstract language of curses, but in specific, named deaths. Together these three sections demonstrate that the Plantationocene is not a past the novel mourns but a structure it shows still operating, still extracting, still determining who breathes and who does not.

Guided by these frameworks, this thesis asks: How do Southern Gothic tropes in *Go Down, Moses* function as a critique of environmental destruction? How does the novel's shifting narrative

form reflect the changing and contested landscapes it inhabits? And how does its fragmented structure mirror the McCaslin family's fractured history and estranged relationship to the land? This thesis argues that Faulkner uses Southern Gothic literary devices—decay, haunting, loss, shifting narrative styles, and fragmented structures—to critique the ecological consequences of the plantation system's persistence and transformation in the American South. The Plantationocene framework allows us to approach *Go Down, Moses* not simply as a racial novel or an environmental novel but one that acknowledges and shows how the two are not separate after all.

“The Old Haughty Ancestral Pride”: Plantation and Kinship

It is no coincidence that *Go Down, Moses* begins with two stories explicitly set on the McCaslin farm: “Was” and “The Fire and the Hearth.” As my introduction establishes, the novel’s geographies are entangled from the start—the McCaslin farm at the center, its plantation legacy bleeding into the county, the South, and the nation beyond. Read through a Plantationocene lens, this entanglement is not only spatial but temporal with the plantation’s legacy persisting across the decades that separate the novel’s stories. While “Was” takes place during the plantation’s operation, “The Fire and the Hearth” unfolds within the post-slavery sharecropping system of the early twentieth-century South, linking the “Old” and “New” South through a single locality. Through these opening stories, *Go Down, Moses* frames the plantation as a persistent ecological and social system that continues to shape kinship, inheritance, and racial power long after the formal end of slavery.

Go Down, Moses begins with “Was,” a comedy set—as the title suggests—in the past. While the plot of this story reads as a darkly comedic courtship (Polk 76), it opens in an odd way, namely with a page and a half dedicated to a description of Isaac (“Ike”) McCaslin’s renunciation of his inheritance, though this character apparently has nothing to do with the events of the story and will not appear in the novel until “The Old People,” three stories later. This structural choice foregrounds the novel’s preoccupation with inheritance even before it properly introduces its central heir. Smith describes this first section as an overture: “Just as an overture establishes major themes and melodies in a symphony or musical, this section establishes the major themes, characters, and events in the cycle” (Smith 117). The events of “Was” are narrated by Ike’s cousin Cass and take place before his birth. Ike’s inclusion in the opening pages of this story in the opening pages of the novel establishes and reinforces how *Go Down, Moses* questions ownership.

It is clear before the events even begin that Ike is considered to be the rightful heir, yet Ike is described as someone “who in all his life had owned but one object more than he could wear and carry in his pockets and his hands at one time, and this was the narrow iron cot and the stained lean mattress which he used camping in the woods for deer and bear or for fishing or simply because he loved the woods; who owned no property and never desired to since the earth was no man’s but all men’s, as light and air and weather were...” (Faulkner 3). While “Was” tells the story of Ike’s parents’ “courtship” and how he came to exist as an heir, the reader knows from the outset that he ultimately will give it all up. This first section establishes the question of land ownership and inheritance that permeates the entire novel, questions that are directly tied to the locality of the McCaslin plantation in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and the plantation system. The introduction of Ike long before his character appears takes away the autonomy of “Was” as a short story, tying it together with the rest of the cycle and letting the reader know that the stories are all connected in some way. In this way, the novel reframes the legacy of the plantation—central to a Plantationocene reading—not primarily through land use, but through contested systems of inheritance.

Once Ike’s introduction gives way to the plot, the legitimacy of inheritance is even more uncertain. There are two courtships at work here. Both, however, undermine the stability of lineage on which plantation inheritance depends. The first is that of Isaac’s mother and father, which was more the result of a card game than affection or desire to marry. Isaac’s father, nicknamed Buck, lived with his twin brother, two proud bachelors in their sixties who were so against marriage that they did everything they could to avoid the women of the county. As Noel Polk argues, this insularity becomes an inevitability in a family invested in “pure blood,” producing a closed system that leads to forms of incest (even if emotional) and, ultimately, isolation (Polk 72). The aging

twin brothers have settled into their own dynamic that is reminiscent of a romantic relationship. One is more domestic, one is more stereotypically “manly.” This arrangement exposes how dependent inheritance is on a conventional family structure that, here, is not present since the likelihood of a direct male heir appears low throughout most of the story. The most obvious heir apparent is their great-nephew Cass, who descends from their sister, a lineage seen as less legitimate in a patrilineal system of inheritance. Yet, it is revealed that there is another potential heir, further complicating an already unstable system of inheritance and underscoring how precarious claims to ownership are within the plantation framework.

The second courtship centers on Tomey’s Turl and Tennie. While Buck goes to the altar reluctantly, Tomey’s Turl and Tennie appear to be genuinely in love. The events of “Was” revolve around bringing Tomey’s Turl, an enslaved man, back to the McCaslin plantation after he runs away to be with Tennie on a neighboring plantation. However, it is quickly revealed that Tomey’s Turl is Buck and Buddy’s half-brother—the son of their father Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin and an enslaved woman he owned—a fact that is treated as relatively common knowledge, as their neighbor Mr. Hubert remarks, “he wouldn’t have that damn white half-McCaslin on his place even as a free gift” (Faulkner 6). Within a patrilineal system stripped of its racial logic, Tomey’s Turl’s claim to the McCaslin inheritance would equal Buck and Buddy’s and supersede Cass’s, a point of contention throughout the novel and especially in “The Fire and the Hearth.”

Despite Faulkner’s characters carrying a nostalgic, albeit complicated, view of the past in the later stories, there is nothing nostalgic or romanticized about the neighboring plantations of “Was.” There is an atmosphere of decay and stagnancy throughout the story. The houses are incomplete and have rotten floorboards, Miss Sophonsiba’s dead (or “roan”) tooth is described a few times, and the white brothers are chasing down their Black half-brother as if he were an animal

with allusions between chasing Tomey's Turl and a fox. Furthermore, Buck, Buddy, and Hubert are all aging bachelors and while Miss Sophonsiba's age is unknown, she is apparently desperate enough for a match that she unceasingly pursues the very disinterested and aging Uncle Buck, and Hubert keeps trying to trick or bribe him into marrying her. If, as Smith says, the McCaslin plantation has all the generic markers of a more nostalgic reading, such as, "the restored big house, the long family lineage, and the sharecroppers and renters who are the descendants of former slaves" (Smith 123), the sense of decay and subversion present in this story undercuts this idea. Buck and Buddy live in what were the slave cabins while the slaves live in the big house. Their main complaint about going to bring back Tomey's Turl is concern over one of them getting trapped into marriage with Miss Sophonisba rather than retrieving an escaped slave. Later, in "The Bear," it is revealed that it is an open secret that the brothers really do not care where their slaves go after nightfall. Even in what is later considered the romanticized past, there is change and subversion of what was considered the norm.

It is a running joke within "Was" that Miss Sophonsiba calls her and her brother's plantation Warwick—and no one else does. Faulkner writes, "it would sound as if she and Mr. Hubert owned two separate plantations covering the same area of ground, one on top of the other" (Faulkner 9). It is as if Miss Sophonisba lives in the more nostalgic, romanticized past. She is set on calling their plantation by a fancier name, wears fine clothes, and speaks in a more flowery manner. Yet, the house is falling apart and she is so desperate for a husband that she tricks Buck into having to marry her, conspiring with Tomey's Turl and Tennie. While the time of "Was" is seen by other characters as the good ol' days, it is clear that neither plantation is at its so-called peak anymore. Her idea of two plantations also parallels the McCaslin experience. The white McCaslins and Black McCaslins live on two separate plantations covering the same area of ground

as well with Tomey's Turl and his children, notably Lucas Beauchamp, having a much different experience than Ike and Cass's descendants.

The second story in the cycle, "The Fire and the Hearth," begins to address this idea of two plantations. Set in the post-slavery sharecropping South, it features Lucas Beauchamp, a Black sharecropper on the McCaslin farm and a McCaslin by blood. Much like "Was," this second story has many comedic elements and hijinks that soften otherwise more serious meditations on inheritance and ownership. The plot deals with treasure hunting and moonshine, but Ike's renunciation of the farm haunts the narrative, coloring the dynamics between Lucas and Roth Edmonds, Cass's grandson and the current owner of the farm. Throughout the more comedic moments, there is constant tension and questioning of who is the rightful owner and inheritor between the two men.

