AS THEY LAY DYING: RURAL DEPOPULATION AND SOCIAL DISLOCATION AS A STRUCTURE OF FEELING

When Faulkner published *As I Lay Dying* in 1930, the modernization of the South had already begun to propel a spatial and social dislocation that would amount by century's end to the departure from the region of not only 29 million Southerners but that also involved, throughout the century, the massive comings and goings of Southerners who shifted places within the South or who left the South but then came back. After World War I, and even more so with the Great Depression and the transformative programs of the New Deal, millions of rural Southerners were faced with the struggle of maintaining a way of life that was rapidly becoming extinct or of making the effort to adapt to new and unfamiliar environments, occupations, and social orders. *As I Lay Dying* allegorizes this collective upheaval of traditional rural life by setting the hapless Bundren family on a journey to town. As the family moves toward the unfamiliar landscape and community of Jefferson and toward new social identities, they are compelled to respond to pressures and limits that emerge in the context of new settings and social relations. At the same time, their movements are being closely monitored by others, who find the prospect of accommodating the influx of rural Southerners like the Bundrens discomfitting.

Despite its formal complexity, the underlying situation and narrative of *As I Lay Dying* is quite simple. Addie Bundren dies, leaving her husband and five children to fulfill her request that she be laid to rest forty miles away, in Jefferson, where her relatives are buried. Her request places a burden on her family, who subsist on limited means as small farmers and occasional wage laborers in rural Northern Mississippi in the late 1920s. After a delay of three days, the family sets out in the heat of July with Addie's body in a mule-driven wagon and, as further delays extend the duration of the journey and Addie's body decomposes further, neighbors and onlookers become increasingly critical of the Bundrens. Not without suffering calamities, the Bundrens ultimately reach Jefferson, unceremoniously bury Addie and, after committing the elder son Darl to an insane asylum and replacing Addie with a new wife and mother—two unexpected and preposterous twists of the plot—return to the country.

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1 This article was written with the support of a sabbatical leave, for which I thank the University of Kansas and my colleagues in the English Department and the American Studies Program.
In this essay, I suggest that the concept of hegemony, as developed by Raymond Williams to refine and enlarge the concept of ideology, is descriptively and methodologically suited to the interpretation of Faulkner’s writings, with their effort to capture the lived experience of modernization in the South. I turn especially to Williams’ concept of the structure of feeling to situate thematic and formal elements of the novel in the larger context of historical transition and to capture Faulkner’s rendering of that transition as a structure of feeling. I focus, then, on a particular set of linkages in the text, which have bearing on the lived experience of migration, social and spatial dislocation, and rural depopulation, on one hand, and social identities, subjectivities, social relationships, and interdependency, on the other, and which demonstrate in the embryonic fashion of aesthetic forms the lived impact of historical transition on feelings and thoughts (that is, not feeling as opposed to thought, as Williams cautions us to remember, but feeling as thought and thought as felt), experiences, relationships, and practices. My particular interest in Faulkner’s response to the phenomenon of migration within and beyond the South and its impact on the formation and transformation of Southern identities is keenly examined in Marxist readings of As I Lay Dying by Kevin Railey, the editor of this volume, in his study Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology, and the Production of William Faulkner and Julia Leyda in her article “Reading White Trash: Class, Race, and Mobility in Faulkner and Le Sueur.”

Aptly developing a comparative analysis of As I Lay Dying and Light in August as treatments of “the questions and ramifications of mobility” in Jefferson and its environs in the 1920s and linking both to Sanctuary, Railey examines the process of identity formation in As I Lay Dying in the larger context of a historical transition, “the turning point where urban, town interests were coming to outweigh rural, country ones” (91). Railey views the Bundrens as representatives of a segment of poor white farming people who identified with middle class ideology, and he characterizes their journey to Jefferson as the fulfillment of their desire, through the acquisition of material goods, to attain the status of middle class town people. He notes that Faulkner’s treatment of this segment of the farming class serves as a reminder that the novel is a “symbolic history told from a particular standpoint . . . connected to the dominant ideological formations” (88). Like Railey, I read the Bundren’s journey as the dramatic rendering of transformations and conflicts that were occurring in Faulkner’s South. While Railey makes the significant point that migration, which Faulkner foregrounds, was only one response to conflicts that other farmers addressed through resistance and political organization, I note that mass migration was the overwhelmingly dominant response. Unlike Railey, I do not emphasize the Bundrens’ identifications with middle class ideology, i.e., with “Progressivism, supported as it was, especially in rural sections, by Protestantism” (88). Rather, I emphasize the novel’s illustration of the destabilization of social identities and social formations for Bundrens and non-Bundrens alike and the intensification of social jockeying with the goal of acquiring or sustaining power in the midst of the massive demographic shifts underway during this period.
Drawing on recent analyses of the treatment of poor whites, white trash, and rednecks in history and literature and on close readings, Julia Leyda offers a rich comparative analysis of socioeconomic and geographical mobility and racialized class warfare in *As I Lay Dying* and Meridel Le Sueur’s *The Girl* (1939). Building on arguments advanced by Marxist social historians from Eugene Genovese to George Rawick and David Roediger, Leyda demonstrates and explains the stigmatization of poor whites in *As I Lay Dying* as a process that served the interests of middle class white Southerners by exacerbating conflict and obstructing alliances among laboring whites and between laboring whites and blacks. She concludes that the racialization of class-warfare poorly served the interests of the “1930s white trash subject,” whose geographic mobility did not lead to their socioeconomic advancement. Leyda offers a sensitive and detailed view of the novel’s dramatization of social identities, particularly the identity of poor whites, destabilized by a shifting political economy and the accompanying demographic and social change. Without conflicting with Leyda’s reading, my own is more attentive to breakdowns on the level of subjectivity, experience, and understanding and to thematic and aesthetic evidence of this breakdown in the novel.

The modernization of the South and the massive demographic upheaval it entailed thrust people into new social and spatial circumstances and arrangements. Adapting to the pressures and limits of these new arrangements involved subjects at all levels of the social order in a dynamic struggle to represent their interests at the level of practical experience by reinforcing, adapting, or overturning dominant meanings, values, and beliefs. Refusing to equate the social, cultural, and political forces that impinge on human life with the “articulate formal system” of ideology, Raymond Williams proposes the concept of hegemony as a more supple approach to the “relatively mixed, confused, incomplete, or inarticulate consciousness” in which these forces find expression (Williams 109). To emphasize the shift in analysis that occurs as one moves from the level of an articulate formal system to the level of a mixed, confused, incomplete, and inarticulate process with specific and changing pressures and limits, Williams defines hegemony as a dynamic process that does not simply reproduce the dominant but that also continually contends with opposition and alternatives:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice. (112-13)
At times of historical transformation, the lived hegemony is particularly beset with shifting pressures and limits, which are manifested on the level of experiences, relationships, and activities but are too new and unfamiliar to comprehend or express. Such transformations exert dramatic pressures on subjects and can, with a force comparable to a flood, fracture, disintegrate, uproot, and carry away subjectivities and social identities for which there is no place in the emergent social order. Hence, whereas Railey argues that the Bundrens’ journey successfully incorporates them into a new middle class, I argue that it serves rather to illustrate the pressures and limits that simultaneously solicit and reject them as middle class subjects, while neutralizing, as Leyda demonstrates, the counter-hegemonic or alternative pressure they might otherwise exert as working class subjects.

