William Faulkner's Rural Modernism

"The city as site of modern life is a cliché by now," Paula Rabinowitz observes in a recent essay on American modernism, and the idea of the city as the locus of modern literature is similarly entrenched (261). For certain modernist authors, the city is the story—one thinks of James Joyce's Dublin or John Dos Passos's New York City. Scholars, defining modernism with reference to these writers' works, have in the main reinforced this association between the metropolis and the modern. Raymond Williams, for example, insists that "there are decisive links between the practices and ideas of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century and the specific conditions and relationships of the twentieth-century metropolis" (37).

How then do we account for William Faulkner, eminent modernist, in light of reigning conceptions of modernism? Faulkner's major works focus on rural life: the town of Mottson, not the metropolis; the farmer, rather than the flapper or the flâneur. In *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the darkly humorous story of the poor white Bundren family's journey from farm to town to bury its matriarch Addie, Faulkner uses the experimental forms associated with modernism to depict the impact of the sociocultural era called modernity, and the processes of urbanization and industrialization known as modernization, on poor whites in the rural South. *As I Lay Dying* makes clear that Faulkner's rural modernism has not simply a geographic logic but also a sociopolitical significance. Rural modernism critiques the conflation of the urban and the modern, in part by revealing how the country is used as a foil against which urban modernity is defined. Understanding the novel's engagement with rural life in the modern era redefines the relationship of Faulkner's work to the literature and politics of its Depression-era context, exposes the social and aesthetic import of rural obsolescence, and suggests a means of rethinking modernism writ large.
Poor White Perennial Obsolescence

In much of Faulkner’s fiction, the socioeconomic movement of the protagonists is related to their movement in space and time. As I Lay Dying differs from the other major works in representing characters not in flux but frozen, thus representing neither ascent nor decline, neither progress nor regress, but rather a confluence of forms of stasis—spatial, temporal, and social. Throughout the Bundrens’ journey, the passage of time is marked most notably by the advancement of corporeal putrefaction: the potency of the stench from Addie’s coffin and the ever-increasing number of buzzards; otherwise, frequent obstacles create the feeling that progress is not taking place. This seemingly static expedition fixes the Bundrens within a narrative of changelessness and suspension—a narrative representative of their social and economic immobility. Eschewing linear time—by, for example, presenting several different narrators’ accounts of the same scene—creates a paradoxical sense of cyclically arrested development. This formal and thematic impression of suspension and repetition establishes a symbiotic relationship between the novel’s form and content: the funeral journey’s many time-consuming obstacles and the novel’s presentation of single scenes from multiple narrative perspectives give textual form to the social stasis of the Bundrens.

Recognizing the social salience of stasis reconciles polar interpretations of the text by bridging the ostensibly irreconcilable divide between the notion of the novel as “an almost timeless fable” without political import (Bleikasten 132) and the contention that Faulkner, as “class-conscious as any Marxist,” offers in As I Lay Dying a social and economic critique of the society he depicts (Cook 39). The novel’s timelessness is a component of its class critique, because this temporal stasis mirrors the social stasis of the protagonists. However, not

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1In Absalom, Absalom! and the Snopes trilogy, for instance, the rise (and decline) of the poor white protagonists Sutpen and Snopes is the central plot event, around which the rest of the action is organized. These two sagas are, in effect, a Faulknerian version of the Franklinian Bildung, for they begin with the youthful bumpkin whose “education” consumes the novel’s temporal and geographic planes: the novel follows its protagonist from youth to death and changes setting largely in accordance with his travels. Thus the dramatic social fluctuations of Absalom, Absalom! are made manifest through its temporal and spatial scope: the text narrates events spanning nearly one hundred years and ranging not only widely through the South but also historically into Haiti and imaginatively into the North (through Quentin and Shreve).
all readers agree that the Bundrens are socially immobile. Susan Willis sees the Bundrens’ journey as “a historical metaphor... for the migration of this country’s agricultural workforce to the cities” (587). John T. Matthews forwards a similar claim, reading the novel “as a fable of social upheaval... with the modernization of the South implied both in the Bundrens’ move to town and in their centrifugal impulses away from the broken forms of family and community” (“Machine Age” 83). These readings posit a level of social change for the Bundrens incommensurate with the text because, although the novel’s conclusion shows the family to have acquired several sought-after consumer goods (bananas, false teeth, a graphophone), the end suggests no real changes in their livelihood or standard of living, and thus there is neither a departure from the agricultural mode nor social upheaval.