"The Fire and the Hearth" is one of two novellas in the cycle, the other being "The Bear," Ike's story. While Ike is commonly seen as the protagonist of *Go Down, Moses*, Lucas is the primary protagonist of "The Fire and the Hearth," and his presence in the background of other stories (like Ike's) contradicts the view of a single protagonist. Smith associates the prominence of Lucas as a character no less central than Ike to the conflict around inheritance in the novel:

According to the logic of the superiority of male descent, Lucas represents as likely a candidate as Ike as he descended from the male line of McCaslins. Lucas, whose biracial descent discredits any claims he might make to McCaslin privilege, highlights the contradictory logic of the colour line and patriarchy . . . His presence disrupts the logic of a protagonist, or, in other words, a single heir to the narrative inheritance. Although many read Ike as the sole protagonist of the volume, the cycle actually deploys multiple protagonists. (Smith 124)

Lucas's prominence in the novel gives an alternative to Ike as an inheritor. While one descendant gives up his inheritance, the other is not allowed to have it. Furthermore, while "The Bear" perhaps could be extracted and read as a more general story on wilderness—and it has been—"The Fire

and the Hearth” is much more specific to its Mississippi context. According to John Carlos Rowe: “The regionalism of ‘The Fire and the Hearth’ encompasses problems of race, gender, and class that have wider significance for modern America, but it is nonetheless a narrative that begins with the very specific socioeconomic problems facing African Americans in the New South” (Rowe 15). While Ike’s introduction in “Was” brings the inheritance question to the forefront of the novel, “The Fire and the Hearth” reinforces that this is a story that deals with the impacts of the plantation system long after slavery was made illegal.

The story is predominantly in Lucas’s point of view, but it also gives us Roth’s point of view. Lucas is proud and looks down on Ike for giving up his inheritance:

He, Lucas Beauchamp, the oldest living McCaslin descendant still living on the hereditary land, who actually remembered old Buck and Buddy in the living flesh, older than Zack Edmonds even if Zack were still alive, almost as old as old Isaac who in a sense, say what a man would, had turned apostate to his name and lineage by weakly relinquishing the land which was rightfully his to live in town on the charity of his great-nephew... (Faulkner 39-40)

Lucas identifies as a McCaslin and feels seniority and superiority in his role as not only the oldest person on the Edmonds/McCaslin plantation, but the oldest McCaslin descendent, even as he acknowledges that “in the world’s eye he descended not from McCaslins but from McCaslin slaves...” (Faulkner 36). Lucas knew Buck and Buddy, something that Roth cannot claim. That, along with being descended from a male line, gives him a feeling of ownership. Likewise, Roth is obsessed with the question of Lucas’s claim on the land, reflecting on Lucas’s descent from the legendary patriarch of the McCaslin family, Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin:

He’s more like old Carothers than all the rest of us put ~~realizedr~~, including old Carothers. He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind, myriad, countless, faceless, even nameless now except himself who fathered himself, intact and complete, contemptuous, as old Carothers must have been, of all blood black white yellow or red, including his own. (Faulkner 118)

By acknowledging that Lucas is not only a biological heir of “old Carothers,” Roth’s reflection reframes inheritance through a Plantationocene lens, suggesting that what is passed down is not just land or blood, but an entire system shaped by geography, climate, and biology, all of which work together to reproduce particular beliefs and social relations rather than some mysterious “curse.”

The two men are forced into different roles because of the Mississippi plantation society, and it causes them to continuously wrestle with their identity as individuals and with each other. Roth simultaneously places the older man on a pedestal while going through the motions of early twentieth century race and landowner/sharecropper dynamics. As such, they both have their rituals that play into the dynamics of the time. For instance, Roth comes by, looks at the fields, and gives advice, but Lucas just nods along and ignores him. Roth knows Lucas is ignoring him, but they go through the ritual regardless. As the story unfolds, their dynamics are shown to be increasingly complicated. Roth was raised by Lucas’s wife, Molly, and sees her as his mother. There was a point where he and Lucas’s son, Henry, were like brothers and played and hunted together, but then one day when Roth was seven, “...the old curse of his fathers, the old haughty ancestral pride based not on any value but on an accident of geography, stemmed not from courage and honour but from wrong and shame, descended to him. He did not realize it then” (Faulkner 111). From that point on, Roth distanced himself from Henry because of the “curse.” Smith describes this moment as Roth believing that old haughty ancestral pride was “born of blood and some ancient truth rather than conditioned by milieu, historical moment, and personal attitudes” (Smith 136), but Faulkner explicitly writes that that same pride was based on “an accident of geography.” Their twisted family dynamics come from the plantation system in the South, something that determines not only racial hierarchy but also one’s position within a system built on the appropriation of land

and the exploitation of human labor, a structure that Roth simply inherits and reproduces in the “New South.” This idea is echoed by Ike in “The Bear” when he declares the whole South cursed. Roth was only the latest iteration of the cycle repeating.

In Roth’s section, we see how the white McCaslins—or rather, the Edmonds—feel about the Black members of their family. In short, they have a bit of an inferiority complex when it comes to Lucas. Roth’s father, Zach, tells him, “You think that because Lucas is older than I am, old enough even to remember Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy a little, and is a descendant of the people who lived on this place where we Edmonds are usurpers, yesterday’s mushrooms, is not reason enough for him not to want to say mister to me?” Roth inherited his father’s insecurities. As Smith argues, “Lucius’s [Isaac and Lucas’s grandfather] white heirs struggle not only with the actual biological kinship with African Americans but also with the reality of having shared land, experiences, parents, and children” (Smith 132). The Edmonds did not simply inherit land, but the trauma tied to it. In their youth, the Edmonds and Beauchamps enjoy living as family, but then the “curse” of the Edmonds accepting their place in a world still dealing with the legacy of the plantation system sets in.

Throughout the story, there is constant tension between Lucas feeling a sense of ownership of the land and the reality that he does not own it. Lucas feels as if “it was his own field, though he neither owned it nor wanted to nor even needed to. He had been cultivating it for forty-five years, since before Carothers Edmonds was born even” (Faulkner 35). Likewise, nearly all of the clashes between Lucas and Roth have to do with their uncertainty over who has the rightful claim. Lucas’s sense of ownership is seen in other ways as well. For instance, early on in the story, Lucas tries to separate his daughter from George Wilkins, a rival moonshiner. His plan is to get George sent to Parchman, a notoriously bad Mississippi prison, where he would have to farm someone

else's land, "ploughing and chopping and picking cotton which was not his on the State penal farm at Parchman" (Faulkner 33). Yet, both Lucas and George already do that. Despite Lucas's sense of ownership, in this setting, he does not have a legal claim because he is descended not only from Lucius McCaslin but from Lucius's slave. When Roth tells Lucas he needs to give up the gold hunting and focus on the fields, mostly because Molly wants Lucas to give up the treasure hunting, Lucas reminds him that his weekends are his own while again questioning Roth's claim: "But them two nights is mine. On them two nights I I farm nobody's land, I I care who he is that claims to own it" (Faulkner 121). Again and again, the question of ownership creates friction between the two men.

With the story establishing time and time again that Lucas is a McCaslin who could be argued to have more of a claim to the land than Roth, Lucas's fixation on finding the gold he believes to be buried on the McCaslin land takes on a new meaning. First, the moments where Lucas approaches the mound has the same mystical quality that is found later in "The Bear," something that is missing in descriptions of the McCaslin farm. While trying to hide his still, it is as if Lucas steps into the pre-colonial wilderness, something treated with reverence by Faulkner both here and in the hunting trilogy:

He was in the creek bottom now. Curiously enough, visibility seemed to have increased, as if the rank sunless jungle of cypress and willow and brier, instead of increasing obscurity, had solidified it into the concrete components of trunk and branch, leaving the air, space, free of it and in comparison lighter, penetrable to vision, to the mare's sight anyway, enabling her to see-saw back and forth among the trunks and the impassable thickets. Then he saw the place he sought—a squat, flat-topped, almost symmetrical mound rising without reason from the floor-like flatness of the valley. The white people called it an Indian mound. (Faulkner 37)

There is a distinction drawn between the developed McCaslin farm and the more mystical wilderness that goes beyond the plantation system. As he digs into the mound to hide his still, the

earth is described as something alive, something that speaks to Lucas with whispers, sighs, and roars. And when the mound begins to cave in around him:

...striking him a final blow squarely in the face with something larger than a clod—a blow not vicious so much as merely heavy-handed, a sort of final admonitory pat from the spirit of darkness and solitude, the old earth, perhaps the old ancestors themselves...his hand found the object which had struck him and learned it in the blind dark—a fragment of an earthenware vessel which, intact, must have been as big as a churn and which even as he lifted it crumbled again and deposited in his palm, as though it had been handed to him, a single coin. (Faulkner 38)

