



# Violent Disruptions: Richard Wright and William Faulkner's Racial Imaginations

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VIOLENT DISRUPTIONS: WILLIAM FAULKNER AND RICHARD WRIGHT'S  
RACIAL IMAGINATIONS

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Violent Disruptions: William Faulkner and Richard Wright's Racial Imagination

Abstract

*Violent Disruptions* contends that the works of Richard Wright and William Faulkner are mirror images of each other and that each illustrates American race relations in distinctly powerful and prescient ways. While Faulkner portrays race and American identity through sex and its relationship to the imagination, Wright reveals a violent undercurrent beneath interracial encounters that the shared imagination triggers. *Violent Disruptions* argues that the spectacle of the interracial body anchors the cultural imaginations of our collective society and, as it embodies and symbolizes American slavery, drives the violent acts of individuals. Interracial productions motivate the narratives of Richard Wright and William Faulkner through a system of displacement of signs. Though these tropes maintain their currency today, they are borne out of cultural imaginings over two hundred years old. Working within the framework of the imaginary, *Violent Disruptions* places these now historical texts into the twenty-first century's discourse of race and American identity.

In the first part of the dissertation, I show in detail the various narratives at work in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) in order to portray the imaginations shared by the white characters and disrupted by the interracial body as spectacle. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) depicts a similar racial imaginary but with more focus on its violent, corporeal effects. By contrast, in the second half of the dissertation, I demonstrate the writers' central and racially-charged characters from their earlier works,

*Light in August* (1932) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1938; 1940) and look at how the figures of Joe Christmas and Big Boy, respectively, work as literary prototypes for their version in later works.

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## Gratitude

### To Mommie

It takes a village to raise a child and it most definitely takes one to keep a grad student afloat. I am forever (happily) indebted to my advisor, Werner Sollors for believing in me from day one; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for always lending support without question or judgment; Glenda Carpio for her patience, Tommie Shelby for his enthusiasm and positivity; Robert LaPointe, without whom I would not have lasted one year at Harvard; and to Timothy Patrick McCarthy, for whom I had the privilege of teaching, of befriending, of gaining a mentor, of learning what righteous anger, activism, true love and acceptance can look like (his wedding remains one of my most memorable beautiful experiences). Tim, you agitate, agitate, agitate without a single misstep and I am so glad to know and claim you.

To my baby brother, CJ, and sissy, Catherine, you are the first people who I learned to love without question or condition, who continue to bring me instant joy now as teenagers as you did as little tots. I adore you and thank you so much for always believing in your big, “old” sister...who is over 30 and doesn’t have a house but will always have a home to share with you.

To my family and to parents, my father for never ever holding back, for telling me his stories as a “North American Negro male,” for showing me love and humor in spite of. And, of course, for winning the bet.

To my Aunt Linda, who gave me my first bath and “returned” me to my mother when I was a baby and would not go to sleep. It is a privilege to be your namesake and it’s one that seems to grow every year. I love to carry your name, to claim you as my other mommy, to be a part of this wacky, beautiful sisterhood of Shamwell women.

To mom, there’s so much. You dreamt of me before I was born. You steered me while never ever letting me feel out of control. You taught me the true meaning of motherhood and teamwork and what it’s like to be a completely wanted and loved child. Our household was filled, more than anything else, with sheer laughter and a romance between mother and child. Yes “I did it.” But so have you, mom, and you continue to show me what it is to live as a free woman. One who cackles, makes faces without pause, who sternly reminds me never to wake up at the end of someone else’s life. *We* did it, mommie.

To my friends and colleagues that *made* my grad school experience not just bearable but memorable, ridiculous, and warm: Drs. Cameron Leader-Piccone, Peter Geller, Laura Murphy, Amber Moulton, and Jen Nash.

Finally, some unsolicited but priceless advice for whoever may be reading this and maybe about to embark on a new life journey be it grad school, a new job, a move...be sure to get yourself the following friends:

A Kyla Sams: If you don't have a Kyla to call you by your full name whenever the ivory tower goes to your head, your life will be lacking. A Kyla who knows exactly what you're thinking just by the shared looks on your faces. Who will take a bus up at a moment's notice after you've called her in tears over too many things. A Kyla who knows when to pick things apart and when to simply call things as they are and to keep it moving. A Kyla who you've been fast friends with since 14 years old, going on 17 years (who'll say "that's too long" when learning this). This is the kind of friend who keeps your teeth white. Get a Kyla Sams.

A Dr. Ashley Farmer (and the Wright family): Ashley brings you brownies because you've been dealt a serious life blow...or because it's a Tuesday. She will tell you when to own your voice and to make it loud as well as when to shut up when you're being ridiculous (that actually happened, she made a very justified argument to me about too much self-deprecation and then finished it with "Also, shut up"). Ashley will be your friend even when you're being a bad one because she has a good eye for deserving people. Ashley will patiently listen to your same, tired laments and gripes inherent to grad school life. She will humor your silliness as you pass notes in class (yes, that happened). She will share her heart with you.

Find these women, share your lives with them. My life, this project, are so much the richer for having known them.



## Prelude

“My task is to make you hear, to make you feel, and, above all, to make you see. That is all, and it is everything.” — Joseph Conrad

In 1983, one year after I was born, Susie Guillory Phipps lost her five-year long legal battle against the state of Louisiana. She began her case in an effort to change the racial designation on her birth certificate from “Colored” to “White”; the case opened up the always-heated debate surrounding the state’s then upheld “one-drop” rule (Phipps was 3/32 “Negro” based on her great-great-great-great enslaved African grandmother). Guillory Phipps stated, “I am White. I am all White. I was raised as a White child. I went to White schools. I married White twice.”<sup>1</sup>

Jump ahead to the twenty-first century: it is 2004 and I am twenty-one years old, in my first job out of college sharing after-work drinks with some co-workers. One guy had been flirting with me all night and joined me when I walked to my car. He started making more aggressive advances and after the umpteenth rejection, asked, in exasperation, “Look, is it because I’m white? Because I’ve never been with a black girl but I’ve seen a lot of porn.” I could think of nothing to say but goodbye. Without fail, whenever I tell this story, one person will shout, “What was he thinking?” In 2009, *The Harvard Crimson* covered an undergraduate panel on being a bi/multi-racial student on campus in an article called “Falling in Love with Hue.” I attended this panel and shared this story. The entire panel including the audience roared with shock and awkward laughter. Why would someone making romantic or sexual advances interrupt his own come-on with the subject of pornography? Why would he *inform* this advance with

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<sup>1</sup> “Color Blind.” *Time Magazine* (July 18, 1983).

pornography? And why does pornography come up when race is introduced?<sup>2</sup> “Been with” has a clear double meaning – he could have meant “been” in the sense of a casual relationship, or he could have meant “been with” in the sexual sense. I have forgotten more significant moments than this but what he said has never left my mind. Indeed, it bolstered the driving force behind my decision to pursue a doctorate in African American studies. It is correct but too simple to say that this person had stereotyped me and was responding to whatever that stereotype triggered in him (sexual desire, intimidation). What interests me is how great these imaginings can be. That night I replayed the bizarre exchange in my mind and, in doing so, I recalled another exchange: “I’m the nigger who’s going to sleep with your sister, unless you stop me.”<sup>3</sup> These are the words Charles Bon tells Henry Sutpen in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). What always struck me about this particular line is how the Bon figure disrupts or clarifies his station relative to Sutpen, for Bon is *imagined as* half-black and Sutpen is, supposedly, white. Nearly ten years later if I wonder about the motivations behind this man’s question, I immediately think of Andrew Warnes’s query: “Why does sex, in the popular American imagination, seem always shadowed by violence?” or my ill-thinking suitor’s disclosure about his sexual proclivities or Lacan’s “mirror stage” theory and its implication of the self as fragmented.

These are the questions and notions guiding my dissertation. Grounded in the psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan’s post-structuralist foundation that any notion of

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<sup>2</sup> It’s important to note my distinction between sex and pornography, because sex is in the exchange as well, yet he brought in an institution where sex is the feature but not the only act occurring.

<sup>3</sup> Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936), 286.

the “self” must be distinctly violent, this project treats the works of William Faulkner and Richard Wright as selves to be read and examined. Just as the human self creates, employs, and even exists in an imagination, the novels discussed here treat imagination as its own being and as a projection completely capable of directing the lives of those who subscribe to it. According to Lacan, not even our unconscious escapes the effects of language, and so, “the unconscious is structured like a language.” When I use terms such as “imaginary,” “imaginative,” or “imagination,” I am speaking of the images and acts that inform how we see and, thus, treat others, pulling primarily from Lacan, as well as from Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s definition of *racial formations* by citing the imagery consistently constructed and utilized in these formations.<sup>4</sup> Lacan’s “Imaginary” greatly informs this project on imagining and the interracial. Bigger Thomas’s closing that what he killed for he is, Charles Bon’s mimicry of his father’s life in order to gain his recognition, Big Boy’s movement from innocence to notorious and Joe Christmas’s aggressive embodiment of interracial tensions all fit within Lacan’s notion that

...existentialism must be judged by the explanations it gives of the subjective impasses that have indeed resulted from it; a freedom that is never more authentic than when it is within the walls of a prison; a demand for commitment, expressing the impotence of a pure consciousness to master any situation; a voyeuristic-sadistic idealization of

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<sup>4</sup> Omi, Michael and Winant, Howard. eds., *Racial Formation in the United States*. Routledge, 1994.

the sexual relation; a personality that realizes itself only in suicide; a consciousness of the other than can be satisfied only by Hegelian murder.<sup>5</sup>

In *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright* (2009) Mikko Tuhkanen argues for a broader and newer discourse between psychoanalysis and African American literature. Specifically, she he performs a Lacanian treatment of Richard Wright texts as does Abdul JanMohamed with Wright in *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright and the Archeology of Death* (2005). My discussion of Wright's texts and their relationship to Faulkner's grounds its interventions in and springs from these works as well as the Lacanian critical race scholarship, *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (1998) edited by Christopher Lane and *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (2000) by Kalpana Seshadri-Crook. While acknowledging the problems in psychoanalysis race theory it is also important to note the possible productive outcomes of its application, as well. *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* rightly observes that "the intersection of race and psychoanalysis (and, in their project, feminism) as many 'transformative possibilities' as 'stubborn incompatibilities'" (Tuhkanen xix).

This dissertation continues the psychoanalytic treatment of literature while also being quite mindful of the historic tensions between psychoanalysis and African

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<sup>5</sup> Lacan, Jacques. "Jacques Lacan." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. 1290.

American cultures.<sup>6</sup> It also takes for granted that race as a social construct and racism inform citizens' decisions about our daily lives. In *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (1989) Shoshana Felman argues that instead of the traditional locating of literature within an already accepted psychoanalysis "we must engage in a real *dialogue* between literature and psychoanalysis" and that we start upsetting the critical status quo when we "consider the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature *from the literary point of view*" (5-6). I find this to be my scholarly experience: that this literature is more in conversation with theories of psychoanalysis than solely informed by the latter. Ultimately, it is this conversation that this current project brings to the surface.

My focus here is just what the racialized body looks like in the individual and collective imagination and the thoughts, actions, deeds, emotions, and laws that these images trigger. In an age where we have a black president and congratulate ourselves for living in a "post-racial" nation, it is imperative to also plead for a racial reality-check: "...[A]dvances in racial justice do not mean that racism is dead in the United States; indeed, it continues to exercise a *powerful hold on the American imagination*."<sup>7</sup> It is this "hold" that concerns me: what it looks like and the effects it can have on our bodies and minds. This hold is what took over the exchange I had with the man who'd "seen a lot of porn." This hold is what took over the relationship between the characters Charles Bon,

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<sup>6</sup> A more detailed discussion of these fissures are elaborated in Chapter Three on Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" in his short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940).

<sup>7</sup> Walker, Clarence E. "'We're losing our country': Barack Obama, Race & the Tea Party." *Daedalus*. Winter 2011, Vol. 140, No. 1, p.126. Emphasis mine.

Henry Sutpen, and the residents in Yoknapatawpha County in *Absalom, Absalom!* and what triggered Bigger's fateful murderous fateful actions when he kills Mary Dalton.

This is the same hold that takes over when we learn about the latest hate crime.

There are innumerable, timeless fantasies and fears coursing through the American cultural imagination. But what are the more pertinent images within these – the ones that may in fact drive people to commit brutally violent and sexual acts? Today, a particular collection of static yet very old yet evolving images drives our culture: these are the constructions of and sensations born from the subject of racial identity. Crucial to this ideology is the how the fluidity of race subverts identities considered to be absolute and finite. The most popular, yet most denied factor of this racially haunted imagined identity is the interracial element. Whether we call it interracialism, miscegenation, racial amalgamation, or race-mixing; the imagined embodiment of what these terms may connote can trigger a bounty of consequences. Chapter One introduces and discusses what is at the top of the hierarchy in the racial imagination: the sensations of fantasy and threat, beginning with and best portrayed in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel that intersects in significant ways with Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), which I demonstrate in the second chapter. Just what are these specific images that Wright and Faulkner were so concerned with and took to task in the pages of these two works? In both literary productions, they individually and (unknowingly) confirm and expand the cultural beliefs of their time that are still present in America today. The notions of race, identity, and the confrontation with history all concern black men and white women, black women and white men, and inform why only certain acts and progressions occur within specific scenarios presented by each author. Such scenarios include the concentric,

interracial, back-and-forth passing on imaginary, verbal, and textual levels in Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon's relationship (as depicted between Quentin Compson and Shrevlin McCannon) in *Absalom, Absalom!* They also include Bigger Thomas's physical progression of violence—from accidentally killing Mary Dalton to raping and plotting to kill his girlfriend Bessie—that also moves along interracial lines (from black to white, to black to black) in *Native Son* and discussed in chapter two.

Chapters Three and Four look at two earlier texts by the same authors in order to discuss the racial prototypes that each works from and develops in the later works. Chapter Three examines Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" in his first collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and explains how the story contains, at its narrative core, the same interracial spectacle that we see haunts and dictates the actions of Bigger Thomas. Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) has a very similar aggressive and blunt attitude that Charles Bon does in *Absalom, Absalom!* only a crucial difference is that much of the characteristics Bon is famous for are imagined by other characters in the novel whereas Christmas is a real character who commits real action. Chapter Four investigates the narrative disruptions that all its characters undergo as a testament to the relationships between the visual, race, and self-knowledge.

Tuhkannen asks "[What is] the precise way we can engage Lacanian psychoanalysis with African American literature[?]" (xv). My current project relies heavily on his scholarship on Richard Wright and psychoanalysis and uses it as a springboard from which to apply similar approaches and analyses to William Faulkner and to the two authors' bodies of work. This project does so in order to argue that psychoanalytic critical race theory is a discourse in which both Faulkner and Wright

worked with.<sup>8</sup> When looking at the depictions of “race” in the works of Faulkner and Wright, I use the definition employed by Omi and Winant that “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (55); I also pull from their *racial formation* theory in my understanding of the racial imaginary I explore in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Native Son*. Omi and Winant define *racial formation* as “the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55). Borrowing from this theory as well as that of Tuhkanen, I hone in on all four processes, particularly that of transformation, in order to see—with due nods to Eric Lott—how whites *and* blacks live out their respective constructed identities. In particular, I am concerned with how both sides attempt to bridge (or possess) the other by way of race-mixing on both real and imaginary terms.

Throughout this inquiry, I rely heavily on the language of the imaginary, imagination, self, desire, and fantasy, pulling from the solid foundations set by Jacques Lacan and Frederic Jameson and from polemics by Eric Lott, and Michael Omi and Howard Winant and Mikko Tuhkanen, among others.

### **I. Definition of Terms:**

*Interracial* usually means interracial sex between white and black people.

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<sup>8</sup> For fuller introduction to the “American optic” and race in black literature see Tuhkanen, Mikko. *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory and Richard Wright*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009: Tuhkanen takes careful note to address the failings of previous scholarship in which psychoanalysis is taken at face value; specifically, “...Margaret Walker’s psychobiography *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius* (1988) and Allison Davis’s chapter on Wright in *Leadership, Love, and Aggression* (1983): both demonstrate the necessity of relentless suspicion in the face of psychoanalytic approaches to questions of race” (xv).



*Imagination* or, rather, the *racial imagination* I mean the images one sees mentally or psychically that usually involve a body and/or a sexual act between people of different races.

The *imaginary* has its roots in the Lacanian definition of the same. In the context of my project it refers to what we visualize in our minds when our notions of identity are perceived as threatened. This is a fear of extinction, and when speaking of extinction in the traditional or historical American sense, then this inherently involves a fear of *racial* extinction.<sup>9</sup>

*White symbolic order* is borrowed directly from Mikko Tuhkanen's *The American Optic*, "...the symbolic is rendered blind and vulnerable to challenges" (xxii).

## **II. Literary Implications:**

I apply the above terms and concepts in the close readings of Faulkner and Wright to follow. Faulkner and Wright both make use of a white symbolic order that is vulnerable to a *racial imaginary* to drive in their novels, but the novels' plots do not portray this vulnerability nor its imaginary in the same ways. Tuhkanen, relying on the scholarship of Žižek, explains that "...all symbolic constellations are supported by an inassimilable foreign body that simultaneously enables and threatens symbolic structures; this *object a* marks the site where the real, whose foreclosure is the condition of the emergence of the subject and the *object a* is the mask of blackness" (xxii). This is the

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<sup>9</sup> In addition, while not employed frequently in this project, the phrase *the interracial threat is expressive of a more generalized fear that cannot ever be contained* suggests that there is a collective sense of threat in the American imagination and it is racialized.

*interracial* for this current project: that the interracial is the trigger for anxiety and corporeal violence in the self.

For Faulkner, the imaginary is something more spoken than seen, or it is at least, spoken first and then seen after. The role of speech, telling, and hearing are imperative to the imaginary, and the interracial images of the body and sex that surface in the imagination of central characters. Before Quentin and Shreve can imagine (and then re-tell) the stories of Thomas Sutpen, Henry Sutpen, and the murder of Charles Bon, they must first hear stories passed down from Quentin's father or grandfather or Rosa Coldfield; if not heard, they must first read stories in letters from Quentin's father. After all the storytelling and re-telling, they finally imagine and create a dialogue between two men, one of whom is imagined to be biracial. The only "reality" in their story is the murder and death of (the now imagined as biracial) Charles Bon. Thus, the imagined interracial is a tool to fantasize about extinction. Here, the one who is finally extinguished is a possibly biracial man – an embodiment of interracial sex – yet Thomas Sutpen is also killed by his own white tenant-fieldhand, and Henry extinguishes the Sutpen design by never procreating. We, the readers, do know that the only Sutpen blood to continue is miscegenated blood. Thus, finally, the reconstructed and recounted imaginary in *Absalom, Absalom!* is a tool used to process the imagined threat of white extinction. For it is Shreve and Quentin who have the last words on the matter: Shreve describes future race-mixing in an almost fantastical, excited matter without a tone of fear, but Quentin's defensive "I don't hate [the South]" implies reaction to a threat.

The *imaginary* and the *interracial* play vital roles in Wright's *Native Son* as well, but in an almost polar opposite manner. As readers, we're already privy to the author's

own outlining of the inspiration for his novel and the significant roles that the imagination played for him to produce this work. So in both the novel and the explanatory essay “How Bigger Was Born” (1940), Wright’s texts demonstrate that he defines the imaginary as something entirely *seen*. Indeed his novel’s major motifs all involve strong elements of sight, blindness, color, and how those visual moments evoke certain scenes in one’s imagination. The central murder scene between Bigger Thomas and Mary Dalton occurs because Bigger mistakes the “white blur” for the blind Mrs. Dalton and panics enough to smother her daughter rather than be suspected of raping a white woman. He imagines what people would assume and thus, reacts in the “real,” corporeal sense of killing another human being. Much later on in the novel, once Bigger is on trial for his crimes, the prosecutor evokes ingrained interracial threat and fantasy during his closing argument. He literally creates a scene of rape that the readers know did not happen, adding an extra level of violence to the ultimate murder when he describes Mary as begging for her life on her knees – a scene that has its own sexual undertones (the raging black man standing over the white woman on her knees). However, the most damning is when the prosecutor laments Mary’s body being burned because otherwise “we” might be privy to the “bite marks” he imagines on her white breasts—recreated, imagined “evidence” that results in Bigger being sentenced to death. This passage underscores the novel’s connection to *Absalom, Absalom!* in the use of an *interracial imaginary* to discuss, narrate, and even create real death – extinction.

Both writers are not so much discussing the problem of race in America – to speak so broadly – or even the problem of the haunting American South, or the violence of Jim Crow. Rather, they narrate acts of extinction, and these acts take place in the

imagination first. In response to Toni Morrison's polemic that the American literary imagination is grounded in whiteness – and hopefully complicating her premise – the American imagination is not grounded in whiteness or blackness, but in interracialism itself. Specifically the sexual act occurring between the black and white races is ingrained in the imagination but, of course, flies in the face of social realities that are grounded in racial discrimination. Faulkner and Wright explore these conundrums and discover that ultimately, these contradictions and tensions between the imagination and reality result in extinction. Individual and racial extinction is what's ultimately at stake in their stories; Wright depicts this through corporeal violence by black men but with explicit interracial implications, Faulkner does this by interrogating our ideas about history and narrative. Faulkner specifically asks what happens when we cannot place another into our historical narratives and finds the answer to be nihilistic and death-driven.

Tackling the works of either Wright or Faulkner is a challenging feat. The scholarship surrounding either and both is insurmountable. Thus, what's nearly inevitable with canonical authors and their texts is that they “become the already-read,” as Barbara Johnson describes and “...that really *reading* the canon is subversive, because students in traditional ‘humanist’ classrooms are usually taught *not* to read it but to learn ideas about it” (Johnson 30). One of the tasks of the present study is to describe the ideas *from* the texts of William Faulkner and Richard Wright.

## Chapter One

### **What We Talk About When We Talk About the Past: Story-telling and Race**

#### **Fashioning in *Absalom, Absalom!***

It can only be coincidence that William Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!* the same year that Jacques Lacan gave his 1936 lecture on his “Mirror Stage” theory in psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup> Still, the novel and the psychoanalytic theory share a striking and compelling relationship. Lacan’s theory grounds itself in the notion that the self-recognition that occurs in our infant stage serves as the foundation for an inner conflict the rest of our lives between our self-image that is stronger and more independent than our actual selves. The (imagined and projected) stand-off between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon is a literary depiction of this Lacanian psychoanalysis. Faulkner writes, “You are my brother” said by Henry Sutpen to Charles Bon – a Lacanian moment of *reconnaissance* (*Absalom, Absalom!*, 286).<sup>2</sup> Charles Bon replies, “No, I’m not. I’m the nigger who’s going to sleep with your sister, unless you stop me” (286). What is this if not a Lacanian *misreconnaissance*? Two white men, one Southern and one foreign, imagine a fatal confrontation in which one Southern white man murders a man whose race and origin are unknown. This imagining and re-creation is a literary depiction of Lacan’s mirror stage,

...a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan, Norton, 1288.

<sup>2</sup> From hereon, *Absalom, Absalom!* will be abbreviated to *AA* when in parenthesis.

lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic — and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.<sup>3</sup>

Du Bois's "[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" is one of his more well-known observations about American culture [*Souls of Black Folk*, (1903), 17]. In the twenty-first century, this project asks for a new reading when considering Luce Irigaray's position that "[s]exual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age" (*Ethics* 5). This project is not arguing for a trumping of race or for a new hierarchy with sexual difference at the top of critical discourse. Rather, I ask for a newer reading of our most well-known texts by some of our most well-known writers who tackled race and racism in their works in order to see and discuss the racialization of sex and the sexualization of race as one and the same and as topics William Faulkner did, in fact, confront: "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, that bothers you?" (*AA*, 286).

## **1.2 Hollywood and *Absalom, Absalom!***

It is not a coincidence, either, that Faulkner was working as a scriptwriter in Hollywood when he produced what's considered to be his most famous and challenging novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>4</sup> The novel reads as a psychological thriller, a murder mystery,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. "Jacques Lacan." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. 1288.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph R. Urgo, "*Absalom, Absalom!*: The Movie." *American Literature*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Mar. 1990), pp. 56-73.

and a tale of intrigue. As befits a detective story, two young men frame the tale by working with incomplete and fragile evidence both intangible and tangible (oral histories and letters, tales written or remembered) repeated over a lamp-lit table in order to put enough together to reach their own powerful conclusions. Indeed, like a suspenseful movie, there is even a surprise ending: Charles Bon is black! He was going to have sex with his white sister! Joseph R. Urgo persuasively analyzes the parallels between Faulkner writing the novel and working for MGM Studios intermittently during the early to mid-1930s.<sup>5</sup> His main argument is twofold: one, that novel (which was considered for a screenplay) should have been turned into a movie, and two, that the rapid pace of Hollywood productions during this time – a movie a week – may have been a primary influence on this particular novel, but not necessarily in the way one would expect. Instead of being written rapidly, the novel is characterized by an element of Hollywood self-consciousness: “...Jesus the South is fine, isn’t it? *It’s better than the theatre, isn’t it?* It’s better than Ben Hur, isn’t it? No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn’t it?” (176, emphasis mine). This scene – in which Shreve and Quentin are recreating the story of Charles Bon’s death – contains both this element of self-consciousness as

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid: Faulkner spent four months in 1932 working at MGM studios, three weeks in July 1934 at Universal Studios, five weeks in December-January 1934-1935 at Twentieth Century Fox, and two separate periods in 1936 and into 1937, for a full year.[...] As Bruce Kawin points out, students of Faulkner’s career must keep separate the work he did in Hollywood in the 1930s and the work he did there in the 1940s. In the 1930s, Kawin argues, Faulkner was definitely using his film writing to advance his own thinking, to try out versions of his stories, and to gain a large audience for his work. His six months’ experience with filmmaking prior to and simultaneous with the writing and revision of *Absalom, Absalom!* (begun early in 1934 and completed in January 1936) made that novel possible in many ways. Primarily, “*Absalom, Absalom!* is a celebration of *collaboration as a fruitful human exercise toward creating new works of art and reaching new levels of comprehension.*” Faulkner learned this in Hollywood (57-58, emphasis mine).

well as an element of cultural awareness.<sup>6</sup> Something that seems too big for one imagination requires a comparison to the projected image i.e. the epic movie “Ben Hur” (1929, based on the 1880 novel, *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, by Lee Wallace).

This biographical information in relation to the final literary product demonstrates Faulkner’s struggle to illustrate the popular American obsession with race, specifically the miscegenated body, despite the ease with which the projected screen can inspire, effect, influence, and confront the individual imagination. In his article “‘We’re losing our country’: Barack Obama, Race and the Tea Party,” Clarence E. Walker explains, “I use the term ‘national imaginary’ here to mean ‘a system of cultural representations that makes the contours of the nation-state emotionally plausible.’” In the United States, people, regardless of their color or ancestry, are bound together by the myth of individual success that sits at the center of the American “national imaginary.”<sup>7</sup> When I discuss the racial (or interracial) imaginary, I am specifically referring to the perceptual system of racial and bodily representations – what drives the viewer gazing upon an object when that gaze is interrupted or informed by color (difference). What problematizes this “individual success” is the stain of slavery as embodied by miscegenation and violence; this continues to haunt our narrative of the American dream. I join Walker, Ewing, and

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<sup>6</sup> Polk, Noel, and Joseph R. Uργο. *Reading Faulkner: Absalom, Absalom!* Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2010, 110: "Shreve refers most probably to the first American stage version of “Ben Hur,” a large, spectacularly popular production in 1899 based on the 1880 novel by Lew Wallace. There were also popular film versions in 1907, 1925, and 1959. *Ben Hur* was so popular that it spawned American fraternal organizations such as the “The Supreme Tribes of *Ben Hur*,” which later became an insurance company. Some American towns were named Ben Hur.”