These scholars’ claims, far from willful, eccentric misreadings of the text, are manifestations of the problems inherent in connecting Faulkner’s modernist fiction with critical appraisals of modernism and modernity. Although Willis and Matthews cite different scholars—Benjamin, Debord, and Baudrillard on the one hand, Huyssen and Adorno on the other—both are drawing on a body of work that conceptualizes the modern as an urban phenomenon and that is therefore imperfectly suited to the modernness of this novel or the world it depicts. Willis and Matthews attempt to tie the Bundrens to the mass migration from farms to factories that, in the first half of the twentieth century, produced significant demographic shifts from rural to urban areas and, in some cases, from South to North. However, *As I Lay Dying* neither literally nor symbolically represents this migration; on the contrary, it represents the effects of this migration on those, like the Bundrens, who stayed in rural areas and continued to pursue farming. Thus industrialization influences the novel not because Darl and Jewel Bundren leave the farm to take jobs in textile mills or sawmills—a common narrative in the historical and literary record of this period, because these mills represent two of the most important industries in the 1930s South—but rather because they take a job transporting lumber to a mill. The novel illustrates the symbiotic relationship between the country and the city—here it shows that the Bundrens’ rural labor (growing cotton and hauling lumber) serves and is shaped by the region’s industrial markets (textile and lumber mills). However, it also shows that the features of rural modernization—the employment opportunities, the
roads, the access to consumer goods—do not result in any meaningful changes in the Bundrens’ socioeconomic experience: their infrequent engagement in paid labor affords them the occasional trifle but does not in any significant way modify their lives.

*As I Lay Dying* takes up not the familiar figure of the modern—the neurasthenic manifesting a “metropolitan blasé attitude” (Simmel 178)—but the seemingly anti-modern: the rural-dwelling poor white. Through this personage, the novel explores the *creation* of the modern, laying bare the processes by which rural poor whites come to serve as foils for other whites’ modernness. To analyze this phenomenon, I propose the idea of perennial obsolescence: a theory that poor whites are seen not in terms of certain practices and objects that might be outmoded but rather as uniformly and perpetually archaic. Looking at rural poor whites as necessarily out of step facilitates the creation of social distinctions within a largely homogeneous white population. For, indeed, the Bundrens are looked down upon by those with whom they come in contact despite the relative uniformity of the segment of Yoknapatawpha society depicted. *As I Lay Dying* features no Old South aristocrats or New South entrepreneurs; the most prosperous character in the novel is probably either Dr. Peabody, whose dead accounts seem to markedly overshadow his viable ones, or the druggist Moseley. At the same time, the Bundrens are not destitute; they do, after all, own their land. Notwithstanding this comparative lack of economic inequity, though, the Bundrens are seen as out of step with the modern era by both literary scholars and the novel’s fictional townsfolk. Sylvia Jenkins Cook notes “a timeless quality” about the lives of Faulkner’s rural-dwelling poor whites and writes of *As I Lay Dying* that “except for the few details that establish time, it might as easily be placed a century earlier” (41). Cook’s claims are not inaccurate; Faulkner’s poor whites, true to the experiences of those who live in poverty and in isolated rural communities, are far behind the vanguard of progress. What is important to note, then, is that the novel shows this representation of poor white experience to be based in part on rural poor whites’ old-fashioned practices and possessions but also on the perception of the commentator.

The townspeople’s observations about the Bundrens substantiate the idea that poor white obsolescence is a matter both of reality and of perception, for the family members and their possessions seem to metamorphose as they move from being described by poor rural
spectators to being depicted by more affluent urban ones. For example, the Bundrens’ wagon, seen by Darl as merely “shabby” (157), is to town-dweller Moseley “ramshackle” (203). More dramatically, Addie’s well-made coffin, admired in Frenchman’s Bend as an example of Cash’s skill in carpentry and hailed by farmer Vernon Tull as “tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket” (88), becomes to its town chronicler “that home-made box”: one in a catalog of unfit objects that make the Bundrens’ entrance into town comparable to “a piece of rotten cheese coming into an ant-hill” (203). These descriptions also extend to the Bundrens themselves; Dewey Dell experiences time as moving very rapidly—events occur “too soon” for her to handle them all (120)—while Moseley associates her with an excess of slow-moving time. In each case, the urban gaze regards rural poor whites as inherently and unvaryingly archaic—as, that is, obsolete. This way of perceiving poor whites resonates with Evan Watkins’s formulation of obsolescence as “not at all a survival from the past” but rather something “produced by and integral to the conditions of dominance in the present” (39). The townspeople establish their urban, modern identities in the narrative through their descriptions of the Bundrens, and the signs of obsolescence on which they focus are chosen as foils for their own desired self-presentations. Thus the ramshackle wagon, homemade coffin, and slow-moving time establish an implicit contrast with a significant set of opposites: the automobile, the mass-produced product, and fast-paced modern city life. Viewing rural whites as obsolete and alien offers a means by which urban whites, who are in some cases only slightly different from their country counterparts in economic terms, can establish a claim of radical and irrefutable cultural superiority.