According to Jack Temple Kirby, rural modernization brought about the “great transformation” of a Southern landscape composed of traditional rural communities that had remained relatively unchanged from the Civil War to World War II, “a long period of persisting rural poverty, of sharecropping and mule power, and of semiprimitive backwoods and mountain cultures” (xiv). Taking issue with periodizations that point to the beginnings of the New South in the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century, Kirby describes the four-decade period that followed World War I as the period of most significant upheaval, which shaped a collective experience of massive movement and erasure on the level of material and social life:

The four decades between 1920 and 1960 encompass the great transformation. Change was most intense during the two middle decades—the 1930s and 1940s—when the Great Depression, New Deal farm programs, and the demographic chaos occasioned by World War II all conspired to end or alter the main elements of the old systems. The broader chronological scope, 1920-1960, presents the old and new in stark contrast. Despite an ongoing black exodus (which began about 1915), the rural south in 1920 was much as it had been in the 1870s; in fact, it was in certain respects worse off. The plantation monoculture subregions were larger; much more southern land was worn or ruined; the ‘Mexican’ cotton boll weevil, unknown until the 1890s, was completing its northeasterly course to the limits of the cotton kingdom; and southern farm staples were about to encounter a price crisis perhaps worse than those of the end of the previous century. By 1960 about nine million southerners had migrated from the region, more millions had settled in southern towns and cities, sharecroppers and mules had become rare, and southern farms and rural communities, both now vastly reduced in numbers and souls, more closely resembled those of the North and West than the prewar South. The southern countryside was thus enclosed and depopulated as dramatically as was rural England toward the end of the eighteenth century (xv).

Today, under conditions of rapid technological change and intensive global development, we can better grasp the enormity and abruptness of the collapse of rural societies over centuries of modernization. Those of us without first-hand experience of the transition from agrarian to modern life nonetheless become aware of its impact on families and communities through wrenching tales of rural depopulation in China, Africa, India, and Indonesia, for example, which appear in the news alongside reports on the systematic yet unregulated global-
ization of corporate interests. Globalization continues to force millions off the land in a “painful process of economic and social integration” that, as Alabama historian Wayne Flynt argues in reference to the American South, “was probably both inevitable and in the long run beneficial” in spite of

the short-term consequences of the collapse of the southern regional economy and the integration of southerners into a national market for unskilled labor [which] brought interregional migration, severance from kin and neighbors, shock to institutions such as churches, and great personal anguish. (x-xi)

As one of the last regions in the United States to undergo modernization, thanks to its slave-based plantation economy, the American South, well into the twentieth century, was profoundly shaped by a transformation that millions experienced as pain, shock, and anguish. Ironically, they were feeling pain experienced earlier by their ancestors, who settled or rather, occupied, the southwestern frontier after having been brutally forced from their homelands during the clearances of the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, particularly in the Scottish Highlands. They were feeling the pain of African slaves who came in chains, on forced marches, to clear the land for cotton production; the pain of indigenous peoples who were “removed” from their land to make way for the early-nineteenth century settlers and forced on the long, grueling, often fatal Trail of Tears; the pain of Afro-Southerners who fled their Southern homes when opportunities arose, particularly with World War I, to escape the anguish of Jim Crow. From World War I to the 1960s, the years in which Faulkner flourished as a writer, rural depopulation, agricultural mechanization, and black migration confronted millions with the shock of social and spatial dislocation. 2

Faulkner’s writings of the late 1920s and 1930s already offer a response to the massive movements, erasures, and inscriptions that became more intense after 1940. As a response to the early stages of the transformations Kirby describes, As I Lay Dying provides a less explicit historical perspective on the transformations of modernity than do post–World War II writings, such as the Compson Appendix, which thematizes demographic upheaval as a historical topos, dating from the flight from the Scottish Highlands of the first Compson immigrant and leading to the rural depopulation and southern exodus that informs the disintegration of the Compson family and the pressures that are transforming their way of life. Only recently have the demographic shifts whose early history we consider here, and whose significance to southern life becomes increasingly explicit in Faulkner’s writings over the course of his literary career, been conceptualized in terms of a vast “southern diaspora.” 3

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2 For a discussion of clearances and mass emigration from Europe, see Johnson. On Southern intellectual responses to modernization, see Romine; and Kirby, 223-28. On the comparison between the development and enclosure of Southern farmland and the British enclosures of the late eighteenth century, see Kirby, 276, and 276 note 2. On African American and white migration grasped in terms of a Southern diaspora, based on newly estimated calculations of the numbers of migrants, see Gregory. For a provocative treatment of rootlessness and diaspora in the South, see Jones.

3 See Gregory for estimated numbers of Southern-born migrants for each decade of the twentieth century.
Without attempting an analysis or explanation of the broad transformations associated with the modernization of the South, Faulkner’s literary production articulates the affective pressures—contradictory and confusing impulses and experiences—felt during this great transformation by individuals, families, and communities. As Raymond Williams suggests, aesthetic works offer more purchase on the lived experience of such transitions than can be gained through the historical or sociological analysis of separate elements, such as “the material life, the general social organization, and the dominant ideas” of a given time and place (Higgins 33). Expressive cultural forms like Faulkner’s literary writings can provide access to what Williams theorizes as more than the sum of parts, i.e., to the lived or felt experience of a whole complex of life.

Naming this lived or felt effect of the whole complex of life a “structure of feeling,” Williams develops a methodology, as Stephen Shapiro elucidates, for recognizing and demonstrating the emergence in expressive cultural forms “of new modes of subjectivity within moments of historical transformation.” The concept of a structure of feeling seeks to account, beyond the existence of dominant identities, for the lived experience of the dynamic process through which dominance seeks to sustain itself in the context of challenges from oppositional and alternative formations. “We are talking,” Williams writes,

about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’ as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience that is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (132)

To capture the “finite but significant openness” that exists on the level of social life when it is analyzed as a lived process rather than reduced to a finished product, Williams turns to works of art, which are often composed, as is certainly the case with the writings of Faulkner, of a pertinent “finite but significant openness” supple enough to capture the material that, as Williams emphasizes, is in process, latent, embryonic, not yet meaningful (114). As evidence of a contemporary structure of feeling, works of art can offer “a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions... particular deep starting-points and conclusions” (134). By way of example, Williams continues in this passage, drawing on his more extensive work on nineteenth century British literature, to sketch out a process through which the social meaning of poverty, debt, and illegitimacy was transformed, first in specific structures of semantic figuration of the sort discussed above, and later through an articulate alternative ideology.