<sup>7</sup> Walker: Walker borrows from Katherine Pratt Ewing’s *Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).



others in using the terms “imaginary” and “American imagination” to refer to the historical myths and realities that shape the bodies we see around us. In history, literature, analysis, and in our present-day culture there are incidences of how racialized bodies rupture our narratives of normativity, of belonging, and how we determine and structure where things are and remain in their proper places. Lacan’s definitions and discussions of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and the Real as dimensions of the human psyche help illuminate and explain these disruptions. While all are equally important and mutually inclusive, it is the Imaginary that holds the most importance here. The Imaginary is the human fascination with form and is what Lacan describes at length in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of I.” Following Lacan’s theory that the Imaginary consists of the space between the self and the “I” depicted as separate but reflected (“The human self thus comes into being through a fundamentally *aesthetic* recognition. The self-image that causes identification and recognition is a *fiction* ‘over there,’ dictating the efforts of the subject (‘I’) toward a totality and autonomy it can never attain.”) what are we to make of the projected stand-off between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon? Were Quentin and Shreve merely thinking according to Lacanian theory? Perhaps, but then what could cause this disruption on the part of Henry and why would the reaction be one of murder?<sup>8</sup>

Charles Bon – who simultaneously represents sameness (Sutpen’s son) and difference (Sutpen’s son by a woman of a different race)—takes advantage of the disruption inherent in this paradigm, forcing Henry to confront it when he interjects “I’m the nigger who’s going to sleep with your sister” (286). Urgo describes Henry Sutpen’s

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<sup>8</sup> Lacan, Norton, 1288.

subconscious as affected by Charles Bon, comparing their interaction to that between a film-viewer and the screen:

Bon's skill has on Henry the same effect that a film has on one's senses, where images appear too fast for the intellect to judge and analyze before the emotions either accept them as true or reject them as false... Unlike reading or listening, one cannot interrupt a movie, or interfere with it, while it is running. (63)

Urgo calls for more attention to the historical influences on the well-known imaginative themes in Faulkner's literature, especially *Absalom, Absalom!* He addresses the imaginative element in a more technical manner via the necessary factors in filmmaking, such as narrative speed and deliberate constructions of the visual. His essay lends surprising insight into Faulkner's own anxiety-ridden experience with the idea of a projected image on the screen:

The film 'The Champ' (1931)...was hardly underway when Faulkner said to the projectionist... 'How do you stop this thing?' There was no use looking at it, he said, because he knew how it would turn out. Then he asked for the exit and left... Later he would admit to being 'flustered' and 'scared' by the entire experience of coming to Hollywood to work for \$500 a week, and by the fuss made over him. (63)

Ordering and pleading is a strong thread in *Absalom, Absalom!* and we have to wonder if this was a purposeful stylistic device born from the author's own frustrations with cinema. There are two important points regarding the novel and its strongest themes

that I wish to illustrate: that Faulkner, in fact, did achieve a novel with powerful cinematic elements. This would seem to contradict the conclusions reached by Urgo and other scholars that he abandoned cinema for its faults. Second, that this achievement depended on his inclusion and dissection not simply of the imagination, but of how the imagination regards race. In this way, *Absalom, Absalom!* incorporates the cinematic mechanism of projection through structure, narration, and deliberate plotting. This incorporation only succeeds by a simultaneous and paradoxical triggering and projection of the American racial imagination. Simply put, Faulkner argues through his fiction that it is the threat and fantasy of the Civil War's racial aftermath – racial amalgamation – that defines American identity more than anything else.

Thus, this small word, “wait,” simultaneously shapes the broadest thematic arc and is the most local of motifs within *Absalom, Absalom!* It is among the best examples of Faulkner's depiction of racial and historical confrontation and confusion; an inner conflict between the self and memory; and the repetition and (re-)creation of cultural narrative embodied in an artistic one. The instances of waiting in *Absalom, Absalom!* are too numerous to count; but there are also exact critical moments where “wait” is the pivotal image, action, or word in the novel. For example, in its conclusion, Miss Rosa Coldfield consistently vacillates between ordering Quentin Compson to “wait” or to continue entering the decrepit Sutpen's Hundred mansion (292-294); or much earlier, when both the reader and Quentin (and his Harvard roommate, the Canadian Shreve) are initially introduced to Thomas Sutpen and privy to his thoughts:

...and Sutpen still *waiting*, certainly no one could say for what now, incredible that he should wait for Christmas, for the crisis to come to him

– this man of whom it was said that he not only went out to meet his troubles, he sometimes went out and manufactured them.

But this time he *waited* and it came to him: Christmas, and Henry and Bon rode again... (84, original emphasis)

There are at least twenty-five instances where “wait” is asked or demanded explicitly by a central character, either to himself or as an internal thought imposed by the secondary framing characters Quentin and Shreve (who share most of the “wait” moments.) The most famous occurs between Shreve and Quentin when Shreve stops Quentin’s possessed retelling to plead: “Wait then...For God’s sake wait!” (175). Faulkner’s noted “repulsion” better informs the importance of the storytelling, urgency, and desire themes that shape and re-shape the (hi)story with which the reader is confronted. To reiterate, *Absalom, Absalom!* does not abandon visual or imagined projection, but rather, it attempts to do so in a better manner than what could have been done on-screen. The resulting query *and* claim from this observation is, “Why?”

Shreve’s plea above marks a significant twist for the rest of *Absalom, Absalom!* (just a mere twenty pages from the exact middle of the novel) where the inextricably linked plotlines move from stories of physical action, direct or indirect, to a saturation of *textual* action that either halts the story or spurs the story further. Shreve and Quentin, and to an extent Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon (the third and fourth framers of the novel), vary between (re)telling, comprehension, *interruption* – “Wait!” – and truth-making to construct their narrative. The specularly and visual locus inherently embodied

in race reflect the cinematic techniques that Faulkner must have witnessed in Hollywood and consequently influenced his novel. Urgo's analysis provokes a fresh look at the nation's collective imagination and its dependence on race – specifically, on miscegenation. Urgo points out specific examples of how Faulkner was intrigued by the speed and style of film's medium and its influence on the viewer. The written narrative calls forth images for the reader, but what those images *look like* are ultimately decided by the reader's imagination. The visual narrative, on the other hand, performs both creative acts –description and its projection. The images are screened before the viewer who is then forced to accept these descriptions.<sup>9</sup> Despite the talk of adapting *Absalom, Absalom!* for the screen, Faulkner ultimately preferred the written text. The novel allowed him to perform what he deems in the novel (vis-à-vis Shreve) as “better than” anything one would catch on the screen or the stage. The critical question to follow, then, is did the novel's central focus on myth-making and history, and the threat-fantasy dilemma of racial amalgamation have a hand in its success? Writing on the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama, Gerald Early posits that “(Obama's) story could only have happened here. What are the chances of a person from a historically despised

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<sup>9</sup> A telling 21<sup>st</sup>-century example: viewers of the science-fiction thriller “The Hunger Games” (2012\_ angrily reacted to the casting of one character as African-American despite the original novel's explicit description of the character as having “brown, silky skin” and kinky hair, see Little, Lyneka. "Hunger Games Tweets Spur Debate About Racism." Speakeasy RSS. Wall Street Journal, 30 Mar. 2012. Web. 29 Dec. 2012. <<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/03/30/hunger-games-tweets-spur-debate-about-racism/>>.

and persecuted minority being elected leader of some other nation?”<sup>10</sup> There is a singularity to race in America that Faulkner’s novel attempts to articulate and that still eludes us and drives us today. Thomas Sutpen’s story is told in such a way – by himself and by the other characters – that his narrative is dependent upon the singular events of American history and the specularly within the racial imaginary.

When outlining the American values listed in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Donald M. Kartiganer calls for a suspension of belief and the use of one’s imagination, citing Hyatt H. Waggoner who pointed out that “there is more lifelikeness in what Quentin and Shreve partly imagine than in what is known” (300). This paradox that what’s imagined is more “alive” than what actually occurs lends credence to the weight and power of imagination. Waggoner explains ““An act of imagination is needed if we are to get at lifelike, humanly meaningful truth; but to gain the lifelikeness we sacrifice the certainty of the publicly demonstrable.”” So, not only is imagination a motif in the novel, an action committed by the novel’s characters, but it is also a literary action required from its readers. More so, imagination is needed in order to witness the *unimaginable*. Incest and miscegenation are not “publicly demonstrable,” (300, emphasis original) and the only way to acknowledge that they do occur and exist is through the imagination.<sup>11</sup> *Absalom, Absalom!* is a work about the individual and collective imagination and the chaotic

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<sup>10</sup> Early, Gerald. "The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama." *Daedalus* 140.1 (2011): 11-27.

<sup>11</sup> Focusing on Thomas Sutpen and Charles Bon, Waggoner writes, “Yet the reader is led by circumstantial solidity of this chapter to feel more certain that this sympathetic account of Bon is correct than he is of any other interpretation he has encountered so far in the book” and that, ultimately, the story of Thomas Sutpen “hangs on this leap of the imagination” (300).

tragedy that ensues when these are confronted with American notions of race. While possessing many cinematic qualities, its plot succeeds much more as a text because, in the words of the author himself:

...no individual can *look* at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. So these are true as far as Miss Rosa and as Quentin saw it. Quentin's father saw what he believed was truth, that was all he saw. But the old man was himself a little too big for people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson to – see all at once [...] It was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird, which I would like to think is the truth.<sup>12</sup>

Once more, in one word – “look” – Faulkner argues against the externally imposed image, such as the screen, versus the implied and suggested image connected to one's own imagination – yet, that *can still be projected* from text to mind. Faulkner,

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<sup>12</sup> Faulkner. “Remarks on *Absalom, Absalom!*” *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: a Casebook*. Comp. Fred C. Hobson. Oxford UP, 2003. 283-93, emphasis mine: “The [remarks in this section by Faulkner] came in response to questions from students at the University of Virginia in April 1957 and at Washington and Lee University in May 1958. They are included in *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Plotner (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 1959). These remarks constitute *the closest thing to an interview Faulkner ever gave concerning Absalom, Absalom!*”

intentionally or not, argues that there is something intangible, yet deeply affective when telling a story in a text versus through projected image alone. Subsequently, in relation to “look” and blinding, the role of “wait” then takes on more weight as its own subject and theme in *Absalom, Absalom!* The “fourteenth image” Faulkner speaks of is my point of departure from some of the major scholarship surrounding his work and that of other contemporary white authors such as Ernest Hemingway (whose literary style was definitively in direct opposition to Faulkner’s), or his predecessor Mark Twain, whose 1894 novel *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* weaves its own tale of miscegenation and imagination.

When giving the William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University in 1990, Toni Morrison provided inspiration for one of the prevailing analyses of Faulkner and his white literary peers. Eventually published as the polemic *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), Morrison broke new ground in outlining the origins of the modern American literary canon. She identified the idea of whiteness as that canon’s foundation and, thus, all else working as the “Other” – what she deems “Africanisms” (6). These Africanisms are devices that uphold and revere whiteness at the expense of black literature and actual black Americans and, consequently, our entire culture. Morrison highlights crucial themes and questions evoked from the underground Africanisms in our culturally lauded texts, and her argument makes key points concerning the relationship between the reader and the (white) writer. Regarding Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* (1937), she remarks on the descriptions of black Harry and white Eddy: “Eddy is white, and we know he is *because nobody says so*” (72, emphasis original). Even though she also gives



due diligence to *Absalom, Absalom!*, there's a blind spot that destabilizes her interrogations. For in fact, *Absalom, Absalom!*'s central character of Thomas Sutpen (as well as his potential son Charles Bon), is a racial mystery. If we follow Morrison's argument on Hemingway, then we should believe the same about the rest of the texts she addresses. But, on the contrary, instead of the assumption that Sutpen is white because "nobody says so," *Absalom, Absalom!*'s apparent silence when describing the racial details of its central characters leads to the *opposite* conclusion: we do *not* know that Sutpen is white because nobody says so, either.

Nor can anyone else, from the omniscient narrator to the most obscure character such as Charles Bon, truly identify Sutpen's ethnicity. His whiteness is entirely supposed because of others' remembrances or the social factors informing his tale. Faulkner's style in *Absalom, Absalom!* inverts Morrison's point: by never saying what Sutpen's race is but substituting allusions, ambiguity, and even explicit contradictory descriptions for absolute silence, we readers are left to figure out this "fourteenth truth," and it is not a simple conclusion in the least.<sup>13</sup> Charles Bon – as Quentin and Shreve determine him –

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<sup>13</sup> See Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* for more explicit instances of Sutpen's racial ambiguity and contradictory descriptions such as: "...[Sutpen] no more conscious of his appearance in them or of the possibility that anyone else would be than he was of his own skin (185);" Miss Rosa's recollecting Sutpen's marriage to Ellen Coldfield, "...and on the front seat the face and teeth of the wild negro who was driving, and he, exactly like the negro's save for the teeth (this because of his beard, doubtless)..."(16). Again, Miss Rosa's recollecting whilst also projecting what's occurring in another's mind, the following phrase also distinctly contradicts itself in describing Sutpen as "white" and also as a "black beast": "...and Ellen seeing not two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another's eyes as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur, too. Yes" (20-21). Also see Vernon. "Narrative Miscegenation: *Absalom, Absalom!* as Naturalist Novel, Auto/Biography, and African-American Oral Story." *Journal of Narrative Theory* Summer 31.2 (2001): 155-79. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 May 2011 for more discussion of Sutpen's racial ambiguity and its connection to themes of

works as the human embodiment of this contradiction. If Bon is biracial, then Sutpen has to be white and this, we will see, explains his design and purpose. Using Morrison's polemic as a lens and a point of departure, I aim to outline, illuminate, and analyze the complications Faulkner's novel presents to ideas of race and how we – as readers and as citizens in a racially oppressive state – visualize the racialized body.

### **1.3 Contradiction and the Assumption of Whiteness**

Can we tell the story of the American Dream if race is a factor? The lack of concrete knowledge regarding the racial makeup of Thomas Sutpen complicates, and possibly flattens, his story and grand design. Morrison upset academic and literary circles when she argued that our most revered authors—Hemingway, William Styron, Willa Cather, Edgar Allan Poe, and Mark Twain, among others—create worlds in which whiteness is the norm and race is only deployed to discuss difference. “Africanisms” are a trope in American literature – a literature that's come to define, build, and maintain collective notions of what constitutes American identity. In this process, she argues, those of us in these shared spaces have come to imagine *in* whiteness and we must be told explicitly when someone is not white in order to then re-imagine ourselves. *Absalom, Absalom!* poses a provocative contrast to Morrison's thesis: rather than whiteness as synonymous with the presumed American literary imagination, this novel suggests that, one, for whiteness to be such then blackness must be as well because one cannot exist without the other; and two, that our imagination—literary, cultural, and otherwise—is essentially dependent on both *images* of race. In the section “Black Matters,” she

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bestiality as a lens through which to better inform his actual racial identity, if it is to exist at all.

commends the then-recent scholarship and actions taken to examine racism and its effects on the victim. But she also argues:

[This] well-established study should be joined with another, equally important one: the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it. It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject. What I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions. The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters. (11-12)

Regarding Faulkner she writes, “[w]ith few exceptions, Faulkner criticism collapses the major themes of that writer into discursive ‘mythologies’ and treats the later works – whose focus is race and class – as minor, superficial, marked by decline” (14). She then wonders,

Does Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, after its protracted search for the telling African blood, leave us with just such an image of snow and eradication of race? Not quite. Shreve sees himself as the inheritor of the blood of African kings; the snow apparently is the wasteland of unmeaning, unfathomable whiteness. (58)

Her theory that we know who is white *because nobody says so* is not as clear within Faulkner's work (as demonstrated in the very line she cites). Morrison's observations about the assumption of whiteness are crucial to her polemic and to more contemporary readings of Faulkner, even though *Absalom, Absalom!* presents a conflict to her overall critiques. Closer readings reveal that this particular "white" text is full of "Africanisms," upsetting the discussion on whiteness, the imagination, and American literature.

There is no question that some of the Africanisms Morrison describes are at work in most of Faulkner's oeuvre. But Faulkner does and does not fit so neatly into Morrison's definitions. For instance, that same outcome Shreve predicts for the human race employs Morrison's Africanisms, but complicates their traditionally negative connotations: "...in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (302). Certainly there is a nihilistic aspect here that Morrison focuses on above, but there is also a disarming reversal of time and place. "African" is not associated with slavery or interracialism in the traditional threatening manner; instead it is associated with royalty – a harking back to the autocratic dynasty Thomas Sutpen destroyed his life attempting to create. Shreve's suggestion is then set in direct linear contrast to Quentin's hysterical insistence that he does not hate the South, and it's fair to read Shreve's excited proclamation as one that's potentially threatening and frightening to other American readers (yet, it is an attractive fantasy to foreigners such as Shreve). Faulkner closes *Absalom, Absalom!* with open and ambiguous language, and whether or not he intended the novel as a warning to his (white) American readers, he achieves this in a different manner than the other writers Morrison holds responsible for the American literary imagination. Within the framing narrative there is no actual threatening black

figure in *Absalom, Absalom!*, except for the one its characters imagine (the black slave who may have triggered Sutpen's design).

In "Designing Sutpen: Narrative and Its Relationship to Historical Consciousness" Eric Casero describes the retelling between Grandfather Compson and Thomas Sutpen that involves a black servant ordering young Sutpen to go to the back door ["he told Grandfather how, before the monkey nigger who came to the door had finished saying what he did, he seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back..." (186)] as "a traumatic experience for Sutpen, causing him to examine the contents of his own memory" (88). He explains, "[t]he story of *Absalom, Absalom!* is the story of Sutpen the tragic hero, but it is also the *story* of the story of Sutpen the tragic hero: the narrative, that is that develops around him and functions as a temporal and historical transfer of human consciousness" (89, emphasis mine). That "traumatic" confrontation is supposedly what sent Sutpen on his frenzied path to aristocracy – his "grand design," but the cited *sentiments* here are imagined and projected by Quentin and Shreve. Conclusively, this "threat" presented by a black man is not so much experienced by Sutpen, but by the young men in their *recreation*. The most threatening black presence in the frame narrative is one constructed in the imaginations of the white characters. Indeed, another *white* man, his farmhand Wash Jones kills Thomas Sutpen, the representative pillar of agrarian capitalist success and presumed to be white. Therefore, it is not that *Absalom, Absalom!* does not answer Morrison's call for "a new white man," but this work does so in a manner that does not fit as neatly within her construction of this figure. *Absalom, Absalom!* demolishes conventional constructions of whiteness

whilst revealing it as a state of being inextricably *linked* to blackness as more than just an oppositional tool for the construction of white identity.

A necessary departure must occur from this previous work in order to expound upon Morrison's model of silence-as-whiteness in the American literary imagination. The model she presents is one factor in a different but equally important imagination – the racial. This is not to suggest Morrison lessens the importance of race as critical to the literary imagination – indeed, her thesis depends on it. My departure argues for further emphasis on this critical aspect: in fact, race is not only a critical aspect of the American literary imagination, but it is one and the same *to* that imagination –for in our culture one cannot exist without the other. *Absalom, Absalom!* depicts this tension in a purposefully obscure manner that belies the historical construction of race, let alone the history of slavery and the Civil War, combined with the more incorporeal images of the mind (sexual, familial, racial) are impossible to speak of in a clear and direct manner (“Wait, wait!”). I am referring to images of the body, and its related assigned locations and positions when racialized or historicized. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the first of its kind to speculate that the American literary and racial imagination are indistinguishable; if we (Americans) have a story to tell, then race is a requisite component of the tale. Certainly “race” is an incredibly broad term: I refer specifically to the constructions (social and legislatively) of discreet black and white racial identities, as well as the racial amalgamation (social, biological, codified in law and custom, and imagined) that continues to be inseparable from considerations of either. In Lacanian terms, the self is a perceiving subject and at the core of any imaginary mechanism, meaning the self is

constantly constructed in relation to a perceived other.<sup>14</sup> When there's a history of slavery and miscegenation, the question to pose is how does a subject incorporate the perception that will inherently involve confrontations of the body and the mind? To clarify and to trace this concept back to *Absalom, Absalom!*, how does one consider what was once property as another human being, especially if and when that former property may also be one's relative? That is the haunting or "curse" of American history that continues to infect the American racial imagination and the influence the unraveling of the narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>15</sup> This type of discussion demands a psychoanalytic foundation, and Jacques Lacan's *Imaginary* provides a clear lens. For my present purposes, this model (elaborated in the preceding introductory section, "Prelude: To Make You See") best illuminates the imaginations at work in Faulkner.

When I use "imaginary" and its related terms, I am referring to a collectively shared "sphere" of images that's produced both in and out of the self, what Casero calls a "third, 'historical' dimension [in which] the characters' consciousnesses interact with each other in the social realm of real time, as well as across history" (87). Lacan is properly post-structuralist, which is to say that he questions any simple notion of either "self" or "truth," exploring instead how knowledge is constructed by way of linguistic and ideological structures that organize not only our conscious, but also our unconscious lives. This model is exactly how I approach the writings of Faulkner here – that there is a

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<sup>14</sup> Norton, Lacan, 1288.

<sup>15</sup> Faulkner. "Remarks." Hobson, 287: "The curse is slavery, which is an intolerable condition – no man shall be enslaved – and the South has got to work that curse out and it will, if it's let alone. It can't be compelled to do it. It must do it of its own will and desire, which I believe it will do if it's let alone." – this comment within the longer interview from Faulkner will be dealt with in further detail later in the chapter.

series of ideological structures that shape the lens through which we view ourselves and our world. Race, specifically its markers (and what defines those markers), is what causes the most anxiety within these structures, as it is an eternally changing concept. It is this constant evolution that causes psychic disruption that can lead to real violence. On self-image and its realization, Lacan writes,

[The Ideal-I] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality. (1286)

In 1965, Kartiganer wrote “[m]ore than any other character in the novel, Charles Bon is a product of a purely imaginative act, a ‘poetic’ act which cuts away the veil of mystery and uncovers a living being who finally achieves significant proportions, becoming the counterpoint to Sutpen’s history of domination and inhumanity” (300). What deserves more consideration in the twenty-first century is how successful *Absalom, Absalom!* remains as a canonical text because or in spite of its unique and confounding structure. For example, we have seen how much Kartiganer praised the novel for revealing its author’s “philosophical position” and its demands on the readers’ imagination; Urgo’s late-twentieth century take on the powerful role of the visual both on and in the novel; Eric Casero and Joseph Reed correctly claiming that *Absalom, Absalom!* constitutes the substance of narrative (or, perhaps, a metanarrative), being the historically



and ideologically determined processes by which stories are created and disseminated among cultures and people.<sup>16</sup> Finally there is Noel Polk, the late eminent Faulkner scholar, who, in *Reading Faulkner: Absalom, Absalom!* (2010), wrote that “*Absalom, Absalom!*’s critical tradition is marked by the novel’s implicit encouragement, taken up by readers for over seventy years, to ‘play’ with its meanings as do its primary characters, for whom play is serious business” (xi). Such development of consciousness remains the signature mark of Faulkner’s novel from its debut through today. The fact that what is now a seventy-five year old novel still evokes enough frustration, provocation, and fascination to spur ongoing scholarship supports the claim that it is a work of art – its conclusive or open-ended meanings changing within every era of our time. In it, identity is a construction of the other major characters that leaves readers with open-ended conclusions and projections of what various identities are supposed to be. The larger force ruling the minds and bodies of other characters (specifically, Rosa Coldfield, Grandfather Compson, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson, and Shreve McCannon) is their individual and shared cultural imaginations – which have at their center the fantasy/threat duality of interracialism. This includes Shreve, whose frustrations with fragmentation in Quentin’s story is symbolic of what made and still makes American history stand out. In truth, these shared racial imaginations are at the center of the novel. Miscegenation and the threat of it, in particular, is a heavy focus of *Absalom, Absalom!* as projected onto and embodied in the figure of Charles Bon. Still, this focus is part of a larger concentric, deterministic narrative that tells the birth, unfolding, and paths to which the racial imagination can lead. In addition to the path of the narrative devised by Quentin and

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<sup>16</sup> Casero, 86.

Shreve, analyzing those of Thomas Sutpen and Charles Bon, as well as that of Miss Rosa Coldfield, reveal how the roles of fantasy and threat that heavily influence, if not control, the lives and fates of the characters, and even the reader. Central to *Absalom, Absalom!*'s purported notions of race are the combined elements of threat and fantasy. Conversely, what is fundamentally fascinating while threatening to the Faulknerian sense of self (of the readers, his characters, and especially that of the larger American public who share a racialized imagination) centers on race. In fact, for *Absalom, Absalom!*, what truly defines both sensations is the narrative and cultural invention of race itself.

#### **1.4 Fantasy in Faulkner's Interracial Fiction**

‘You are my brother.’

‘No I’m not. *I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister,*  
unless you stop me... You will have to stop me, Henry.’ (285-6)

One of the richest sections of *Absalom, Absalom!*, this bit of dialogue between Charles Bon and Henry occurring near the end of the novel is entirely invented by other characters. After much build-up, Quentin and Shreve recreate and imagine the scene that finally intersects the familial with the interracial. Until this moment, the novel’s framing narrative had not explicitly allowed for these deterministic threads of family and miscegenation to intertwine. When it does, it does so indirectly, given that even this horrific occasion is still *imagined* by others. But what they imagine is crucial as it is very much based on the reality of the men involved, Polk explains: “Bon provokes Henry to kill him, as Thomas Sutpen provokes Wash to kill him. The exchange encapsulates the

drama created by Quentin and Shreve to explain the murder: *black men and white men do not recognize themselves as brothers*” (189, emphasis mine). Even though the actual rigidity enacted by law and social mores did not allow for the brotherhood of black and white men, Faulkner portrays it on this imaginary level. Furthermore, he allows the novel to resolve its mystery based on solidity of this fictional premise: Charles Bon is a white man’s brother, or he’s a sexually threatening black man and incest is the sexual act that brings the biological and the interracial together. *Absalom, Absalom!* horrifies its own characters by threat of incest, and this terror is inextricable from the underlying threat of miscegenation and its progeny. But, as opposed to feeling disgust at incest (recall that both Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Henry, here, pose provocative challenges to this supposition in their incestuous feelings towards their respective sisters) and racial amalgamation, *Absalom, Absalom!* depicts both in a manner where there is just as much fantasy and allure. For example, Eric Sundquist addresses the role of the readers’ and characters’ collective racial imagination by exploring the theme of love. He focuses on the chapter when Bon introduces Henry to the unique social mores of New Orleans, in which horror and intrigue overlap:

The barrier of Bon’s marriage to the octoroon is ultimately overwhelmed by the barrier of incest and, later still, the barrier of miscegenation. But as the etymology of incest (*in + castus*) suggests, it is the superimposition of these barriers, which are themselves opposed, mirroring figures, that expresses the tragic depth of *Absalom, Absalom!* by making exceedingly “monstrous” the love Quentin and Shreve try desperately to understand by creating. They do so in a series of compelling inventions that, as they

progress, more and more deviate from the simpler but less conclusive explanations of the tragedy offered by Rosa and Mr. Compson virtually in order to create a barrier that can be, that *must be*, passed in imaginative violation and union. (131)

In merely itemizing Henry's biographical, geographical attributes, Bon projects this horror back onto Henry as the source of any disgust. Additionally, Sundquist rightly claims that these narrative acts "must be" on the imaginary level *because* of the horrific forces at work, which Quentin and Shreve struggle to manipulate into a work of what Sundquist highlights as "love."

Faulkner threads these themes of threat in his novel in a twofold manner: one, a character makes a declarative statement—"You are my brother" – a statement that would normally, almost instinctually evoke invitation, warmth, acceptance, and linkage. But Bon's equally emphatic refusal follows this statement: "No, I'm not," then solidifies this refusal of brotherhood with a reformulation of his own identity that poses a direct threat to the initial claim (not only is Charles Bon not Henry's brother, but he's "the nigger who's going to sleep with [his] sister"). But this is not the final threat with which the characters and readers are left. Instead, Faulkner ultimately turns the onus of the declarations and refusals back onto Henry with Charles's line, "Unless you stop me." This does not take place in order to make the threat scarier, but rather to shed light *back onto* Henry – the white man claiming a black man as his brother. Here we read an acute disruption: Henry is confronted by race and race-mixing and fraternity all at once, throwing up the notions he's held regarding his race, its purity and his lineage. This

rhetorical act of simultaneous reflection and deflection mirrors the mechanics of the text itself, in that its narrative coherence depends upon the implicit cooperation of the reader/“audience” who both recognizes and rejects his own involvement in this twisted tale of American identity.