The country/city divide is thus a significant geopolitical facet of *As I Lay Dying*—a key means, as Dewey Dell Bundren’s experiences in town reveal, of creating intraracial social distinctions. Dewey Dell and the city dwellers with whom she interacts recognize and reinforce the notion that city dwelling confers social capital. Dewey Dell thinks “We are country people, not as good as town people,” and townsfolk agree with Dewey Dell’s assessment, viewing her according to stereotypes of country people as inarticulate, out of date, slow, and as identical with one another as they are different from city people (60). Moseley, a druggist in the town of Mottson, says of Dewey Dell as she enters his store, “She kind of bumbled at the screen door a minute, like they do,
and came in” (198; emphasis mine). With this Moseley launches a chapter in which, over the space of five pages, he offers nine observations about “them”: the class to which Dewey Dell belongs and with which Moseley considers himself quite familiar. And what Moseley knows about people like Dewey Dell is that they are bumbling, slow, eager to “poison themselves” with patent medicine, and that although they are going to take a long time to spend very little money, “you have to humor them” (200).² MacGowan, the drug store clerk with whom Dewey Dell next comes in contact, offers an incredibly colorful ethnographic account of the “country woman” (241), classifying Dewey Dell as “one of them black eyed ones that look like she’d as soon put a knife in you as not if you two-timed her” (242) and explaining of country people that “Half the time they don’t know what they want, and the balance of the time they can’t tell it to you” (243). Moseley and MacGowan ultimately represent two different kinds of urban responses to rural people: Moseley comes to the sympathetic, if condescending, conclusion that “it’s a hard life they have” (202), while MacGowan takes advantage of Dewey Dell’s naïveté and desperation in order to exploit her sexually. Both, though, staunchly refuse to see Dewey Dell as an individual and instead view her as representative of a known and undeviating type: the anachronistic, inarticulate, and dim-witted country person.

The Bundrens’ ontological reveries challenge these urban stereotypes of country people, articulating forms of self-definition that rebel against the dismissive urban categorization of rural poor whites as a singular and inferior whole. In one of his most opaque reveries, Darl considers his ambiguous economic and ontological position as a middle man in a lumber transaction by contemplating his relationship to the timber: “the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does” (80).³ Here Darl’s efforts toward self-definition are part and parcel of his

²Julia Leyda has a slightly different take on Moseley’s response to Dewey Dell. While likewise examining how townsfolk distinguish themselves from rural poor whites, Leyda shows that Moseley uses his ideas about what Dewey Dell is likely to purchase to associate her with African Americans.

³John T. Matthews offers a reading of this passage that is, in part, very similar to my own. Matthews observes that “the Bundrens’ function as ‘middlemen’ in this transaction becomes a metaphor for Darl’s selfhood” (“Machine Age” 73) and uses this to
conception of his socioeconomic status, because he links his place in the economic order—lacking the ability to buy or sell goods and instead equipped only with his labor-as-commodity, he takes piecemeal work as a conduit for others’ goods—to the fundamental ontological questions by which he is troubled. The ambiguity of Darl’s relationship to the lumber—he is the present non-owner, contrasted with the past owner and the future owner—is related to and, indeed, to some extent constitutive of his crisis of being, reflected in his lament, “I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not” (80). Darl’s inability to identify “what” he is, catalyzed by his in-between position in the economic exchange, devolves into questioning “if” he is. These ontological ponderings—musings on is and was, is and is—not—represent Darl’s struggle to be self-defining and the challenge posed by that effort because of his status as a rural poor white: in the micronarrative, as an ambiguous conduit between those holding the clearly defined roles of seller and buyer, and in the macronarrative, as a figure socioeconomically and racially marked despite the supposedly unmarked status of class and whiteness.