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4 For a thorough and cogent analysis of Raymond Williams’s concept of the structure of feeling, drawing widely on Williams’ writings, I am indebted to Shapiro. See also Williams 108-35, and Higgins 33-35, 119-40, 162-78, 223.
Faulkner himself, although he spent most of his writing life in Mississippi, was one of those hundreds and hundreds of thousands to begin moving in, out, and around the South as early as 1917. As a white bourgeois male, Faulkner himself enjoyed a wide range of spatial and social mobility; he served in the military during World War I, traveled and worked odd jobs in New Haven, New York, New Orleans, Pascagoula, and Europe, and drove around much of Northern Mississippi during the political campaigns of one of his uncles. By the time he wrote *As I Lay Dying*, he had established himself as someone able to move back and forth between South and North and between the dominant culture of towns and cities and the residual culture of the countryside. He depicted the socio-spatial dislocation of male bourgeois subjects like himself in previous novels, suggesting via characters like Donald Mahon, Horace Benbow, and Quentin Compson that such bourgeois subjects, who returned to the South with altered viewpoints, beliefs, and desires, were no longer willing or able to be reintegrated in Southern social life. However, when Faulkner turned to characters like the Bundrens, that is, to characters with more limited spatial and social mobility, he focused on the tragic or tragicomic mishaps of their journeys and on their inability to adapt to new environments.

Like Jack Temple Kirby and William Faulkner, Raymond Williams comes from a family whose historical experience was rooted in the collapse of traditional rural life. Drawing on personal experience, each seeks with limited success to represent the marginalized experiences of the mass of people "whose interests and values," Kirby observes, "were seldom well served or reflected by the 'articulate'" (xv). Basing their claims to represent marginalized social groups in a common experience of historical transformation, these middle-class observers root their representations of the experience of transition in a general consciousness of difference, contradiction, instability, and conflict rather than in a particular, fixed ideology. To challenge the presentation of individuals as members of stable, unified, or homogenous social groups, each suggests that individual and group responses to transformation are governed less by fixed ideology, principled reason, or unified purpose than by what Kirby calls, citing Irving Howe, "the urgencies of their experience" or by what Williams calls "the pressures and limits of a given form of domination... [as it is] experienced and in practice internalized" (Kirby 223; Williams 110).

Faulkner's depiction of individual variation, Kirby's rejection of a coherent Southern identity, "beyond several manifestations of poverty and dependency" (223), and Williams's concept of structure of feeling represent historical change as a process that disturbs social identities and relationships, including those best served by the transformation. The concept of the structure of feeling captures the discontinuities and uncertainties of the lived experience of historical transition, an experience not yet legible in material practice, existing structures of meaning, or established social identities and relationships. Just at the edge of semantic figuration, a structure of feeling is an "effect" that is rooted in transformations occurring on the level of material life, social organization, and ideology. The structure of feeling is, as Stephen Shapiro explains,
the transitional effect of the subject's attempt to express experience in the moment when older institutions and attendant forms of expression are decreasingly functional and before the dislocated collective subject's incorporation into and establishment of new institutions. The concept of a structure of feeling looks to comprehend that which is poorly articulated and difficult to locate, not because it lacks a material reality, but because subjects have not yet constituted the institutional apparatuses that can consolidate communicative forms that may inscribe the presence of new social relations. (42)

Unlike the concept of ideology, which focuses on articulate formal structures in dominance, the concept of a structure of feeling seeks to capture transitional effects, the necessarily inarticulate efforts of a dislocated social group to express experiences taking place in the context of new social relations and an emergent material reality that is no longer served by older institutions or expressive forms.

The concept of a structure of feeling may illuminate the overall atmosphere of many of Faulkner’s writings, including *As I Lay Dying*, which fall into a category that Richard King defines as “sublime founding narratives,” and which convey an overall sense of unease, urgency, obsessiveness, and anxiety connected to the transition to a new social order. Although *As I Lay Dying* does not explicitly connect the journey of the Bundrens to the general depopulation underway in the rural South, it nevertheless deploys the Bundrens as a trope or figuration of the collective experience of the hundreds of thousands of families who were beginning to set out from isolated Southern agrarian communities to towns and cities within and beyond the South. With its tense and dramatic river crossing at the center of the novel, *As I Lay Dying* offers a condensed allegory of the hazards of an upheaval that moved people to unfamiliar social terrains.

*As I Lay Dying* presents the Bundren family as a fragmented and conflicted social group rife with misunderstanding, secrecy, and betrayal, and enhances the incomprehensibility of their experience by disrupting narrative coherence and linear chronology. The semantic and syntactic disorder serve to indicate the turmoil the Bundrens experience as they leave their habitual surroundings and struggle to adapt to changing pressures and limits. By using the same tropes and techniques he used to depict the bourgeois Compsons in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner suggests with *As I Lay Dying* that, however different their social locations, the same historical phenomena are closing the spatial distance that once maintained the social separation of the Compsons from the Bundrens. If portions of *As I Lay Dying*, as Sundquist has argued, offer a compassionate, “unabashedly moving” view of the Bundrens as they make their way from the countryside to Jefferson, other portions present them as an embarrassment, outrage, or threat. While acknowledging the heroism of their struggle as they move into...

5 King suggests that we look to Faulkner not for ideologies as such but for narratives, particularly for narratives about the founding and decline of social orders. He draws a useful distinction between the tortured and agonized atmosphere of the sublime narratives and detached, ironic, bemused modality of the pastoral founding narratives (22-44).

6 For a reading of *As I Lay Dying* that praises the novel because—in “perhaps the only certain moment in his career—Faulkner’s own compassion became brilliant, powerful, and unabashedly moving,” see Sundquist 43.
difficult and unfamiliar spatial and social settings, it also emphasizes, through both the external viewpoints of non-Bundrens and the internalized viewpoints of the Bundrens themselves, that the Bundrens are pinned in the one-down position. While it may be, as Sundquist maintains, that comedy is a means of "releasing pressure and relieving anguish," it does not relieve the unremitting anguish of the Bundrens but rather the anxiety of those bourgeois subjects whom their unseemly presence perturbs.

Addie’s death and the Bundren’s journey to Jefferson unfold in fifty-nine sections that are crafted from fifteen different points of view. These multiple viewpoints reveal the Bundrens as they view themselves and as they are viewed by others. The fifteen lenses give readers access to experiences, beliefs, and aspirations that both bind the Bundrens together as a family and as part of a rural community yet that also separate them from themselves, one another, their community, and the people who live in towns. Depicting the Bundrens from fifteen points of view, the detailed portrait of this family and its community unfolds within the looming shadow of the great transformation, which is figuratively announced by the death of Addie Bundren. The burial journey to Jefferson allegorizes the reorganization of the rural landscape and the evacuation of the southern countryside to form large-scale, mechanized neo-plantations. Under the pressure of rural modernization, more than four million people either left the South permanently in the first three decades of the twentieth century; left the region and returned; or, like the Bundrens, moved about within the South.