Additionally, the rendering of this action between these possibly interracial brothers is both true and false. The scene does not take place in the frame narrative—Quentin and Shreve’s plotting of the “interior” plot—in which the reader can situate him/herself. Instead, they imagine this dramatic dialogue some thirty years and 1,000 miles from its ostensible occurrence. Both the process of narrative construction and the figures of American racial ambivalence – Thomas Sutpen, Charles Bon, and Jim Bond – it produces point to the lasting confusion resulting from the lack of separation between the past and the present. At the root of the novelistic unfolding is the fantasy of miscegenation so nightmarish, it becomes worse than bigamy, worse than incest; one that requires a violent retributive act of biblical proportions. The title of the book is from the Book of Samuel in the Bible in which King David reacts to the death of his rebellious son: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33). In *Reading Faulkner*, Uργο and Polk point out that “[w]hile the biblical reference affirms the son, it is not apparent in Faulkner’s title alone who that son is – Henry, Bon, Quentin, or Sutpen himself. Nor is it apparent how David’s plaint that he wants to die for his son applied to the novel’s presumptive king, Thomas Sutpen” (3).

*Absalom, Absalom!* is about the threat inherent in the fantasy of racial amalgamation and its inverse: the threat and the salvation found in understanding our

history, the threat and desire for a narrative that makes sense of “reality,” and especially the threat of and lust for the miscegenation that is the key to both. Within the individual and the collective imagination, there sits a falsely static image of what the interracial *looks* like, and yet, as Faulkner demonstrates, we also use this truly fragmented racial image to then describe what we otherwise cannot make out, what is otherwise unclear, what does not, in truth, contain an image at all. Key passages highlight the overwhelming threat resulting from the impossibility racially *disembodied* image, i.e., the destabilization of a particular character’s sense of self. The passage opening this section carries the most weight for the novel as a whole, as does Bon’s assertion: “He did not have to do this, Henry. He didn’t need to tell you I am a nigger to stop me. *He could have stopped me without that*, Henry” (285, emphasis original), or Shreve’s: “I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. . . .and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings” (270). Here is a possible resolution to a distinct and overwhelming fear. First, Charles Bon explains to his white half-brother that their father did not have to reveal his racial origins to “stop” him. In his explanation, Bon simultaneously repeats his racial revelation only to demolish it: “he didn’t need to tell you. . . .he could have stopped me *without that. . .*” (286). Bon illustrates a hierarchal structure of race and lineage. Bon desired his father’s recognition, but what he actually received was his father’s denial and betrayal of his son’s racial identity. In this scene, Faulkner presents threat in a triangular fashion: the black son is a threat to his white father, a sexual threat to his white father’s daughter, and also an incestuous threat to his own sister (but only if his lineage is acknowledged by his purported father). The white father is a threat to his black son’s existence, for Bon has set

up his own identity in such a way that he denies himself a full existence without his father's recognition. Finally there is a threat to Henry Sutpen, the white son and brother (1), a threat to his self-knowledge, as he cannot fathom another brother(2) sleeping with his sister(3). Real brotherhood imposes itself at the expense of Judith's sexuality. Furthermore, her sexuality may get in the way of the true brotherhood that Henry first proposes. All of these suggestions and allusions unravel from one considerably short section of the novel in an example of the text as both narrative within the text, and as textual form – meaning the very nature of the story is also what informs the act of narration: the making *is* the telling.

The next line to consider comes from the Canadian Shreve near the very end of the novel. If Faulkner wanted to make explicit threats to the identities of both his characters and to his readers, then this would constitute an example. But he doesn't simply depict Shreve as saying, "...in time we will all be one race" (206), an argument that has had its iterations since the founding of America through its present.<sup>17</sup> Rather, Faulkner pulls his characters deeper into their own imagined story and pushes his readers into our own collective imaginary: "I who regard you..." speaks both in and out of the narrative with possessive and subjective pronouns; "...you will also have sprung from the

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<sup>17</sup> See Jefferson, Thomas. "Query XIV." *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Ed. Frank Shuffelton. New York, NY: Penguin, 1999. 264: "Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race." And see the innumerable pop-cultural to scholarly arguments surrounding the idea of a "postracial" America such as: H. Roy Kaplan, *The Myth of Post-Racial America: Searching for Equality in the Age of Materialism* (2011); Early, Franklin, Ferguson, Geary, Martin, Jr., Carpio, Gautier, Shelby, Sundquist, Walker, Griffin, Sollors, Jocson, Hsu, Hollinger, and McPherson in *Race in the Age of Obama, Daedalus* (Winter 2011); Gregory Parks and Matthew Hughey, *The Obamas and a (Post) Racial America?* (2011).

loins of African kings” is more double-speak, leaping even farther back into history (African kings, pre-slavery) in order to imagine the future (“...will have sprung from”). The use of “you” expands the reach of the thread from the characters to our own imaginaries outside of the text. Faulkner accomplishes something quite brilliant here: both his characters and his readers are struck with their shared imaginaries, fantasies, and threats of the consequences of miscegenation. Shreve’s final words do not leave us with images of Faulkner’s characters springing from the loins of African kings, but with images of ourselves instead. Faulkner also introduces this method of expanding the imaginary by referring to the black character Jim Bond in the plural: “I think...the Jim Bonds are going to conquer...” By multiplying Jim Bond (and multiplying Bond’s own origin narrative), Faulkner disrupts the imaginations of both Quentin and the reader. Both are forced to see Bond (and, again, his story) in multiples resembling the branches of a family tree.

It is possible that Shreve is also alluding to his own miscegenated past. Faulkner was not known to be concerned with anything but the progress of American civilization, yet Shreve refers to himself (“I”) as not only doing the regarding of another American, but as also having descended from Africa. There are two strands of threat and the fantasy in this scenario. Shreve could be hinting to his own racially ambiguous past or future, or suggesting something about how the rest of the world will regard Americans (“I who regard you”). Again, there is an instance of double-speak: Shreve points to Quentin as an object of fascination, but he also implicates himself in this prediction of future miscegenation (“I...will also have sprung...”). But what Shreve describes in an excited, almost hysterical tone, Quentin voices as something much more disturbing and deeply



threatening. Finally, Faulkner leaves his readers with another set of threads that are not interwoven: Shreve narrates the miscegenated future of the country, if not the world, while Quentin narrates in repetition that he does not hate his origins. Shreve predicts future racial origins that are based on past events, while Quentin makes repeated verbal attempts to deny what he does not presently hate about his origins and how that past has shaped him. We are faced with a deterministic future grounded in the past and a man determined to embrace it by performative denial.

What are the possible definitions of “it” in Quentin’s closing iterations? It’s natural to first read “it” as “the South,” and it is difficult not to when Quentin oscillates between “the South” and “it” in his final exultation. But since the entire novel’s premise is unreliability, even syntax cannot be taken for granted. I suggest that Faulkner employs “it” as another embodiment of the imaginary. These lines exemplify a method employed throughout the novel, where pronouns and adjectives replace the subject, not so much adding descriptive texture as an ambiguous nature. Quentin, Shreve, and the reader are all invited to imbue “it” with meaning: the South, the past, race, miscegenation, incest, and the fantasy and threat all of these can hold. This ease with which one can substitute “the South” for “it” paints a particular portrait of the South that Quentin rages against (threat), that Shreve’s excited by (fantasy), and in which Faulkner situates the novel. By not naming “it” as the South directly, *Absalom, Absalom!* conflates and separates miscegenation with and from the South, leaving Quentin alone to struggle with this false dichotomy.

Shreve’s Canadian nationality provides a conundrum to any reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*: are only “outsiders” un-threatened by the interracial roots of the South? The

Southerners Henry Sutpen and Quentin do share moments of fantasy; Henry particularly experiences fantasy on interracial and incestuous lines. When Henry sexually contemplates his sister, Bon has not yet been “accused” of his biracial origins (by Quentin and Shreve). Nevertheless, this encircling crafted by the author, narrator, and framing characters produces a dilemma: the fantasy borne from interracial threat that happens before Bon’s bold dare to Henry in the novel’s conclusion. It would seem that for “outsiders,” fantasy of the racial aftermath of the Civil War is merely exciting; but for Americans (northern and southern), incest moves to the forefront of that fantasy in a threatening sense. In this fashion, Bon’s final question to Henry, “So it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can’t bear” is more of a larger conundrum: slavery and its requisite miscegenation has now made it impossible to pick which taboo is worse – something only an American may sense.

In Quentin’s and Shreve’s imaginations, Bon narrates a dual performance in which Henry does or does not have to be an active participant because of the way that Bon assigns his role. As a result, Bon is the sole “author” of the scenario and of his own death. Just as we can see this act as Bon stripping Henry of agency (albeit in a nihilistic style), we must remember that Quentin and Shreve are the true creators and re-tellers of this moment. They strip Henry, a white Southern male, of his own agency, and they do so vis-à-vis the voice of an allegedly illegitimate black/biracial man. This is another element of the conundrum that *Absalom, Absalom!* poses. The narrators give Charles a supreme level of agency: he’s in control, mastering the life of his white brother, in charge of his own death, and finally, manages to terminally ruin his white father’s plans in psychically destroying his only legitimate son. For a black man to be in charge of his

own life up to and including his death in the restless Reconstruction South is a revolutionary act [something Richard Wright explores obsessively in *Native Son* (1940) and in his short stories in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1938), to be discussed in the next chapters]. Controlling one's own death is verifiably a fantasy (speaking in the psychological terms of a construction of self that involves anxiety), as death is the ultimate loss of control. Quentin and Shreve give this power to a black man – or a man whose blackness may be solely their own creation. If there were a mathematical formula to extract from *Absalom, Absalom!*  $x$  would be the constant loss of control, miscegenation as the extremely unstable variable  $y$ , and the final equation(s)  $z$  is the incomplete solution to the wound in the American condition. Most troubling – and clearly illustrated in Quentin's exclamations – is the possibility that the only working solution would be to get rid of the variable itself. In other words, race – and American identity as we have come to craft it – would have to disappear.

Bon authors his own death and his brother and father's fates. In fact, Henry is immobilized until Charles narrates his actions for him. Henry can only “stop” in the narrative assigned to him by Charles, and if he does not do so, the narrative will unfold along the lines determined by Charles. In either case, Charles is the one in charge – he has agency over his own and another's actions – despite the fact that he cannot gain control over the one thing he truly desires: paternal recognition. Yet, he is the one who tells Henry what to do as if he were Henry's father. He complicates Henry's “brotherhood” narrative and frames his own identity in terms of authorial and corporeal action (“who is going to sleep with your sister”) and potential conflict (“unless you stop me”). The moments in the novel that evoke a threat demand a closer look at how they

were generated, for the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* trouble our collective racial imagination such that the threat employed within the text works outside of it, too. This “miscegenation” of inner-textual/extra-textual threat works only if our imaginations are racialized, meaning that when there’s anything ambiguous, unexplained, mysterious, open, we Americans fill that space racially. When faced with ambiguous half-stories and hints about the past, Quentin and Shreve independently and collectively fashion tales of interracial horror. Even regarding the definitively more threatening man of mystery – Thomas Sutpen – it is his very strangeness that lead Quentin and Shreve to inform his agrarian origins with race and to explain his undying ambition by way of desiring a white legacy.

### **1.5 Thomas Sutpen: The New White Man**

The introduction to Sutpen’s origins makes very clear how unaware the young man was of his own innocence. Faulkner employs a “skin” motif in the early Sutpen passages that highlights this lack of awareness: “He didn’t even know he was innocent that day when his father sent him to the big house with the message[...] he no more conscious of his appearance in them or of the possibility that anyone else would be than he was of his own skin” (185). Casero points out that “Quentin sees Sutpen as a mythic figure, but one whose myth was determined for him, whose tragic flaw (his innocence) eventually led to the downfall of his empire” (99). Out of all the terms Faulkner could have used to demonstrate this ignorance, he alludes to racial identity and ambiguity to tell the story (again, demanding that the reader use his imagination to assign race and class to Sutpen). Rather than any overt description of Sutpen’s race, Faulkner’s text consistently hints at it in a manner that detracts from a clear image rather than clarifying assumptions,

such as in this description of Sutpen's family: "...the way his older sisters and *the other white women of their kind* had of looking at niggers, not with fear or dread but with a kind of speculative antagonism..." (186, emphasis mine). Instead of proffering a direct view of Sutpen's racial image, *Absalom, Absalom!* portrays him *indirectly* through his sisters; however, we come to see just how unstable sibling relationships can be once Quentin and Shreve suppose the biracial brotherhood of Bon and Henry.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the author's word choices appear acutely purposeful in confounding an explanation of racial identity. Sutpen's sisters aren't simply white, they are white *of a certain kind*. In addition to class, this leaves open the possibility of racial *passing* – that Sutpen's family is itself bi or multi-racial and his sisters may be the "mulatto" women who would, indeed, look with disdain at other non-passing blacks in order to keep up their act. Although class plays an important part in the lengthier passage, this excerpt also grapples intensely with the influence that threat and fantasy have on the mind. Class seems to dominate the scene that introduces Sutpen's early childhood, when as a poor youth he experiences the epiphany about himself and the world around him that first leads him to pursue his patriarchal design. His father sends him on an errand to "the big house," where a black servant meets him at the front door and orders him to go around back and to never come to the front of that house again. More than class consciousness, this scene captures the larger framing themes of the novel: loss, and that such a simultaneous discovery and loss occurs on the axis of racial confrontation (186). An

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<sup>18</sup> Faulkner, "Remarks." Hobson, 288: "[Sutpen] wanted to take revenge for all the redneck people against the aristocrat who told him to go around to the back door.": Even in his own words, Faulkner comes across as hesitant to *explicitly* call Sutpen white, instead still preferring to condition his racial identity by external factors. These details in the interview to be discussed further.

earlier scene also captures a sense of innocence only known once it is lost, though in the passage below, this awareness does not come from any racial exchange, but instead occurs in an incestuous imaginary. Henry's desire for Judith, represented as "his fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity," entails a sense of discovery through loss: "the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all" (77). Both father and son experience *Absalom, Absalom!*'s thematically significant traveling through time that connects the spaces of race, incest, desire, and fear along the axis of innocence and loss – both discoveries instigated by a sense of threat. Significantly, innocence and its loss become one and the same for the Sutpen men; for the father it's racial while for the son it is familial, even incestuous. First, there is the identity crisis Sutpen undergoes from being told to go around the back door by a "nigger," which immediately leads to a young man's realizing he is no longer innocent. Meanwhile his own son recognizes – and even seems to appreciate – that something as "precious" as virginity (a kind of intactness that's shared with notions of identity his father had) is only identifiable once it is taken. Overlapping passages such as these upset the common ideas of family that Faulkner illustrates for his readers on the opening pages of his novel with the Sutpen family tree. *Absalom, Absalom!* shatters traditional images and values of the patriarchal family tree and does so in ironic fashion, repeatedly attacking the arbitrarily determined concepts of race, kinship, desire, and fear. Parallel to this dismantling is the literal flipping of the "norm" the novel performs: the story introduces the multifaceted structure of identity and family not from its head – the patriarch – but through someone furthest removed. Quentin is followed by Rosa, who is followed by the actual patriarch Thomas, only to conclude with the least stable of the family branches – the elusive, mysterious, ambiguous Charles

Bon and his progeny, who is actually only imagined to have been murdered by the legitimate heir, Henry.

Sutpen's transformation is rich with racial allegory. The following excerpt powerfully illustrates what inspires his ambition to be a wealthy autocrat, first in Haiti and then in Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi. Almost halfway through the novel, this section greatly anchors the whole narrative. A close reading exposes the meaningful actions, narratives, and themes weaving the whole novel together, especially those concerning Charles Bon and his narrators, Quentin and Shreve. There is a multitude of symbolic action in this quick glimpse into Sutpen's early life – actions that speak to how the *sight* of racial identity informs it in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and by extension, American culture:

Because [Sutpen] was still innocent. [...]before the monkey nigger who came to the door had finished saying what he did, he seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back through the two years they had lived there like when you pass through a room fast and look at all the objects from the other side and you find out you had never seen them before [...] that when you hit them you would just be hitting a child's toy balloon with a face painted on it, a face slick and smooth and distended and about to burst into laughing and so you did not dare strike it because it would merely burst and you would rather let it walk on out of your sight than to have stood there in the loud laughing. (187)

Such insight affects not only Sutpen's present, but also shapes how he then views his past — “back through the two years...like when you pass through a room fast and look[...] from the other side” (189) — and how he envisions his future —

He was just thinking, because he knew that *something would have to be done about it; he would have to do something about it in order to live with himself for the rest of his life* and he could not decide what it was because of that innocence which he had just discovered he had, which (the innocence, not the man, the tradition) he would have to compete with.  
(189, emphasis mine)

Significantly, both readers and Thomas learn of his youthful naiveté — “innocence” — by way of a confrontation with a frightening “other.” The black servant's repeated description as a “balloon” is fascinating: this twinned subject and object that is meant to hold such lasting power over Thomas is something that it is inflated, yet hollow. The servant's image conjures up sensations of the disembodiment that young Sutpen feels in that moment (as does his son when imagining incest with his sister, since it is imagined through the body of Charles Bon). Quite literally, the black servant's sole description equals an “empty threat,” though one that sparks aggressive action. This occasion of something “empty” or powerless actually posing a real threat signifies another moment of paradox. Can the threat still be empty and without substance when it inspires such real consequences as Sutpen abandoning his first family and home to recreate a new identity (and do it again in Haiti)? The black servant-turned-balloon predetermines the final danger Charles Bon presents to the Sutpens, Quentin and Shreve, and the readers: as a



biracial man of this era he holds little power, yet acts from a sense of power he knows he has over Thomas Sutpen. Even though Sutpen conflates black figures with insubstantial balloons, *he* was the one truthfully suspended from his current reality:

The nigger was just another balloon face slick and distended with that mellow loud and terrible laughing so that he did not dare to burst it, looking down at him from within the half closed door *during that instant in which, before he knew it, something in him had escaped and – he unable to close the eyes of it – was looking out from within the balloon face* just as the man who did not even have to wear the shoes he owned, whom the laughter which the balloon held barricaded and protected from such as he, looked out from whatever invisible place he (the man) happened to be at the moment, at the boy outside the barred door in his patched garments and splayed bare feet, looking through and beyond the boy, he himself seeing his own father and sisters and brothers as the owner, the rich man (not the nigger) must have been seeing them all the time....(190, emphasis mine)

Although Sutpen transposes himself with “the monkey nigger,” his is able to float above his own surroundings (freeing himself) and gain what he feels to be perspective. This is a privilege he only gains by escaping into the very embodied metaphor he assigned to the black man confronting him. Thus, here is a crucial and captivating occurrence of interracial passing on all levels of the imaginary, fantasy, and threat. Sutpen sees the world with its multitudes of white people and the blacks beneath them, as the rich white

man he's meant to report to, and finally, as the black servant ordering him to go around back. The ambiguity in this last transformation is confounding in its powerful impact: it could be a moment of intra-racial passing, thus occurring more on a class-struggle level. It could also be an *interracial* transformation, perhaps even actual miscegenation on an imaginary level. In an instant, Sutpen moves from possible poor black youth to poor black man in a better position of power, or from possible poor white youth to poor black man; either way Thomas embodies "the nigger" confronting him. Admittedly there is concurrent interracial class strife that could cause such tensions and heightened anxieties for Sutpen, and from which he spends the rest of his life trying to escape. But race as the perception of color is the marker he first learned to use to define status. The back-door order confounds Sutpen's sense of self, which then creates a sense of threat so deep that he psychically escapes from the white body he was not even aware he had and seeps into the skin of the black man that threatens him, before ultimately physically leaving his family, his "roots." It's not simply that he moves into the body of the black Other, it is specifically the "balloon face" that he embodies. Essentially, he embodies the disembodied as the balloon is then extended, floating in space – a space Sutpen has created in order to lessen the threat that this black body presents. Mysteriously, he moves from the threat confronting him to embodying the very threat itself. Returning to the potential mathematics at work in *Absalom, Absalom!*, here is another passage suggesting that the solution to interracial strife – imagined or real – is the disappearance or miscegenated transformation of race entirely. The way young Sutpen views the present, his past, and his future predicts the ways in which Shreve will come to imagine this same past and predict a larger, inclusive future, but their respective insights and prognoses

unravel in opposite ways. A stunning contrast results from this narrative method: Sutpen imagines himself as the rich white man to whom he was to report and foresees a culture that he realizes he wants no part of:

...brutely evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity, populate, double treble and compound, fill space and earth with a race whose future would be a succession of cut-down and patched and made over garments bought on exorbitant credit because they were white people, from stores where niggers were given the garments free. (190)

In *Absalom, Absalom!*'s conclusion, Shreve states that everyone will eventually descend "from the loins of African kings." Meanwhile, Sutpen imagines a more brutally nihilistic prediction ("cattle, creatures heavy and without grace" who would in turn "spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity"). Sutpen's vision emphasizes the two threatening imaginative threads of fantasy concerning the future of American black and white populations. There is no textual or imaginative space for the reader to get comfortable in what appears to be the familiar, as the language Faulkner employs to describe the white and black populations works against traditional type. The narrative does not predict a positive outcome for whites, but uses lofty language when describing the future of blacks through Shreve's final words.<sup>19</sup> In a sense, the Sutpen-youth section is a lengthy foreshadowing of the more weighty passage with Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon. For in that later moment, Henry, the white man, is confronted with what Faulkner

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<sup>19</sup> Although this is not entirely fair either, since to predict the disappearance or transformation of one race into another inherently means that *both* races will ultimately become something else altogether.

has constructed to be his worst fear – the unrecognizable other. Charles does not simply confront him with the possibility of fraternity, his black lineage, or the threat of interracial incest. He ultimately confronts Henry with the fact that he will eventually be unable to see his own brother, or to recognize what or who a black man is. This is one of the more resonant outcomes of the novel, and is why the tropes of threat and fantasy are so important: how do we confront the unknown, or how is it perceived as a threat when it is unknown?

Regarding Sutpen's foresight, Faulkner uses language that, without the mention of "white people," could very well be aligned with the traditionally racist language used to describe black people at this time ("cattle," "creatures," "brutely"), including the stereotype that blacks are overly fertile ("populate, double treble and compound"). Most strikingly, his vision for the country of black and white, rich and poor, carries tones of an almost intra-miscegenation ("a succession of cut-down and patched and made over garments"), employing the metaphor of clothing and consumerism to imply a mixing-up that leads to degradation. Faulkner makes sure to remind the reader of the critical detail that Quentin and Shreve take a hazily remembered exchange between Grandfather Compson and Sutpen, and wholly invent the experiences Sutpen shares. These narrative reminders occur as out-of-frame comments that interrupts their storytelling, such as when they recreate both this tale of confrontation and describe his self-consciousness: "[Sutpen] had never thought about his own hair or clothes or anybody else's hair or clothes until he saw that monkey nigger, who through no doing of his own happened to have had the felicity of being housebred in Richmond maybe, looking— ('Or maybe even in Charleston,' Shreve breathed.)" (188). Here, the explicit confrontation with the

unexplainable (Thomas Sutpen's elusive past) just as explicitly leads to an attempt to explain it with the racial imagination. During his epiphany, Sutpen articulates the cause of his intense feelings:

*He never even give me a chance to say it. Not even to tell it, say it: it too fast, too mixed up to be thinking, it all kind of shouting at him at once, boiling out and over him like the nigger laughing: He never gave me a chance to say it [...] I went up to that door for that nigger to tell me never to come to that front door again and I not only wasn't doing any good to him by telling it or any harm to him by not telling it, there aint any good or harm either in the living world that I can do to him. It was like that, he said, like an explosion – a bright glare that vanished and left nothing, no ashes nor refuse: just a limitless flat plain with the severe shape of his intact innocence rising from it like a monument; that innocence instructing him as calm as the others had ever spoken [...] He never saw any of his family again. (192)*

There was an intent: an imagined action of what Sutpen was going to say that was interrupted by the real verbal action of the black servant, triggering Sutpen's imaginary and the subsequent physical action of running away. What precedes Sutpen's imagined embodiment of the black servant is the man's sudden theft of intent and of action ("He never even give me a chance to say it"). The black servant halts Thomas's speech with his own command, adding yet another element to this very packed moment of passing as he usurps Sutpen's voice – a voice Sutpen "innocently" took for granted. What follows is a suspension of perspective where young Sutpen rises above his own self and gains a new

one through the presence and actions of the black man standing before him. When Sutpen finally descends from the imaginative realm back to the real, his psychological suspension becomes physical and familial: he cuts all family ties. Yet, as Sutpen abandons his family in search of a new identity, his allegedly biracial son relentlessly pursues his father's family in search of his real, but unrecognized identity. These theoretically oppositional threads actually implicate both a narrative and cultural determinism: both men share the abandonment of family (Bon also abandons his mulatto mistress in New Orleans to pursue his "white" father) and a single-minded, parallel, and mutually exclusive grand designs that must destroy the other's to succeed.

### **1.6 Whiteness and Naming**

Returning to Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, as Sutpen's story is told and retold, then reinterpreted and refashioned, his whiteness is less and less clear. Not only must all these characters remember and retell what they know in order to reach a satisfactory answer to the "Sutpen tragedy," but we readers must also keep struggling to remember.<sup>20</sup> For if we do not, then the presumption is that Sutpen is determinately white when in fact, by performing such detective work as an outsider – who Faulkner claims carries the "fourteenth image" – this is not certain at all. On the contrary, everyone else projects whiteness onto him in order to reach a comfortable conclusion. Faulkner uses a

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<sup>20</sup> With no relevant national or personal history, even Shreve inserts his own historical remembering when interrupting Quentin's retelling: "( 'Not in West Virginia,' Shreve said. '—What?' Quentin said. 'Not in West Virginia,' Shreve said. 'Because if [Sutpen] was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn't any West Virginia in 1808 because—' 'All right,' Quentin said. '—West Virginia wasn't admitted—' 'All right, all right,' Quentin said. '—into the United States until—' 'All right all right all right,' Quentin said.)" (179). This historical correction by Shreve is also another example of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s interruption mechanism as a way of *completing* the tale rather than destabilizing it.

preconceived chain of referents to create and destroy “a new white man.” If Sutpen were white, then *Absalom, Absalom!*’s main story would concern his grand “design” to become a captain of industry and to build a legacy of generations.<sup>21</sup> A son from a previous marriage to a black woman upsets that design. If Thomas Sutpen were not white (it is not necessary to say he is black, just that he is “not white”), then the entire novel – rather than the imaginative musings of two characters – becomes a story of interracialism, passing, and violent self-transformation. The racial imaginaries *Absalom, Absalom!* creates and projects lead more to sensations of haunting than any sense of resolve. Returning to Urgo’s and Polk’s elaboration of the novel’s mention of *Ben Hur*, perhaps Faulkner was not so much frustrated with cinema as he was afraid of its consequences. Given *Absalom, Absalom!*’s lasting images and themes, assuredly there must have been some hesitation about being the harbinger of the actual disappearance of racial identity. Using the intimately shared imaginaries of its characters and the deliberate breaches with which Faulkner intertwines his novel’s narrations and narrators (“Wait, wait!”), this chapter ultimately testifies to the perversely impossible, yet still influential racial imaginary at work in American culture. Faulkner dealt with this conundrum using themes of incompleteness, haunting, contradiction, and ambiguity, and in doing so, justified that this kind of tale works best on the page, in order to evoke *and* provoke the “preconceived” images and stories in the reader’s own mind versus merely projecting them onto the screen and/or viewer. Returning to Shreve and Quentin’s respective closing determinations, the novel ends on notes of nihilism and belief. Consequently, we

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<sup>21</sup> *AA*, 194, this is the first incident in the novel where Sutpen, himself, uses the term “design” versus other characters’ indirect insertions: “ ‘I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside.’ ”

also have to consider how the racial imagination is a working force in a novel concerned with whiteness and blackness, but whose central character is arguably white or, at best, ambiguously so.

In the following chapter, we will see what happens when another novel equally concerned with blackness and whiteness deals with the conflicts that arise when the central character's blackness (and his imagination, instead of the narrative created through Quentin and Shreve, who are undeniably white) is the thematic focus, and where real action based on historical incidents frames the novel, Richard Wright's *Native Son*.