By alluding to the pre-existing native society, Faulkner's landscapes fit María del Pilar Blanco's pan-American approach to the Southern Gothic landscape that "allows for a longer literary historical timeline that reveals the deep origins of a Southern Gothic landscape that was, from the outset, marked by violence and racial oppression" (Sivils 85). Furthermore, Lucas's discovery of gold in the Indian mound reinforces the idea of Faulkner's landscapes revealing cyclical trauma, "in which artefacts of injustice are buried, unearthed, mourned and reborn, so as to haunt humanity anew" (Sivils 89). Lucas does not find the gold in a ditch. Instead, he finds it in an Indian mound. His discovery sets him on a path of gold fever where he manipulates and plots for the best way to extract the gold using a capitalist system, managing to have the white metal detector salesman doing the labor for him. He goes looking for the gold every night. By the third section, Molly is fed up and goes to Roth about divorcing Lucas, bringing up the second kind of curse in the story. She is tired of him hunting for gold every night and is terrified that he will find something. She says, "Because God say, 'What's rendered to My earth, it belong to Me unto I resurrect it. And let him or her touch it, and beware.' And I'm afraid. I got to go. I got to be free of him" (Faulkner 102). By the end, Lucas gives up the machine to Roth so he will not lose Molly. He still believes the gold is there, but that it is not meant for him. Philip Weinstein reads Lucas's initial discovery of the coin as an ecological rebuke of sorts, interpreting the old earth's "admonitory pat" as a

reminder to not rise above his position (Weinstein 20-21). Yet, Molly refers to it as a curse, a sickness. All in all, isn't the desire to extract gold and wealth from land the very thing that established colonization and the plantation system? The curse Ike and Roth refer to comes from the system of exploitation of both land and labor that is embedded within colonization and the plantation, and Lucas is recreating it by desecrating this Indian mound in his search for legendary gold, figuring out the best way to extract labor and profit.

The fact that Lucas propagates or echoes the colonial violence and exploitation that underscores the plantation system demonstrates the power of the Plantationocene to structure the characters' lives and their relationship to the land. As John Carlos Rowe acknowledges, "The Fire and the Hearth" does not redeem "Was" since it reinstates "subtly a class system as insidious for our own age as the slave system of the Old South" (Rowe 90). I would argue that this lack of redemption is the point. Unlike Ike, Roth does not refuse his inheritance. He accepts his role as landlord and wrestles with its implications. While it can be argued that he handles his position with a somewhat paternalistic idealization, he has a secret motivation: "the purification of his own history through his hardwon right to rule" (Rowe 86). Perhaps there are automobiles and metal detectors in the more contemporary story, but the land-based trauma and questions of inheritance remain.

"Was" and "The Fire and the Hearth" are the only two stories of the novel to be principally based around the McCaslin plantation. As they are the opening stories of the novel, it is clear that the plantation setting matters. The conflict comes from this setting, raising questions of inheritance that could only come from a segregated, post-Reconstruction Mississippi where family is disregarded based on race and skin color. Smith notes that the Southern Gothic's sense of "regional ethnicity" comes from the legacy of slavery and writes, "*Go Down, Moses* idealized in the often-

denied relationships among black and white southerners and the cost of this denial (Smith 122).”

Additionally, Smith writes:

The county comes to stand for an entire geopolitical region and gets treated as its own identity, akin to a regional ethnicity. The realization of this framework aligns Southern literature with ethnic literature as being both part of and separate from a national literature. This sense of regional ethnicity stems from the legacy of slavery. *Go Down, Moses* realizes the often-denied relationships among black and white southerners and the cost of this denial. (Smith 122)

While the later Ike-centered hunting trilogy could perhaps be read as taking place elsewhere in the United States, both “Was” and “The Fire and the Hearth” are specific to the American South and as such hold up a mirror to the nation as the rest of the story cycle further paints a picture of how the past race dynamics in a plantation system have evolved to the present day.

“Most of That Was Gone Now”: Wilderness and the Plantationocene

“The Old People,” “The Bear,” and “Delta Autumn”—often referred to as the “hunting trilogy”—mark a shift away from the McCaslin plantation to the Big Woods, or wilderness. These stories are the most explicitly ecocritical in *Go Down, Moses*, tracing Isaac McCaslin’s coming-of-age in the woods and the ways this experience shapes his understanding of inheritance amid the modernization of the early twentieth-century South. Yet they are frequently read in isolation—especially “The Bear”—as though this change in setting signals a break in the novel’s thematic concerns with race.

Faulkner’s wilderness initially appears as something separate and sublime. As Greg Garrard defines it, wilderness signifies nature “uncontaminated by realization,” a space imagined as pure and set apart (59), a view that Ike himself embraces. However, this chapter argues that the romanticized wilderness of the Big Woods is not outside the plantation system but continuous with it. While it has not been developed or exploited to the same extent as plantation land, it remains shaped by the same historical and ecological forces. As Garrard notes, the very idea of wilderness as separate from human culture emerges from an agricultural framework (60), situating the Big Woods within, rather than beyond, the plantation economy. Despite Ike’s belief in its sanctity, the wilderness remains marked by the same land-based traumas that structure the plantation itself.

For Ike, the wilderness is a sublime, almost sacred space that demands initiation. Ike’s first hunting trip is transformative, marking his entry into a space defined in opposition to the “settled familiar land” of the plantation. The language used to describe the Big Woods reinforces its sacred and animating presence:

It was only the boy who returned, returning solitary and alone to the settled familiar land, to follow for eleven months the childish business of rabbits and such while he waited to go back, having

brought with him, even from his brief first sojourn, an unforgettable sense of the big woods—not a quality dangerous or particularly inimical, but profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding, amid which he had been permitted to go to and fro at will, unscathed, why he knew not, but dwarfed and, until he had drawn honourably blood worthy of being drawn, alien. (Faulkner 175)

Here, the wilderness emerges as “profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding,” a force that both permits Ike’s presence and renders him alien until he proves himself. Across the trilogy, the Big Woods remains a living, watchful entity, described as “tremendous, attentive, impartial and omniscient” (Faulkner 181). Yet Ike’s reverence depends on imagining the wilderness as separate from the systems that shaped the plantation, a distinction the novel ultimately unsettles.

This wilderness is filled with ghosts, with spirits of a vanished people and the fading wilderness itself. Sam Fathers is Isaac’s conduit into the wilderness, his teacher. An enslaved descendent of a Cherokee chief and a quadroon slave, the other characters see his mixed blood as something that sets him apart. For Ike, Sam is how he learns of the “Old People,” or the Native Americans who had “vanished” from the Big Woods, a word choice that makes it seem as if the disappearance had mystical origins rather than the historical process of colonization:

And 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. And more: as if some of them had not happened yet but would occur tomorrow, until at last it would seem to the boy that he himself had not come into existence yet, that none of his race nor the other subject race which his people had brought with them into the land had come here yet; that although it had been his grandfather’s and then his father’s and uncle’s and was now his cousin’s and someday would be his own land which he and Sam hunted over, their hold upon it actually 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’s voice the mouthpiece of the host. (Faulkner 171)

By seeing the wilderness as timeless and sacred, he questions whether anyone has the right to own it, the writing in the chancery book a blip compared to the enduring presence of the wilderness that he saw as existing long before he or even his grandfather did and something that he believed would outlast him. By seeing the wilderness beyond human time and questioning the ownership, attention begins to be subtly drawn to the original sin and curse of the South. Francois Pitavy writes, “The original wrong had been not only racial, a sin against man, but natural, a sin against the land, of which the old people themselves had been guilty. The appropriation, or rather enslaving, of man, had been compounded by that of the land: the wrong cannot be undone, the double burden of the South cannot be overthrown” (Pitavy 93). The Plantationocene names this double burden as a single, extractive system that enslaved both the people and the land; the wilderness that Ike mythologizes as timeless and sacred was never outside it.

While the wilderness of the Big Woods is never outside the Plantationocene, Ike is capable of genuine, fleeting communion with what remains of it. However, he has to set civilization aside and rely on Sam Fathers’s teachings in order to have a brief encounter with the legendary Old Ben, the eponymous bear of “The Bear” who is hunted throughout the story. Faulkner writes, “He stood for a moment—a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted” (Faulkner 208). Ike can only briefly experience the wilderness, represented by Old Ben, by willingly leaving civilization behind, but that wilderness was already marked for destruction. With Old Ben’s death, what had seemed timeless to Ike is revealed as finite as the wilderness is sold, logged, and converted into farmland, consumed by the system that was always coming for it.