With seven of the fifteen points of view and three-quarters of the sections representing the Bundren family, and at least half of the other eight representing members of the Bundren’s rural community, As I Lay Dying gives the impression that it speaks for the Bundrens and, by extension, for the dislocated population to which they belong. Yet in spite of the fact that only three of the novel’s fifteen points of view represent the attitudes of people who live in Mottson and Jefferson (Peabody, Moseley, and MacGowan), who hold the Bundrens in “comic” contempt, their view still achieves dominance. This dominance is realized on the level of practical experience through “a complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits” (Williams 112). In Mottson, even before they arrive in Jefferson, the Bundrens are quickly marked as ridiculous, inept, insignificant, or outrageous as a function of their appearance, language, and behavior and, as a consequence, they are dismissed, deceived, and berated. Their arrival in town is felt as an assault on customary pressures and limits, which leads the people who encounter the Bundrens to assert and reassert the limits that have served to structure and maintain the hierarchical distinction between town and country. The Bundrens themselves have internalized their subordinate status, which they express in feelings and behaviors that indicate the pressures and limits exerted on them as they cross the boundaries of their status as country folk. Thus, for all the multiplication of viewpoints, and for all the intersections involved in the experience of rapid change, this novel identifies with rural refugees like the Bund-
rens to only a limited extent. The closer the Bundren family comes to town, the more events have played acts of speech, "partially or wholly detached from the bodily selves that appear to utter them" that reinforce the structural domination of town over country (Sundquist 30).

Aware of the dynamic juxtaposition of the old and the new, Faulkner moves from the residual complex of life of the Southern countryside to the dominant complex of life in modern cities and towns, like his own Oxford, Mississippi. He captures this awareness in his often-cited characterization of the circumstances in which he wrote As I Lay Dying, that is, on an upside-down wheelbarrow while working the night shift at a coal-fired electric power plant in Oxford. As aptly and concisely as this image represents the juxtapositions, often surreal, that appear repeatedly in this novel and that testify to the coexistence of outmoded economies, traditions, and beliefs with the increasing yet uneven domination of modernity in the South, I wish to return to the more dramatically and emotionally intense scene, which spans numerous sections of the novel and frames the Bundren's challenging river crossing. As opposed to this concise depiction of the author writing on a wheelbarrow in the power plant, this extended scene condenses the Bundren's practical experience—a set of feelings, relationships, expectations, and actions—as they make their precarious spatial and socially symbolic way from one world to another.

At the dramatic center of the journey to Jefferson is the intense and relatively lengthy depiction of the river crossing, a mock heroic battle fought and won, not without severe losses, by the three eldest sons, Cash, Darl, and Jewel, with additional help from neighbor Tull, and with encouragement on the outer banks of the river from father Anse, sister Dewey Dell, and baby brother Vardaman. According to the testimony of many different voices, it is nothing short of remarkable that the Bundren are undertaking this journey, reluctant as they are to make transitions of any kind. This furious resistance to change, a key element in the structure of feeling associated with the transformations at issue here, is announced in the first of the three "Anse" sections:

Durn that road. And it fixing to rain, too....

A-laying there, right up to my door, where every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find it. I told Addie it want any luck living on a road when it come by here, and she said, for the world like a woman, 'Get up and move, then.' But I told her it want no luck in it, because the Lord put roads for traveling; why He laid them down flat on the earth. When He aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man. (35-36)

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7 Sundquist argues that the individual sections of the novel cannot be seen as monologues because of the inconsistencies, heterogeneities, and contradictions that rupture the illusion that they emanate from the characters (30). These inconsistencies that disturb the aesthetic level of the text, in my view, are indicative of unresolved contradictions on the social level as well. Thus, for example, Addie Bundren was never able to speak freely about her love affair or marital dissatisfaction, in spite of the centrality of this material to her lived experience and closest relationships. More to the point, these posthumous revelations indicate the unresolved differences and continuing effects of her town versus Anse's country origins.
Anse, disempowered in society but still the dominant patriarch in his family, defines manhood here in terms of his resistance to the pressures of moving with the times in space. Later, having acquired a pair of false teeth and a new wife, he takes pleasure in displaying his souped-up manhood, gained by capitulating to the pressures he once resisted. He takes a compensatory pleasure in these acquisitions, which were gained at the expense of a series of encounters that emphasize the destabilization and diminution of his social authority as he moves from country to town. Peabody undermines whatever patriarchal authority might have been attributed to Anse’s intransigence and resistance to leave the countryside by characterizing it as an indication of his passivity, laziness, narrow-mindedness, and stubbornness and, by suggesting that he inherited this resistance from his mother, feminizing Anse’s posture.

He stands there beside a tree. Too bad the Lord made the mistake of giving trees roots and giving the Anse Bundrens He makes feet and legs. If He’d just swapped them, there wouldn’t ever be a worry about this country being deforested someday....Anse has not been in town in twelve years. And how his mother ever got up there to bear him, he being his mother’s son. (42)

The implication of this point of view, which acknowledges by the way that the Bundrens and others like them have been powerfully attached to the land for generations, is that it will be difficult to evacuate the countryside for the purpose of establishing a more profitable mode of agricultural production and that it will be difficult for those who are forced off the land to reestablish themselves elsewhere. Reflecting the broader network of cultural values that distinguishes stasis from movement and, by extension, country from town, both Anse and Peabody invoke the Lord to legitimate these distinctions as everlasting newly created for and according to a divine purpose. As Railey points out, religious beliefs caused some country people to identify with values and distinctions that went against their own best interests.

When Peabody arrives at the Bundrens house and sees Addie, he concludes that she “has been dead these ten days. I suppose it’s having been a part of Anse for so long that she cannot even make that change, if change it be” (43). The repeated comic development of this theme of the resistance of country folk to change suggests its importance as a trope, a hyperbolic signifier of the pressures exerted on rural individuals, families, and communities to relinquish a way of life that had endured for several generations. The pressures to yield to transformation and simply “Get up and move, then” as Addie suggests to Anse, seem to have had the paradoxical effect of intensifying the desire and belief that rural folks and their families ought “to stay put.”

Having suggested that Anse “Get up and move,” Addie does not express discomfort with the transformations related to the road or with the emergent identities, opportunities, and relationships it creates for her sons, for example, who are able to travel and hire themselves out as workers rather than remaining confined to working with and for their father. Yet Addie’s own antipathy toward change emerges, as it does for her daughter Dewey Dell, in connection
with sexual partnerships, with Anse and with Lafe, made possible by the spatial and social movement between country and town. Addie and Dewey Dell express their resistance to change in connection with pregnancy and their reluctance to make the transition to motherhood. As expressed in a reverie on the way to Jefferson by Dewey Dell, who hopes to arrest her pregnancy through abortion and, more broadly speaking, resists the determining impact it will have on the course of her future: “That’s what they mean by the womb of time: the agony and the despair of spreading bones, the hard girdle in which lie the outraged entrails of events” (121). Like Addie, who experienced childbirth and motherhood as a violation of her “aloneness...over and over each day” (172), Dewey Dell expresses her discomfort with the very prospect of motherhood as a negation and disintegration of self: “I couldn’t think what I was I couldn’t think of my name I couldn’t even think I am a girl I couldn’t even think I nor even think I want to wake up nor remember what was opposite to awake” (121). Although framed more or less explicitly and varying with gender, the resistance to change is felt by many members of the Bundren family and characterizes their willingness to make the burial journey as all the more demanding and self-sacrificing. Forced by circumstances or compelled by opportunity to move beyond their habitual manner of thinking, feeling, and behaving, the Bundrens undertake a journey whose connection to the phenomenon of modernization is never directly asserted but is rather evoked by a set of potential linkages and by the incomprehensibly exaggerated weight of the burdens they bear, obstacles they confront, and sacrifices they make along the way.