## Chapter Two

### **White Blurs and Black Sex: Fatal Imaginings in Richard Wright's *Native Son***

*Absalom, Absalom!* plies the American racialized imaginary in both the novel's frame and in the plotline to call attention to the disruption in our collective identity that the willed erasure of the miscegenated body presents. Through a non-linear narrative characterized by a performative and thematic interruption, Faulkner resurrects this multifarious body to make sense of the contradictory and otherwise senseless narrative of American identity. This creation of meaning from the lacunae that arise in our cultural, historical narrative occurs whenever interracialism reveals itself at the core of American imaginative thinking. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) charges its subjects with the similar quest to create a voice from an oppressive nihilism, yet it does so through the story of a black man's struggle against unconquerable racist forces. *Native Son* inverts the interracial spectacle, yet through an all-encompassing imaginary world constricting its characters, reaches the same final tragic point as *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>1</sup> In stark contrast to how that novel begins, Wright's novel situates its main subject, Bigger Thomas, directly within the story's frame so that his every thought or act amplifies the underlying collective imagination shaping the unfolding story.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, the connection between

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, both novels close on declarative claims: Quentin Compson's *I don't hate it!* and Bigger Thomas's *But what I killed for I am!* (*Absalom, Absalom!*, 303 and *Native Son*, 429, respectively).

<sup>2</sup> Wright, Richard. *Native Son: The Restored Text*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.

both novels is how the racially informed American imagination firmly shapes the narrative frame in a way that mirrors how it shapes our collective consciousness. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the shared cultural imagination is an active force openly employed by its narrating characters within various levels of textual stability: nothing is ever fully known, nothing can be determined, yet imagination itself is the creation of meaning that becomes the only “truth.” In *Native Son*, there is one sort of imagination immediately evident within its frame, the racism of every day life for black Americans. It is not made up or created to fill in the gaps as Quentin and Shreve do to inform the past. As the novel continues, though, there are particular imaginaries that inform the actions and reactions of its protagonist, Bigger Thomas. In *Native Son*, Wright weaves a fast-paced and tense plot centered on two warring imaginary forces: racism and sex. Bigger and others seemingly stand out as agents driving the novel’s story, but that is repeatedly shown not to be the case. Rather, Wright’s characters are *reacting* to greater forces against them. This theme is relentlessly stressed by the physicality *Native Son* assigns Bigger, starting from the brutal opening scene of him killing the rat in the apartment. There are four distinct segments in the novel that portray the extreme power that imagination and imaginary, specifically these scenarios illuminate the role of sight in the individual and collective imaginary: (1) the novel’s introduction, (2) Bigger’s panicked murder of Mary Dalton, (3) his capture and return to Mary Dalton’s bedroom as a crime scene, (4) and his standing trial in the courtroom.

Moving from the threatening miscegenated body that the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* deliberately rescues from erasure Wright’s *Native Son* closes in on the lesser embodied “white blur.” Where the former novel implicates race in its narratology *Native*

*Son* situates the black body (Bigger Thomas) at the center of its story and implicates the physicality of the racialized imagination. What the two novels share is the idea of the creation and recreation of history, by white men, and the inherent resurrection of the racialized bodies. In Faulkner's novel, two white men recreate history by talking to each other, attempting to make sense out of historical fragments. This chapter takes a look at the key differences, though, when a white man tells other white men *about* a black man whose fate they will determine. Notions of racial identity and history haunt the whiteness in *Absalom, Absalom!* and whiteness, itself, is a notion (and a being, embodied best by the blind Mrs. Dalton) that haunts, chases, directs, and condemns Bigger Thomas. This chapter focuses on the parallels and fissures between the two novels to further explore how both consistently define and redefine the purpose of the racial imagination.

These specific works by the Southern-born Wright and Faulkner expose deep conflicts within American constructions of race that are inextricable from slavery's legacy of miscegenation and violence.<sup>3</sup> Their literature presciently outlines racial tensions at work in American society and suggests possible, albeit disturbing, solutions to ease or even erase these tensions. As discussed in chapter One, Faulkner uses the imagined post-bellum threats of the miscegenation articulated through overlapping, multivocal and unstable narratives that do not center on one character so much as an entire set of characters, all of whom are "miscegenated" in their relationship to one another and the central story. Meanwhile, Wright's novel has one major central character that textually and actively anchors the entire plot of murder, escape, trial, judgment, and ultimately, a self-discovery. Not only is Bigger Thomas central to *Native Son*'s plot, but

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<sup>3</sup> Hobson. *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook*. And see Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. New York: Henry Holt and, 2001.

the novel's leading imaginary is central, as well — one that is centered on sight and its crucial role in the racial imaginary.

Two novels written decades apart by authors of different races share a strong bond in their treatment of the threats and fantasies that the imagination develops when confronted and confounded by the racialized Other. Where Faulkner's novel is textually fraught with a racial ambiguity facilitated by a deliberately unstable narrative, Wright's is explicit about racial dichotomies and the "waking nightmare" that the black (male) individual exists in everyday. Moving beyond Faulkner's tale of whites eternally chased or haunted by their black Others, Wright's black protagonist is physically chased and haunted by whiteness on a physical level as well. There are unique outcomes from these divergent modes but, for both novels, the role of the imagination and the dual *fantasy-threat* of race-mixing are intrinsic to the articulation of the narrative itself. Illinois State Prosecutor Buckley does not rely upon racist judgment alone to achieve his goal; Buckley inserts *untruths* that then trigger the already charged racism against Bigger. He uses Bigger's actual murder of Mary Dalton as a springboard to describe a more alarming and *fictional* tale of interracial rape and homicide – making this a site where evoking or *provoking* the collective racial imagination results in tangible acts of life and death.

Though this chapter's focus is primarily *Native Son*, Wright's personal notes about the early crafting of the story significantly pertain to this dissertation's broader discussions about the relationship(s) between the two author's works, in part, through exploring their personal writings as independent literary texts. Hence, the "poetic motifs" Wright instructs himself to weave into his budding novel matter a great deal in exposing Bigger Thomas' disarming familiarity to *Absalom, Absalom!*'s anti-hero Charles Bon. A

close reading of Wright's personal notes reveal some provocative connections between Bigger Thomas and Charles Bon, and between the novels' respective imaginative themes at work:

***POETIC MOTIFS TO BE WOVEN INTO THE FINAL SCENE:***

- I. A sense of others striving to wrench world away from a few and remold it to a truer shape of desire.
- II. A sense of that world in concrete form, buildings, earth, sunshine, snow still unmelted upon roofs.
- III. A upward [sic] surge of self-confidence, 'What I killed for I am.'
- IV. The realization that he tried wrongly.
- V. Realize in flow of time the nearing goal of death, making him more feverish and feeling more and more what is in him to be emptied.
- VI. A storm of passion of remorse and regret – then a quiet curiosity about what is to come – and a pride enough to walk to death.
- VII. Most important of all poetic motifs is that of life being a deep, exciting, and enthralling adventure; that is the note on which the book should end to carry over the promise and feeling of something which musn't happen in the future I MUST SPEAK IN POETIC TERMS OF THIS...<sup>1</sup>

Reconsidering Charles Bon within the context of Wright's preliminary outlines for *Native Son* draws attention to and reemphasizes the self-abnegating threat in Bon's words to Henry Sutpen ["I'm the nigger...unless you stop me" (286)], as Bon recognizes what must happen when handing Henry the gun. Bigger taking another's life instead of his own compels him to a similar self-reflection and confession: " 'I didn't want to kill!' Bigger shouted. "What I killed for, *I am!* It must have been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder..." (429).

## **2.2 Native Son: A Re-reading**

One of *Native Son*'s underlying queries is its perspective on the black man's plight: who or what creates it and how do we address it. In both of his essays "How Bigger Was Born" (1940) and "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937) Wright warns that the symbolic struggle of Bigger Thomas is every black man's struggle. In his introduction

to the recent anthology *Richard Wright's Native Son*, Andrew Warnes argues that despite Wright's well-known Communist political agenda at the time of his writing, the text's language, plot, and narrative complications demand a simultaneous deemphasizing of the novel's older political tone and a deeper exploration of the book's more contemporary, relevant literary tensions:

[*Native Son's* explicitly political] passages, however, grow more interesting when placed alongside complicating moments such as the closing pages of 'Flight' [...]. Not only does *Native Son* become less didactic at such points; stepping off the soapbox, it also begins to play around with imagery, improvising in such a way as to remind us that Wright is a product of the same black southern culture responsible for jazz and the blues.[...] He writes freeform, moving associationally rather than ideologically and from image to image rather than precept to precept. *In turn, Bigger changes*. (xv, emphasis mine)

Although neither *Native Son* nor the role of Bigger Thomas were relevant to Morrison's thesis in *Playing in the Dark*, Warnes's point above precisely situates Bigger as a timeless figure who is also instantly and paradoxically rooted in historically specific times.<sup>4</sup> His emphasis on the jazz and its multivocality found within the novel helps us

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<sup>4</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6-7: "My curiosity...has become an informal study of what I call American Africanism. It is an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, African-like (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served[...] It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom." Chapter one addresses this and other points in a

consider its relevance in the current century when the systemic “traditional” racism we’re more familiar with has evolved into a subtler injustice, an injustice repeatedly occurring in the visual realms. In agreement with Warnes’s urging above seventy years after *Native Son*’s publication, there is still a pressing need for more detailed examinations of the ways in which this story is concurrent with our present-day realities such as New York City’s controversial Stop-And-Frisk Program in which, in 2012, some 400,000 innocent black and Latino young and adult men were detained for suspicion of weapons or drug holding despite two percent of the frisks resulting in actually finding a weapon.<sup>5</sup> This more modern discussion must happen in order to demonstrate the novel’s other potent agenda: how the intersections between the haunting interracial imaginary and racism itself have evolved through the present; for instance, since the turn of the century, there have been a slew of reports concerning racial bias in tobacco advertising, the treatment of illness, and dispensing medication for pain.<sup>6</sup> These noted disparities and their tragic

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more thorough manner, although her argument might work better for Wright’s black text than for the white literary canon she covers.

<sup>5</sup> “Analysis Finds Racial Disparities, Ineffectiveness in NYPD Stop-and-Frisk Program; Links Tactic to Soaring Marijuana Arrest Rate | New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) - American Civil Liberties Union of New York State.” *Analysis Finds Racial Disparities, Ineffectiveness in NYPD Stop-and-Frisk Program; Links Tactic to Soaring Marijuana Arrest Rate | New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) - American Civil Liberties Union of New York State*. New York Civil Liberties Union, 22 May 2013. Web. 23 May 2013. <<http://www.nyclu.org/news/analysis-finds-racial-disparities-ineffectiveness-nypd-stop-and-frisk-program-links-tactic-soar>>.

<sup>6</sup> See Bakalar, Nicholas. “VITAL SIGNS; Racial Disparity Affirmed In Tobacco Advertising.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 28 Aug. 2007. Web. 23 May 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/28/health/28disp.html?fta=y>>; Sack, Kevin. “Research Finds Wide Disparities in Health Care by Race and Region.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 05 June 2008. Web. 23 May 2013.

consequences (cancer rates, premature amputations, withholding opiates) speak directly to the issue of sight, the racial imaginary and its triggers towards the racialized body. The four central scenes mentioned above stand as textual examples that interracialism – specifically the specter of sex between a white woman and black man—paradoxically, only passively directs the major themes of *Native Son*. But these scenes also individually demonstrate how this specter is born, remembered, reshaped, and enacted depending on the racial identity of the characters involved. What is most intriguing is the larger issue of what it means to have a shared imagination with interracial sex at its core and how each individual responds to this undeniable intimacy. A shared imagination becomes problematic when the bodies sharing an image embody differing images themselves, meaning there is a power differential between the beholders, as well. There is a resulting anxiety from this spectacle, Lacan describes a similar phenomenon in his mirror stage:

[...] existentialism can be judged on the basis of the justifications it provides for the subjective impasses that do, indeed, result therefrom: *a freedom that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the walls of a prison [...]; a personality that achieves self-realization only in suicide*; and a consciousness of the other that can only be satisfied by Hegelian murder. (1288, emphasis mine)

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<[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/05/health/research/05disparities.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/05/health/research/05disparities.html?_r=0)>; and Tamayo-Sarver, J. H., S. W. Hinze, R. K. Cydulka, and D. W. Baker. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Emergency Department Analgesic Prescription." *American Journal of Public Health* 93.12 (2003): 2067-073.



### 2.3 The Imagination as Evidence and Witness in the Courtroom: Bigger and Buckley's Intimate Relationship

Bigger's speech acts and mental actions in respect to the first and last encounter he has with a white man – who turns out to be the final narrator and director of his fate—Buckley are the novel's most charged interracial intimate moment, more so than his murder of Mary. Despite the novel's articulation of Bigger's own haunted and oppressed imagination, there is another deeply significant narrative arc *surrounding* the relationships between Bigger and those around him. Buckley's closing argument is a performance with striking creative acts that seal Bigger Thomas's fate: horrific dialogue detailing sexualized acts of brutality. Buckley endows what is literally a black-and-white case of murder into an *unspeakable* crime: his language morphs *potential* interracial sex act into rape. Because the sex Buckley describes is interracial it is *equal* to rape, thus, it is also brutal: "...the marks of his teeth were ever seen on the innocent white flesh of her breasts" (412). Buckley suitably charges Bigger with a new crime where the possibility of interracial sex is what Buckley passes onto the jury to condemn him.

But remember that Bigger never raped Mary Dalton, nor did she ever utter a dramatic plea to him to spare her life. The actual murder and ensuing dismemberment were abrupt and brutal, undoubtedly, but they stand apart from Buckley's rhetoric. Buckley's rendition is an integral element of the imaginative act *begun* by Bigger in Mary Dalton's room. His violent acts are preordained on an ever-escalating scale, starting in the opening scene where he is terrorized by the monstrously large rat that he triumphantly (and proudly) kills. What comes to existence in the courtroom is an interracial mixing of mind and voice. Given Bigger's own trajectory and the fact that,

structurally speaking, the first time Bigger and Buckley meet is not person-to-person but instead body to image:

The poster showed a white face.

‘That’s Buckley!’ He spoke to himself. ‘He’s running for State’s Attorney again....Boy if I was in his shoes for just one day I’d *never* have to worry again.’...The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster were tall red letters: YOU CAN’T WIN! (13)

Indeed, what’s sealed in the last pages of *Book Three: Fate* starts unfolding within the first twenty pages of the story in *Book One: Fear*. Unbeknownst to either of them, Bigger and Buckley share passionate obsessions with power, fear, and rage. Additionally, Bigger is not the only one progressing along from fear to fate. What else would better explain Buckley’s campaign slogan, “You can’t win!” as a form of gaining public attraction and support? The line is confrontational, argumentative, defensive, and most importantly, the latter perceptions and projections come from spaces of fear. Furthermore, as fear and threat go hand in hand, Buckley’s poster image and command connote both in much the same way that he understands the white jury will “view” Bigger. The parallel alone destabilizes the supposed power Buckley is meant to embody. Therefore, it makes sense that Buckley would dismiss Bigger’s lawyer Max’s “act of self-creation” defense— for it is absolutely imperative that his own voice and imagination i.e., his *own* act of self-

creation – substitutes for anyone else’s. Buckley still needs others’ voices, their acts and their bodies, to improvise and trigger the racial imagination of his audiences. From start to finish, on physical and imaginary levels, the black criminal and the white prosecutor are intrinsically linked, beginning with his exchange with the flat yet charging image of Buckley on the street and ending with Buckley’s informing Bigger’s body in order to seal his fate.

Buckley’s closing puts forth and wraps up the impactful interracial transformation towards which the entire novel evolves. His speech illustrates the relationship between race and the imagination, and in doing so, the text performs its own creative act of simultaneous threat and fantasy. Buckley’s compelling efforts to retell Bigger’s crime to the all-white jury is a *recreation* of an eternal American tale that evokes fear, horror, and desire in everyone– the fear of racial amalgamation and underlying attraction, as well as deeper threat of what such acts produce: a racial identity with no name, the unspeakable. We read a compellingly similar process in *Absalom, Absalom!* when Quentin and Shreve, through the bodies of Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, imagine the past so forcefully that even the readers are left wondering what did or didn’t actually occur. A small, striking moment during Bigger’s pre-trial simultaneously nods to and embodies this triad of the racial imagination and the threat, fear, and fantasy deeply rooted within it. After Bigger’s capture, more and more concurrent narratives develop to give name to the unspeakable. One investigative journalist digs up Bigger’s past from a Mississippi editor: “I think it but proper to inform you that in many quarters it is believed that Thomas, despite his dead-black complexion, may have a minor portion of white blood in his veins, *a mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature*” (281).

In this same article where the Chicago reporter introduces Bigger as a “Negro sex-slayer,” there is an earlier passage where he describes Bigger’s skin as “exceedingly black”; his jaw “remind[s] one of a jungle beast,” and elaborates that: “*It is easy to imagine* how this man, in the grip of a *brain-numbing sex passion*, overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her...” (279). Here is the threatening blackness married to seductive, interracial imagery that must necessarily culminate in murder to erase the act even though, tautologically, the “mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature” is in fact the very product/evidence of this passion. For the white characters in *Native Son*, the racial imagination allows for the fantasy but disavows the physical embodiment of interracial acts.

As one who has more ability than the press to continue producing the images that sustain this imaginary realm, Buckley succeeds in solidifying these myriad recreations (narrated and reenacted by the press) of interracial sex and violence already existing by the time Bigger stands trial. Strikingly, Buckley suggests interracial sex by targeting Bigger as any black man who will sleep with a white man’s female relative. Buckley’s scheme appears to utilize the threat of sex, even consensual sex, between a black man and a white woman in order to invite or warrant execution. Wright constructs a significantly paradoxical, theatrical scene: the stage is the courtroom (one of America’s most traditional and powerful modern spaces of legitimacy and creation), the event is murder, and Buckley’s closing monologue works as the plot and the central act, despite its development near the end of the novel. Pure hysteria saturates the language that ultimately does Bigger in more so than his actual crimes, this language triggers the

interracial spectacle at the center of the racial imaginary — one that melds fantasy with horror:

My God, what bloody scenes must have taken place! How swift and unexpected must have been that lustful and murderous attack! How that poor child must have struggled to escape that maddened ape! How she must have pled on bended knee, with tears in her eyes, to be spared the vile touch of his horrible person! Your Honor, must not this infernal monster have burned her body to destroy evidence of offenses *worse* than rape? That treacherous beast must have known that if the marks of his teeth were ever seen on the innocent white flesh of her breasts, he would not have been accorded the high honor of sitting here in this court of law! O suffering Christ, there are no words to tell of a deed so black and awful!  
(412)

There *are* no words to describe the acts Bigger Thomas committed – not simply because the murder and dismemberment are so gruesome and tragic but because the incidents recounted above never happened that way. Instead, Buckley permeates his speech with ambiguous terms that are strangely exciting, such as his inflamed provocative references to the body (“bended knee,” “tears in her eyes,” “marks of his teeth...white flesh of her breasts”). The claim that there are no words to describe this “scene” in fact labels it a “scene,” triggering the psychic mechanism that depends on the mind’s ability to craft and remember images from which an individual can then act.

Buckley exclaims, “And the defense would have us believe that this was an act of *creation!*” (412). Despite this furious response, Buckley stages a personal creative act out

of his shared whiteness when he concocts the fantastical scene of Mary Dalton's brutal rape and murder. If we follow every creative act in the novel, from Bigger's daydreaming on the sidewalk to Buckley's closing argument, what comes into view is the following structured frame just as Wright outlines through *Fear to Flight*: (1) Bigger's inner imaginative torment haunted by race and the specter of whiteness best embodied in Mrs. Dalton; (2) Bigger's inner self bursting out of his skin into physical action spurred by the belief that a blind white woman can *see* him performing the unspeakable, and his escalating violent acts. But (3), *Fate*, is an abrupt departure from Bigger as the center of action. Buckley commits the final conclusive act of creation in the most unlikely space Bigger could ever imagine finding himself in. Buckley puts Mary Dalton on her knees, Buckley gives her a voice pleading for her life (versus her confirmed drunken blubbing), and Buckley –as if committing a sort of sexual violation of his own – puts Bigger's teeth on her breasts. In truth, Buckley erases the voice and body of black Bessie (who certainly did protest against her rape) and supplants it with Mary's invented one. He even strips her of any agency by calling her a "child" whilst the reader knows she directed the events of that whole evening, and vocally performing sex acts that titillate his white audience and horrifying them with the bestial reduction of Bigger to a black "ape," just in case his color didn't paint that picture clearly enough. To this extent, and remembering Wright's brainstorming notes, who can we say commits the final creative act of *Native Son*? Is Buckley the novel's driving "poetic motif" with his stern white face "in concrete form" angering yet inspiring that "surge of self-confidence" in Bigger, sharing that "feverish" feeling and filled with "a storm of passion," motivating Bigger to feel that his life is ultimately one of "enthraling adventure"? (Wright Papers). Of course,

Wright's final line about this suggests that he intended for Bigger to realize too late that life is a beautiful adventure worth living and that he should have remorse and regret by the end of his trial. However, Buckley's character complicates the author's original agenda. Admittedly, Bigger gets the last textual word, but in light of Buckley's speech, Bigger's last words nearly fit the final scene in which Buckley placed him.

There is also an element of passing that warrants more analysis, as there is a blending of imaginations between Buckley and an audience that includes Bigger and any black attendees in the courtroom. Once more, Buckley's language passes on an image for the all-white jurors to internalize and in doing so, he also passes his creation into the minds of everyone else, including the novel's readers. Given that race is at the core of these imagined exchanges, what results is an intra- and interracial act of mixing on a near supernatural level reminiscent of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s candlelit, frenzied, whispered exchanges between Quentin, Rosa, or Shreve. But at the end of the trial it's the white audience whose minds matter. They hear and accept Buckley's depiction and conclusively condemn Bigger to death based on this lasting image that supports and reinforces their own racial imaginaries.

#### **2.4 Threesomes: Interracial Sex and the Roles of the Physical, the Imaginative and the Viewers**

The trigger scene when Bigger murders Mary Dalton is what spurs him on to a new labyrinthine journey towards death, suggesting that interracial sex is the thing that cannot exist in the world *Native Son* depicts. Who is ultimately at fault for this negation? The black physical body, or the white bodiless presences that Bigger must always confront, from Buckley's painted face on a stone wall to Mrs. Dalton's "floating white

blur.” What Wright does *not* make as explicit in his explanatory essays, his autobiography, or in *Native Son* is that it is not so much racism alone that must end, but more specifically, the haunting specter beneath racism’s drive—the fantasy and threat of interracial mixing, whether social or physical. *Native Son* casts Bigger as consistently troubled by intensely oppressive forces, and despite what Wright intended from his “Notes” on what must be “woven into the final scene,” any text stands in relationship to, as well as outside of, the author’s own intent. In this sense Wright’s language, when referring to *Native Son*’s final explosive scene and outlining “A sense of that world in concrete form, buildings, earth, sunshine, snow still unmelted upon roofs” as what should permeate Bigger’s mind, could suggest an emphasis on haunting in the form of an untouchable whiteness. However, the language of both Wright’s “Notes” and in the novel is ambiguous enough that another conclusion could be that the only tangible whiteness for Bigger is in concrete – not human – form. There is no date to the notes Wright wrote to himself, so despite the positive connotations of words such as “earth” and “sunshine,” when the novel is published the character of Bigger has deeply negative reactions to elements both natural (snow reflecting the sunlight blinding him) and manmade (buildings with faces of powerful white men, owned by powerful white men, infested by rats, buildings he must kill in, hide in, climb the furthest heights of). Even the well-known post-publication debate that Bigger’s entire family plus his lawyer plus the Daltons and Jan could not possibly fit into that jail cell puts into question, rightly, that the author’s intentions and the results are not the same, so perhaps the former should have little significance. Although Wright later publicly acknowledged this anomaly and dismissed it as irrelevant to the novel’s larger significance, it’s still helpful for rereading



such moments in the novel now.<sup>7</sup> Wright's original intent or even that dismissal does not matter so much as the fact that in the "final scene," there is a haunting indeed taking place and it's symbolized through the concrete form of a jail cell. This calls into question if Bigger is ever free by the novel's end in the way Bigger (or his creator, Wright) intended: "Realize in flow of time the nearing goal of death, making him more feverish and feeling more and more what is in him to be emptied" (Wright Papers).

"Thought and feeling were balked in him; there was something he was trying to tell himself, desperately, but could not. Then, convulsively, he sucked his breath in and huge words formed slowly, ringing in his ears: *She's dead*... She was dead and he had killed her" (87). This is another return to Wright's poetic motifs concerning Bigger and the moment in *Native Son* when he smothers Mary Dalton to death. Just as Wright's motifs are open to interpretation enough that we can see Buckley as the first and last harbinger of Bigger's "nearing [the] goal of death," similar resolutions follow a newer close reading of Mary Dalton's murder. When unpacking the entire panic-inspired killing, what comes to mind is whether *this* moment works as the type of poetic motif that Wright previously described. And truly it does, since the first time Bigger comes the closest to death (of a human being, given his first taking of a life in the novel is that of the rat) and to a death by his own hands is not during his bar duel with Gus, but when he can physically, psychically feel a life force struggling to sustain itself and when he senses its passing. Not coincidentally, this is also the first instance of interracial passing. What is inside Bigger "to be emptied" is firstly achieved by way of Mary: "As he took his

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<sup>7</sup> Wright Papers, See Correspondence, Harper & Brothers Publishers, Box 98, Folder 1378: Wright had already defended its inclusion to his editor during the publication process.

hands from the pillow he *heard a long slow sigh go up from the bed into the air* of the darkened room, a sigh which afterwards, when he remembered it, seemed final, irrevocable” (86).

There are thematic instances of passing and race-mixing between two bodies that appear to work as one entity in *Native Son*. On one side, there is distinct passing of death from one nihilistic black male body to a white female (debatably) empowered body. In contrast, there are also interracial physical and symbolic acts between Bigger and Mary, Bigger and Mrs. Dalton, and amongst all three characters. The Bigger-and-Mary schema up to and after her murder reveals another three-part structure to the novel’s design. Note that Bigger realizes that Mary is dead at the end of their physical movement from the Dalton hallway into her bedroom. Consider that this passage occurs over four pages, starting from the alienating snowy white outside to the innermost of personal spaces – the dark, shadowy bedroom (though we will see that the cold whiteness of outside follows him into this space, too). Even in this new and forbidden location, alienation is still the determining mechanism for Bigger’s mind and body.

He held his hand over her mouth and his head was cocked at an angle that enabled him to see Mary and Mrs. Dalton by merely shifting his eyes[...]

His eyes were filled with the white blur moving toward him in the shadows of the room. For a long time he felt the sharp pain of her fingernails biting into his wrists. *The white blur was still*. [He was] intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him. He stood up. With each of her movements toward the bed *his body made a*

*movement to match hers*, away from her, his feet not lifting themselves from the floor, but sliding softly and silently over the smooth deep rug, his muscles flexed so taut they ached. (85)

The vivid language above provides a starker image of Bigger's motions during and after Mary's murder and makes it possible to textually trace his body from on top of Mary's to paralleling every move of another white woman, Mrs. Dalton. What is not as directly embedded in this image is the interracial sexual aspect cloaking the whole murderous event – including both the events preceding the murder and the race to escape afterwards. There is the glaring image of a black man smothering a white woman in her bed (glaring in its textual detail as well as glaring in Bigger's own mind), a smothering that unfolded out of an initial scene of sexual exploitation. Mary is drunk and Bigger does begin to take advantage of her state by fondling her breasts. The suspicion of and then real presence of another body in the room interrupts the arousal Bigger experiences with Mary's drunken body; consequently Bigger puts a pillow over her head to keep her quiet. "Smothering" has its own metaphorical sexual connotations that, when racialized in this manner, take on a different kind of violence as well. This particular kind of violence has a history: the black man ravishing the white woman, *smothering* her with passion such as when Shakespeare's Othello *smothers* Desdemona, a scene still frequently discussed in Shakespearean and African-American Studies.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Othello by William Shakespeare*. Ed. Horace H. Furness. Vol. VI. London: J.B. Lipincott, 1866, Act V, Scene 2, Lines 1-95: "Othello: 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul – Let me not name it to you...Put out the light, and then put our the light...[After smothering Desdemona] What noise is this? – Not dead? Not yet quite dead?...I think she stirs again: -- no – What's best to do?'" There is a

These moments also establish this crucial act as, plainly put, an interracial threesome involving Bigger, Mary, and Mrs. Dalton, the latter who functions as an intangible, yet all-powerful “white blur” that haunts, chases, and threatens Bigger throughout *Native Son*. To emphasize the multi-faceted nature of the acts taking place, Bigger kills Mary only after a homicidal *coitus interruptus* where right after “he stiffened,” he promptly senses the need to escape the blind eyes of Mrs. Dalton.<sup>9</sup> Curiously, before he’s fully aware he’s killed Mary, Bigger first feels that he’s “wiped out” the white blur: “For a long time he felt the sharp pain of her fingernails biting into his wrists. The white blur was still” (85).<sup>10</sup> Bigger feels Mary fighting for her life but Mrs. Dalton is the person he’s consciously trying to psychically eliminate. When escaping, he then proceeds to perform a sort of dance with Mrs. Dalton: “He stood up. With each of her movements toward the bed his body made a movement to match hers, away from her, his feet not lifting themselves from the floor, but sliding softly and silently” (85).

