My research paper, entitled “The Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: Towards a Sexual Identity for Faulkner’s Women,” engages issues of feminism and feminine sexuality in the novels of William Faulkner. The critical dialogue on Faulkner’s women typically figures around the presence or absence of a feminine ‘voice’ in Faulkner’s novels, and Faulkner’s portrayal—whether empowering or demeaning—of women as sexual, procreative bodies. The preeminence of gender inequality in Faulkner’s canon is recognized but rendered largely bipolar in all criticism to date. In critical writings on Faulkner and feminism, Faulknerian woman are nearly always either powerful or subjugated; sexually predatory or sexually repressed. These readings, though valuable, focus almost exclusively on the female effect over a male experience, and on the deliberateness of Faulkner’s rendering of such an effect.

While maintaining the value of such arguments and drawing on critics who consider social ‘traumas’ of the postbellum South, my study posits female sexuality as a culturally marginalized experience of Southern trauma: the trauma of the Southern woman forming an individual sexual and personal identity at the close of an era of inequality and sexual dominance. In my critical readings of three of Faulkner’s ‘lesser-read’ novels—Sanctuary, The Unvanquished, and The Wild Palms—I contend that sexuality is central to relations of power in the Faulknerian South. The historical overemphasis on the submissiveness or subversiveness of Faulkner’s women—and the virulent reaction their sexualities provoke in his male characters—suggest that deviations from norms of sexual and intimate relationships in Faulkner are challenging to the established social, racial, and gendered order. Women in Faulkner therefore become the effective ‘property’ of the men who govern their sexual beings—unable to escape the strictures of white womanhood either by ‘being sexual’ or ‘being pure,’ ‘they are coerced into a narrative—or rather—a fiction—of female purity and male chivalry.

Faulkner’s narrative framing of these and many other novels is also central to my inquiry. As both man and writer, Faulkner is notorious for deliberately evading direct questions and refusing to acknowledge external influences on his fictional work. This is particularly evident in the elliptical, fragmented, ‘modern’ narrative structures in his major novels. Faulkner prefers to stage opinion and truth: to make the reader experience events rather than know them with diegetic certainty. Rather than present women as voices or physical presences that effectively challenge or subvert male authority, therefore, Faulkner stages a new brand of Southern postbellum trauma—the female trauma of sexual self-assertion. The question Faulkner seems to ask—or rather, the question he ultimately invites the reader to ask—with regard to his female characters is therefore not ‘How do the women in Faulkner challenge and subvert the male authority that subjugates them?’ but rather ‘How does a woman create an individual sexual identity and develop a sexual sense of self in a social climate that insists upon both the repression of the female sexual impulse and the categorical revelation of all female sexual acts?’

I engage the question of female sexual identity in close readings of three of Faulkner’s strongest and most controversial female characters: Temple Drake in Sanctuary (1931), Drusilla Hawk in The Unvanquished (1938), and Charlotte Rittenmeyer in The Wild Palms (If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem), 1939. In each of these readings, I explore the Faulknerian woman’s rejection of the traumas of captivity and subjugation and commitment to sexual self-discovery. For these women, the momentous event and aftermath of the Civil War is a radical—and personally traumatic—moment of divergence from the Southern norms of gender performance and sexuality. Faulkner’s women, even those who deliberately appear to ‘challenge’ the authority of the South, are subject to a particular brand of sexual trauma: the inability to effectively assert a sexual identity despite the increasing necessity of doing so. Faulkner is particularly attuned to this female ‘trauma,’ and recognizes the ‘failures’ or ‘degradations’ of each of these radical women as responses to the traumas of censorship, violence, and suppression. By deconstructing the ‘femme fatale’ archetypes that are fallaciously employed to ‘classify’ and ‘categorize’ Temple, Drusilla, and Charlotte and recognizing their ‘subversive’ efforts as means of self-definition rather than deliberate rejection of the Southern culture, I argue, Faulkner stages the female Civil War and postbellum experience of self-fashioning with remarkable compassion. Faulkner’s late women define individual sexualities in a culture that forbids them. They “sing the Lord’s song” of their forbidden desires in the “strange land” of their oppressors, and importantly enact the problematics of race and gender that possess the New South.1

1The title of my research paper is taken from Psalm 137:3-8 (also quoted here). Faulkner also used this text to title his 1939 novel If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem, now also referred to as The Wild Palms.
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Funded by the Ellen M. and Herbert M. Patterson Fellowship