While “The Old People” works to create the myth of the sublime, haunted wilderness and “The Bear” is Ike’s coming-of-age, “Delta Autumn” is Ike’s reckoning. An old man in the latter,

he is able to reflect back. Yet, he still sees the sins of his family and those of the South as coming from the “tamed land” rather than seeing the wilderness as part of the same system:

...that day and himself and McCaslin juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land, the old wrong and shame itself, in repudiation and denial at least of the land and the wrong and shame even if he couldn't cure the wrong and eradicate the shame, who at fourteen when he learned of it had believed he could do both when he became competent and when at twenty-one he became competent he knew that he could do neither but at least he could repudiate the wrong and shame, at least in principle, and at least the land itself... (Faulkner 351)

In “Is Faulkner Green? The Wilderness as Aporia,” Pitavy describes a tension between the colonists' desire to dominate the wilderness so that the new land could be “claimed in the name of political, economic, and social progress” (84) and the later mythologization of the wilderness as a kind of paradise lost:

Yet as soon as it was conquered and tamed (and its inhabitants, the Indians, christianized, or eradicated), that is, when it had been divested of its original mystery, the wilderness nostalgically became paradise lost itself, a place of original purity and mystery, forever haunting the American imagination and fiction, as in Cooper, Thoreau, and William Faulkner. It stands for freedom, goodness, and is the reverse of constraint, artifice, wickedness, of what Huck Finn calls “sivilization”; it is a place of redemption and renewal, of rejuvenation, the foundation of Americanness, in Crevecoeur and Turner. But it also entails a backward-looking glance, a flight from history and modernity into primitivism (a tendency also perceptible in Turner's myth-making historiography). The wilderness no longer is to be reclaimed, as with the Puritans, but it must be resurrected, in the name of the American dream. (Pitavy 89-90)

Pitavy goes on to describe how the Big Woods are Ike's sublime space, a place beyond the civilized world where he can have revelations (Pitavy 90). Ike has this worldview and actively and continuously flees what he sees as “cursed” developed land into this “paradise lost.” Yet, he is never able to escape because it is not actually separate.

I would argue that the wilderness in *Go Down, Moses* is not a separate, sacred space that is later lost, but rather an already commodified and historically entangled landscape that exposes

Ike's ideological naïveté. Even if Ike is able to experience a brief moment of connection with the wilderness in his encounter with Old Ben, the Big Woods as a whole exist within this system. While Pitavy suggests that Faulkner participates in a broader mythologization of wilderness as a kind of "paradise lost," the text itself repeatedly undermines this separation by showing that the Big Woods are already embedded within systems of ownership, labor, and extraction. Even at the height of its so-called purity, the land is owned by Major de Spain and accessed through a hunting economy sustained by enslaved labor, including Sam Fathers, Tennie's Jim, and Tomey's Turl. Not long after Old Ben dies, Major de Spain sells the woods to a lumber company: "He went back to the camp one more time before the lumber company moved in and began to cut the timber...and in the winter following the last hunt when Sam Fathers and Lion died, General Compson and Walter Ewell invented a plan to incorporate themselves, the old group, into a club and lease the camp and the hunting privileges of the woods..." (Faulkner 315). The eventual logging of the woods does not mark a fall from an earlier purity, but rather the continuation of a structure of use already present in the hunting camps. Read this way, Ike's vision of wilderness as sacred and outside history is exposed as a nostalgic refusal to recognize the extractive system that has always governed the land.

While Ike worries about the wilderness and there is this sense of doom in both "The Old People" and "The Bear," especially given the time slippage of the narration in different instances, "Delta Autumn" is where the myth of the wilderness really falls apart. Ike is an old man and the world has changed:

He watched, as he did each recurrent November while more than sixty of them passed, the land which he had seen change. At first there had been only the old towns along the River and the old towns along the hills, from each of which the planters with their gangs of slaves and then of hired labourers had wrested from the impenetrable jungle of water-standing cane and cypress, gum and holly and oak and ash, cotton patches which as the years passed became fields and then plantations.

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—the thick, slow, black, unsunned streams almost without current, which once each year ceased to float all and then reversed, spreading, drowning the rich land and subsiding again, leaving it still richer. Most of that was gone now. (Faulkner 340)

In this section, Faulkner not only shows the progression of modernization, but clearly depicts the Plantationocene. Where there once was wilderness in Ike's boyhood, there is now even more farm land, land that might have no longer been a part of the plantation system, but was part of the New South's sharecropping system. The wilderness was never separate from the Plantationocene, as much as Ike liked to hold it apart as sacred, it just had not been developed in the same way yet. In this more modern story, the ghosts look different and rather than a mysterious buck, a stubborn old bear, or stories of a vanished people, they manifest as town and river names. The wilderness used to be thirty miles from Jefferson, now it is two hundred. The men nostalgically mourn what has vanished, remembering when there was game, even as they fail to recognize that the wilderness they grieve was never separate from the extractive system that consumed it.

Pitavy argues that Ike does in fact experience epiphany and revelation in the wilderness, writing that, "Coming out of the wilderness is a fall from stasis and timelessness, or a fall back into time—entering a world of division and fences, of 'skeleton cotton and corn-fields' (131), an experience of discontinuity and separateness, of encroaching progress. But this is precisely the world in which Ike must live, yet which he must repudiate, not only because he will not live by what his initiation into the wilderness has taught him, not only because he cannot retain the rare moments of epiphany ..." (Pitavy 92). Yet, that world of division and fences, that encroaching progress does not mark the wilderness as this divine paradise lost in a modernizing world because it had already been lost. As Ike was pondering the morality and accuracy of ownership, the land was already owned. The plantation ledgers that most clearly trigger his repudiation of the farm are

not the only records kept. Major de Spain owned and sold his patch of wilderness, land that was turned into revenue at the continued expense of others. The people whose knowledge Ike received from Sam Fathers were gone because of colonization, the last of them dying with his mentor.

While Faulkner often reflects on the past and what reckoning with it looks like for the South, he was living and writing during a period of rapid industrialization and widespread deforestation, something that is reflected in these three stories and the wilderness is slashed further and further away. Zachary Vernon describes this historical moment and how the timber industry, often owned by Northern companies, manifested a new type of colonial exchange, one in which Southern resources were extracted and sent elsewhere. “A large factor leading to the south’s involvement in this ‘colonial economy’ was the timber industry, which shifted money and power toward urban and northern places and thus away from the south” (Vernon 95). However, while Vernon describes how some scholars see the New South as colonial dependents, he disagrees, citing the active way that Southerners have contributed to the ecological destruction (Vernon 95). In Vernon’s overview of the history of deforestation in the Mississippi Delta, he describes how the deforestation had begun in the 1880s as Northern timber speculators bought land cheaply and began clearcutting practices, the railroad following shortly after to aid the extraction, and the woodlands being converted into farmland. The rapid deforestation lasted about a half a century and by the 1930s, around the time Faulkner wrote *Go Down, Moses*, much of the forests were gone (Vernon 94). This history is seen in these three stories. The big woods shrink further and further away from Jefferson, the hunters mourn the lack of game—“Times are different now,” another said. “There was game here then.” “Yes,” the old man said quietly. “there was game here then”—and the sound of the locomotive has replaced the scream of the panther (Faulkner 345). At one

point, the train that enters the woods is harmless, like a snake slipping into the woods, but Ike's view of the train begins to change even in "The Bear":

yet this time it was as though the train (and not only the train but himself, not only his vision which had seen it and his memory which remembered it but his clothes too, as garments carry back into the clean edgeless blowing of air the lingering effluvium of a sick-room or of death) had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid... (Faulkner 321)

In Ike's shifting perception of the train, Faulkner renders industrialization not as a future threat but as something already embedded in the landscape, accelerating the disappearance of the wilderness Vernon describes.

Once the forests turned into farmland, they fully participated in the New South sharecropping economy. As much as Ike placed the woods on a pedestal and questioned ownership, they were owned by Major de Spain and were ultimately sold. Throughout Ike's boyhood, he sees the wilderness and this patch of forest as something beyond time, something he is only able to connect to through Sam Fathers, who is able to connect through being the son of a chief. Yet for all the mythological language surrounding "the old people," Sam is the son of a chief who sold the land to the white people. On Sam's deathbed, Isaac describes him as "...the old man, the wild man not even one generation from the woods, childless, kinless, peopleless..." (Faulkner 246). Sam was only one generation away. In one generation, Sam's people had disappeared from the region. Isaac describes Sam as the last of his kind. In conversations about Sam, Ike's cousin Cass describes Sam himself as kind of a battleground between the Native American, the Black slave, and the white man. Cass says that Sam "was betrayed through the black blood which his mother gave him. Not betrayed by the black blood and not willfully betrayed by his mother, but betrayed by her all the same, who had bequeathed him not only the blood of slaves but even a little of the very blood which had enslaved it; himself his own battleground, the scene of his own

vanquishment and the mausoleum of his defeat” (Faulkner 168). While Native Americans have commonly been depicted as stewards of the land, especially in contrast to the colonizing and extractive cultures (Corstorphine 122), this idea is not as straightforward in *Go Down, Moses*. Ike does romanticize Sam, his culture, and his bloodline as something that is more in touch with the natural world, but Sam’s very existence is a result of both colonization and the plantation society. He is descended from a chief and a quadroon slave woman and is himself a slave.