Remarkably, this dance of mirrors illuminates the novel’s racial amalgamation theme: Mrs. Dalton/the white blur is always disembodied, lifted above the ground,

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particularly interesting debate begun with this edition concerning if Othello did more than smother Desdemona given that these lines imply that she still moved and speaks one line after the smothering in addition to Othello's own "Not quite dead."

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Native Son*, 85: “He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. Then he stiffened. The door behind him had creaked.” Of course, this “stiffening” is equally symbolic of an erection as it is to Bigger’s fearful paralysis at the sound of interruption.

<sup>10</sup> The purposeful phrasing “wiped out” points to the dual sexual-fearful theme in this scene: “wiped out” could in fact refer to physically removing something out of sight or in the way or it could colloquially refer to exhaustion from sexual climax.

without weight, whereas Bigger is fully physical, deeply in touch with and frightened by his own senses, his feet sliding on the ground for his plan to work. He cannot simply float away like he imagines Mrs. Dalton, no matter how high he reaches even in *Flight* when climbing further and further up buildings to escape the police. In conjunction with Mrs. Dalton's disembodiment is the dependence that such an imaginative act cannot happen without Bigger's will. He is frightened – as is Mrs. Dalton, but for different reasons –but it is not definite that he has no agency whatsoever. There is the automatic agency presumed when one can and does take the life of another, even accidentally, but there is a stronger deeper agency Bigger asserts against Mrs. Dalton/the white blur. His “dance” with her is the beginning of this agency asserting itself: “He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. Then he stiffened. The door behind him had creaked. He turned and a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. It was Mrs. Dalton. He wanted to knock her out of his way and bolt from the room” (85). *He was aware only of her body now...lips trembled...he stiffened:* Such language is just as ambiguously erotic as Buckley's later accusations discussed above. Still, there is no rape – perhaps there would have been but there will always be that abrupt interruption – introduced through the aural with the “creaking” of the door as Mrs. Dalton walks in. Inspiration fills Bigger – possibly befitting that *sense of urgency* with which Wright intended to fill his protagonist [“Frenzy dominated him” (86)], but he acts out of panic and fear, more befitting “motivation” than “inspiration.” Most importantly, this panic and fear come from what Bigger *imagines* Mrs. Dalton might “see” him doing to her daughter. Yes, he is worried about what she may hear but the

following dance around the room, trying to escape is rooted in a fear of *being seen by blind whiteness*.

## **2.5 The Trajectory of a Murderer**

Two critical points in *Native Son* mark Bigger's transformation: his differing treatment of Mary Dalton and Bessie (it is difficult to believe that the "Bess" in his autobiography and the "Bessie" in *Native Son* are pure coincidence).<sup>11</sup> There is a clear violent progression from Bigger's hysterical smothering of Mary to his premeditated murder of Bessie. On top of this physical progression is the interracial progression from black to white to black again. Bigger leaves his black world for the white unknown with no plans to take a white woman's life; he then runs after the murder and, recognizing his black girlfriend as a liability as he plans his escape, he very clearly plans to kill her. In contrast to Mary's possibly "natural" path to intoxication Bigger deliberately plies Bessie with liquor – her weakness – achieves intercourse with her (rape) and finally smashes her head in with a brick before throwing her body down a vent to die a slow a painful death. An in-depth look at Wright's gendered attention to race in *Native Son* reveals a progression of violence that is set on the stages of female bodies and, most spectacularly, the violence escalates from white to black.<sup>12</sup> The most meaningful moment between Mary and Bigger is not when he fondles her in her bed. Rather, the text brings to climax

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<sup>11</sup> Wright Papers, See Black Boy, Earliest Drafts [titled: "Black Confession" 1942(?), n.d., Box 9, Folder 202-208.

<sup>12</sup> Note that the literal violence in the novel moves from the enclosed space of his apartment with his family to the open space of the empty unit where he kills Bessie. Indeed, Bigger moves from killing an animal (the rat), fighting another black man (the bar fight), killing Mary Dalton, then Bessie.

the interracial sexual innuendo that the story only hints at until this point – from Bigger seeing her on the movie screen to physically possessing her underneath him. Finally, though Mary’s body is still exposed to Bigger in a way she has no control over, this time her flat projected image is now evolved into full human, feeling form. He, a black man, has the ability to intimately touch her, and does:

Her lips, faintly moist in the hazy blue light, were parted and he saw the furtive glints of *her white teeth*...He eased his hand, the fingers spread wide, up at the center of her back and her face came toward him and her lips touched his, *like something he had imagined*...she swayed against him. He tightened his arms as his lips pressed tightly against hers and he felt her body moving strongly. *The thought and conviction that Jan had had her a lot flashed through his mind*. He kissed her again and felt the sharp bones of her hips move in a hard and veritable grind. Her mouth was open...

...Something urged him to leave at once, but he leaned over her, excited, looking at her face in the dim light, not wanting to take his hands from her breasts...*He tightened his fingers on her breasts*, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. Then he *stiffened*. The door behind him had creaked. (85, emphasis mine)

Ironically, in spite of the rigid Jim Crow racism meant to physically bar any hint to any form of racial amalgamation, sexual or not, *Native Son* demonstrates a true fluidity within

these arbitrary barriers. Not only do Bigger's physical actions support this destabilization, but the deeply veiled narrating language reveals this anxious tension, as well. For instance, "he stiffened" fits equally into either a state of sexual arousal (erection) or a state of absolute fear. The line doesn't read as "and *then* the door behind him had creaked" but instead "then" is in the preceding line: "*Then* he stiffened." Routinely, the novel's syntax is such that every line or scene displays a duality, if not a triplicate of whiteness confronting the black mind (the idea of Jan having sex with Mary barring Bigger from leaving Mary in her bed is his first mental interruption before that the physical one by Mrs. Dalton's), the black body confronting the white mind, whiteness disrupting white and black bodies, et cetera.

Bigger's genuine sexual interaction with Mary precedes Buckley's later imaginative monologue. The novel skillfully blends the physical and the imaginative: in Bigger's state of *Fear* (Book One) he does in fact fondle Mary's breasts, but when finally facing his *Fate* (Book Three), Buckley puts Bigger's teeth on Mary's breasts. Here is another significantly harmonious textual progression of the interracial spectacle centering the racial imaginary: Bigger's *hands* fondled Mary's breasts, the only teeth described in that scene are those of *Mary's*, and when Mrs. Dalton startles him "[Bigger] clenched his teeth and held his breath..." (86) – meaning his mouth was in direct opposition to what Buckley later claims, the only slight similarity being when Bigger's "lips parted." This performative exchange between Bigger and Buckley echoes the exchange of the real and imaginary intrinsic to the racialized imagination; fittingly, Buckley cannot avoid mimicking the amalgamation he ostensibly fears when he unknowingly supplants Mary's bared teeth with Bigger's biting teeth. The thematic relationship between the imaginary



deployed by Buckley and the “action” within the plot itself recalls the narrative mechanics of *Absalom, Absalom!* Moving on from the initial breakthrough scene in “Fear” and into Bigger’s final *Fate*, there’s another meaningful passage that takes place in Mary Dalton’s bedroom, with Bigger as a haunted figure of a different sort. Only this time, there are no women in the room, only men, and what follows harkens back to the homoerotic masturbation scene with Bigger and Jack in the movie theater from *Fear*. In addition to homoeroticism, there is interracial fantasy taking place on multiple levels: Bigger watches Mary Dalton projected onto the movie screen as well as the main feature “Trader Horn” featuring “pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances[...]and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes...” (33). Yet this interracial, fantastic supplanting follows Bigger’s masturbation where before he’d lamented, “I wished I had Bessie here now” (30). Accordingly, Bigger’s imagination – and his narrative thread – moves from an intra-racial homo-erotic physical and imaginary space where both men masturbate picturing their respective girlfriends; to staring awestruck at rich white people, Mary Dalton, and fantasizing about monetary and sexual gains; and finally, to a more complex blending of the external projection and the internal imagination where there’s a combination of inter- and intra-racial sexual excitement taking place.

Aime J. Ellis takes a slightly subversive angle in her article, “‘Boys in the Hood’: Black Male Community in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.” Rather than looking at the masturbatory scene as Wright’s example of the myriad emasculating experiences black men underwent in 1940’s America, she argues, perhaps we should view it as an attempt

to re-*humanize* black men in an oppressive state.<sup>13</sup> Citing Keneth Kinnamon's study of Wright's *Native Son* manuscript developments up to publication and Wright's progressive reductions of Bigger's sexuality in each draft, Ellis argues:

Yet despite Wright's efforts to shed light on the tortured psyches of poor urban black males under the reign of racial terror, he ultimately fails to elaborate on the sexualized dimensionality of black male identity in general and of their homosocial practices in particular. And this omission is perhaps done for good reason: focus on Bigger's sexuality would inevitably distract from Wright's central thesis that Bigger's violent behavior is a product of rage and not sexual passion. Moreover, the political and social climate of the 1940s demanded a certain sensitivity toward America's most volatile sexual taboos—racial amalgamation and the myths surrounding black male sexuality.[...] While Wright makes a seemingly conscious decision to “de-emphasize Bigger's sexuality,” he is nonetheless unable to altogether avoid leaving traces of the sexual dynamics and masculine anxieties that inform the practices of Bigger and his male friends. (194-195)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ellis, Aime J. “‘Boys in the Hood’ Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*” *Callaloo* 29.1 (Winter, 2006): 182-201.

<sup>14</sup> See also Kinnamon, Keneth. “How *Native Son* Was Born.” *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993, 122: “Having dropped the original ending of the novel, Wright omits from the galley's passages about “life, new and strange” and passages invoking fire imagery: ‘Bigger Thomas is part of a furious blaze of liquid life energy which once blazed and is still blazing in our land. He is a hot jet of life that spattered itself in futility against a cold wall.’ Here Wright may have been uneasy with the

Ellis is correct that Wright fails to avoid “leaving traces,” though I would go further to suggest that Wright does not actually reduce themes of sexuality in terms of Bigger Thomas and his male friends, but that he fails to do so for nearly all characters in the novel. The previous readings of the movie theater co-masturbation, murder, and courtroom scenes indicate that sexuality is a major mechanism driving the narrative, and that it is specifically a sexuality developed from and informed by the racial imagination. For example, the following analysis deals with yet another sexually charged triad that brightly illuminates the interracial imagination and performance working within sexuality.

There is a perplexing incident in the middle of *Fate* that’s as arousing as it is frightening, when the white photojournalists and police drag Bigger from jail to Mary’s bedroom and demand him to show them what he did.<sup>15</sup> While two young men

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orgasmic hyperbole of such a metaphor. Certainly other cuts de-emphasize Bigger’s sexuality, such as the deletion of a reference to masturbation as a trope for Bigger’s entire life. In Buckley’s speech, too, Wright cuts a reference to the Florida newsreel and “the obnoxious sexual perversions practiced by these boys [Bigger and Jack] in darkened theatres.”

<sup>15</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage International, 2007: in this Nobel-Prize winning debut novel, Morrison also threads this theme into her work that centers on the rape of a young black girl by her father. Yet the reader learns that her father was a victim of sexual assault, as well – the assault is dependent on the function of the performative in scenes of power and the novel provides this scene through remembering. It also suggestively ignites a traditional treatment of black sexuality with whiteness as an oppressive force when two white policemen intrude upon Cholly Breedlove’s first time having sex: “Just as [Cholly] felt an explosion threaten, Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around. There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it. Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand...The men had long guns. ‘Hee hee hee heeeee.’..The other raced the flashlight all over Cholly and Darlene.

masturbating in a movie theater may garner some disgust or judgment, it plausibly presents a moment of innocence and free expression between black men with little agency, as Ellis argues. What occurs in the scene cited below from “Fate” harkens back to the intra-racial homoerotic moment of “Fear” and swiftly deforms it by the intrusion of white oppression and the imposition of white interracial fantasy and sexual threat:

They led him into the room. It was crowded with armed policemen and newspapermen ready with their bulbs[...] [Bigger] felt the eyes of the men upon him and his body stiffened, flushing hot with shame and anger...

‘Now, Bigger, be a good boy. Just relax and take it easy. We want you to take your time and show us just what happened that night, see? And don’t mind the boys taking pictures. Just go through the motions you went through that night...’

Bigger glared; his whole body tightened and he felt that he was going to rise another foot in height. ...He stood without moving. The man caught his arm and tried to lead him to the bed.[...] Bigger’s lips pulled back, showing his white teeth. Then he blinked his eyes; the flashlights went off and he knew in the instant of their flashing that they had taken his picture showing him with his back against a wall, his teeth bared in a snarl.

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‘Get on wid it, nigger,’ said the flashlight one. ‘Sir?’ said Cholly...’*I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good.*’ [...] Cholly heard the cllop of metal. He dropped back to his knees[...] Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began *to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe.*” (147-148, emphasis mine)

‘Scared, boy? You weren’t scared that night you were in here with that girl, were you?’...Come on now, boy. We’ve treated you pretty nice, but we can get tough if we have to see? It’s up to *you!* Get over there by that bed and show us how you raped and murdered that girl!...Show us what you did.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘You *have* to!’

‘I *don’t* have to.’

Mirroring the original scene where Bigger killed Mary, by *Fate* there are more layers distorting the original image. Fear is still an element paralyzing Bigger, but Mary and Mrs. Dalton are not the arousing and disrupting forces at work, respectively. In spite of this, arousal and disruption are still present, embodied by white men rather than women. Instead of Bigger’s arousal, the white men are aroused, excited and awed by the black male subject they have cornered. Instead of disruption in the form of *coitus interruptus*, the white men “wipe out” the real events of that murderous night and supplant it with their own version of events that they demand, need, Bigger to affirm by re-enacting their own imaginative scripts. Demanding Bigger to perform a sexual act – one he never achieved – enables the white men to exert their own sexual force over Bigger and Mary Dalton – this is similar to Henry Sutpen using Charles Bon to be sexually intimate with his sister, Judith Sutpen. Their acts of bearing down upon Bigger seem to be in tension with the obvious threat a known killer would presumably pose to. Although Bigger is the photographed subject “baring his white teeth” in Mary’s bedroom, it is the white presence that forces him into a corner, not for the first time. The repetition of Bigger’s panicked

state from “Fear” captured in the lights of the camera and in the eyes of the aggressive white men, following his initial panicked actions in the blind eyes of a white woman (and the forcefully covered eyes of another), evokes the almost physically overpowering forces at work when it comes to the thought of interracial action in the minds of both black and white men. For Bigger’s own racial imaginary physically overpowers him moving him from sexually fondling to smothering Mary Dalton, Bigger’s language and the law dictate the fate of Bigger’s body.

The moment he murders a white woman we know that Bigger Thomas’s fate is sealed. Yet his supreme violent act takes place in the first part of the book, *Fear*. Before the novel’s jarring opening, *Native Son* first presents itself as a textual embodiment of imaginary: the table of contents reads “Book One,” “Book Two,” and “Book Three” (viii). Once the novel begins these “Books” are then provided with one-word details that ambiguously describe intangible and tangible sensations or actions, starting with (1) *Fear*: a sensation that can involve paralysis or trigger movement, or is simply intuited, (2) *Flight*: a movement that works on both physical and imaginary levels, and (3) *Fate*: a more conclusive term dependent upon time, but also upon the actions and sensations of a subject. All three terms can individually involve or suggest movement of any sort but are nevertheless necessary to one another to inform the deeper meanings of each. For example, fear can paralyze or inspire physical movement such as flight; flight can occur within the mind, such as in dreams, or be an actual movement by the body, or even both simultaneously; and fate works as a conclusion, a finale to all movement, as well as what theoretically provokes all physical and emotional states from the start. Starting from its sensations of foreboding, dread, and suspense felt when Bigger is disrupted from sleep, to

his no less than traumatic night ride with Mary and Jan, to his terror-stricken flight from capture, all the way to its final fateful imaginative and performative scenes in the courthouse and in Bigger's cell.

*Native Son* opens its textual frame with the aural experience of waking up from a dream: "Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!" similar to the "creak" that alerts Bigger to Mrs. Dalton's presence in Mary's room. The opening's stylistic twist is that for the rest of the story, Bigger Thomas lives a waking nightmare that is both fantasy and horror. While this slight observation may not be new, it still stands successfully as testimony to Wright's past public statements on black existence in America at the time of his writing: that what may be a dream or a nightmare for others (or "bankers daughters" specifically) is a distinct reality for many black men.<sup>16</sup> The alarm clock's harsh sound is a disruptive wake-up call, and disruptive transition from one state to another (usually a state of agitation as Bigger's story unfolds) becomes a strong thematic thread throughout the rest of the novel. It begins with the struggle to stay *asleep*, to stay protected from those elements that make Bigger such a frightening (and frightened) character, to stay *suspended* (a physiological state involved in both fear and flight) in a dream world. Accordingly, Wright continually replays this brutal awakening throughout all three sections, as Bigger's progression through each can be read as a struggle to become cognizant and active that ironically capitulates him further into a nightmare.

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<sup>16</sup> Wright, Richard. "How Bigger Was Born." Ed. Arnold Rampersad. *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1993, 454: "When the reviews of [*Uncle Tom's Children*] began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."

## **2.6 Harsh Realities and Arousing Fantasies**

*Native Son*'s opening simultaneously introduces its readers and its own subject, Bigger, to a series of threats. There is the threat of waking up, the threat of the nuisance rat, the threat of starting one's day without a purpose: "...if [Bigger] did not get more [money] than he had now he would not know what to do with himself for the rest of the day" (13-14); the threat of committing a crime (robbing Blum's store); the threat of entering into a white neighborhood: "Would they expect him to come in the front way or back? It was queer that he had not thought of that. Goddamn!...Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody. He grew angry. Why had he come to this goddamn job? He could have stayed among his own people and escaped feeling this fear and hate. This was not his world" (44). This progresses to the fear of entering a white home, of interacting with white people and, especially, with a white woman: "He saw [Mary Dalton] smiling broadly at him, almost laughing. He felt that she knew every feeling and thought he had at that moment and he turned his head away in confusion. Goddamn that woman!" (65).

On the other hand, the very points of threat also work as points of fantasy. There is the fantasy of waking up from a nightmare (only to face the threat of a living nightmare); the fantasy of ruling one's house by committing exaggerated violence against an animal: "'I got 'im,'" he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. 'By God, I got 'im'" (6); the fantasy of robbing a white man (Blum) for his money, the fantasy of the freedom of a day without responsibility or obligation: "He stood on the corner in the



sunshine, watching cars and people pass....He wanted to see a movie; his senses hungered for it. In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat” (14). And naturally, consequently, there is fantasy that unfolds in all movie theaters, and which Bigger and Jack exploit by sexually gratifying themselves: “Bigger moved restlessly and his breath quickened; he looked round in the shadows...then slouched far down in his seat...‘I’m polishing my nightstick,’ Bigger said” (30); the fantasy of entering that same white neighborhood with no harm done to him, of being welcomed into a white household, of being approached, perhaps even propositioned by a white woman:

‘[Mary Dalton] was a hot-looking number, all right.’

‘Sure,’ Jack said. ‘When you start working there you gotta learn to stand in with her. Then you can get everything you want, see?...them rich white women’ll go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have the chauffeurs.’

[Bigger] was filled with a sense of excitement about his new job. Was what he heard about rich white people really true? Was he going to work for people like you saw in the movies? (33)<sup>17</sup>

The alarm’s sound functions as a political metaphor that Wright took very seriously in his life and work, a long tradition of a call to “wake up” the masses.<sup>18</sup> Yet, it also works on a more microscopic and apolitical symbolic level. The alarm does wake up

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 33: note that this fantastical thinking occurs *after* seeing Dalton on screen and *after* masturbating.

<sup>18</sup> Rowley, Hazel. “Cuernavaca.” *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001. 195-212.

Bigger and his family (and he proceeds to fatally lash out at the oppressive rat terrorizing his female relatives), but the question of whether he “wakes up” politically or socially remains ambiguous by the novel’s end and, as demonstrated in Warnes’ argument discussed above, pushes the novel further away from political grandstanding and more into the realm of an artistic work worthy of continuous deconstruction. For instance, when dissecting the myriad proposed causes of Bigger’s crimes (religious corruption, “ghetto conditions,” racism and so on) Warnes challenges: “Why does sex, in the popular American imagination, seem always shadowed by violence? Why is Chicago’s press so quick to reach for the language of contagion, to make even the local violent threat that Bigger poses seem nothing short of apocalyptic? [...] why does *Native Son* still matter?” (xvii). It has been the intent of this chapter to nod to Warnes’ warranted query for the twenty-first century, especially given that he pays distinct attention to the relationship between sex and violence in the novel. My own response to his question is that the problem lies in his own wording. The phrase “popular American imagination” is much better put as “the popular American *racial* imagination.” What has been taken for granted too much and for far too long in the term “American” is its critical and interdependent relationship to racial construction.

This chapter’s turn from Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* to Wright’s *Native Son* demonstrates what the latter best achieves in depicting the struggle against racism through the roles of the interracial imaginary, yet this imaginary is the same mechanism at work in the former. In closing, I want to suggest an imaginary arc between *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom’s Children*, specifically the latter’s first story “Big Boy Leaves Home” to introduce the second half of my investigations: each author’s respective literary

progressions surrounding witnessing, defining, and confronting racial identities. Better portrayed in *Native Son*, but still quite present in the earlier short story, the themes of violence as transformative liberation, eternal nihilism, and especially, sexuality at the center of human thought and action— all of which I have explored at-length above – hold significant force over the narrative of “Big Boy Leaves Home,” as I demonstrate in Chapter Three.

### Chapter Three

#### **Play and Death in Richard Wright's *Uncle Toms Children***

The Freudians talk about the Id  
And bury it below.  
But Richard Wright took off the lid  
And let us see the woe.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps sex carries with it some racial memory; perhaps my underdeveloped body was trying to summon up from the depths of me an answering response. I don't know.<sup>2</sup>

After the publication of *Native Son* in 1940 Richard Wright agreed to an analysis performed by his friend, the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham, offering to all future scholars a direct psychological reading of his work. Wertham then published his findings in "An Unconscious Determinant in *Native Son*" in *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology* in July of 1944. One event revealed in the analysis stands out, serving as the possible springboard for most, if not all, his writings. Michel Fabre describes it in *The World of Richard Wright* when, as a young teenager, Wright worked for a white family (the Bibbs family in *Black Boy*):

Mrs. Bibbs, who lived with her husband and her mother, was a beautiful young woman who showed Richard a certain affection[...]. But one morning as he was carrying some fuel, he opened the bedroom door

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<sup>1</sup> Wertham, Frederic. Letter to Richard Wright. 27 May 1942. Wright Papers

<sup>2</sup> Wright, Richard. *The World of Richard Wright*. Ed. Michel Fabre. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1985. 138: This is Wright's self-reflection when remembering his sexual abuse at the hands of an older cousin. From his own dark memories of sexual abuse Wright already made connections between sex and guilt, lust and shame, and sexuality with racial identity. He ultimately cut this section from his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945).

without knocking and surprised the mistress of the house in the process of dressing. She was greatly annoyed and she reprimanded him severely, demanding that he knock before entering. (122-123)

Even if Wright himself might have initially denied it, nobody would argue that a writer does not incorporate personal experience in his art. Thusly, this is not something to prove; instead, this chapter focuses on what it means that Wright, Big Boy and his contemporaries, and Bigger Thomas all share an incidence of sexualized death or dismemberment that leads to empowerment.

Andrew Warnes' question, "Why does sex, in the popular American imagination, seem always shadowed by violence?" is a critical query to have in mind when reading Faulkner and Wright. Sex, interracial sex, is at the center of both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Native Son*. The latter takes the spectacle of interracial sex to help demonstrate the oppressive forces of racism (all of Bigger's actions and all of Buckley's words are triggered by the fear and desire of a black man and a white woman having sex). For Wright's first published collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), the spectacle of interracial sex is still quite present but the role of sight, physically and metaphorically, holds much more influence and force. When considering Wright's public vilification of his own first collection – that it was too sentimental for white audiences – it's interesting that the role of the visible is so influential in *Uncle Tom's Children* even though its author deemed the work as a failure, overall. The question to ask then is not if there are these elements concerning the racial imagination and the role of sight but what is the shape of such elements, what is its nature? And how do they

differ from the “white blur” in *Native Son*? That *Uncle Tom’s Children* is the father of *Native Son* is a point made for decades [insert citation of exemplary scholars here] both in the literal sense that one work followed another, that the author said as much in his explanation for the latter novel and in the symbolic, literary sense that the protagonists in *Uncle Tom’s Children* create the foundation for Bigger Thomas’s character. Particularly in “Big Boy Leaves Home” and “Long, Black Song” there are the same examples begging the same larger questions about sex and violence evoked from a story written long before *Native Son*.<sup>3</sup>

In the stories from *Uncle Tom’s Children* there is a return and a leaping forward in Wright’s initial, pre-Bigger Thomas engagements with the racial imagination. More pointedly, the first story, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” examined through the lens of fantasy and the imaginary, reveals a lot more about Bigger’s origins, Wright’s lifelong literary agenda(s), and his ultimate literary accomplishment: illuminating the unseen. “We don’t know anything about race. Whenever we speak of race, or use the term racial type, we speak, in fact, of a void which cannot be filled” (Warnes cvii). Such a void is both the nadir and the apex of Wright’s work, fictional and non-fictional. In his 1998 polemic *The Afrocentric Idea*, Molefi K. Asante argued that African-Americans learn to identify as objects done *to* rather than as subjects *doing*, a notion that gained some support in order to empower African-Americans to resist oppression and become individuals with agency. Yet Richard Wright had created a similar vision within his first collection of short stories. The fiction in *Uncle Tom’s Children* takes the shape of a repetitious arc always standing

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<sup>3</sup> Warnes, xvii.

between the negative and the positive. Fabre suggests that Wright has used his accidental sighting into a symbolic interracial spectacle throughout his fiction.

Though justified by the narrative context, these descriptions also serve to reproduce the trauma of young Wright's unintentionally breaking the prohibition which surrounds white women, to such an extent that the writer seems committed whether by conscious recourse or at a more symbolic and almost archetypal level of black/white confrontation, to reproduce this situation. Beyond race, the encounter is anchored in a sexual taboo. (129)

Fabre's observation lends credence to a Wright imaginary — one in which interracially sexual suggestions spur interracial violence.