Like Darl, Vardaman and Addie work to define themselves in ways that challenge totalizing urban views of poor whites. Vardaman’s most significant reverie of this sort takes the form of a meditation on Jewel’s horse in which limited visibility in a dark barn prompts him to ponder the relationship between himself and the horse: “It is as though the dark were resolving him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components—snuffings and stampings; . . . an illusion of a coordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an is different from my is” (56). By pondering his

demonstrate how “the language of the market . . . has saturated the most private formulations of personal identity” (72). However, Matthews utilizes this claim to forward an argument about the dialectical relationship between modernization and modernism, and so we significantly diverge on what we take to be the logic behind Darl’s middling status. That is, Matthews reads Darl as a representative modern man, while I contend that Darl is a paradigmatic poor white man, his in-between status reflective of his socially and economically tenuous position whether on the fringes of the antebellum plantocracy or in the outskirts of the global transnational economy of late capitalism.

“This passage has traditionally been addressed in terms of the relationship between character and language in the novel; for representative explanations of the ostensible disparity between young Vardaman and his sophisticated narration, see Ross 302 and Sundquist 29-30.
relationship to the entities that populate his world, Vardaman engages in an act of self-definition that flies in the face of efforts at stereotypical categorization. The fact that envisioning the horse’s atomization leads Vardaman to a revelation about the difference between himself and the horse suggests the deeper significance of this epistemological act, because by dissecting the “illusion of a coordinated whole”—the “them” to which the country people are relegated by urban spectators—Vardaman defines his singularity: “an is different from my is.” Addie, too, asserts a singular and self-defining poor white identity in the face of townspeople’s view of rural poor whites as a homogeneous “them” when she declares, “I would be I” (174). In each of these three instances, the Bundrens challenge the practice, illustrated by Moseley and MacGowan, of creating a hierarchical system of social differentiation among white people by taking recourse to hyperbolic or fallacious contrasts between country backwardness and urban modernity.

The Sweat Economy

*Pa dassent sweat because he will catch his death from the sickness.*

—Dewey Dell Bundren

Through his attention to the material privations of rural white poverty, Faulkner articulates a more incisive critique of labor under American modes of agriculture than is formulated in explicitly political works of the 1930s. Several of Faulkner’s texts—including, most prominently, *As I Lay Dying*—use sweat as a means to identify and measure the labor that is masked within the dominant economic order. By way of sweat, these works enter into dialogue with proletarianism and agrarianism, two contemporaneous political and ideological movements that Faulkner explicitly addressed in one of the two introductions he drafted for a 1933 edition of *The Sound and the Fury*:

> We seem to try . . . to draw a savage indictment of the contemporary scene or to escape from it into a makebelieve region of swords and magnolias and mockingbirds which perhaps never existed anywhere. Both of the courses are rooted in sentiment; perhaps the ones who write savagely and bitterly of the incest in clayfloored cabins are the most sentimental. Anyway, each course is a matter of violent partisanship. *(412)*

Clay-floored cabins used to forward “a savage indictment of the contemporary scene” are a shorthand reference to proletarian fiction. Magnolias and mockingbirds, longstanding tropes of Southern nostalgic
fiction, here refer to an influential contemporaneous incarnation of that kind of historical revisionism: the 1930 Agrarian manifesto I'll Take My Stand. Despite their ideological differences—proletarian literature is a progressive, worker-centered genre, while the Twelve Southerners' conservative Agrarianism serves bourgeois interests—both can be seen, to varying degrees, as propagandistic and reductively sociological. Both also in significant ways set the terms by which As I Lay Dying is judged: As I Lay Dying's departure from proletarian conventions is a nearly ubiquitous point of commentary in 1930s reviews of the novel, and the Fugitive Agrarian "retreat from social into aesthetic theory" produced New Criticism, the predominant mode of mid-twentieth-century literary analysis (Moreland 25). Because of the prominence of the proletarian and Agrarian movements in the thirties, their respective treatments of poor whites set the terms by which As I Lay Dying's poor whites would be (mis)understood for decades.