Ike’s mythmaking is rooted in a distinctly American fantasy: that “A land of promise, America is virtually without a past” (Corstorphine 123). He constructs a myth of timelessness and ancientness about the wilderness and Sam’s people, but again, Sam was only one generation removed. In *Go Down Moses*, Ike’s grandfather is also a bit of a mythological figure in the McCaslin family history. Again, that mythmaking does not actually go back that far. “If the story of the expanding frontier articulates a simple dichotomy of civilization against the wilderness, then the end of the frontier marks a more subtle Gothicism, marked by the haunting presence of the past. The ‘new product’ that is America turns out to bear the traces of previous ownership and stories already inscribed upon it” (Corstorphine 125). Ghosts run rampant through the woods. From a young age, the past meets the present for Ike through Sam’s fireside stories of “the old people” (Smith 134). Faulkner writes, “And 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 part of the boy’s present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening” (Faulkner 171).

There is also the idea of blood on the land and the land being cursed because of it. In “The Old People,” Cass tells Ike: “Think of all that has happened here, on this earth. All the blood hot and strong for living, pleasuring, that has soaked back into it. For grieving and suffering too, of

course, but still getting something out of it for all that, getting a lot out of it..." (Faulkner 186). In this section, Cass is relating the idea of the blood on the land to the wilderness as they are discussing Ike's encounter with Grandfather, a ghostly buck that Cass himself had an encounter with thanks to Sam Fathers when he was younger.

In "Delta Autumn," Ike's actions as an old man throw the self-righteousness of his repudiation into question. Ike's relative Roth, featured more prominently in "The Fire and the Hearth," was having an affair with a Black woman. The other men in the hunting party know and are joking about Roth's "doe." Roth goes off into the hunting camp and leaves Ike an envelope of money to give her. At first, Ike does not realize that she is a woman of color when she shows up with a baby. But after talking with her, he realizes not only that she is a woman of color but that she is in fact Roth's own cousin. The cycle repeats. But Isaac is not responding to the repetition of the family cycle when he says, "*Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America*, he thought. *But not now! Not now!*" (Faulkner 361) and strongly encourages her to go north and marry a Black man. He gives her General Compson's silver-bound hunting horn, one of his last items of value at their parting. She chastises him: "Old man, have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you I remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" (Faulkner 363). Pitavy writes that Ike "does not understand that you do not buy off your wrong with a sheaf of banknotes," and that the horn "has become a meaningless memento: the buck is dead, so is the wilderness he had refused to inherit, and which is now destroyed by the encroachments of progress" (Pitavy 92-93). Ike's moral crisis unfolds in the same space where the wilderness has already been diminished, and that is no coincidence. The horn was always going to be hollow, the hunting camp was never a refuge from the plantation's logic but a space where that logic plays out

again in a new form, and “not now” was always the only conclusion a mythology built on hollow ground could reach.

In “Delta Autumn,” Ike ultimately concludes that the curse of the South does extend to his beloved woods:

This Delta, he thought: This Delta. *This land which man has deswamped and denuded and delivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires’ mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms and live like _____ and _____ crop on shares and live like animals, where cotton is planted and grows man-tall in the very cracks of the sidewalks, and usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has times to say which one is which nor cares...* No wonder the ruined woods I used to know I cry for retribution! He thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge (Faulkner 364).

Ultimately, the sins that cursed the land are those of colonization and slavery. Isaac McCaslin’s failure, then, is not a failure of insight but of action. As Pitavy argues, his “ritual initiation into the wilderness... has brought Ike no revelation and left him with no heritage to bequeath, because he did not have the courage to confront his heritage... and endure the inescapable wrong and shame of his predicament” (Pitavy 94). Although Ike seeks transcendence—attempting to “enter the sacred realm” by abandoning the tools and structures of civilization—this gesture ultimately produces no material or ethical transformation. Zachary Vernon similarly emphasizes the limits of Ike’s environmental vision, noting that “despite these revelations, Isaac’s environmental philosophy ultimately fails to engender social or political change,” leaving him to “impotently... witness his beloved woodlands become ‘untreed’” (Vernon 101). The wilderness disappears, just as the cycles of exploitation within the McCaslin family persist. Ike relinquishes his inheritance, but only in a way that preserves existing structures of power—passing land to other white family members and offering only limited, symbolic reparations to his Black relatives.

This gap between moral recognition and meaningful action is especially visible in “Delta Autumn.” As critics have noted, Ike’s repudiation has long been read either as a noble rejection of his grandfather’s sins or, conversely, as “a selfish act of avoidance” that does little to “acknowledge or alleviate the plight of his African American relatives” (Smith 132). His response to Roth’s incestuous relationship—insisting “not now” while urging separation rather than accountability—reveals the limits of his ethical framework. Even when confronted directly with the continuation of the family’s racialized violence, Ike defers justice into an indefinite future. Scholars have further argued that Ike sustains this deferral through a kind of self-serving mythmaking. Drawing on gothic modes, he frames the South’s history as a “curse” to be endured rather than dismantled, relying on what has been called “the myth of time”—the belief that injustice will resolve itself if one simply waits (Flores-Silva 42). In this sense, Ike’s vision does not challenge the structures of the plantation but reproduces them at the level of ideology, transforming historical responsibility into passive endurance. At the same time, Ike’s crisis is genuine. As Smith notes, his understanding of temporality, kinship, and place “coalesce... instigating a crisis of identity” that ultimately destabilizes his confidence in his own interpretations (Smith 133). Yet even this moment of instability fails to produce change. His symbolic gestures—such as giving the hunting horn to Roth’s child—acknowledge kinship without confronting its implications, revealing what Smith describes as the “faulty” nature of his interpretive practices (Smith 133).

More broadly, the novel itself participates in this tension between critique and evasion. As one critic observes, the mythic structure of “The Old People” and “The Bear” does not simply mourn a lost past but “lend[s] a myth to this new, reformed community,” projecting the possibility of justice into a distant, almost unimaginable future (Rowe 82). Yet this future—like Ike’s “not

now”—remains perpetually deferred. What appears to be a break from the Old South instead reveals “an elaboration of the sins of the Old South” within the New (Rowe 82). Critical debates over Ike’s renunciation reflect this ambiguity. While early readers viewed his rejection of inheritance as heroic, later critics have emphasized how little it alters the material conditions it seeks to resist, recasting him as “a failed hero whose noble intentions... failed to alter the stark realities of racism” (Polk 68). Still, as Noel Polk notes, even these reassessments often accept Ike’s moral framework at face value, treating his interpretation of the past as unquestioned truth.

What this chapter has argued, however, is that Ike’s failure is inseparable from the very framework through which he understands the wilderness. From the moment of his initiation—marked by Sam Fathers smearing the blood of a buck across his face, a gesture that symbolically links violence, inheritance, and lineage (Polk 80)—Ike’s relationship to the land is structured by myth. By imagining the wilderness as timeless, sacred, and separate, he obscures the histories of dispossession, labor, and extraction that have always already shaped it. In this way, the Big Woods are not an escape from the plantation system but one of its extensions. Ike’s tragedy lies in his inability to recognize this continuity: he seeks redemption in a space that has never been outside the structures he wishes to escape. As a result, his repudiation remains symbolic, his ethics deferred, and the land—like the histories embedded within it—continues to bear the weight of an unresolved past. While Ike has this attitude of “not yet” as it comes to equal rights and interracial marriage, he failed to see how the true “not yet” was actually in relation to his beloved wilderness.

“Pharaoh Got Him”: The Plantationocene Without the Myth

Go Down, Moses reflects how the nation’s historical violences and unresolved traumas continue to haunt the present. As Dolores Flores-Silva writes: “*Go Down, Moses* is one of the most darkly incestuous of Faulkner’s novels. What it conveys of a counterculture of modernity is filled with lynching, execution, suicide, tenacious violence, and relentlessly heartbreaking fatigue. The posthumous presences go beyond human remains to include animals, forests, the land itself” (Flores-Silva 43). This combination of human and nonhuman hauntings is particularly evident in sections of the novel often overlooked or treated as outliers—“Pantaloon in Black,” “Go Down, Moses,” and part four of “The Bear”—which are among the darkest episodes and arguably the most revealing for a Plantationocene reading. This chapter argues that their apparent outlier status is precisely what makes them essential; it is in these sections, where the family saga falls away and the myth-making stops, that the Plantationocene becomes most legible. Furthermore, the narration of Rider in “Pantaloon in Black” and Gavin Stevens in “Go Down, Moses” challenges the idea that Ike is the central narrator-protagonist (Smith 125). Instead, Ike’s prominence is less about narrative centrality and more about his engagement with the South’s land-based traumas and the lingering consequences of its violent history.