Negative and positive are the respective spaces of the persecuted, downtrodden black human being, and the space of agency and control over his or her life. The highest point of each story is when each black protagonist realizes (consciously or otherwise) that he or she must achieve a particularly *violent* agency that is key to subverting oppression and, in suit, finding freedom. For Wright's characters, this genuine agency works out as a liberated consciousness that comes only after one has suffered *and* perpetrated a violent act. Furthermore, this oppressed protagonist cannot reach subjecthood (versus continued objectification in the face of racism) without a violent intervention. The text plays these dynamics out on the level of the spectacle. Indeed, all but the last two stories place the spectacle as both setting and action in the center of the story. As this study progresses we will take careful note of the opening spectacle that sets Big Boy in action for the rest of his story and how the roles of sight direct his action (as well as his white pursuers). The

struggle to fill this void (on the part of the characters) is what's important in Wright's text. This void — a space depicted differently in each story — informs how each character sees themselves and others of a different race as well as how the reader sees the characters performing these actions. As noted by Tuhkanen there comes a point where the unfamiliar becomes not only familiar but *too familiar*. Consequently, an anxiety or tension gets triggered at the *sight* of this discomfort, this upset. The interracial body, especially the *suggestion* of how this body comes to exist, both represents tension and causes the anxiety over its representation. The scene with Big Boy and his friends stripping down immediately turns into a different spectacle. What was once the reader seeing these characters at play in the nude is now a white woman. Now the reader sees the white woman seeing black nudity. This *sight* — the what and the what-is-seen — triggers the ensuing violence for the rest of the story.

Most have found it satisfactory to say Big Boy and the rest of the protagonists in *Uncle Tom's Children* simultaneously represent this void and its substance. While not in disagreement, I suggest that there is more to these roles, especially that of Big Boy, and thus, the void and all its iterations that warrant fuller examination. Ultimately, the writing and un-writing script the mechanics of the racial imagination. Tuhkanen's arguments work at an important level here when he argues that psychoanalysis provides a benefit in thinking about race as “a visible category”:

Engaging African-American literary and theoretical texts with Jacques Lacan's work, it asks what happens when we interrogate ‘the American Optic’ through what Lacanian theory teaches us about the role of the visible and the scopic drive in the constitution of the human subject.



Subsequently, it proposes a shift in race theory, arguing that the visibility of race does not merely assign the subject a social category or discipline one's mobility in society but may have an *ontological status*: in certain symbolic configurations, the subject's emergence, taking place through the visible, may involve 'racialization.'

What Tuhkanen calls "racialization" this project calls the "racial imaginary" and they both involve racializing the animate and the inanimate, the subject and the object, the man hunted by the black and white print predicting his fate, as well as the man using the very same medium in order to imagine his own. Wright was not off the mark when discussing the revolutionaries of the late 1940s and was, as seen above in both citations, prescient in his awareness that there was a collective tension and untapped anger in many black communities. Although the richness of Wright's personal experiences and insights sometimes found their way into his own literature, he also sought out the experiences of those already "in the struggle" such as David R. Poindexter, a "rebel from the South" and a communist orator who regularly spoke in the main Negro Forum in Washington Park. While working for the Federal Writer's Project in Chicago, Mr. Poindexter was one of Wright's first case studies.<sup>4</sup> In the Cold War collection *The God that Failed*, Wright describes Poindexter as "a man living on the margins of a culture...struggling blindly between two societies" (Crossman, 115). They both grew up in the South under racist

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<sup>4</sup> Wright describes his relationship with Poindexter in "I Tried to Be a Communist" and gives him the pseudonym "Ross" in *American Hunger*. See Butler, Ward, Jr., eds. *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008.

oppression and they quickly grew close. He wanted to tell Poindexter's story in such a way as to "make his life more intelligible to others than it was to himself" (Rowley 96-7). He told Poindexter, "I'm after the things that made you a Communist" (Rowley, 96-97). In her biography on Wright, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, Rowley explains: "As an adolescent, Poindexter had witnessed the terrifying formation of a lynch mob in Nashville, Tennessee. His account inspired Wright's story 'Big Boy Leaves Home,' in which Big Boy watches helplessly while his friend Bobo is lynched on the hillside.<sup>5</sup> Given what we already know about Wright's earlier days and his friend's drowning, why does Rowley seem to minimize the trauma of Wright's own story in this later section of her book? From a literary and political angle, it's fair to say that Wright was *always* essentially addressing the question of what drives the oppressed black citizen to resist. I want to also ask if it is fair to state that Big Boy was in fact "helpless," since he not only escapes, but can also fantasize and enact a violence towards the murderous white mob that they probably wouldn't imagine possible.

Richard Wright's literary architecture is set on the structure of sight, and its consequential dismantling and disruption by racism and sexuality. And because sight has so much to do with the body, sexuality and sex are then corrupted in kind. There is what one sees and then there is what one holds in his individual imaginary, which is informed by collective systems of racial and sexual hierarchy. In kind, when one sees a naked black body — and it's not hanging from a tree — there is a disruption; perhaps the white woman found herself aroused by Big Boy's nudity. This would only further her disgust and fear as *she is not supposed to like what she's seeing*. The result can only be

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 97.

violent—as violent as Oedipus blinding himself for what he sees and is attracted to. The Oedipus story and myth are nearly synonymous for Wright, especially in his earlier works.

In this chapter, Wright’s short story, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” receives fresh analysis — to highlight its origins in the relationships between racial identity and storytelling, following the lead of Michael Atkinson in his essay “Richard Wright’s ‘Big Boy Leaves Home’ and a Tale from Ovid: A Metamorphosis” and his emphasis on myth in Wright’s fiction.<sup>6</sup> This chapter also shows how Big Boy and his narrative path set the larger path(s) for Wright’s future protagonists, including Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. In fact, Big Boy in “Big Boy Leaves Home” is the raw space from which Bigger later comes forth. This argument, though, is different, than simply nodding to Wright’s public dismissal of this very work (in “How Bigger Was Born”)<sup>7</sup>. Rather, the story of Big Boy actually does already contain these elements and unleashes the potential for provocation prior to *Native Son*; in fact, the latter could neither have come to fruition nor have had Wright’s desired effects if not for the provocative elements within Big Boy’s tale. To put it plainly, Big Boy is the father of Bigger Thomas.

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<sup>6</sup> Atkinson, Michael. “Richard Wright’s *Big Boy Leaves Home* and a Tale from Ovid: A Metamorphosis Transformed.” Rpt. in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. 11th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995. 129-39. New Century Views.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, Richard. “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born.” *Native Son (The Restored Text Established by the Library of America)*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1940. 431-62: “I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”

*Native Son* is Wright's most famous novel of race, violence, and the interracial fantastical or, how the spectacle can be its own character and agent of action when the white symbolic order is involved; specifically, when the white symbolic order is threatened. There is no larger, more potent threat to this white symbolic order than that which disrupts the very definition of whiteness. However, this final arc began in his earlier work *Uncle Tom's Children* and we are especially made privy to how he crafted this arc in his own life in the biographical work *Black Boy* published in 1945. Yet how did *this* story – the opening story of *Uncle Tom's Children*—come to be in the first place? “Big Boy Leaves Home” was published in 1936, before the rest of the collection. There are revisions, indeed, in Wright's final and famous version; and then there are a number of revised manuscripts and typescripts that Wright worked his narratives through before reaching what he must have found to be the “correct” story. Thus, “Big Boy Leaves Home” deserves special attention, especially because of the fact that its main character does not “choose” to die as do others in the rest of in *Uncle Tom's Children*. For example, the following climactic passages from the other four narratives illustrate how each subject faces “death” in order to gain the only kind of “life” he/she desires and deserves—one with choice and mobility. From “Down by the Riverside”: “Gawd! They were going to kill him. Yes, now he would die! He would die before he would let them kill him. Ahll die fo they kill me! Ahll die...”(123); from “Long Black Song”: “So help me God, I'm gonna be *hard!* When they come for me I'm gonna be here! And when they get me outta here they's gonna *know* I'm gone! If God lets me live I'm gonna make 'em *feel* it!” (152-153); from “Fire and Cloud”: “Ah know now! Ah done seen the sign! We's gotta git together...Ah know whut t do! We gotta git close t one ernother...Now its fer us

tack” (218); from “Bright and Morning Star”: “She waited, giving up her life before they took it from her, *she had done what she wanted*” (261).

Tuhkanen describes Aunt Sue as a “lone terrorist” whose author “attempt[s] to theorize becoming beyond existing symbolic possibilities” (xxiii). In each of these stories, the crucial moment where racist whites use violent tactics to strip blacks of their humanity coincides with the moment where blacks rip their own humanity away from them. More to the point, in all of the final proclamations cited above, there is less an element of the fantastical than there are elements of vengeful rage. In fact, Big Boy’s internal monologue is *pure* vengeful fantasy:

... he leveled [the shotgun] at an advancing white man. Booom! The man curled up. Another came. He reloaded quickly, and let him have what the other had got... Then another came. He got the same medicine. Then the whole mob swirled around him, and he blazed away, getting as many as he could... by Gawd he had done his part, hadn’t he? N the newspapersd say: NIGGER KILLS DOZEN OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED! Er mabbe theyd say: TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED! He smiled a little. Tha wouldn’t be so bad, would it? (50)

Understanding the imaginary as a mental universe governed by a system of signification (see the introduction for more elaboration on Lacanian psychoanalysis and the mirror stage). There is a minimal amount of realistic variants in Big Boy’s imagination compared to the heroes of the other stories in the collection. One, he actually has a

moment when he can potentially save his friend Bobo's life, but he also knows how futile that would be and so he merely, painfully, watches. Yet this reflection occurs prior to Bobo's lynching and dismemberment. This happens when Big Boy is still "only" hiding in a kiln – one of the very kilns he and his friends had joyfully made prior to their fatal discovery by the white woman. Twice in the story we are presented with the complicated relationship between race, sight and violence: Big Boy and his friends are nude and a white woman sees them resulting in a fatal confrontation; Big Boy watches the violent lynch mob kill his friend. Both scenes specifically contain the interracial and its violent triggers – triggers only activated by witnessing.

Though the angry white mob never reaches Big Boy, he gleefully fantasizes about the possibilities if they did. Admittedly, Big Boy does die a social death: he must leave his home and his family in order to survive, and the lynch mob succeeds in burning down his house and killing his best friend, Bobo. Yet Big Boy's familial-social death turns into an act of reclamation—he feels both in control and at a loss. Once he flees his own home he feels a power and a fear enabling him to consider and enjoy retaliatory murder – a power from an agency Wright portrayed as a premature seedling during Big Boy's battle with Jim over the rifle. When Big Boy tells Jim, "Ahll kill yuh; Ahll kill yuh!" he then makes good on his threat (32). Although his first crime was a panicked self-defense, it took him to an unknown place of powerful control over his life. The issue of control and taking it back, in particular, is not a new one nor am I aiming to describe it as such for this project. Rather, this project focuses on *how* such control is both taken away and then taken back; and on the visual aspect that's crucial to how this occurs. That the visual and

the interracial are one and the same when the body and the spectacle are involved i.e. the racialized body *is* the spectacle.

In “Riverside,” the protagonist Mann has been subjected to violent forces of nature—a dangerous hurricane and an equally devastating flood—as well as violent acts of racism, such as when he's forced to part with his family to fortify the levees. Yet both moments have equally corporeal effects on Mann and on his family: his wife, Lulu, dies en route to save her life and the life of their unborn child; he is physically separated from both his mother-in-law, Grannie, and his son, Peewee, symbolically stripping him of any roots and of any future, but freeing him to make decisions solely for himself. His anxieties run so deep that his own flesh tightens its grip on Mann's mobility: "His body seemed encased in a tight vise, in a narrow and black coffin that moves with him as he moves" (114). Although Mann didn't steal the boat with which he attempts to rescue his family he's still forced to defend it later, and in doing so, shoots and kills a white man. He must conceal his crime lest his family suffers, only to witness his family destroyed anyway, in that his wife dies in childbirth and his son and mother-in-law are, essentially, lost at sea. He is later forced to save the lives of his white victim's family, the Heartfields, while fearing that they will implicate him in his crime (which the son later does). But, according to Wright, there comes a time when one's ability to make a choice actually grows stronger when he is pushed into suffocating spaces. Mann considers seemingly impossible choices, such as the following: "His gun nestled close to his thigh. Spouse Ah shot 'em n took the boat. Naw! It would be better to wait till he got to the levee" (95).

Despite his limited options, Mann can still choose whether to use the hidden gun and finds comfort in having the option of ever using it against the white soldiers who have forced him to abandon his family and work. And so, again, an unintended shooting in self-defense brings our hero to an enlightened state of consciousness – one where even the murder of a fellow black man, Brinkley, is justified in liberating the black self. In the following inner monologue, Wright describes this new stage of existence in the language of the body and, explicitly, in the visual: “[Mann’s] body grew taut with indecision. Yes, now, he would swing that axe and they would never tell and he had his gun and if Brinkley found out he would point the gun at Brinkley’s head. *He saw himself* in the boat with Brinkley; *he saw himself* pointing the gun at Brinkley’s head; *he saw himself* in the boat going away; *he saw himself* in the boat, alone, going away...” (111, emphasis mine). Wright splits Mann into both the gazer and the gazed so as to provide him with an organic, genuine wholeness. Mann develops a self-pride and self-consciousness only after having committed his first violent act against a white man. Here there is an much more explicit emphasis on physicality that we do not read in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* but that, nonetheless, still puts forth ideas about the racial imaginary and the white symbolic order. When Mann kills this white man he is both committing violence on a corporeal level while so erasing a white body and, thusly, committing a much more potent and effective violence. In murdering this white man Mann takes a father away from his family, breaks the law, violates the Jim Crow hierarchy and upsets the white symbolic order that controls his and his victim’s bodies. Afterwards, he stands outside of himself and he embraces his new alienation as the chance to gain true freedom.



In contrast to Mann's grasping the chance to shape his inevitable death, Silas, the cuckolded husband in "Long Black Song," welcomes the opportunity to finally take out what appears to be a lifelong anguish and anger at whites, after his wife, Sarah, sleeps with a white man.<sup>8</sup> Her betrayal is the final blow to his tense, objectified identity. His last words reveal the futility of attempting to shape a whole self when trapped within a destructive structure: "The white folks ain never gimme a chance! The ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!" (152). But the white salesman and his friend in the story *don't* simply take Silas's life – Silas shoots one of them dead and in so doing, knowingly brings about his own end. Again, the white symbolic order faces upset. In helplessly firing back, Silas muddles up what's expected: that white men can and will kill this black man. This fate remains true but not Silas puts a ripple in this expected outcome. Faced with the strict conditions of racism, Silas *creates* the scene of his own murder so as to finally master his life. There is a connection to Bigger Thomas's acts of violence in *Native Son*, for, again, we witness the instinct of self-defense leading to a more self-conscious and deliberate resistance.

In the penultimate story, "Fire and Cloud," Reverend Taylor faces similar obstacles when he physically and emotionally battles with himself over which path to take in order to save his starving black community – the church, the law, or the Communists. He curses the situation and sees no way out of this "big white fog." He doesn't know how to tell his people how to stand up for themselves—how to forge and

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<sup>8</sup> From Wright's notes on the manuscript he refers to Sarah as the protagonist of the story (Wright Papers: JWW MSS 3 Box 63 f. 745). In my reading, Silas is almost the *victim* of Sarah but only as she is a pawn in a larger schema (Jim Crow).

cling to an identity that demands legitimacy and worthy subsistence—without incurring dangerous repercussions. He prays: “Lawd, Ah don know whut t do! Ef Ah fight for the things the white folk say Ahma bad nigger stirrin up trouble N ef Ah don do notn, we starve....But somethings *gotta* be done!” (160). Still deliberating while everyone from every side breathes down his neck for a solution, a white gang kidnaps and brutally whips Taylor to keep him from marching with his congregation. It’s *this* violent attack that gives Taylor a voice neither he nor the reader knew he had. He learns that he needn’t worry over violent repercussions because his very life consists of the random violence of racism. In other words, there are “repercussions” just for living:

The whip brought more fire and he could not stand it any longer; his heart seemed about to burst.[...] Then fire flamed over all his body; he stiffened, glaring upward, wild-eyed...

‘Alright, kill me! Tie me n kill me! Yuh white trash cowards, kill me! [...] We’ll get yuh white trash some day! So hep me Gawd, we’ll git yuh!’ [...] He relaxed and closed his eyes. He stretched his legs out, slowly, not listening, not waiting for the whip to fall. (200-201)

Right after this scene Taylor's worries disappear into a calm confidence and a self-awareness similar to what Mann felt before dying. Taylor

felt neither fear nor joy, just an humble confidence in himself, *as though he were standing before his mirror in his room*[...] then he looked down, not to the dust, but just a slight lowering of eyes, as though he were no longer looking at them, but *at something within himself*. (216)

A positive self-righteousness saturates the final story, "Bright And Morning Star."<sup>9</sup> Sue, in a similar fashion to Big Boy's excited fantasizing, physically toys with the brutal violence she endures to protect her son and in doing so, she reaches a dynamic space. Privately she passionately relishes her resistance:

Yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted! she thought exultingly. N yuh ain gonna never git it! Hotly, something *ached in her to make them feel the intensity of her pride and freedom*; her heart groped *to turn the bitter hours of her life into words of a kind that would make them feel that she had taken all they had done to her in stride and could still take more*. Her faith surged so strongly in her she was all but blinded. (240, emphasis mine)

Her desire and potential success in making her white attackers feel her intensity harks back to "Long Black Song" and gives more meaning to Silas's battle with the white men - though they kill him, the white men still had to face an unrelenting black man shooting at them. More importantly, this story suggests the fusion of fantasy and reality occurring only from such acts – for here is finally when the black individual can exist in the same kind of freedom she only imagines. *Uncle Tom's Children* reveals a subversive and revolutionary meaning to what tragically took place on a daily basis between blacks and whites in Jim Crow America. Yet, rather than only looking at violence and death as failure, it suggests that shaping one's end—if not one's life—is a sign of success. Each character lives a fragmented, nervous life. In violence, one finds completion and self-awareness neither provided, nor allowed to exist anywhere else. Paradoxically, in the

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<sup>9</sup> "Bright and Morning Star" was first published in 1938 in *The Masses*, a radical communist journal and not included in the original 1938 publication of *Uncle Tom's Children* by. When Harper Collins reprinted *Children* in 1940 it included "Bright and Morning Star."

space where African-Americans are told they are threatened with inhumanity is where they actually find their humanity.

Black resistance writers such as David Walker in 1829 and Frantz Fanon in 1961 believed that resistance involves taking violence and throwing it back onto its original agents in order to achieve a post-racist/post-colonial world. In between the literature of Walker and Fanon stands Wright's more artistic representation of the form that this type of resistance may take. For Wright, a hero has to essentially *overthrow himself* in order to achieve the sort of agency that actually subverts racist oppression. Up to the heaviest point of oppression, Wright's hero is always in a static state, highlighting that for Wright, agency cannot occur without a violence that begins on a local, individual level. Wright's requirement for any revolutionary realization, dramatic or not, is a violent act done to and by the single black body. The narratives in *Uncle Tom's Children* provide clear portraits of the desperate choices African-Americans faced in the Jim Crow South and their ensuing consequences. In crafting each of his stories around these elements, Wright centers them on tragic human dilemma: *choosing* to die rather than being killed. "Big Boy Leaves Home" is an illuminating example of the arguments that "Big Boy" and the collection overall are, in fact, quite connected to *Native Son* and to *Black Boy*.<sup>10</sup>

"Big Boy Leaves Home" sets the guiding formula for the rest of the collection.

First, the main character shoots and kills a white man out of panic and fear:

'Run, Big Boy, run!'

The [white] man came at Big Boy.

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<sup>10</sup> See Atkinson; JanMohamed, Abdul R. *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005; Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1989; Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008.

‘Ahll kill yuh; Ahll kill yuh!’ said Big Boy.

His fingers fumbled for the trigger.[...] CRACK! He fell forward on his face.[...] (51)

Yet, his following self-defensive actions become moments of revolutionary breakthrough. His fear of getting caught by them dissolves into fantasies of vengeance:

But ef tha mob came one by one hed wipe em all out. Clean up the whole bunch. He caught one by the neck and choked him long and hard, choked him till his tongue and eyes popped out. Then he jumped upon his chest and stomped him like he had stomped that snake... (51)

Big Boy experiences an intangible yet distinctly clear self-realization from the accidental shooting of a white man, to the prideful and vengeful, murderous retaliation towards *several* white men he knows are coming after him. In other words, he blends the real with the racial imaginary — the imaginary containing the interracial spectacle that spurred events in the first place. There are actual white men coming to lynch him, but of course these are not the same men Big Boy kills in his mind. Besides the white man Jim in the opening section of the story, the only white men Big Boy retaliates against are unreal, fictions of his imagination. As a whole, *Uncle Tom’s Children* may have been a failure in Wright’s eyes in that he had made an awfully naïve mistake in provoking the sentimentality of his white audience.<sup>11</sup> However, he still accomplishes a work of resistance that is uniquely African-American. *Uncle Tom’s Children* warrants more credit

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<sup>11</sup> Rowley. “Grappling With Bigger May 1938-February 1939.” *Richard Wright*. 150.

for its ability to evoke and provoke. I prefer to look at the collection as both an important work in its own right, and as a preface to *Native Son* and *Bigger Thomas*.

Despite Wright's public claim that *Native Son* was his (successful) attempt to undo the effects of *Uncle Tom's Children* (that it had offered too much sentimentality to white readers), what emerges in reading "Big Boy Leaves Home" are striking thematic similarities regarding themes of sight in the face of interracial sex. Wright reinforces the connection between the themes of a violently reclaimed identity and the initial erasure enacted by sight through the motif of print. Specifically, Wright uses the newspaper and its black and white print to frighten, guide, inspire and enrage both protagonists in the respective stories. While *Bigger* follows the degrading newspaper headlines to keep tabs on his investigation, *Big Boy* has a different relationship to the newspaper he imagines capturing and reporting his actions:

Then the whole mob swirled around him, and he blazed away, getting as many as he could. They closed in; but, by Gawd, he had done his part, hadn't he? N the newspapersd say: NIGGER KILLS DOZENS OF MOB BEFO LYNCHED! Er mabbe theyd say: TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED! He smiled a little. Tha wouldn't be so bad would it? Blinking the newspaper away, he looked over the fields.

(50)

The motif is not a simple one, though it works perfectly to shape the racial imagination of Wright's oeuvre and fill its void. There is a play on the traditional role of literacy and liberation in black history. What is usually heralded as the means to freedom—or what icons such as Frederick Douglass called their key out of slavery—gets

twisted and turned into a part of the problem as well. Literacy works as a way for Big Boy and Bigger to fantasize and plot out their respective escapes from racist torture and imprisonment. That the newspaper medium is in stark black symbolically reinforces this complicated design. The stories of both Big Boy and Bigger are about “black” and “white,” as loci of resistance and oppression, a tense balance that must be upset in order for true liberation to occur. Some of the hardest-hitting scenes stress the color symbolism separating the black characters—Jim and Bertha; the Daltons and their daughter, Mary; and especially the blind “white blur” of Mrs. Dalton— from their tormenters. And all the while both protagonists’ minds are haunted (even in the positive sense of Big Boy’s phantasmic revenge) by the *black and white print* spelling out their fates: *NIGGER KILLS DOZENS OF MOB BEFOR LYNCHED! (50)/ NEGRO RAPIST FAINTS (279)*. In Bigger’s case, we know that when he read the newspapers in order to follow the police’s steps he was scared, nervous. Assuredly, the smudge effect matters little in Big Boy’s case since the newspaper at hand is imaginary, but the significance is that it is still the object of choice – a paper medium bringing stories to the public in black and white where the smudge effect can suggest the *vulnerability* of the very object and, thus, the very story that it’s telling.

Given Wright’s self-admonishment that he wanted to undo his first work’s sentimental effects on his white readers, a remaining question, then, is why are there such important similarities that concern the very elements between which he wanted to show rifts? The manuscript progression of these particular works helps us see whether or not the similar themes found in the final versions existed from the beginning, evolved or *devolved*. Such an examination also demands a look at whether Wright explicitly noted to

himself any similarities and differences, and what meanings these edits and progressions possibly held for him, and for the legacy of his works. What truly complicates this query is the noted changes Wright made to his manuscript at the behest of the white women in charge of the Book of the Month Club, an organization that would put Wright on the national and international literary map. When examining these changes the similarities between Wright's protagonists stand out in an even starker relief especially the roles of violence and retaliation.

### **3.2 Wright's Origins' Tale – What Is Behind “Big Boy”?**

Early in 1936 Wright submitted his lynching story, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” to an anthology of contemporary writing, *The New Caravan*. He received a prompt acceptance letter with a fifty-dollar check. It was not a Communist publication; all the other writers were white; the selection was on merit alone. It was Wright's first publication in a book, and it was the first time he had been paid for his writing.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly, it is loss, grief and mourning that inspired the story of Big Boy. Wright lost a friend in a drowning incident in his boyhood days:

Someone suggested a swim in old man Burnett's water hole. Joking and laughing, they strolled toward the woods. It was a dangerous plan. Barrett, a white man, had sometimes appeared at the swimming hole with his gun and threatened to shoot the “black niggers: if they didn't get out of his pasture.[...]Robert Ellis dived [and] did not come up. They were struck by horror.[...] A week later, Robert Ellis's body drifted to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 112.



the bank of the white man's water hole.<sup>13</sup>

So in Wright's early life there is a real traumatic instance of the loss of innocence, set in the context of youthful joy set against a backdrop of lethal danger. Drowning is not the only threat posed: playing hooky from Sunday school and playing on the property owned by a white man who has publicly claimed to kill any black trespassers are dangerous as well. Above is a scene of pleasure set within the dilemma of the known, but intangible threat of real (white) violence and the inevitable guilt from surviving this violence.

In this manner, we can allow for the possibility that Wright's first story was a work of mourning, but that does not exclude the imaginary given his authorial confessions above. He was presented with a *chasm* long before his knowledge or involvement with the revolutionary Communist Party. What's demonstrated is more

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 26: "When we reached the h-o-l-e-, I saw a boy, s-t-r-i-p-p-e-d- naked and poised on the edge of the bank, about to dive. Others were pulling off their clothes as fast as they could. I ran up and began to undress. . . .

'That water looks awfully deep and strong to me,' the boy, R-o-b-e-r-t- E-l-l-i-s-, said.

'You just scared!' somebody yelled.

'I'll beat you in!' I called to Robert Ellis.

'No, I'll beat everybody in,' another boy called. Robert Ellis was still hesitating. His clothes lay behind him and upon the pile was his violin case; he played the violin in his church across town each Sunday. [...] Robert Ellis, feeling that if he did not jump he would be beaten, leaped toward the water, head first, his hands together; He hit and went out of sight. We yelled and waited for him to rise, but he did not.[...] Towards late afternoon I went home, sick, feeling that somehow I and all the other boys were responsible, yet knowing that if we had tried to save him we, too, would have been sucked under by the sweeping current. Those of us who had seen him dive took on a new dignity and grownupness in the eyes of the others and we related our versions of how it happened with lurid detail, yet within still trembling a little from our fright. We still played hooky from Sunday school, but we did not go swimming.

personal: his struggle with reconciliation. The imaginary must play a crucial role when mourning a real incident through its re-recreation by storytelling. The real questions to ask are why the elements present in the story are there and, after close reading, what's found is that those elements were there in the real events of Wright's life, as he himself remembered it around 1942. The difference – and the work achieved through the imaginary, or the memory triggered by the imagined story– is how Wright's work re-created the real to feature these elements. For example, Wright turns the body into the disembodied (a drowned body to a tarred, feathered, and finally dismembered and rendered essentially non-existent, as Atkinson argues below). The private scene of joy (the boys enter Barrett's private space to play with each other) is twisted into the public scene of horror (a whites-only mob gathering and growing to fatally mutilate one black child). Most intriguing is the supposed meaninglessness of the boys' nudity bastardized into the fascinating and absurd sexual charges during Bobo's murder, where a white woman sees nude black boys and the intrusion is upon *her*. Whereas one black body evoked loss and grief, the Bobo's mutilated black body works as an *aphrodisiac* for the white mob: there's explicit sexual excitement that directly follows his dismemberment, and his genitals were the last to be severed:

*'We'll hang ever nigger t a sour apple tree...'* There were women singing now. Their voices made the song round and full. [...]

*'LES GIT SOURVINEERS!'* ... The long dark spot was smudged out...

*'Look! Hes gotta finger!'* ...

‘Hes got one of his ears, see?’...

‘A woman fell out! Fainted, Ah reckon...’[...]