In his 1933 Marxist study of American literature, Granville Hicks offers a characteristic complaint against Faulkner's work: Faulkner "will not write simply and realistically of southern life" or of "representative men and women" but instead tells the Bundrens' story "in a way that brings out all their eccentricities" (266). In this assessment, Hicks gives voice to the party-line stance of 1930s proletarian-oriented socioaesthetic theories. His complaints against Faulkner's fiction are echoed by Mike Gold, editor of the Communist New Masses magazine, who describes the new genre of "proletarian realism"—which "deals with the real conflicts of men and women who work for a living" and uses "as few words as possible"—as an antidote to the fictions of "bourgeois idleness" written by "verbal acrobats" (5). Hicks and Gold laud fiction that offers the "savage indictment of the contemporary scene" that Faulkner describes—a model of social-protest fiction from which Faulkner's writings assuredly deviate. However, Faulkner's deviation from these conventions makes As I Lay Dying not apolitical but rather differently political. As John T. Matthews suggests in his groundbreaking article excavating the links between proletarian texts and Faulkner's thirties works, "if more instrumental versions of proletarian literature sought a class revolution in no uncertain terms during this decade, perhaps Faulkner's texts kept alive another kind of spirit—a spirit devoted to the incessant questioning of history and social forms" ("Proletarian Literature" 189). Contrasting As I Lay Dying with more overtly political texts of the thirties readily
bears out this claim. For example, the 1930s works of fellow Southerner Erskine Caldwell are, like *As I Lay Dying*, stories of grotesque poor whites; Caldwell, though, has an explicit political agenda. *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) identify the sharecropping system as the cause of the economic hardship and attendant sufferings of poor Southerners and advocate government intervention and tenant activism to transform the agricultural order. However, the sharp decline in sharecropping that began in the late thirties—catalyzed by New Deal agricultural programs and modernized farming methods—did not improve the lives of poor sharecroppers; instead, it simply transplanted them into similarly exploitative wage labor on farms or in factories. In going against the precepts of proletarian fiction, Faulkner crafts a more enduring and nuanced portrait of “the real conflicts of men and women who work,” in Gold’s phrase, because he eschews offering answers for ephemeral problems and instead, as Matthews notes, engages in a more lasting interrogation of society and history.

On the other side of the equation, conservative in their politics and representing the escapist “makebelieve region” that Faulkner critiques, are the Vanderbilt Agrarians and their 1930 manifesto. A sharp contrast between the essays in *I’ll Take My Stand* and Faulkner’s 1930s poor white fiction emerges in their respective representations of labor. The Twelve Southerners distinguish conservative Southern agrarianism from progressive Northern (or American) industrialism. Unlike the industrial order, relentlessly addicted “to work and to gross material prosperity,” Southern agrarianism is characterized in *I’ll Take My Stand* as a system defined by leisure (12). John Crowe Ransom explains that the Southerner “envelop[ed] both his work and his play with a leisure which permitted the activity of intelligence” (12) and boldly writes of the antebellum era that “labor itself was leisurely” (14). Frank Lawrence Owsley concurs in his description of antebellum life: “The life of the South was leisurely and unhurried for the planter, the yeoman, or the landless tenant. It was a way of life, not a routine of planting and reaping merely for gain” (71). These unrealistic portrayals of Southern labor history, characteristic of the anthology’s essays, whitewash the historical record by ignoring the slave labor that made antebellum agriculture possible. If antebellum life was “leisurely and unhurried” for the planter and the yeoman of whom Owsley writes, it certainly was not for their slaves. Furthermore, the landless white tenant might more realistically be looked at in terms of
his misuse under the plantation economy: excluded from much of the agricultural system, he was forced to eke out a living on the fringe of the plantocracy, often by doing the plantation’s dirty work as an overseer or patroller. The Agrarians’ South is, as Faulkner suggests, a “makebelieve region.”

Faulkner’s 1930s poor white fiction counters this unrealistic and paradoxical representation of leisurely labor by creating what I term a “sweat economy”: a system for recognizing the work that inheres in objects in order to stave off the dissociation of the laborer from the fruits of his or her labor.⁵ Sweat in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) reveals the underlying toil upon which white aristocratic privilege is grounded. Slaves who “sweat in the fields” create patrician wealth (78), while poor white workers define “the difference between white men and white men” (183): a planter leisurely reclines “in a barrel stave hammock” (184), while a poor white engages in labor “brutish and stupidly out of proportion to its reward” (191). Similarly, in “Barn Burning” (1939), tenant farmer Ab Snopes observes that the whiteness of Major de Spain’s mansion is a product of “sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain’t white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it” (12). The trope of sweat reveals that the unrelenting whiteness of the home—its exterior, furnishings, and occupants—was founded on and is sustained by African American workers: the slaves whose labor built de Spain’s mansion and wealth and the domestic servants who maintain the house and its owner’s social position. “White sweat,” the labor of white tenant farmers like Snopes, also upholds de Spain’s whiteness: poor white labor cultivates both the farm’s crops and the respectability of “gentleman farmers” like Major de Spain. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and “Barn Burning,” the sweat economy lays bare the labor that the capitalist economy works to obfuscate: the exploited labor making possible the leisure that, according to the Twelve Southerners, is the hallmark of agrarian society.