While most of “The Bear” is set in the wilderness, part four is an interlude that returns to the plantation. Here Ike wrestles with his family’s history, poring over the ledgers that record generations of slaveholders and the enslaved people who lived and died on the McCaslin farm, ultimately renouncing his inheritance entirely. Matt Low discusses how part four, the “longest and most complicated section of the story,” has been cut from different versions of “The Bear” (Low 56). Both Low and Smith suggest that the fourth part is not seen as necessary for “The Bear” as a hunting story. Faulkner himself cut it from *The Big Woods* (1955) (Smith 129), a collection of his

hunting stories. As Smith argues, however, part four is essential for understanding how “The Bear” fits within the broader narrative of *Go Down, Moses*. She writes, “The inclusion of this section in *Go Down, Moses* indicates how much meaning for the cycle as a whole derives from incongruity” (Smith 129). Part four is more explicit than the rest of “The Bear” and even “The Old People” in its questions of ownership as it directly deals with the events surrounding Ike’s rebuking of his inheritance. In Ike’s perspective, the question of repudiation should not even be a question because the land has been cursed ever since man claimed to own it. As Ike says to Cass in their lengthy debate regarding ownership,

“I cant repudiate it. It was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father’s and Uncle Buddy’s to bequeath me to repudiate 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. Because it was never Ikkemotubbe’s fathers’ fathers’ to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realized, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his for ever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing.” (Faulkner 256-257)

Ike’s logic here reflects the long shadow of the Plantationocene: the moment land became property—sellable, inheritable, transferable—Indigenous models of stewardship were replaced by an extractive system of private ownership that corrupted everything it touched. Ike sees this clearly. What he cannot see is a path forward.

For all his clarity about the past, Ike remains paralyzed by the present. His diagnosis of the Plantationocene is accurate; his response to it is not. Rather than imagining a way forward, he retreats into “not yet,” a posture that mistakes passivity for virtue and allows the system he critiques to continue operating undisturbed. Flores-Silva describes his frantic declaration of the

curse as a “frantic gothicizing panic” (Flores-Silva 42), and that can be seen in his conversation with Lucas’s brother-in-law as Ike attempts to pay a sort of reparations:

“I you see?” he cried. “I you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse on to the land: maybe for that reason their descendants alone can—not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted. Then your people’s turn will come because we have forfeited ours. But not now. Not yet. I you see?” (Faulkner 278)

Flores-Silva sees this moment as Ike constructing a story that allows him to live passively yet virtuously with the curse, insisting that only the passing of time will fix things. Unsurprisingly, the brother-in-law, Fonsiba’s husband, pushes back, offering a vision of the New South that Ike cannot accept: “You’re wrong. The curse you whites brought into this land has been lifted. It has been voided and discharged. We are seeing a new era, an era dedicated, as our founders intended it, to freedom, liberty and equality for all, to which this country will be the new Canaan—” (Faulkner 279). As Flores-Silva writes, Ike’s gothicizing “works to foster the ‘not now’ in the face of a nascent Civil Rights Movement across the South and the nation” (Flores-Silva 42). Ike at once accurately diagnoses the Plantationocene and remains trapped within it, unable to imagine a way forward that does not require waiting for someone else to act.

The family ledgers that Ike reads in part four of “The Bear” function as the Plantationocene’s own archive—a partial, fragmented record of the extraction of both land and people on the McCaslin plantation, and that Ike reads selectively enough to confirm what he already believes rather than confront what he cannot yet face. The ledgers detail slaves bought and sold, giving Ike the information he needs to begin filling in the gaps of his family’s dark history, culminating in the revelation that Lucas’s grandmother committed suicide after discovering that her daughter was pregnant by the same McCaslin who had impregnated her. It is strongly implied

that the family secrets stretch beyond miscegenation to incest with Tomey's Turl and his mother sharing a father—Ike's grandfather, Lucius. Faulkner describes the ledgers as "that chronicle which was a whole land in miniature, which multiplied and compounded was the entire South"—they represent:

the whole plantation in its mazed and intricate entirety—the land, the field and what they represented in terms of cotton ginned and sold, the men and women whom they fed and clothed and even paid a little cash money at Christmas-time in return for the labour which planted and raised and picked and ginned the cotton, the machinery and mules and gear with which they raised it and their cost and upkeep and replacement—the whole edifice intricate and complex and founded upon injustice and erected by ruthless rapacity and carried on even yet with at times downright savagery not only to the human beings but the valuable animals too, yet solvent and efficient and, more than that: not only still intact but enlarged, increased: brought still intact by McCaslin... (Faulkner 298)

The ledgers are the Plantationocene rendered in ink, a system of extraction so total it recorded people and mules and machinery in the same accounting logic. The "curse" Ike refers to as something abstract and beyond time is here made tangible, scribbled in his relatives' handwriting, including that of his own father. The most chilling entry is the Christmas Day suicide of Tomey's Turl's grandmother, who drowned herself in the creek after discovering that her daughter was pregnant by the McCaslin who owned and had impregnated them both (Flores-Silva 43), a violence the ledger records without acknowledgment or consequence. But Smith cautions against taking the ledgers, or Ike's reading of them, at face value. The entries are not chronological, some collapse years into a single line, and others record events only after the fact; Eunice's death was listed six months before anyone noted its cause. More critically, the novel shows us only some of the ledger entries, a selection that mirrors Ike's own reading practices. As Smith argues, although Ike claims omniscience, he reads for a predetermined meaning, omitting what does not fit and allowing the gaps to confirm what he already believes (Smith 130). Ike's pursuit of the ledgers nonetheless

signals something real—a desire, as Smith puts it, for “a grand narrative that can clarify his family, home, region, and nation” (Smith 129). Building on Smith, I argue that Ike’s selective reading of the ledgers is not incidental but structural: it is the same impulse that produces “not yet.” The ledgers do not show Ike the Plantationocene in full; they show him enough to feel the weight of the curse while giving him permission to defer action indefinitely. Ike can’t read the Plantationocene’s own archive and still not see his way out of it. The ledgers confirm the “curse,” but they do not show him how to lift it.

“Pantaloone in Black” shows what that retreat costs—not in the abstract language of curses and inheritance, but in the immediate, material present of the New South. Rider’s story does not mythologize the past; it lives inside its consequences. Just as Ike reads the ledgers to confront the fragmented and morally fraught history of his family and land, “Pantaloone in Black” shows how those same histories reverberate in the present, across race, class, and the spaces of the New South beyond the McCaslin/Edmonds/Beauchamp family. Rowe identifies “The Fire and the Hearth” as the “centerpiece” of the collection, but I would argue that “Pantaloone in Black,” “Go Down, Moses,” and part four of “The Bear” are also structurally important. Rowe describes “The Fire and the Hearth” as the story that is more future-facing rather than “simply the lid [Faulkner] lifts repeatedly to expose the dead,” as he describes the more myth-making hunting trilogy. The sections selected in this chapter also encompass “problems of race, gender, and class that have wider significance for modern America, but it is nonetheless a narrative that begins with the very specific socioeconomic problems facing African Americans in the New South” (Rowe 15). Where the hunting trilogy mythologizes and the farm stories trace inheritance, these sections show the Plantationocene in its most immediate form, where the system’s consequences are lived, grieved, and died rather than debated or deferred.

“Pantaloone in Black” comes between “The Fire and the Hearth” and “The Old People,” acting as a bridge between the plantation setting and the wilderness. It is the only story in *Go Down, Moses* not to feature a member of the McCaslin/Beauchamp family, an absence that is itself significant. While it has been treated as an outlier, I argue that its structural placement is deliberate and essential: by centering a Black tenant with no claim to McCaslin kinship or land, Faulkner makes visible what the family saga obscures. Rider’s story connects the Plantationocene with the wilderness not by bridging two separate spaces, but by demonstrating that they were never separate to begin with: the Big Woods that Ike treats as refuge and the sawmill country where Rider works and dies are both part of the same extractive, racially organized landscape. Where Lucas’s claim on the McCaslin land is contested and debated throughout “The Fire and the Hearth,” Rider has no claim at all. A tenant and sawmill worker, he has no kinship connection to the McCaslins, no reparations in a bank account, and no leverage of any kind. Rowe sees his placement in the cycle as intentional, meant to contrast with Lucas, who is too embedded in the McCaslin family structure to fully expose what the plantation system does to those outside it (Rowe 92). Rider has none of that privilege. Where Lucas’s sense of ownership is debated among himself and Roth, Rider’s dispossession is simply stated and restated: “The house was the last one in the lane, not his but rented from Carothers Edmonds, the local white landowner” (Faulkner 137). He fixed up the house and put money and work into it to make it a home for him and his late wife, but coming back after her funeral, his lack of ownership is reiterated: “The house had never been his anyway, b’t now even the new planks and sills and shingles, the hearth and stove and bed, were all a part of the memory of someone else” (Faulkner 139). Lucas’s complicated status exists within the family’s buried dynamics; Rider exists entirely outside them, just another tenant on Edmonds’ land.