The river crossing, with all its hyperbolic challenges, demarcates the symbolic boundary that separates country from town. By the time the Bundrens make it to the other side of the river, Cash has broken his leg and the mules have drowned, but everything else is recuperated—the coffin and Addie’s body, the damaged but salvageable wagon, and all of Cash’s carpentry tools. The sacrifice of Cash does not result in his death but rather in the impairment of his emergent social identity as a carpenter. To move freely in and out of agrarian life, Cash must remain of sound body and mind, equipped with the physical mobility, skills, tools, and social relationships necessary to practice his new trade. Breaking his leg for the second time, nearly losing his recently purchased tools, and almost losing his leg altogether when he and his family fail to seek proper medical care, suggests the vulnerability, atomization, and instability of his emergent material life. The mules, which Kirby describes as the “preeminent source of farm power, factotum of regional symbolism, and one of the most interesting creatures ever to walk the earth,” and which recur as a topos in Faulkner’s writings that asserts their significance as a figuration of the disappearing rural South, are sacrificed to a violent and ugly death (Kirby 196). Losing the mules but saving the wagon, the coffin, and Addie’s decaying body structures a dilemma that the Bundrens will solve at the expense of Jewel, who will be forced to sacrifice the horse he obtained through a process of secret and arduous labor whose narration occurs in the midst of the river crossing, and of Darl, whose desperate rebellion against the continued exposure of Addie’s body casts him
in the role of the scapegoat, who is ejected from the family (and committed to the state mental institution) to release the pressures and relieve the anxieties of problems that the family has no other means to address, let alone resolve.

Given the symbolic significance of the flooded river in this novel and a decade later, in Wild Palms, it is worth recalling the significance of river crossings in narratives of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt and of the African-American freedom struggle. In both narrative traditions, the dangers and privations of the journey lead the fleeing slaves to question the wisdom and value of their decision to embark. As an allegory of the transition from traditional agrarian society to modernity, As I Lay Dying recalls these narratives of emancipation, the sacrifices required by flight, and the persistent role of uncertainty and doubt in the course of the journey. According to As I Lay Dying, the journey of the Bundrens and ultimately millions of others does not seem to have been worth the price of the ticket.

Having characterized the Bundrens as resistant to change and Anse Bundren as particularly resistant to going to town, As I Lay Dying offers Addie Bundren’s death and request to be buried in Jefferson as the public pretext for Anse’s change of heart. Yet the notion that Anse’s change of heart is driven by his attachment and obligation to his wife is undermined by revelations of the private motive (to “get them teeth”) that actually overcomes his long-standing inertia. Similarly, most members of the Bundren family undertake the burial journey, in spite of their resistances, the sacrifices required of them, and the “outrage” to others, not to fulfill their duty to Addie but to obtain material goods from town, the seat of an increasingly dominant commodity culture. Anse has wanted a pair of false teeth for the past fifteen years, Dewey Dell hopes to purchase something from a pharmacist that will terminate her secret pregnancy, and Vardaman hopes for some bananas and an opportunity to gaze upon goods, such as a toy train and a bicycle, that he knows he cannot have.

To fulfill these unspoken desires, however, Anse and Dewey Dell and little Vardaman rely on help from others, which they solicit under the false pretense that the purpose of the journey is to fulfill Anse’s promise to Addie. Anse expects his sons Cash, Darl, and Jewel to provide the labor and make the sacrifices that the burial journey requires and, although Jewel balks at first, each son feels compelled to comply. The demands of the journey require additional assistance, including food and shelter, from neighbors like the Tulls, the Samsons, and the Armstids, on whom the Bundrens habitually rely. On the day of Addie’s death, for example, Tull wraps his offer to help Anse with his crop in a reflection on the repeated assistance that Anse receives from “most folks around here”: “About that corn, I say. I tell him again I will help him out if he gets into a tight, with her sick and all. Like most folks around here, I done holf him so much already I cant quit now” (33). Leaving the support embedded in these social relationships behind as they make their way to town, the Bundrens must be shocked to find themselves received not as familiars deserving of ready assistance but as strangers meriting ridicule, deceit, and expulsion. Although Anse is treated comically for abusing the cooperative ethos of this social network, the characterization of
his dependency and interdependency as excessive and corrupt, even by members of his own rural community, reflects a dominant middle class sensibility that undervalues this functional aspect of traditional rural society.

Tull’s move to assist the Bundrens in their effort to cross the river marks the approaching boundary line of the network of social relations on which Anse and his family tacitly rely. As he approaches the flooded banks of the river, Tull echoes the sentiments earlier expressed by Peabody when he describes Anse in a posture of characteristic passivity and helplessness, “setting on the wagon in his Sunday pants, mumbling his mouth. Looking like a uncurried horse dressed up” (123). As if he were blocking out a dramatic scene, Tull also characterizes Dewey Dell and Vardaman as passive yet eager spectators, “watching the bridge...big-eyed he was watching it, like he was to a circus. And the gal too” (124). Emphasizing the symbolic significance of the nether side of the river and associating it with passivity and spectatorship, Tull himself gazes back toward the rural landscape—his mule, land, and house—as if he were gazing at an aesthetic representation of the fruits of his lifelong labor.

When I looked back at my mule it was like he was one of these here spy-glasses and I could look at him standing there and see all the broad land and my house sweated outen it like it was the more the sweat, the broader the land; the more the sweat, the tighter the house. (139)

At this moment, calculating what he has gained from his years of sweat, Tull reveals his suspicion that Anse and his family are yielding to unworthy pressures in making this journey, for which he believes they stand to lose more than they can possibly gain.8 “Just going to town. Bent on it. They would risk the fire and the earth and the water and all just to eat a sack of bananas. You ought to laid over a day” (140). Yet neither resistance of the Bundrens, the risks of the river crossing, nor the outrage to others can match the current of forces, which are thicker than the desire to eat a sack of bananas, that propel them, along with millions of others, away from traditional rural communities to an uncertain future.