‘HURRY UP N BURN THE NIGGER FO IT RAINS!’...

[Big Boy] saw a tar-drenched body glistening and turning.[...]Then he saw a writhing white mass cradled in yellow flame...The mob was quiet now, standing still, looking up the slopes at the writhing white mass gradually growing black in a cradle of yellow flame.[...]

‘Ahll take some of yuh ladies back in mah car...’ (55-58)

Wright’s life fed his fictional tales, even though he’d also repeatedly tell his audiences and say privately that he often did not know where the sources for his characters or stories came from.<sup>14</sup> Prior to what we know now as “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” as the preface later added to *Uncle Tom’s Children*, wherein Wright provides the reader with vignettes of various racist experiences he endured in the Jim Crow South, he had written an earlier draft simply titled “Preface” where there is little biography and much more character elucidation:

When BIG BOY LEAVES HOME was begun there was not the slightest notion that its ending would call forth further effort. It might be said that these stories ‘jus growed’; each growing out of the soil of satisfactions and dissatisfactions with the previous one. What had begun as pure and happy inspiration gradually resolved itself into a planned and plotted

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<sup>14</sup> See “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” in Wright, Richard. *Native Son (The Restored Text Established by the Library of America)*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1940. 431-62.

work, possessing its own logic, pretensions, and sequence. . . .there was both an immense pleasure and dissatisfaction. The pleasure came from the feeling that here was a story fairly well told; and the dissatisfaction came from the vital things to express. Poor Big Boy had not had a chance.<sup>15</sup>

Could Wright's last line – more a testimonial to himself than his potential readers – not be the lead up to his final hardened masterpiece, *Bigger Thomas*? Back then, according to the author himself, the answer would be “no”: “Mann was Big Boy grown up, blunted and dulled by circumstance.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the more we examine Big Boy the more we see his character as the fragile, but still firm beginnings of the also paradoxically hard but vulnerable *Bigger Thomas*. In *Native Son*, *Bigger Thomas*'s crime was his murderous reaction to his *perception* of being seen with a white woman. In the context of Jim Crow, Wright demonstrates that perception, sight, and the seen are all one and the same when race is involved. Discussing the novel's predecessor, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” and its relationship to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Michael Atkinson states that “Big Boy's crime, and the crime of his companions, is not seeing, but being seen; ironically their *crime is synonymous with their powerlessness*, their impotence as humans” (134, emphasis original). Indeed, Wright explores the role of sight in race relations in both works. In his personal notes, Wright makes a poignant confession:

The courage of the revolutionist, its interior mechanism, is not of Big Boy, or, Mann, or Sarah, either singly or collectively. Really, the [sic]

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<sup>15</sup> Wright Papers: JWW MSS 3 Box 63 f. 745

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

revolutionaries are a [sic] another people apart, living in terms, images, symbols all their own; terms of the future, no doubt.... They are in the vortex of our the events of our time, the focal events of our day and age; they are living in the heights of our time. Then I said, rather rashly and caringly, I will mix [sic] them; *I will try to bridge this chasm*.<sup>17</sup>

This *chasm* is precisely what “Big Boy Leaves Home,” *Native Son*, and Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* all struggle to bridge; it is also the unnamed racial imaginary or Tuhkanen’s “American optic” that, in truth, enables this bridging to occur. After citing a longer passage from Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* about his frustration with the prison psychiatrist who repeatedly kept trying to get him to admit he “hated” his mother, Tuhkanen quotes Cleaver angrily writing, “he deliberately blocked all my attempts to bring out the racial question, and he made it clear that he was not interested in my attitude toward whites. This was a Pandora’s box he did not care to open” (xiii). Tuhkanen then surmises: “nothing maybe more decisive than the fact that [Wright’s] writings have been seen as a precursor to the militant black movements of the 1960s and were adopted by numerous Black Panthers and Black Muslims as the emblem of black male rage” (xiii). Indeed, Wright’s work as a precursor to black militancy is undoubtedly fair but, it is only one thread of his work. When considered as part of the larger canon of interracial literature Wright’s depiction of black violence appears to be part of a lengthier and older discourse: about race, color, the sight of trespass, and the chasm this spectacle reveals. Wright’s Big Boy introduced the lethal outcome when all four threads come together for black bodies. Faulkner’s novel *Light in August* (1932) goes one step further,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

articulating our interracial history in order to dismantle any notions of self-knowledge and any notions of what our future holds.

## Chapter Four

### **Violations and Disruptions in *Light in August***

What is it about the interracial that is so visual? Why does the color of skin immediately create a story about the one who carries the color? In *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (2012), Andrew Solomon cites philosopher Susan Brison: “Trauma not only haunts the conscious and unconscious mind, but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, ready to resurface whenever something triggers a reliving of the traumatic event” (493). Brison and Solomon are specifically discussing women who raise children conceived from rape, but the notion of trauma and the physical, psychic marks it leaves behind is one applicable to racial oppression. In the United States, the color of one’s skin can tell a distinctly violent story, one that is mired in sexual violence as well as *consensual sex* between white bodies and bodies marked *not-white*.

In both Faulkner and Richard Wright’s works, there are distinct interracial themes that crucially depend on the visual and this important role of sight and skin. *Light in August* (1932) is just as much a worthy comparison to Wright’s work as is *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Where the latter places the racial imaginary at the center of the novel’s action, the former novel demonstrates the racial imaginary *in action*. In the former, the racial imagination not only at the very center of the story but, in Quentin and Shreve’s frenzied mystery-solving and story(re-)telling, it is triggered, informed, and influential upon their own personal and collective narratives. In *Light in August* the racial imagination is still a driving force for the novel, only this time we are privy to how the

racial imaginary informs an actual not-white/interracial body when we read the life and death of Joe Christmas. The body and narrative of Joe Christmas portray the workings of the racial imaginary on the part of his white counterparts and how he confronts the inner tensions. In “Totalitarian Faulkner: the Nazi Interpretation of *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*” (2011) Daniel Spoth discusses the allowance of Faulkner’s literature in the Nazi Regime which usually banned most works similar to Faulkner and argues that this admission had less to do with any ideological motive on the part of its German translator (who really just needed the money) breaking away from most scholarship saying otherwise. Nevertheless, it’s also easy to read these works as pro-fascism given their shared themes and ideas concerning racial purity, white supremacy and the benefits of an agrarian lifestyle and identity. This latter caveat is Spoth’s concern: that perhaps it’s *too* easy to dismiss the *dismissals* of fascism in Faulkner because the reader is already posed to do away with such a reading. But, Spoth posits, if we were to suspend this resistance we can see there are some important fascist themes in the works, not to say Faulkner was pro-fascist but simply that there are, indeed, fascist themes and these are worth investigating. Such arguments are pertinent when considering the themes in *Light in August* concerning the relationship between morality and blood and the hierarchies of memory and knowledge.

Without a doubt, this novel nods to notions of racial and Anglo-Saxon purity; but these are not the novel’s primary concern. Its approach is less about mourning (although mourning and loss are present themes in this and most of Faulkner’s works) and more about a forecasting – one based on the past. The dilemma is what does one use from his



past in order to determine his present and future. In Faulkner's words, do we live by memory or knowledge? *Light in August* outlines a legacy yet, Spoth notes,

The effect of books, especially those by the likes of [Ted] Hughes and Faulkner, is completely disproportionate to their significance. It is only decades later that it occurs to some literary critics that such books see things as they are and contain warnings to which no one listened at the time. [Faulkner's writings contained] a sort of prophecy or 'warning,' that it saw 'things as they are,' and that he believed it should attract more attention than it did. (243-4)

This chapter aims to investigate and affirm this insistent prescience in Faulkner's work on race and the south.

When asked about her racial background, actress Zoe Saldana said it made her uncomfortable to discuss race because she was not raised to see color:

I find it uncomfortable to have to speak about my identity all of the time, when in reality it's not something that drives me or wakes me up out of bed everyday. I didn't grow up in a household *where I was categorized by my mother.*<sup>1</sup> (emphasis mine)

Interrogating the racial makeup of someone not white is an American tradition (indeed, it has been a cornerstone of our legal system beginning with the "one-drop" rule of the ,

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<sup>1</sup> Syreeta. "Zoe Saldana Can Miss Me with Her Oversimplified Views on Race and Gender." *Zoe Saldana Can Miss Me with Her Oversimplified Views on Race and Gender*. N.p., 20 May 2013. Web. 27 June 2013. <<http://feministing.com/2013/05/20/zoe-saldana-can-miss-me-with-her-oversimplified-views-on-race-and-gender/>>.

especially for those in the public eye. There are many obviously troubling notions in Saldana's words but what's most striking and pertinent for this current project is how much her words resonate with the Latin *partus sequitur ventrem*, the legal doctrine incorporated by British and American colonial legislation related to slavery. Derived from Roman civil law, it holds that the slave status of a child followed that of the mother, literally "that which is brought forth follows the womb." In her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," (1987) Hortense J. Spillers poses a welcome challenge to the traditional reading of this common code, citing William Goodell:

...we cannot do much better than look at Goodell's reading of the *partus sequitur ventrem*: the condition of the slave mother is 'forever entailed on all her remotest posterity.' This maxim of civil law, in Goodell's view, the 'genuine and degrading principle of slavery, inasmuch as it places the slave upon a level with brute animals, prevails universally in the slave-holding states' [Goodell 27]. But what is the 'condition' of the mother? Is it the 'condition' of enslavement the writer means, or does he mean the 'mark' and the 'knowledge' of the mother upon the child that here translates into the culturally forbidden and impure? (79)

If we open up this "condition" and what it could contain that's carried over we gain a clearer, though more complex idea of how the interracial body and its embodied miscegenation can interrupt and disrupt the identity of the beholder. In "Wright,

Faulkner, and Mississippi as Racial Memory” Thadious M. Davis tells us that white southerners are:

[o]bsessed with memory of the past as a key to understanding their contemporary society, they become victims of stasis or of mental paralysis which renders them incapable of living fully, but which also necessitates articulation of their condition from a defining perspective that elegizes the antebellum world even while condemning its moral failures. (*Callaloo*, 1986, 473)

Saldana’s words reflect a similar interrogation from *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) when Charles Etienne is arrested and Jim Hamblett demands, “ ‘What are you? Who and where did you come from?’ ” (165, emphasis original); and in the exchange between Bobbie Allen, the prostitute/waitress who asks, “what are you?” to her customer, Joe Christmas, in Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932).

When considering minority literature Anne Anlin Cheng asks, “How does one go on to *record* fragmented history?” (*The Melancholy of Race*, 139). With the advent of minority literature, as conceived by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, came “[t]he desire to know and bear witness as some kind of ‘redemptive’ act” (Cheng 143).<sup>2</sup> Faulkner’s literature may not be included in the minority literature canon in the purest sense that Faulkner did not produce out of any restricted social spaces. Intending to contribute to the range of analysis on Faulkner and interracialism, this chapter seeks to

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<sup>2</sup> In their books *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) the philosophers criticized the concept of “majority” and argued that If becoming-minor often occurs in the context of what are ordinarily called minority groups, then this is because becoming-minor is catalyzed by existence in cramped social spaces.

study the specific, formal ways in which Faulkner's Joe Christmas embodies and enacts an American racial imagination; and it fits in and outside of minority literature as a testament to *and* evidence of the interracial imagination in fiction. I will read the character and the novel as a critique and prognosis for our national identity and its construction. I also aim to complicate and add to the Lacanian psychoanalytic model of the Self and the Imaginary as it is discussed and described by the aforementioned Mikko Tuhkanen in *The American Optic* while moving from but not abandoning the "racial formation" theory as put forth by Omi and Winant:

One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with sex) is their race. *We utilize race to provide clues about who a person is.* This fact is made painfully obvious *when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize* – someone who is, for example, racially 'mixed' or of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar. Such an encounter becomes *a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning. Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity.* (*Racial Formation in the United States*, 12, emphasis mine, underline original)

The authors put in sociological terms what Faulkner expresses in his fiction beginning with his interracial character Joe Christmas. Finally, Spillers, perhaps unwittingly justifies a newer, more psychoanalytic approach to reading the interracial in literature when she concludes,

...these 'threads cable-strong' of an incestuous, interracial genealogy uncover slavery in the United States as one of the richest displays of the

psychoanalytic dimensions of culture before the science of European psychoanalysis takes hold. (77)

As previously discussed in chapter one, *Absalom, Absalom!* is preoccupied with memory, history, and a national racial identity; but it's not as easy to detect the concerns and motives in the earlier *Light in August*. Ironically, the fact that much of the plot is not second- or third-hand further confuses any reading that searches for the story's preoccupations. This is because, I believe, the core subject of this novel is American racial identity – what it was and what it will be. With the later novel, we can eventually outline the thirteen number of narratives and degrees of storytelling. In *Light in August*, this laborious task would seem to be less necessary and yet the narratives here remain incomplete as if the novel mocks any attempts at fully grasping a story – or, better put, at fully grasping a story of origins. Consequently, a story without a beginning cannot have an end. This is the critique and the prognosis that Joe Christmas's narrative demonstrates. *Light in August* displays, rather than resolves, such tensions. I suggest that the very form of the novel and its contents affect a historical and cultural reconstruction. This reconstruction simultaneously enacts a critique of that reconstruction. The racially ambiguous figures, Charles Bon and Joe Christmas, imagined or real, embody this display, critique and the tension between. Joe Christmas's confrontations demonstrate are but one example of this.

The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice...racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and reformed. We use the term *racial*

*formation* to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formation is the treatment of race as a *central axis* of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception.

(Omi and Winant, 12)

When Saldana publicly skirts any discussion of her racial background she gives voice to those moments “when we encounter someone whom we cannot *conveniently* racially categorize – someone who is...racially ‘mixed’...Such an encounter becomes *a source of discomfort...*” (Omi and Winant, 12, emphasis mine). The scholars conclude “[w]ithout a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity” (12). An identity and a story are one and the same in this chapter and, I suggest, in *Light in August*. Accordingly, the interracial identity and its inherent inabilities, refusals to be anything else mean that to tell of it warrants a story with no ending. Even worse than having *no* identity would be to have the *wrong* identity. I introduce this here, intentionally in the discourse of the visual and race, because while their discussions remain devoid of psychoanalytic vocabulary, to borrow from Cheng, they come close to identifying fantasy as the structuring principle of racial formation (Cheng, 167). And it is the horror within this fantasy – and what this horror reveals, that there can exist an intimacy fully disavowed – that we can explicitly trace between our narratives and their depictions. For example, there is a distinct line between when Joe Christmas tells Bobbie Allen, “I got some nigger blood in me” (196) and the line delivered by the late Elizabeth Taylor, in the movie *Raintree County*, when

she explains that “the worst of fates to befall whites [is] ‘havin’ a little Negra blood in ya’ – just one little teeny drop and a person’s all Negra” (Omi and Winant 11). If we tell ourselves stories in order to live, to cite the great storyteller Joan Didion, why do we tell *these* stories and why do they keep us alive?

In their complete definition and explanation of racial formation Omi and Winant argue that we “become *disoriented* when people do not” perform in such a way that obeys the logic borne out of our racial imaginations (12, emphasis mine). Leslie Fiedler spoke of the same sensation when he described “...the constant confusion of identities [in Twain’s Finn]” in his polemic “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey” (*The Partisan Review*, 1948). Fiedler shocked nearly every scholarly circle when arguing that at the heart of nineteenth-century American literature was an as-yet unrecognized and disavowed archetype: the archetype of the “mutual [homoerotic] love of a white man and a colored” (146) as read in Ishmael and Queequeg, Natty Bumpo and Chingachgook; Huck and Jim: “lying side by side on a raft born by the endless river toward an impossible escape” (145). The ensuing disavowal of these relationships, Fiedler said, is an “implacable nostalgia for the infantile” (144), the (white) American dream of boyhood, of “good clean fun” and “self-congratulatory buddy-buddiness” (144). In sum, the white American, “dreams of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended” (151). There’s no disagreement here with Fiedler’s homoerotic model in literature. This project, and this chapter specifically, complicate the relationship between the black and white male models in literary works. And to bring to surface the idea that beyond the homoerotic is the *familial* when considering interracial relationships between black and white men. A strong, weighty motif in *Light in August* is this discomfort with

the suspiciously familiar. For all of the naming, misnaming, misidentification, and corrections committed by Joe Christmas and anyone who regards him it's Lena Grove – who never actually meets Christmas – whose confusion threatens to be most significant. When Reverend Hightower meets her at the cabin after her child is born she has difficulty telling him what happened:

‘Mixed up?’

‘[Mrs. Hines] keeps on talking about him like his pa was that—the one in jail, that Mr Christmas. She keeps on, *and then I get mixed up* and it's like sometimes I cant—*like I am mixed up too and I think that his pa is that Mr—Mr Christmas too—*’ (409, emphasis mine)

If Mrs. Hines – Christmas's grandmother – “keeps on talking” in this mixed-up manner confusing Lena who mixes up *their* (mother and child) story then her baby – the next generation of the South – will also be “mixed-up.” In the following novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, Shreve expresses a similar confusion only, more than once, he interrupts he and Quentin's storytelling exclaiming “Wait, wait!” Previously discussed in chapter one, when re-examining Shreve's pleas in light of the characters in *Light in August*, I read his words as more of a plea to halt the inevitable, rather than to pause so that he may have more of a hand in the creation of the Sutpen story – as if he's protesting the continuation of a narrative beyond anyone's control. Returning to Omi and Winant and their apt observation that race “[has become] ‘common sense’ – a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world” (13) and Faulkner's white characters are all “mixed up” about who is who and on what happened then the adage that we tell ourselves stories



in order to live holds that much more ominous support. The story of Joe Christmas, and of the racial imagination, is nothing smaller than the story of American survival.

Let's reconsider Saldana's sound bite next to Christmas's self-identification whilst also regarding the remarks of Spillers on what she calls the "symbolic integrity" of "male" and "female," as two subject positions that lose validity and differentiation within a regime of captivity. When opening "Mama's Baby" she starts by telling us who she is and who she is not: "Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name" (65). Other figures in the novel refer to Christmas as a foreigner or by the name he tells them, "Christmas." Except for two crucial instances: at the orphanage when the McEacherns and the matron decide he will take on his adoptive parents' name: "[h]e didn't even bother to say to himself *My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas...*" (145, emphasis original); and later, when he first speaks to Bobbie Allen and when asked for his name he replies, " 'It's not McEachern...[i]t's Christmas'" (184). In both moments Christmas defines himself by exactly what he is not: a white man named McEachern. In "Mama's Baby" Spillers continues to list and explore the relationship between enslavement, its negations and affirmations to the black woman I suggest this same sentiment works when exploring the interracial body in Faulkner. Indeed, Spillers explicitly cites Joe Christmas when saying that characters such as he, Caliban or Heathcliff "[have] no official female equivalent" (65). Since my purposes here are not explicitly concerned with gender I argue that the interracial sexual spectacles in "Big Boy Leaves Home" and the interracial figures Charles Bon, Bigger Thomas, or Joe Christmas do not have any official *American* equivalent – not as we regard and have always regarded American identity as being synonymous with white. They are without

country yet inextricably tied to it, hence threatening the relationship between whites and country.

#### **4.2 Passing Notes: Reading Interracial Skin**

How to tell our (his)stories drives the imagination centering *Light in August* and race marks the linear time in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi symbolizing our fraught relationship with American history since the Civil War. The passage of time is synonymous with the color of skin, consequently our skin tells us who we are and why. At the 1985 International Symposium on Richard Wright at the University of Mississippi Gerald McWorter gave the closing remarks:

‘Symbolically, Wright in his creative expression and concretely in his life dealt extensively with flight as movement away from racist terror and class exploitation — away from the South, away from racist ideas and values, away from the USA, away from provincialism. His flight was also to something, essentially to the ultimate conditions of freedom as promised by the West at her best.’<sup>3</sup>

Flight is a crucial theme for *Light in August*, as well, and in very similar ways. Indeed, as much as flight shape the stories of Bigger Thomas and Big Boy, flight and passing direct the fates of Lena Grove and Joe Christmas.

*Light in August* is another representation of the American imagination as we have come to form and regard it since this nation’s founding. In this regard, Faulkner has

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<sup>3</sup> McWorter, Gerald. “[W]right vs. Wrong: Richard Wright and the Black Studies Movement,” Wright Symposium. Oxford, MS. 23 November 1985, cited in Graham, Maryemma. “Introduction.” *Callaloo*, No. 28, Richard Wright: A Special Issue (Summer, 1986), 445.

repeatedly fictionalized the ways that our imagining both directs and responds to our lives. Similar to Shreve's final predictions at the closing of *Absalom, Absalom!* Reconstruction turned history and its telling of it into how we predict our future: "But we done freed them now, both black and white alike. They'll bleach out now. In a hundred years they will be white folks again. Then maybe we'll let them come back into America" (247-48). This chapter examines *Light in August* in order to locate and describe the imagination framing and driving the novel in order to then define the ensuing questions about identity and selfhood in the novel and, more broadly, about how we define and regard our collective racial identities.

In the middle of both *Light in August* and *Native Son*, a white jury condemns Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas for punishment of their murders of white women, the former's crime is never factually confirmed. In Christmas's case, it's the *perceived* crime they judge him for: "...[the] Grand Jury was preparing behind locked doors to take the life of a man whom few of them had ever seen to know, for having taken the life of a woman whom even fewer of them had known to see" (416). For both judgments it's less the crime than the perceived, suggested and imagined act which then *becomes* a crime: sex with a white woman by a black man, interracial sex. This spectacle, already shared in the whites' imagination confronts and condemns Bigger Thomas and Joe Christmas. Indeed, returning to the previous chapter and to Big Boy in *Uncle Tom's Children*, it's the *sight* of black nudity that results in Bobo's lynching and Big Boy's escape. The sight, whether it's real or imagined, triggers real action and violence here. In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995) Eric Lott describes the relationship between the image and its subject: "'Black' figures were there *to be looked at*, shaped to

the demands of *desire*; they were screens on which audience *fantasy* could rest, securing white spectators' position as superior, controlling, not to say owning, figures" (28). Lott provides a socio-economic, psychological approach to how we may read Joe Christmas's physicality. His "parchment" skin serves his spectators to read their own story on his body. Faulkner compounds his own motif with notes: the tube of toothpaste turned "promissory note" that leads to his leaving his orphanage, the unseen but detailed "note" that passed from Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas during their tryst and the note Joe Brown sends to the sheriff by way of a black child: "Thus the promissory note which he had signed with a tube of toothpaste on that afternoon two months ago was recalled" (143); "He never saw her put a note there, yet she insisted on his visiting it daily; when he did so, the letter would be there. [...] Sometimes the notes would tell him not to come until a certain hour" (259). Burden's communications with Christmas direct his bodily movements and the interracial passing and interracial sex to follow. Her notes lead him "to that house which no white person save himself had entered in years and in which for twenty years now she had been all night alone; for a whole week she forced him to climb into a window to come to her" (259). So it comes as no surprise when it's the note he never bothers to read that coincidentally leads to both of their ends: "It seemed to him that he could actually hear the words inside him: you should have read that note. You should have read that note thinking, 'I am going to do something. Going to do something'" (275-6). Strangely enough, it's *without* the certainty of Burden's written direction that Christmas is all the more aware that his fate is about to take a sudden turn. It is the *lack* of boundary that causes his disruption.

*Les enfants de mauvais souvenir* means “the children of bad memories,” a phrase used to describe the children born from rape during the Rwandan genocide in 1994. When reporting on the Rwandan war’s tenth anniversary, Emily Wax referred to this population as the “living legacy of a time of death.”<sup>4</sup> It is this same wound of slavery, rape, and the most sinister notion of white and black bodies *willingly* having sex that marks the black and interracial figures in Faulkner’s *Light in August*. Just as the characters in Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* serve as prototypes for his Bigger Thomas, Joe Christmas in *Light in August* shares certain features with his more unstable literary relative, Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!* Instead of two white young men re-telling and creating a story of the American South within the novel’s framing narrative, we are presented with the story of miscegenation as an integral part of the novel in *Light in August*. Here, we learn immediately that Joe Christmas is, if nothing else, an outsider. As the novel progresses we learn, as do the characters in the novel, that he is an outsider in more ways than one.

Christmas is an interracial figure whose mind we gain full access to, but ultimately, he disappears into the novel’s ether: the further and further he runs from persecution the less we are privy to his thoughts. This culminates in the final chase between he and Percy Grimm, who shoots Joe Christmas and castrates him as he bleeds to death. It’s only fitting that the character most similar to him, Charles Bon, would re-appear as a living ghost. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Bon does factually exist, but that’s about all the remaining characters and readers can correctly ascertain. His story of interracial origins is crafted by people who cannot possibly know or verify this fact. Black or not, in

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<sup>4</sup> Max, Emily. “Rwandans Are Struggling To Love Children of Hate.” *The Washington Post* 28 Mar. 2004, A ed., sec. 01: n. pag. Web.

the later novel the consequences of Bon's actions do closely resemble those of Joe Christmas. To that end, both works speak to larger notions of American history, narrative, and specifically, a kind of living death that is particular to, Faulkner's work suggests, our American identity. The Civil War split an already early, fragile, national identity and slavery became the great unifier or divider among those left in its aftermath. What was a domestic conflict over the future of its national economy became a moral issue that still aggressively charges us in our words, thoughts and actions within the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. If slavery is the curse of the American South, according to Faulkner, then the miscegenated body is its legacy and its future. If *Absalom, Absalom!* shows us how that curse can ruin American patriarchy and how it haunts the American imagination, then *Light in August* illustrates how the black American body embodies and carries this legacy while simultaneously threatening its precarious existence.

His interracial body poses and symbolizes a cultural disorientation that threatens a severe destabilization and yet his figure is the center of the novel *for this very reason*. Whereas in *Absalom, Absalom!* Charles Bon presumably "knows" who he is and it's the *what* he knows that's the problem, Joe Christmas does *not* know, nobody else can know and *this is the problem*. Thusly, the interracial, for the American nation, poses less of a threat about racial ambiguities and threats to any concepts of purity, and more so threatens our very notions of who we are as citizens in the first place. It is a question of history and knowledge that this novel poses. Spillers's language in "Mama's Baby" lends credence to sentiments of disorientation in slavery and the imaginations required to support it:

Even though we tend to parody and simplify matters to behave as if the various civil codes of the slave-holding United States were monolithically informed, unified, and executed in their application [...] we read it nevertheless as exactly this – the *peak points*, the salient and characteristic features of a human and social procedure that evolves over a natural historical sequence and represents, consequently, the narrative *shorthand* of a transaction that is riddled, *in practice*, with contradictions, accident, and surprise.[...] For example, aspects of Article 461 of the South Carolina Civil Code call attention to just the sort of uneasy oxymoronic character that the ‘peculiar institution’ attempts to sustain in transforming *personality* into *property*. (78)

What I suggest here concerns the body that continues past enslavement and captivity: the same body as before the war but now there is a different, yet to be told, story.

What’s at stake then is this notion of self when contextualized in the history of a nation based on human bondage. This novel presents it as the story of race and the story of *stories*. Cheng discusses the relationships between images, photography and a national need for a historically informed identity in her chapter, *History In/ Against the Fragment* on the late artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and her fragmented documentary autobiography, *Dictee*. Stating that, “[w]hat we are given in *Dictee* is an afterimage of the event, *and* it is the afterimage that we have to deal with and that has been placed in constant and *uncanny* circulation.[...] In this way the image effects, paradoxically, both attachment and detachment” (145, emphasis original), I wonder what, then, are the images in *Light in August* and what challenges do they depict and pose. Unlike images

without context such as a photograph without a caption this novel presents images situated in a certain context but not obeying what Omi and Winant call a “racial etiquette” that prevails over all other societal systems. The numerous descriptions of Joe Christmas – what Heidi Kathleen Kim calls “a multiplicity of adjectives accentuating ... racial fluidity” – by himself, by other characters including the narrator, all point to the disorientation they describe when defining *racial formation*.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the following descriptions that Joe Christmas “looked like a phantom, a spirit, strayed out of its own world, and lost...” (114) or “ [t]hat there was something funny about him” (308) fit neatly within Omi and Winant’s *discomfort* or *painful* conceptions of race. Discussing the published works of Ouidah Equiano and Claude Meillassoux Spillers points out how melanin came to be and, arguably, still is regarded in social and cultural contexts. Her reading helps to understand the characters’ descriptions of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*:

Hierarchical impulse in *both* De Azurara's and Equiano's narratives translates all *perceived* difference as a fundamental degradation *or* transcendence, but at least in Equiano's case, cultural practices are not observed in any intimate connection with skin color. For all intents and purposes, the politics of melanin, not isolated in its strange powers from the imperatives of a mercantile and competitive economics of

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<sup>5</sup> Kim, Heidi K. “The Foreigner in Yoknapatawpha: Rethinking Race in Faulkner’s Global South.” *Philological Quarterly* Spring 90.2/3 (2011): 199. EBSCO. Web.