That dispossession extends beyond the house. “Pantaloone in Black” moves between the former plantation and what was once wilderness but has since become timber country, and Rider finds no refuge in either space. He feels claustrophobic in both his home—which he is painfully aware does not belong to him after his wife’s death—and in the woods. While the woods at night maintain some of the mystical, living qualities that appear in other chapters, there is no relief for Rider. Traveling to the mill, he passes through cane-stalks that press in with “that oppression, that lack of room to breathe in, which the walls of his house had had,” and drinks moonshine in the river bottom only to describe himself as escaping its “unbreathing blackness” (Faulkner 147). Every landscape in the story refuses him. This is in stark contrast to Ike, for whom the wilderness is a site of initiation, epiphany, and refuge.

That claustrophobia becomes literal at the story’s end. When Rider is found sleeping on his porch after killing the foreman, he confesses immediately, but with a request: “Awright, white folks. Ah done it. Jest I lock me up” (Faulkner 157). In jail, he begins tearing the building apart, insisting the whole time that he is not trying to escape, only to breathe. The irony is that the open air offers him no safety either: he is lynched by the foreman’s family, and law enforcement had noted it was safer for him inside. For Rider, every space is a trap. The plantation, the woods, the jail, the open air—the Plantationocene leaves him nowhere to stand.

By showing the perspectives of two outsiders to the McCaslin saga—Rider in the first part and the deputy in the second—the lens also zooms out and gives a bit more insight into the “New South.” The entirety of part one—from Rider’s perspective—lets the reader into his grief, but part two shows how the deputy dehumanizes him with a whole paragraph of dialogue describing him as less than human. The deputy retells the events of part one, but through an entirely different lens. Where the deputy sees all of Rider’s actions as proof of his inhumanity and lack of love for his

wife, the reader knows how deep his grief was, to the point that it is heavily implied that Rider was suicidal. He sees his wife's ghost and tells her he wants to go with her, embarks on self-destructive behavior, and keeps repeating that "Ah'm snakebit and bound to die" (Faulkner 152). This double perspective zooms out from the McCaslin family saga entirely and lands squarely in the New South: sawmills, moonshine, crooked dice games, lynching. There is no nostalgic haze here, no reverence for a vanishing way of life, none of the elegiac tone that elsewhere makes the past feel like something lost rather than something built on violence.

The contrast with Lucas sharpens the point. compared to Rider, Lucas navigates the law with real resources in "The Fire and the Hearth": he is wealthier than Roth, Roth accompanies him through encounters with the stills and the potential divorce, and the judge knows him from hunting days. Rider has none of that. His crime is greater, since he kills a man where Lucas only runs moonshine, but the disparity in how each is treated has nothing to do with what either man did. It has to do with what each man is within the plantation's social order. Despite being a Black man in early 20th century Mississippi, Lucas is a McCaslin and has some privileges from it, however unacknowledged. Rider is a tenant and a Black man with no family claim, no connections, and no one to vouch for him.

The earth moves at Rider's wife's graveside, just as it moved around the Indian mound in "The Fire and the Hearth," but where Lucas was the passive recipient of the land's admonitory pat, Rider is the one making it move, maniacally hauling timber like a man possessed, shocking those around him. The same living landscape that whispers to Lucas and initiates Ike offers Rider no wisdom and no communion. And the mill where Rider works, the site of the corrupt dice game, the killing, the beginning of the end, is the same encroaching industry that the hunting trilogy treats as a distant, elegiac threat. Here it is not a threat on the horizon. It is where Rider spends his days,

and where his death begins. This is the Plantationocene without the myth. The wilderness that Ike held sacred has already been converted into timber and wages, its hierarchy of race and ownership fully intact. Rider's death is not a tragedy that exists outside the McCaslin story. It is what that story looks like when the family saga falls away and the structure beneath it is exposed.

Where Rider never had a claim to contest, the novel's final chapter, "Go Down, Moses", turns to a family whose right to the land had been debated and denied for generations—and shows what happens to a bloodline the plantation system refused to recognize. The placement of "Go Down, Moses" at the end and the fact that it shares the name with the novel as a whole suggest that the whole novel builds to this chapter. It opens in a Chicago prison where a Black man facing the death penalty reveals his real name to a census taker: Samuel Worsham Beauchamp. Samuel is Molly and Lucas's son, meaning this is yet another story in the cycle about one of the McCaslin/Edmond/Beauchamp clan. The second part of the story brings us back to Jefferson where white lawyer Gavin Stevens is trying to bring Samuel's remains home with dignity as a favor to Molly and the Worshams. Like "Pantaloons in Black," it is in two parts with the first being from the perspective of the Black character and the second being from the perspective of a white character.

"Go Down, Moses" revolves around bringing Samuel Beauchamp home after his execution in Chicago. The idea of home and how it played a role in his death is also present throughout the story. Mollie, introduced in "The Fire and the Hearth," returns here as a grieving grandmother, repeating variations of the same accusation: Roth Edmonds sold her Benjamin, sent him to Egypt, delivered him to Pharaoh. In calling Samuel her Benjamin, Mollie invokes the Biblical story of Joseph, in which Benjamin is nearly sold into bondage by his brothers and driven with his family into Egypt. The accusation is not just metaphorical to Mollie. Stevens eventually understands what

she means: “Now he comprehended what the old Negress had meant. He remembered now that it was Edmonds who had actually sent the boy to Jefferson in the first place: he had caught the boy breaking into his commissary store and had ordered him off the place and had forbidden him ever to return” (Faulkner 373). As Smith argues, in Mollie’s understanding the distance from the McCaslin place to Jefferson is greater than the distance from Jefferson to Chicago and leaving the farm is what sets Samuel’s death in motion (Smith 122). The plantation is the catalyst to his fate.

Faulkner’s choice of Stevens as the primary narrator of this story, his section being much longer than the initial section set in Chicago, works similarly to the second part of “Pantaloon in Black.” While the other stories, with the exception of “Pantaloon in Black,” worked to deepen the reader’s understanding of these complicated familial relationships and dynamics—especially “The Fire and the Hearth” by revealing Roth’s complicated feelings of jealousy, respect, and inferiority towards Lucas—that is missing here. Stevens only sees Mollie and Lucas as Edmonds’ tenants: “His first thought was to telephone Carothers Edmonds, on whose farm the old Negress’s husband had been a tenant for years” (Faulkner 373). Stevens does not know that Roth sees Mollie as a kind of mother, he does not know that Edmonds struggles with feelings of inferiority towards Lucas, and he does not know that Samuel has McCaslin blood.

It is not just Rider who has trouble breathing. Gavin Stevens, despite his privileges of being a white, Harvard-educated lawyer, is also suffocated by the weight of a history he does not fully understand. Faulkner describes a stifling Mississippi summer’s day where even the breeze is more symbolic than practical: “He sat in the hot motion which was not breeze...” (Faulkner 372). It is difficult for anyone to breathe when it is that hot. This claustrophobia expands by the end of the novel as Stevens flees the Worsham residence, where Mollie, her brother, and her sister-in-law sing and repeat, “Roth Edmonds sold him...Sold my Benjamin” (Faulkner 381). Stevens flees their

centuries-old grief: “Soon I will be outside, he thought. Then there will be air, space, breath....the breathing and simple dark” (Faulkner 381). As Flores-Silva points out, it is Stevens, not Mollie, who cannot breathe here—the Yoknapatawpha lawyer undone by a grief his Harvard education gave him no tools to reckon with (Flores-Silva 48). His response is to leave, and then, as the next section shows, to manage and to decide what gets recorded, what gets printed, and what disappears.

The question of record runs through the final pages of the story. Stevens's instinct is suppression; he asks the Jefferson editor not to print a notice of Samuel's death and considers calling the Memphis paper to do the same. But Mollie's instinct is the opposite. When the editor tells Stevens what she asked at the station, “Is you gonter put hit in de paper? I wants hit all in de paper. All of hit,” the contrast is pointed (Faulkner 383). Stevens has been managing the story from the beginning, deciding what gets told and to whom, just as the deputy managed Rider's story over dinner and the ledgers managed the McCaslin history in fragments and omissions. Mollie refuses that. She wants a record, a complete one, and she wants it public. It is the same impulse that makes her grief impossible for Stevens to stay in the room with. She will not allow the plantation's habit of erasure to extend to her grandson's death.

At the end, Samuel comes home, the hearse circling the Confederate monument in the Jefferson courthouse square before continuing to the family cemetery on the plantation. The connection is intentional. As Flores-Silva argues, Confederate memorializing in Faulkner works to freeze a relation to time, a pathology the novel neither endorses nor escapes (Flores-Silva 39). The hearse has to circle it on the way to the plantation where Samuel was born and from which he was expelled. The plantation and the monument are part of the same landscape, the same unresolved inheritance. No collection taken up by Jefferson's white citizens to bring him home with dignity can change that. Not then. Not now. Not yet.