As *I Lay Dying* figures the “thick dark current” of the flooding river as a force that uproots and moves everything in its path, even trees. “Above the ceaseless surface they stand—trees, cane, vines—rootless, severed from the earth, spectral above a scene of immense yet circumscribed desolation” (142). So powerful is the force, Darl observes, as he and Cash begin to settle on a strategy for making the crossing, that it is even “as if the road too had been soaked free of earth and floated upward, to leave in its spectral tracing a monument to a still more profound desolation than this above which we now sit, talking quietly of old security and old trivial things” (143). It is the Bundrens who are in the process of being severed from the earth and from the security of a familiar and viable way of life by social, political, and economic transformations typically figured in Faulkner, as here, in terms of natural forces. As Cash and Darl

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8 See Morrison for a detailed discussion of Tull as the figuration, particularly relative to Anse Bundren, of superior manhood.
face the river like soldiers in battle, they “crouch flagrant and unabashed in all the old terror and the old foreboding” and begin to speak, preparing for action, in “voices [that] are quiet, detached” (142)—about the terrain, how they ought to have been better prepared, and about concern for the safety of Jewel, their younger brother. They anticipate their severance from local knowledge, available to them in the country through a network of social relations, by remarking the absence of the trees that people once used to cross the river when the water is high.

“Tull taken and cut them two big whiteoaks. I heard tell how at high water in the old days they used to line up the ford by them trees.... I reckon he never thought that anybody would ever use this ford again.... He cut a sight of timber outen here then. Payed off that mortgage with it, I hear tell.” (142)

On the other side of the river, at a greater symbolic distance from the country, skills such as how to ford a river at high water or how to find a road inundated with water by observing the position of the trees, will be of little use to them, and they will be cut off from the local knowledge (as in “I hear tell”) necessary to orient themselves and prepare for action in a new and unfamiliar environment. The scattering and arduous retrieval of Cash’s tools from the river, like Cash’s broken leg, signal the deskilling and isolation that the family will suffer as they leave the countryside.

When their strategy for crossing the river fails because of the sudden and unpredictable appearance of a log, the mules make one last desolate and grotesque appearance before they are carried off with all the rest of the deracinated matter by the current: “They roll up out of the water in succession, turning completely over, their legs stiffly extended as when they had lost contact with the earth” (149). This severance from the earth reappears in the final image of the river crossing; as Jewel and Tull are fetching the last of Cash’s tools from the river, “they do not appear to violate the surface at all; it is as though it had severed them both at a single blow, the two torsos moving with infinitesimal and ludicrous care upon the surface” (163). Like the mules, the men too have “lost contact with the earth.” They have lost contact with their legs and are being moved along by the current; given the loss of volition, their efforts to move “with infinitesimal care” seem ludicrous.

Apart from the hazards of balancing the coffin in the wagon, crossing the rising floodwaters, and repairing Cash’s broken leg, the Bundrens express few fears as they set out for Jefferson. Their whiteness, little remarked thus far in the narrative, enables them to move from place to place, even if they are being compelled to move by forces that are beyond their control, without the expectation that they might be apprehended, brutalized, imprisoned, or killed. Although the Bundrens face social challenges and rebukes, they do not face the life-threatening dangers that inspired black Southerners to migrate and that deterred most from returning South, whatever the outcome of their journeys. However, as rural whites like the Bundrens moved into spatial and social loca-
tions formerly occupied by black Southerners, they experienced new pressures, limits, and tensions, arising from conflict and confusion over the signifying value of race and class in the determination of their social status.9

In this new context, Anse has relinquished the social capital he possessed and utilized to make others in his community feel obliged to help him.

Because be durn if there aint something about a durn fellow like Anse that seems to make a man have to help him, even when he knows he'll be wanting to kick himself next minute... I be durn if Anse don't conjure a man, some way. I be durn if he aint a sight. (192-93)

In the new socio-spatial orbit of town, Anse is greeted with disdain rather than assistance, except in the case of the woman whose graphophone attracts him to her house. Searching for a "talking machine" for Cash, whose savings he used to buy a new team, Anse not only finds the new Mrs. Bundren but also the spade he needs so that his sons can dig Addie's grave and the graphophone he can use to repay his debt to Cash. Anse is well aware that he is liable to be greeted with contempt in Jefferson. He has known for years "how town folks are," that is, how they look down on country folks. When he proposes marriage to Addie but discovers that she comes from Jefferson, he worries that her family will not accept him: "I got a little property. I'm forehanded; I got a good honest name. I know how town folks are, but maybe when they talk to me...." (171). Thinking about his new teeth to console himself for the meager rewards his labors have earned him, the damage the rain has done to his crop, and the difficulties of the journey, Anse reflects with resentment on the ease and wealth of town folk.

It's a hard country on a man; it's hard. Eight miles of the sweat of his body washed up outen the Lord's earth, where the Lord Efhimself told him to put it. Nowhere in this sinful world can a honest, hardworking man profit. It takes them that runs the stores in the towns, doing no sweating, living off of them that sweats. It aint the hardworking man, the farmer. Sometimes I wonder why we keep at it. It's because there is a reward for us above, where they cant take their autos and such. Every man will be equal there and it will be taken from them that have and give to them that have not by the Lord.

But it's a long wait, seems like. It's bad that a fellow must earn the reward of his right-doing by flouting hisself and his dead. . .

But now I can get them teeth. That will be comfort. It will. (110-11)

Without any living family among "them that runs the stores in the towns, doing no sweating, living off of them that sweats" (110) to express disapproval of the marriage, Addie simply "took Anse" (171). After bearing two sons, she is so dissatisfied by marriage, motherhood, and its violation of her "aloneness" that she exacts a promise from Anse: "And when Darl was born I asked Anse to promise me to take me back to Jefferson when I died" (173). By making Anse, who has not been to Jefferson in twelve years, promise to bury her in Jefferson,

9 On the whitening of the plantation districts and the subsequent demotion or "blackening" of the social status of poor white farmers, see Kirby 237.
Addie forces her family to suffer the disapproval of town folks after all. Perhaps she exacted this promise with the hope of making her family aware of her, of who she had been, what she was made of, what she had given up when she “took” Anse. Such a desire for recognition informs Addie’s reasons for whipping her students: “Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever” (170). Raised in the country and believing themselves inferior to town folks, Addie’s request to be buried in town, with “her people,” opposes her to her husband and children.

Darl, more observer than participant, inherits his mother’s difference from her rural surroundings, standing apart to observe others in the environment with an acuity that people find uncomfortable and “queer.” As Tull notes, “I always say it ain’t never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as how he looks at you. It’s like he had got into the inside of you, someway. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes” (125).

Having been “in France at the war,” Darl is more like those elite returning soldiers mentioned earlier in this essay, who are so queer by the awareness they acquire from leaving their Southern hometowns that they cannot be re-integrated when they return. Through the experience of cultural dislocation, Darl has become aware of the pressures and limits that change meaning, value, and social identity in the movement from one social and spatial context to another. Attentive to the signifying value of Vernon’s clothing, for example, Darl is able to recognize when Cora and Vernon have “been to town. I have never seen him go to town in overalls. His wife, they say. She taught school too, once” (11). Like his mother or Cora Tull, both schoolteachers, Darl has the education, which he acquired through his experience as a soldier, to recognize distinctions, to know that they mark what is appropriate or inappropriate in a given time and place, and to realize, as Cora does when she and Vernon go to town, that distinctions can be taken on as protective coloring, to make one less conspicuous in a foreign environment.  