Several characters in *As I Lay Dying* use sweat as a measure of labor. Farmer Vernon Tull describes looking at “the broad land and my house sweated outen it” (139) and Anse Bundren, father of the Bundren clan, offers a sustained reflection on the sweat economy vis-à-vis the country/town divide: “It’s a hard country on man; it’s hard. Eight miles

⁵My formulation of the sweat economy draws on Karl Marx’s discussion of estranged labor in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; see Marx 70-81.
of the sweat of his body washed up outen the Lord’s earth. . . . 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” (110). The irony of this passage—that it is uttered by the only farmer who, physically and psychologically enervated from a labor-laden youth, manages to live off of the sweat of others—does not undermine its validity. Agriculture in Faulkner’s œuvre is, under both slavery and the later sharecropping system, an exploitative regime that benefits the few through the sweat of the many. Faulkner’s sweat economy makes visible several key modes of labor in Southern history: slave labor in *Absalom, Absalom!*, tenant labor in “Barn Burning,” and the labor of small farmers kept at the level of subsistence farming by an agribusiness market dominated by large landholders in *As I Lay Dying*. Anse’s observation begins to flesh out this third paradigm; his son Cash’s narration elaborates upon it.

At the end of Cash’s penultimate chapter, he uses sweat to condemn his brother Darl for burning their neighbor Gillespie’s barn: “there just aint nothing justifies the deliberate destruction of what a man has built with his own sweat and stored the fruit of his sweat into” (238). Here again, sweat is used to show the labor value of objects. As Calvin Bedient contends, “what Cash opposes is not simply the destruction of material property. . . . There is always the man in the property to take into account, the value it possesses from having absorbed part of the human life that shaped it” (149). Cash uses the idea of sweat to reckon the magnitude of Gillespie’s loss, figuring the barn and its contents not in terms of dollars and cents but as extensions of Gillespie: as “the fruit of his sweat.” Critics thus err when they view Cash’s perspective as a commodifying vision. Dorothy Hale argues that Cash’s statement is an illustration of his “materialism”: sweat imbues objects with value as private property (20). According to Marx, though, private property results from alienated labor, and Cash’s aim in taking recourse to the sweat economy is to show that Gillespie, far from estranged from the products of his labor, is embodied in them. Cash’s vision is materialistic, then, only in the strictest sense: it works to materialize in concrete forms (here, a barn, animals, and crops) the labor of farming. Like Hale, Matthews sees in Cash’s statement “a conceptualization of labor and production that is fundamentally commodified” and that makes possible the reification of labor (“Machine Age” 75). In fact, Gillespie’s barn and
its contents are, within a Marxist paradigm, use-values—objects produced by Gillespie to satisfy his own wants—rather than commodities, because they are not intended for exchange. Identifying the sweat economy as commodifying ignores its dialectical nature, for it is inextricably linked to the particular material conditions represented in each of the texts of the sweat economy triptych and at the same time a “timeless” form for identifying the traces of labor in the physical world. Faulkner’s sweat economy counters a “makebelieve” vision of the South that was deployed by conservative movements whose interests were served by its evocation of a system defined by “leisurely labor.”

To be sure, this kind of political engagement differs from the polemical activity of some other literary modernists. Neither reactionary nor radical, Faulkner’s sociopolitical endeavors can be aligned no more with Ezra Pound’s propagandizing for the fascists than with E. E. Cummings’s early interest in Communism. Faulkner eschews the documentary impulse—“the fusion of realism and modernism . . . that aspired to document the sufferings of the poor or critique the institutions of capitalism” (Lewis 224) seen in works like John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36) or James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941)—and instead explores rural white poverty in one of his most formally innovative texts: *As I Lay Dying*. Rural modernism, this sociopolitically significant aesthetic form, facilitates a rethinking of literary modernism on several fronts. First, as this article’s analysis of the sweat economy triptych makes clear, attention to the symbiotic relationship between rural content and innovative form suggests new approaches to and links between Faulkner’s works. Second, identifying the country as a modern locus affords a fresh perspective on works—from the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters and Robert Frost to the prose fiction of Zora Neale Hurston and Sherwood Anderson—that cannot be accounted for by city-centric studies of American modernism. Finally, recognizing rural modernism brings Faulkner’s works further into the fold of modernism writ large by explicating the ways in which ostensibly un- or even anti-modern textual elements—slow-moving wagons and sweating farmers—work in the service of the modern.
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