Nevertheless, the form of *Go Down, Moses* enacts what Ike cannot. As Smith argues, the cycle “hints at a unity that it simultaneously denies,” requiring readers to hold “multiple contingent readings” rather than resolving into the single genealogical line Ike desperately seeks (Smith 131). His reading of the ledgers — selective, predetermined, reaching for a grand narrative — mirrors the kind of reading the novel refuses to reward. Rita Barnard’s description of the cycle’s disjointed form as a “metatextual rejoinder to the slave owner’s ledger” captures what is at stake: the novel’s structure is itself an argument against the idea that history can be tallied, closed, and left behind (qtd. In Smith, 2018, p. 131).

But where Ike’s “not yet” is a luxury and the deferral of a man who can afford to wait, the three sections examined in this chapter show what that deferral costs others. Rider does not get “not yet.” He grieves in a landscape that offers him no refuge, no claim, no air, and he is lynched for it. Samuel Beauchamp does not get “not yet.” Expelled from the plantation that shaped him, executed by the state, he comes home in a casket. The hearse circles the Confederate monument before making its way back to the Edmonds land. The plantation has not been transcended or redeemed; it is still the organizing fact of these lives and deaths. What Ike cannot imagine, the novel’s form imagines for him. By placing Rider’s story and Samuel’s death alongside Ike’s ledger reading and his “not yet,” *Go Down, Moses* refuses the continuity and unity that Ike’s mythmaking depends on. The gaps between these stories—the voices, the griefs, the deaths that do not fit his grand narrative—are where the Plantationocene becomes most visible, and where the possibility of seeing beyond it, however fragile, begins to emerge.

This is why “Pantaloon in Black,” “Go Down, Moses,” and part four of “The Bear” are not outliers to the novel’s central concerns but their most concentrated expression. Together, they make visible what Ike’s mythmaking obscures: that the Plantationocene is not a past to be mourned

or a curse to be outlasted but a structure still in operation, still extracting, still determining who breathes and who doesn't. The Big Woods Ike treated as sacred were never outside that structure. The ledgers he read so feverishly recorded only part of it. And the grief that Stevens flees at the end of the novel — Mollie's voice, "without words," filling the room — is what remains when the myth runs out.

Conclusion

“The whole novel is a set of graveyards.” Flores-Silva and Cartwright’s formulation is blunt, but it is the most honest accounting of what *Go Down, Moses* ultimately offers its reader. The conclusion of *Go Down, Moses* is not a conclusion in any conventional sense. Samuel Beauchamp comes home in a casket, Mollie’s grief fills a room that Gavin Stevens cannot leave fast enough, and the hearse circles the Confederate monument on the way back to the plantation. The novel ends where it began: on Edmonds land, inside the plantation structure that has organized every birth and death the novel records.

This thesis has argued that the Plantationocene—defined by Donna Haraway as the systematic exploitation of land and the forced relocation of people and generative units as a prerequisite for extraction—provides the framework that makes *Go Down, Moses* legible as both a racial novel and an environmental one, because it insists those categories were never distinct. The plantation did not simply exploit labor; it remade landscapes and shaped relationships even after the institution itself was outlawed and evolved into something new. In Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, the land and the people bear the same wound.

The first chapter established the plantation as the novel’s organizing structure, working through “Was” and “The Fire and the Hearth” to show how its logic persists not primarily through land use but through contested inheritance. The darkly comic courtship plot of “Was” is not incidental: it reveals the decay that can come from such a system, one so invested in bloodline purity that only manipulation and trickery produces a recognized heir. “The Fire and the Hearth” extends this into the New South, where Lucas Beauchamp farms land he will never legally own, knows himself to be a McCaslin, and is known by the Edmonds and McCaslins to be a McCaslin, and where that knowledge changes nothing except the texture of the resentment. Roth’s “old

haughty ancestral pride” was not inherited from blood, as he briefly believes; Faulkner is explicit that it came from an accident of geography, from the plantation system itself. The first chapter of this thesis is where the Plantationocene is most visible as a social structure, in the kinship it warps, the inheritances it forecloses, and the rituals of dominance and deference that two men perform across forty-five years of shared land neither of them, in different ways, truly possesses.

The second chapter turned to the hunting trilogy to argue against its most persistent misreading: that the wilderness of *Go Down, Moses* is outside the plantation system, a sacred space where Ike can seek and briefly find redemption. It is not. The Big Woods were owned by Major de Spain, worked with enslaved and Black labor, sold to a lumber company, and converted into farmland within a single lifetime. The wilderness Ike mythologizes as timeless and ancient was, by the time he was an old man in “Delta Autumn,” two hundred miles further from Jefferson than it had been in his boyhood. Sam Fathers, Ike’s conduit to that mythic past, was one generation removed from the dispossession that erased his people from the land. Ike’s tragedy is not that the wilderness vanishes but that he never understood it as anything other than what he needed it to be—a space of initiation and revelation, outside history, capable of bearing the weight of a moral reckoning he was never willing to complete. His resounding and repeating “not yet,” on equal rights and on Roth’s incestuous repetition of the cycle reverberate throughout the stories and are inseparable from his failure to recognize that the wilderness and the plantation were always part of the same system. He sought refuge in a space that was only on the slow path to landscape-altering extraction and development.

The third chapter argued that the novel’s apparent outliers—part four of “The Bear,” “Pantaloons in Black,” and “Go Down, Moses”—are in fact its most concentrated expression of the Plantationocene, precisely because they strip away the mythmaking. Ike’s reading of the ledgers

gives him a real history, the actual names of the dead, the Christmas Day suicide of a woman whose name was recorded six months before anyone noted the cause, but his reading is selective and predetermined. He finds in the ledgers what he is already looking for: confirmation of a curse he can endure but not dismantle. “Pantaloon in Black” shows what Ike’s endurance costs others. Rider grieves in a landscape that offers him no refuge, no claim, no air. Every space in his story is a trap—the house that was never his, the timber country that has replaced the wilderness, the jail cell he tears apart not trying to escape but trying to breathe—and he is lynched in the end by the foreman’s family while the deputy retells his grief as evidence of inhumanity. The final story brings the consequences of all that deferral into the sharpest possible focus: Samuel Beauchamp, Lucas and Mollie’s grandson, comes home from a Chicago prison in a casket because Roth Edmonds expelled him from the plantation. Immediately prior to “Go Down, Moses” is Ike’s “not yet” to the woman holding Roth’s child in a hunting camp. The distance between “not yet” and a casket on a train is the measure of what the plantation’s persistence actually costs.

What holds these three chapters together—and what the Plantationocene framework makes visible—is that the novel is not structured around a hero’s failure or a family’s decline, or even an individual’s moral superiority to reject the system, as some read Ike. It is structured around a system’s continuation. The McCaslin farm at the center of Jennifer Smith’s concentric circles is not a point of origin that radiates outward into the county and the nation; it is a node in a network of extraction that predates it and survives it, that shaped the wilderness before the wilderness was sold, that shaped Samuel Beauchamp’s fate before he was born. The novel’s fractured form, its shifting perspectives and unreliable archives, and its refusal to cohere around a single protagonist or a single timeline are not formal quirks. They are the novel’s argument. As Smith writes, the cycle “hints at a unity that it simultaneously denies,” requiring readers to hold multiple contingent

readings rather than resolving into the genealogical clarity Ike is always reaching for. The ledger cannot account for what the plantation actually costs. Neither can Faulkner's novel. Yet the form allows the reader to fill in the gaps, much in the same way that Ike did as he read the ledgers.

The Plantationocene framework asks us to read the novel's racial and ecological concerns as inseparable because they were inseparable in the historical reality Faulkner was writing from and about. The same logic that cleared the forest cleared the people. The same system that denied Tomey's Turl's bloodline converted the wilderness into cotton fields. The same structure that made Rider a tenant with no claim made the Big Woods into a lumber company's inventory. Ecocritical readings of *Go Down, Moses* have tended to center the hunting trilogy, and readings focused on race have tended to treat the wilderness stories as a detour. This thesis has argued that neither reading is complete without the other, and that the Plantationocene provides the framework to hold both without collapsing one into the other.

What Faulkner does not offer, and what this thesis has not tried to supply on his behalf, is resolution. The novel ends with Mollie's voice "without words," with Gavin Stevens fleeing toward air and dark that will not actually be cleaner or darker once he is outside, with a hearse circling a monument to the Confederacy on its way back to land the Beauchamps never legally owned. The plantation has not been transcended. The wilderness has not been restored. Ike is still somewhere saying "not yet." The Plantationocene is not a past the novel mourns. It is a structure the novel shows still operating, in 1942, in the same Mississippi that Faulkner was writing from—and, as the landscape of the real Yoknapatawpha County still attests, long after.

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