By contrast with his own sensitive if unsettling habits of awareness, Darl notes his brother Jewel’s “wooden” refusal to bend or depart from rural social codes that Jewel considers natural and essential to his identity. The very dilapidation of Jewel’s “frayed and broken straw hat” (3) serves in the country to signify his hard work and constant exposure to the natural world, just as his way of moving through space, “with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls” (4), signifies his narrow range of experience and stubborn attachment to an outmoded way of life. Like Jewel, Dewey Dell and Vardaman inherit from their father an internalized resentment over their subordination to town folks. Dewey Dell expresses this resentment as she reflects on her sexual liaison with Lafe and futilely seeks to resolve its undesirable consequences by wishing that it had never happened: “I don’t see why he didn’t stay in town. We are country people, not as good as town people” (60). Vardaman, too, as he

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10 See Locke, who uses this term and asserts the need, given the socio-spatial shifts of the Great Migration, to promote the passing of the Old Negro of the South and the emergence of the urban New Negro.
indulges in the fantasy of owning an electric toy train, struggles with his belief that he cannot have it or any other expensive material goods because he is a country boy:

Dewey Dell said we will get some bananas. The train is behind the glass, red on the track. When it runs the track shines on and off. Pa said flour and sugar and coffee costs so much. Because I am a country boy because boys in town. Bicycles. Why do flour and sugar and coffee cost so much when he is a country boy. "Wouldn't you rather have some bananas instead?" Bananas are gone, eaten. Gone. When it runs on the track shines again. “Why ain't I a town boy, pa?” I said. God made me. I did not said to God to made me in the country. If He can make the train, why can't He make them all in the town, because flour and sugar and coffee. "Wouldn't you rather have bananas?" (65-66)

Given the Bundren's sensitivity to their unequal status as country folks, it is hardly surprising to find the jocular antagonism that Doc Peabody and others feel toward country folks erupting in expressions and acts of contempt when the Bundrens arrive in Mottson and Jefferson. "It must have been like a piece of rotten cheese coming into an ant-hill" (203) says Albert, as he reports to his boss Moseley the outrageous details of the Bundren's arrival in Mottson, where people tolerate the smell of Addie's eight-day-old corpse no better than the Bundren's plan to set Cash's broken leg in cement or Dewey Dell's aim to purchase an agent that will induce an abortion. "[G]o back home and tell your pa, if you have one, and let him make somebody buy you a wedding license" (201), says Moseley to Dewey Dell. He adds:

'You take my advice and go home and tell your pa or your brothers if you have any....And I just wish your precious Lafe had come for it himself....And you can go back and tell him I said so—if he ain't halfway to Texas by now, which I don't doubt. Me, a respectable druggist, that's kept store and raised a family and been a church-member for fifty-six years in this town.' (202)

Responding to the Bundren's rootlessness ("pa, if you have one" "brothers if you have any") and disrespectability ("Me, a respectable druggist"), Moseley's lecture to Dewey Dell is similar to the one the marshal delivers to Anse: "'You take him on to a doctor, and you get this thing buried soon as you can. Don't you know you're liable to jail for endangering the public health?'" (204). The Bundrens, as Albert puts it, are about as assimilable to Mottson as a piece of rotten cheese. Less than forty miles from home, country folks like the Bundrens, with roots in a wide-ranging rural community, appear to be so rootless and disreputable that they are treated as outcasts, consigned to social death, and run out of town.

Far from their knowable environment of origin, the Bundrens find in Mottson and Jefferson a picture of what their lives would be like if they truly were what Anse pretends they are, that is, beholden to no one. From a social life in which they take for granted their reliance on a network of established social relationships, the Bundrens are the recipients of a kind of death penalty in Mottson and Jefferson, where they can rely on noone to offer them help. To experience
social dislocation, to lose "contact with the earth," is to lose contact with the set of relationships that give meaning, shape, and material support to life in a given time and place. The vulnerability of the Bundrens in the absence of such sustaining relationships is figured in Darl's desperate effort to put an end to the journey by setting fire to Gillespie's barn and in the family's ill-considered if convenient decision to have Darl committed in order to settle the damages with the Gillespie's. In doing so, they also relieve themselves of the pressure and anxiety that Darl arouses by probing at their secrets, evidence of wounds, ruptures, and inadequacies in their most important relationships.11

Social relationships are so important that, as Doc Peabody suggests, they can not only sustain life for the good but they can also sustain life unduly or hold people back, holding them to life when they are ready to let go or to a particular place when they are ready to move on. Speculating on Addie's death and on death in general, he suggests that Addie appears to have "been dead these ten days" but was unable to let go because of her relationship with Anse and his characteristic reliance on her (43). At the same time, he introduces a comparison between dying and moving, suggesting that, in some sense, death itself is a socio-spatial dislocation.

I suppose it's having been a part of Anse for so long that she cannot even make that change, if change it be. I can remember how when I was young I believed death to be a phenomenon of the body; now I know it to be merely a function of the mind—and that of the minds of the ones who suffer the bereavement. The nihilists say it is the end; the fundamentalists, the beginning; when in reality it is no more than a single tenant or family moving out of a tenement or a town. (43-44)

When Addie dies, Cash says, "She's gone," and Anse replies, "She taken and left us" (50). Addie herself compares dying to leaving a house and, given her gendered sense of responsibility, expresses her primary concern, to settle the score with Anse, is to leave behind a house that is "clean."

My father said that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead. I knew at last what he meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself, because a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward. And so I have cleaned my house. (175-76)

In the context of a narrative that thrusts the Bundrens from home and of a historical process that thrust a population out of the countryside, it is instructive to emphasize figurations of death as a matter of leaving home or being left behind and of the life and death of self as matters of spatial and social dislocation.

Entering into new social relationships from the time they arrive in Mottson to the time they get to Jefferson, the Bundrens are increasingly identified with blackness. Their progress is marked by "little tall black circles" of buzzards (194).

11 In Faulkner's short story "Uncle Willy," a plot to apprehend and reform Uncle Willy, whose general procedures and motives recall the scapegoating of Darl, results in a dramatic capture on the streets of Jefferson that becomes part of local lore: "So they shoved him into the car and him looking back at us where we stood there; he went out of sight like that, sitting beside Mrs. Merridew in the car like Darl Bundren and the deputy on the train" (229).
Dewey Dell is marked, as Moseley reads the signifiers of her country poverty, inexperience, and backwardness, as someone with only enough money to buy “a cheap comb or a bottle of nigger toilet water” (199). As the family gets closer to town, Vardaman begins chirping repeatedly about the family’s emerging blackness. Lying in the moonlight with Dewey Dell, he observes: “my legs look black. Your legs look black, too” (216). He notes that Jewel’s burnt “back was black” and “looks like a nigger’s” and points out that “Cash’s foot and leg looked like a nigger’s” as well (224). Building to a climactic confrontation as the Jefferson’s approach the final hill before town, in a passage that few critical readings presently overlook, the Bundrens pass “negro cabins,” “where faces come suddenly to the doors, white-eyed,” with “sudden voices, ejaculant,” and encounter “[t]hree negroes . . . beside the road ahead.”

The arrival of the Bundrens provokes just as much anxiety over social status among the blacks who live on the outskirts of Jefferson as it did among the whites who live in Mottson. As in Mottson, the stench of Addie’s body offers a focal point of concern, a figuration of the more pertinent tensions and uncertainties caused by an increasing influx of rural refugees. “When we pass the negroes their heads turn suddenly with that expression of shock and instinctive outrage. ‘Great God,’ one says; ‘what they got in that wagon?’” (229). Because there is also a white man in the road, Jewel becomes confused over whom he should attack. “It is as though Jewel had gone blind for the moment, for it is the white man toward whom he whirs” (229). As the Bundrens are displaced from their rural setting, they arouse new tensions in town, where many of their interactions across racial lines will be governed by a process of jockeying for social status. While the Bundrens in this racial encounter cling to the patently unrealized privileges of whiteness, the nameless black people they meet on the outskirts of town assert their authority and superiority as established inhabitants not simply one hill from town but also, unlike the Bundrens, not far from a familiar, if oppressive, network of social relationships. Unable to grasp any basis for kinship or common cause, these historically distinct social formations, coming together in new channels of contact, engage in conflict rather than forming an alliance to better their status in the emergent social order.12

As the intensification of markers of blackness signals anxiety about where the Bundrens will be located in the racial hierarchy of town folks, the Bundrens confront the confusion of social codes that accompanied the Great Migration and the depopulation of the rural South. For readers of Faulkner, Jewel’s angry response to social rebuke—his indignation, violent posturing, and sense of entitlement—is strikingly familiar. Again and again, Faulkner depicts the furious energy of white Southern males who seek to renew their grasp or raise themselves on the social ladder, like Jason Compson, Thomas Sutpen, or Mink Snopes, relentlessly and defensively grasping at a precarious foothold in the transition to modernity, over-sensitive to any perceived slight, particularly but not exclusively when the offense comes from the presumably inferior social location of blackness.

12 On this topic, see Kirby, Jones, and Leyda.
The racialized social jockeying in *As I Lay Dying* is particularly instructive as an element in the structure of feeling that arose in relation to the dislocation of rural white Southerners who experienced their move as a slide to the bottom of the social ladder. As these rural whites moved from country to town, they experienced a diminishment in social status for which, like Jewel on the approach to Jefferson, they were unsure who to blame, the white elite who rejected them or the poor blacks who refused to subordinate themselves to newcomers who were evidently not quality folks.

In postwar novels, for instance, in *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner elaborates the social scenario depicted in *As I Lay Dying*, namely, the confluence of forces that created conflict between dislocated poor white rural refugees and long-time black residents with social identities that were linked, albeit precariously, to well-established relationships, institutions, and practices. As a consequence, these rural white newcomers assumed an unequal share of the blame for sustaining the violent, displaced, and deeply entrenched racism that was the hallmark of the Jim Crow South, whose terroristic racial regime outlasted the great transformation that depopulated the rural South. By ascribing the most virulent racism to this underclass, Faulkner exonerates bourgeois Southern subjects like himself, whose shabby gentility serves as a protective coloring for their continued investment in the structural inequality, inhumanity, and injustice of the social order on which they continued to develop and renew enduring fortunes.

Thrust from their home and pushed beyond the boundaries within which their lives have predictable substance, meaning, and social support, the Bundrens are compelled to navigate the hazardous natural and social landscapes characteristic of times and spaces in transition. Representative of a growing class of rural refugees, they improvise responses to the urgencies of the new pressures and limits they encounter as they make their way through foreign environments. Unexpected and unwelcome, they labor to extend the reach, adapt the fit, and resolve the contradictions among the articulate ideologies, relationship patterns, and practical skills they bring from their familiar milieu into their emergent circumstances.

Returning the Bundrens to their rural home at the end of the novel offers a false resolution to an emergent historical predicament, reversing those historical flows whose pressure on rural families are evoked in the central trope of *As I Lay Dying*. Suggesting that the Bundrens are able to recover some semblance of normality goes against the novel's repeated assaults on the stability and integrity of this family, not only with the death of Addie Bundren but also with the nightmarish journey to Jefferson and the transformation or degradation of the material bodies of Cash, Dewey Dell, the remains of Addie, the mules, the wagon, etc. Bringing about this unconvincing reversal of the family’s unrelenting series of setbacks involves the abrupt replacement of Addie and removal of Darl, as if such changes would resolve the family’s difficulties rather than present them with new pressures and limits.
Presumably, with a second wife and without Darl, the newly configured Bundrens, enriched by their acquisitions yet diminished by their wounds and casualties, will bury their secrets and conflicts and eke out a future in the fading southern countryside. Against its traumatic opening and uninterrupted sequence of hardships, conflicts, and setbacks, the novel’s abrupt concluding efforts to restore the integrity and autonomy of the rural family expresses a desire that can be fulfilled by neither the narrative nor the historical juncture from which it speaks. Rooted from the outset in the anticipation of an impending loss, *As I Lay Dying* provides the stage for an exploration of the structures of feeling most common to Faulkner’s lamentations, sometimes comic, sometimes bitter, over the inarticulate experience of modern transformation in the South.

The experiences, relationships, and activities of the Bundrens as they respond to the death of Addie Bundren and make their way from their home in the countryside to the unfamiliar and unwelcoming provincial metropolis of Jefferson are driven not simply by an articulate complex of dominant ideologies concerning death, familial duty, work, opportunity, persistence, acquisition, God, or fate but also by the pressure of the inarticulate complex of forces that Raymond Williams theorizes as a structure of feeling. It would be a mistake to think of these inarticulate forces as indeterminate, vague, or irrecoverable simply because they are expressed in terms of mixture and confusion. At the level of internal process, that is, at the level of thoughts as felt or feelings as thought, such confusion or mixture is expressed via concise *idees fixes*, obsessive focal points that convey emotional investments and attachments rather than ideas. Vardaman’s confused notion that his mother is a fish or Cash’s narrow focus on the details of making a coffin offer fitting examples of internal processes as inarticulate reactions, demonstrating the phenomenon of thought driven by feelings and feelings experienced as thoughts. At the level of action, such mixture or confusion is expressed via the urgency and abruptness that characterize the reactions and decisions of the Bundrens and others. At this level, we can grasp Anse’s sudden replacement of Addie with a new Mrs. Bundren or the family’s abrupt agreement to have Darl apprehended and committed to the state insane asylum not simply as preposterous but rather as elements of a structure of feeling. At the level of social relations, this mixture or confusion is expressed via inarticulate conflicts among social groups. The criticism and hostility that greet the Bundrens on their journey are further expressions of the predominance over articulate ideologies of a structure of feeling. Driven less by articulate ideologies than by the pressures and limits of transformation—sudden and gradual, large and small, within and beyond understanding—the Bundrens reveal the contours of an environment that can no longer sustain the lives of its inhabitants.

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