European nation-states, will make of ‘transcendence’ and "degradation" the basis of a historic violence that will rewrite the histories of modern Europe and black Africa (71, emphasis original).

The invasions — disruptions — in the novel’s plots all point to its most sexually interracial moment: the affair between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden. Returning to the narrative hiccup when the narrator refers to Christmas as “negro” and then “white” *when* this happens and *where* matter a great deal. Christmas enters the house of a white woman as a black man, and a white man, and finally, a biracial man. The Burden house stands (and burns) as a metaphor for American radicalized imaginary, especially when considering Sutpen’s Hundred in *Absalom, Absalom!* Returning to the Burden/Christmas notes,

Sometimes the notes would tell him not to come until a certain hour, to that house which no white person *save himself* had entered in years and in which for twenty years now she had been all night alone; for a whole week she forced him to climb into a window to come to her. (259, emphasis mine)

We are informed, not for the first or only time, of his race. But, in the previous chapter, in an exchange between the two lovers, we are reminded, again, that Joe Christmas suspects his racial lineage (the first time being, tellingly, with Bobbie Allen):

‘You dont have any idea who your parents were?’

‘Except that one of them was part nigger. Like I told you before.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘*I dont know it.*’ (254, emphasis mine)

At some point during the story nearly everyone refers to Christmas as a foreigner and expresses confusion about his race, including Christmas himself, but the former passage above demonstrates the one instance when the narrator disrupts his own telling and describes Christmas as *white* and this disruption coincides with when he goes to have sex with a white woman. Put another way, the narrator disagrees with Christmas's prior admission, experiences his own disorientation and fixes Christmas as white in order for his allowance in a white woman's home.

Christmas's racial identity comes up more than once in the context of his sexual relationships (the various white women he slept with as a young man, Bobbie Allen, Burden, and Percy Grimm whose castration of Christmas is interracial sex by proxy). Why sex and race? Identity, specifically racial identity, cannot nor will it be escaped from. The narrator's jumping from black to white regarding Joe Christmas speaks to the confusion that the *sight* of the interracial causes. When Joanna presses him on his background he admits that he actually does not know. Just like with his townspeople it is the *not* knowing that causes Christmas the most anxiety. Indeed, he then quips, "If I'm not, damned if I haven't wasted a lot of time" (254) – although the time wasted greatly depends on what's omitted after "not." Does he mean he's not white or not black? Nodding to Quentin and Shreve, if we do not know then we cannot tell our story right. When this happens we lose our history and consequently, lose our identity.

Christmas enters the novel as someone at least *treated* like a white man even though he's working a "negro's job" (31). But he doesn't fit the model of a white man or a black man: he works at the sawmill at a "negro's job" but he sells bootleg whiskey to

his, presumably, white customers – white men who must go to a white plantation to then enter a negro cabin at the Burden plantation. Christmas’s figure begs the question of who’s actually doing the transgressing and trespassing. His actions are less significant to him and more impactful to those who must *react* to him. Thusly, when Burden is found murdered, Christmas’s foreignness disappears and he’s judged, pursued, and killed as a black man. The narrator tells us that a white man hasn’t entered the Burden house in twenty years and, as far as we can tell, no white man continues to – they enter the negro cabin and the *foreigner* enters the house. But it’s a house of a white woman and racial etiquette only allows for a white man to enter; so, it is this upset, this not-knowing that’s disallowed in Yoknapatawpha. Joe Christmas – the interracial body and the immediate disorientation and disruption it triggers – unravels the fraught black-white binary holding the postbellum South together and collapses it. Accordingly, the townspeople must wipe out the figure who not only will not cohere to the categories of white and black but has the audacity to expose the fact that such categories do not even exist in the first place:

For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town *like he dared them to touch him*, when he *ought* to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even *knew* he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too. (331, emphasis mine)

“Memory believes before knowing remembers” Faulkner warns us almost midway through the novel. And when reading the above admonishment then Christmas is judged because he acted off of knowledge and not the faulty memory of the town. His refusal to act congruously with one race or another – by his appearance – nullifies his existence.

“[R]ace is not appearance, but actions,” Kim concludes, “What has happened to the

category of the foreigner? It has ceased to exist” (209). The interracial paradoxically affirms the black-white binary because it wipes out foreignness.

Why does Joe Christmas undergo these multiple interracial transformations when entering Burden’s house? Is there to more to make of the fact that after he enters the Burden house as a white man, Joanna shouts “Negro, Negro, Negro!” once he’s sexually entered her (260)? Possibly when considering that her expectations of who he will be and what he will do as a “negro leader” are just as overwhelming as the projections of his townspeople who get more excited when they cannot categorize him. Eric Sundquist describes this town as a:

[c]limate of fantasy in which the evidence [of miscegenation], whichever way it may point, counts for little beside the suspicion that overwhelms and submerges it, repressing and distorting it at the same time. *Light in August* is an extended meditation on this fantasy, extended by Faulkner’s desire to work out every conceivable variation, on every level he could imagine, within the limits of one sustained narrative.<sup>6</sup>

And why does a similar yet notably opposite process occur when Christmas enters the negro church: “[a]t three o’clock Wednesday morning a negro rode into town on a saddleless mule. [...] Then they saw that the man was white” (321)? Such moments of physical, racial, and subjective passing suggest a more fluid type of identity for the interracial figure. Regina Fadiman’s study on the novel’s revisions traces how Faulkner purposely revised *Light in August* to portray Christmas as indistinctly as possible such as his deletions of “rust-colored hair” and “hazel-eyes” to further Christmas’s rootlessness.

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<sup>6</sup> Sundquist, Eric J. *Faulkner: A House Divided*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, 68.

These categorical upsets marked in the skin continue in *Absalom, Absalom!* wherein Charles Bon's grandmother shares Christmas's "parchment-colored skin." Kim points out yet another layer of confusion between the novels when comparing the descriptions of their respective interracial figures:

During [Joe Christmas's] childhood, the woman at the orphanage privately gloats that at the colored orphanage he will look like a 'pea in a can of coffee beans' (*Light in August*, 122). But Clytie, the illegitimate half-white Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is also constantly described as coffee-colored. It is Joe's contrast with the coffee color that makes him so confusing. (211)

To die without dying is to lose (or never have) recognition by the rest of society as a human subject. Surveying hundreds of slave colonies around the world Orlando Patterson explains this "social death" as:

Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war. But almost as frequently, the death commuted was punishment for some capital offense, or death...The condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death. Slavery was not a pardon; it was, peculiarly, a conditional commutation. The execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness.[...] the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson. (*Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 1982, 5)

The narratives of Charles Bon and Joe Christmas, demonstrate a performative self-abnegation that calls attention to the facts of *why* they were never supposed to have

existed in the first place; their self-erasure is, in essence, a synchronous self-definition. Accordingly, nihilism is not what these figures expound but, rather, they illustrate Patterson's social death:

The essence of slavery is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and the secular. Already dead, he lives outside the mana of the gods and can cross the boundaries with social and supernatural impunity. (51)

What happens when what was previously marked as an object is now marked as the subject? The attempts to The presence of Christmas and Bon shadows and disrupts what's regarded as American and the national imagination. The imagined biracial character Charles Bon meets a social death before his mortal end, but not because of anything he personally imagines (we never gain access to his thoughts as we do with Christmas), so much as because of what *everyone else around him* imagines as real, such as his past and, specifically, his black origins. The racial imagination of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi is one that disallows Bon's existence so he attempts to gain affirmation through the negative recognition from his white father. When this doesn't happen, he hands a gun with to his theoretically white half-brother Henry Sutpen, thereby fusing his social death with the physical. His predecessor in *Light in August* commands his life and death much more passively and only does so after sexually and violently confronting his community with his interracial body. Patterson puts into sociological terms what Faulkner portrayed in his fiction: that to be biracial is to die without dying.

*Light in August* shares much with *Absalom, Absalom!* but there are some key distinctions. Both novels center on an incident that we (the readers and the novel's

characters) actually do not know. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, we do not ever find out the motive behind Henry Sutpen's murder of Charles Bon. We do not ever know if the two men are brothers or if Bon's mother was black. In *Light in August*, the narrator knows and informs the reader of certain "facts" surrounding the major characters in the story. Crucially, though, we're again at the end of a homicide (chronologically speaking between the two novels' publication dates, this would be the first homicide and Bon's murder would be the second). Again, the murder remains unsolved by the novel's conclusion. Joe Christmas is sought and punished for the apparent murder of Joanna Burden, but neither the narrator nor the reader nor the characters finds out exactly what happened to her save that her throat was cut and she burned along with her house. Still, unlike *Absalom, Absalom!*, the novel's characters demonstrate a certainty and satisfaction with the presumption that Joe Christmas killed Joanna Burden – a collective determination absent in the latter book. For both men it's the shared imaginations and the disruptions within it that solidifies their fates, indeed, that kill them. Neither Quentin nor Percy Grimm knows what happened between Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen or Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas. When Grimm castrates Christmas it doesn't matter whether Christmas did or didn't rape Joanna (as far as the reader knows, their sex was completely consensual). Nor is it that a black man had sex with a white woman. What matters, and what warrants his castration, is that *no one can determine if Joe Christmas is white*. Thus, sex between his "foreign" body and her white one is prohibited.

When explaining the *Symbolic* Lacan provides an example of a husband and wife:

If Harry no longer makes himself understood by others, he has by the same token become incomprehensible to them...When we say, 'You are

my wife,' we are also saying, 'I am your husband,' and are thus ourselves no longer the same as we were before these words. (269)

Lacanian analysis provides a better understanding of Joe Christmas's foreignness. Just as *Absalom, Absalom!* is not so much about Thomas Sutpen or Charles Bon than it is about *how we remember* across generations (Quentin) and distance (Shreve) and thusly revealing the imaginaries and symbols driving the narratives of white American identity. *Light in August's* three-dimensional distances – Christmas's running for years and his subsequent escape then return to southern justice, Lena Grove's wandering but determined search, the omniscient narrator, the physical and literary form of the novel – uncovers how racial citizenship is claimed and defined. In so doing, racial anxiety reveals itself, as well. Thusly, when Lacan continues "...if we consider mankind's first words, we note that the password, for instance, has the function – as a sign of recognition – of saving its speaker from death" (269) we can and should read Faulkner's characters (both black, white, and biracial) as *statements of survival*. Christmas's responses to his environment are inconsistent but his *tension* is very consistent.

Paradoxically, the interracial body is a corporeal disruption *and* revelation for Yoknapatawpha County. Its embodied fusion of black and white directly and aggressively confronts precious white supremacist beliefs that purity can (and must) exist by telling us it never existed in the first place. We have to ask what role does the miscegenated body play in this particular literary imagination. Joe Christmas is this body at the center of *Light in August* and what drives its action. Consider the other main players: Reverend Hightower, Byron Bunch, Lena Grove, Percy Grimm and Joanna



Burden. All are affected by Christmas's figure, even those seemingly the farthest removed such as Hightower yet he is the one to last lay eyes on Christmas before his death. Then the meaning behind Lena's confusion tells us that our pursuit of a history is the very thing that creates confusion, especially the regional and racial history of the South. To repeat her exchange with Hightower in full:

'She keeps on *calling him Joey. When his name aint Joey.* And she keeps on....' [...] She keeps on talking about—*She is mixed up someway.* And sometimes *I get mixed up too,* listening, having to...'

'Mixed up?'

'She keeps on talking about him like his pa was that—the one in jail, that Mr Christmas. She keeps on, and then I get mixed up and it's like sometimes I cant—like I am mixed up too *and I think that his pa is that Mr—Mr Christmas* too—... But I know that aint so. I know that's foolish. It's because she keeps on saying it and saying it, and maybe I aint strong good yet, and I get mixed up too. *But I am afraid.....*' (409-10, all emphasis mine)

Faulkner offers up the history and the future of the South when Lena refers to herself, Mrs. Hines and to her baby as "mixed up." In fact, she describes her baby by what he is called by someone else (Mrs. Hines) and by what he "ain't" just as Christmas has done. This confusion, sparked by the visual then committed by language compounds Lena's already unstable footing when it comes to her place and position as a mother.

*Light in August* is a haunted novel particularly when it comes to race – the idea and notion of it. The literal and figurative re-creations and revisions of what race – *black*

and *white* – meant after the Civil War haunts those living in its aftermath, tripping up everyone attempting a continuity from before the war to after. But it's not that interracial sex and its physical, genealogical consequences did not exist or were even kept secret. Indeed, the end of American slavery meant that what was once hidden in plain sight was now *existing* in plain sight. Joe Christmas lives his life fighting off spaces of invisibility when he agitates white and black crowds with his mere presence.

Yet that is its farthest reach. Christmas plays with and fights against his interracial origins: "Sometimes he would remember how he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white" (225). Such interracial anxieties and tensions both in and between bodies progressed into *Absalom, Absalom!* in the life of Charles Etienne, Charles Bon's son who also leads his life with a fury, engaging in physical confrontations with blacks and whites and flailing about his black wife. Grandfather Compson, bailing him out of jail, pleads with him: 'Whatever you are, once you are among strangers, people who don't know you, you can be whatever you will.' (165) but in *Light in August* we learn that it does not matter if the interracial is amongst strangers or not. If anything, we learn that it is just as volatile if not worse than being black.

Etienne does leave and returns with his "charcoal" wife to confront white and black spaces – but it's not his wife he's flaunting but the *choice* he's made with her:

...of furious and incomprehensible and apparently reasonless moving, progression – a maelstrom of faces and bodies through which the man thrust, dragging her behind him, toward or from what, driven by what fury which would not let him rest[...] it was almost a ritual – the man

*apparently hunting out situations in order to flaunt and fling the ape-like body of his charcoal companion in the faces of all and any who would retaliate: the negro stevedores and deckhands...who thought he was a white man and believed it only the more strongly when he denied it; the white men who, when he said he was a negro, believed he lied in order to save his skin...*” (167, emphasis mine)

He has chosen to have black wife meaning he’s chosen to have a black family, a black identity. What Etienne really thrusts in the faces of his white and black spectators that he *has* a choice. It’s worth returning to the Hamblett line cited in this chapter’s introduction to examine in full here. Grandfather Compson finds out that Charles Etienne has been in a fight at a “negro ball” and since been arrested by Jim Hamblett, the town sheriff, who admonishes Etienne:

‘At this time, *while our country is struggling to rise* from beneath the iron heel of a tyrant oppressor, when the very future of the South as a place bearable for our women and children to live in depends on the labor of our own hands, when the tools which we have to use, to depend on, are the pride and integrity and forbearance of black men and the pride and integrity and forbearance of white; that you, I say, *a white man, a white-*’  
(165, emphasis mine)

*This* precedes Hamblett’s “What are you? Who and where did you come from?” The white sheriff is upset that a white man (in his mind) has acted outside of the racial etiquette shakily ruling the South. Furthermore, Etienne’s actions reveal his agency in having the racial choice to barge into segregated spaces.

### 4.3 Inside/Outside and the Foreignness of Self-Knowledge in Faulkner's South

Joe Christmas's identity cannot be determined and this is a problem for everyone involved. His outsidership – the suggestion that he's foreign – is a grand motif throughout the novel. The novel presents a mystery: how can one be an outsider in one's own native land? This is the tension Joe Christmas carries and by those who behold him and must make a determination. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve is an actual foreigner and his obsession with the South stemmed from his actual foreignness. Joe Christmas's narrative embodies and undermines the national (or regional) idea of an outsider. Reconstruction meant that what was once a human object to be owned was now a human subject to be regarded – but where to regard them and how? His body bares the question and answer to what happens when opposing “bloods” are in one body,

‘Oh,’ Christmas said. ‘They might have done that? dug them up after they were already killed, dead? Just when do men that have different blood in them stop hating one another?’ (249)

Our introduction to Joe Christmas is by way of observance: another laborer at the milling factory regards him from a distance, “Is he a foreigner?” (33). Thereby both the reader and the novel's characters are to behold Christmas as an outsider to varying degrees. But this is, at best, a structural matter – the novel setting up the figure in order to extract a larger meaning. Such as the narrator's referring to Christmas as black save one critical juncture: when Christmas and Joanna Burden began their affair. Tellingly, when describing how the lovers meet and Burden's notes instructing him “..to that house which no *white person save himself* had entered in years” (259, italics mine). Such confusion

comes up again in classic Faulknerian form when a “negro” reports about an incident at the church:

...in the middle of a hymn, there had come a tremendous noise from the rear of the church, and turning the congregation *saw a man* standing in the door. The door had not been locked or even shut yet *the man* had apparently grasped it by the knob and hurled it back into the wall so that the sound crashed into the blended voices like a pistol [...] *Then they saw that the man was white.* (321, emphasis mine)

It is not that Christmas is neither black nor white, it's that he is presumed to be whatever others need him to be. He is only referred to as a man by the narrator – by the way of the black man telling the story – and then the black church sees him as a white man only once he comes closer to the pulpit, closer into focus. In addition, the narrator is not telling us what happened but *what someone else* said happened; and, we're to be just as confronted and confused as the “negro” who's reporting the story. To sum up, a black man tells a white man that another white man invaded his church and that he did so, presumably, as if he were a black man. The invasion is both physical (“...the man had apparently grasped it by the knob and hurled it back into the wall so that the sound crashed into the blended voices like a pistol shot”) and *intra-* and *interracial*. The black congregation presumed that his entry, violent or not, meant the man was black. When this is not the case, “Then they saw that his face was not black, and a woman began to shriek...” (322), there is an immediate *interracial* invasion.

Confusion, disorientation and the disruption triggering these states are murkier but deeply powerful themes here.. When discussing Chinese laborers in Mississippi as a

real presence of a racial “other” in Faulkner’s work Kim points out that “[w]hile it is unproductive to pronounce on whether Joe Christmas’s unknown father was ultimately black or white, Mexican or Chinese, it is certain that the confusion about Joe equally applies to the initial status of Chinese laborers in Mississippi” (208). I suggest that such confusion can and should be equally applied to the *future* of the remaining characters in the novel starting with Lena’s unnamed baby with admittedly “mixed-up” guardians. If blood is the predetermination of how one’s life unfolds then what happens to one who has both opposing bloods in one body? Christmas doesn’t have an answer and lives the question through his actions. Lena Grove fears that we get “mixed up” and move forward without ever knowing who we are. Joanna Burden doesn’t seem afraid at all.

Joe Christmas is not the only foreigner in *Light in August*. In her own words, Joanna Burden tells Joe about her family,

And we were foreigners, strangers, that thought differently from the people whose country we had come into without being asked or wanted. And he was French, half of him. Enough French to respect anybody’s love for the land where he and his people were born and to understand that a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act. I think that was it. (255)

And, later, when the novel’s narrator describes the her life and death:

She had lived such a quiet life, attended so to her own affairs, that she bequeathed to the town in which she had been born and lived and died a foreigner, an outlander, a kind of heritage of astonishment and outrage, for

which, even though she had supplied them at last with an emotional barbecue, a Roman holiday almost, they would never forgive her and let her be dead in peace and quiet. (289)

Christmas presents the physical and racial embodiment of slavery and freedom, objection and personhood, and the interracial sex that absolutely occurred. Burden's narrative – as her surname suggests – is a different weighty matter. The Burden clan may not have transgressed on racial grounds (sexually speaking, though Joanna does come to this, as well) but the *weight* of the shared history that they openly acknowledge but cannot reconcile. The Burden's do not accept that someone such as Christmas is a foreigner – they see it as the self-preservation distancing that it is – but that also means becoming outsiders themselves. Joanna's sexual relationship with Joe Christmas becomes the inevitable consequence of her familial "burden." Her ultimate decision and death are consequential, as well.

On the meaning of origins, Patterson writes:

Alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication. Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate....He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. (5)

In this light what are figures such as Bon or Christmas attempting to achieve? Bon wants his (possibly) white father's recognition at all costs; but Christmas's narrative is trickier as his story begins as an orphan. Already the question of origins is a big one given his place as an orphan. All that follows are the projections, some more informed than others, by those around him, starting with the dietician onto his parchment skin. But Christmas is not the only "inscrutable" person in this story. Lena Grove's baby who remains nameless has two parents who are "mixed up" about his birth. Lena's baby is rootless in all senses: he is without a home and without a father. This latter loss is key considering the obvious significance of paternity and inheritance. His only self-knowledge will come from his mother – *partus sequitur ventrem* – who enters and leaves the novel as a wanderer.

#### **4.4 The Forgetfulness of Knowledge and the All-Knowing Interracial**

Joe Christmas may not know he's going to die but he knows something is going to happen to him. He tells himself "something is going to happen to me" more than once in the story and then, indeed, "something" does. But before realizing his death and castration there are other moments and events that could also be the "something" of which he speaks. What seems to be the point here is that we cannot escape our heritage – indeed, it comes crawling through our windows and fathering indiscrutable figures-- and, in Faulkner's country, heritage tells us who we are and what lies ahead. Joe Christmas is stuck in between a full life and social death: he knows of *something* but he can never name it. Kim tells us,

Faulkner's work, far from even attempting to close the gap or classify its characters, complicates whiteness and blackness by introducing newcomers who force townsfolk to think about their society more closely.



His careful examination of the figures who fall outside the categories of black and white destabilizes these categories. (222)

Christmas's rootlessness is both his freedom as well as his downfall as he can never name his own fate but his presence gives a better, more ominous articulation of everyone else's. He rebelliously transgresses both racial sides but doing so ultimately threatens his livelihood. Joe Christmas defines who he is by the processes miscegenation and relationships, thereby looking for others who, in their reactions to his race, tell him who *he* is. William Faulkner's work illuminates the contrivance and manufactured nature of race at the core of our shared but divided interracial imaginations and national identity – yet one that was scripted into our legislative coda where it remains an active presence.

William Faulkner had his imaginary map of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi and, now, our country has its own chance to imagine place and, thus, redefine our identity and history. For example, in July of 2013 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a key part of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 -- the map that determines which states must get federal permission before they change their voting laws.<sup>7</sup> The VRA is widely considered to be the most important piece of civil rights legislation in American history. The 5-4 ruling places the future of the law to Congress to redraw the map of the following southern states: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. In the ruling opinion Chief Justice John Roberts cited census data showing black voter turnout as currently exceeding white turnout in five of the six states originally covered by the law. Justice Robert's explains in the court's ruling:

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<sup>7</sup> *Shelby Cnty. v. Holder*, No. 12-96, 2013 BL 167707 (U.S. June 25, 2013). Supreme Court of the United States. 25 June 13. *Supreme Court of the United States*.

Our country has changed, and while any racial discrimination in voting is too much, Congress must ensure that the legislation it passes to remedy that problem speaks to current conditions. [...] Problems remain in these States and others, but there is no denying that, due to the Voting Rights Act, our Nation has made great strides. (16)

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg gave the dissenting opinion and, along with listing a slew of race-based voter discrimination in recent history, condemns the ruling: “[Today] the Court makes no genuine attempt to engage with the massive legislative record that Congress assembled. Instead, it relies on increases in voter registration and turnout *as if that were the whole story*” (23, emphasis mine). And it is the “story” that Faulkner is concerned with when he writes, “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders” (118). We believe only what we can recall, a nation that refuses to see past its nose. The postracial discourse after the first and second presidential elections of Barack Obama and the language of progress in the recent Supreme Court decision officiates a contemporary epoch in which race is acknowledged but deemed unimportant and, therefore, suggests a time in which oppression and discrimination’s endemic relationship to this country’s origin and national identity is immediately disappeared.

### **Conclusion: *What are you?***

He wasn't black. He had no black blood in him. On page 269 of the October 1990 Vintage International Edition, it states 'Sometimes the notes would tell him not to come until a certain hour, to that house which no white person save [Christmas] had entered in years.' Faulkner is telling the reader straight that Christmas is white. He is only called 'nigger' and other racist terms for blacks because that was the way they talked down to people.<sup>1</sup>

The above is a comment on a 2009 message board discussing *Light in August*.

The conversation regarding the racial make-up of Faulkner's characters, of any of us, is far from over. Our national American history of slavery and Jim Crow racism tells us that flesh can represent narratives that dictate our physical movements. Our past physical landscape consisted of signs telling us just what sort of stories our bodies could tell based on the color of our skin – one of access and movement or of denial and stillness. When I write of "freedom", "self-destructing", and "vengeance" I am describing similar physical and symbolic acts. "Freedom", Wright and Faulkner demonstrate respectively, is a state of being in racial terms achieved through a physical act of liberating vengeance as well as a cerebral act taking place in memory and imagination. By self-destructive escape and disappearance from the oppressive landscape the black subject escapes *being seen* by oppressors. Consequentially he achieves two radical freedoms: leaping out of the very skin that marks him for oppression and revenge against white oppressors whose identities depend upon his blackness.

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<sup>1</sup> Zhan, Janet. "Joe Christmas' Struggle of Identity in Faulkner's *Light in August*." *Yahoo! Contributor Network*. Yahoo!, 29 July 2009. Web. 29 May 2013. <<http://voices.yahoo.com/joe-christmas-struggle-identity-faulkners-light-3899804.html?cat=38>>.

One of the many fascinating questions African-American literature pursues concerns what it means to be free. These paradoxes involve notions of racial identification, violence and vengeance, and the haunting threat of race-mixing – all concerns that I aim to address and explore in my dissertation. Richard Wright and William Faulkner complicated this thread of violence, freedom, and paradox that the authors above thematized in their later works; and they do this in the context of miscegenation. Blackness has been and remains the “mark of oppression” -- of the violence marking American identity. If “progress” translates to distance from oppression, and the oppressed physically symbolize this same oppression, then for one to escape oppression she must leave her own marked flesh behind. I'm interested in the conundrums and complexities that Faulkner and Wright evoke when considered against our fictitious American notions of the imagination and how they wrote out these anxieties in their literature. One of my central questions is whether our historical memory and consideration of collective imagination can still be defined as such when we have these ruptures in literature that describe such contrary scenes of violence and vengeance. And what does it mean when such violence is already within our imaginations *and* enacted in reality?

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What could the tragic murder of Trayvon Martin and the resulting public media frenzy have in common with the recent blockbuster record-breaking release of the film *The Hunger Games*? The interracial and the racist imaginations inextricably entwined at work together with guilt at the connecting center. It is not necessary to go into the

myriad media reports on the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in alleged self-defense except to note the thread of discourse on the ethnicity of Zimmerman (Hispanic) and the concept of “walking while black” (meaning to do so is to be a walking threat because said subject would be perceived as a threat regardless of his actions). In a similar fashion it is not so much the movie that’s pertinent to this project as is its public reception. In her essay *I See White People: “Hunger Games” and a Brief History of Cultural Whitewashing (Attention, everyone: Racism is BACK!)*<sup>2</sup> Lindy West brilliantly discusses the larger meaning deduced from the rampant Twitter fury amongst teenagers (*The Hunger Games* is based on a young adult novel, the first in a trilogy) when upon viewing the film they witnessed the character, Rue – described in the novel as having thick dark hair, dark satiny brown skin and "golden eyes" – played by a black child (notedly, the author herself, Suzanne Collins when interviewed, describes Rue as “African American”). Yet in response to the film many teens tweeted vitriolic racist bigoted expressions of outrage at Rue being “a nigger” and thus not caring as much that she dies.

West goes on to decry what many of those who study literature may already suspect if not know: that when reading or, on a larger and more significant scale, imagining and seeing there is already a set of molds in mind and there are also mines lying in wait (Morrison discusses this dynamic in racial terms in *Playing in the Dark*). When these mines are triggered in the mind the effects on the body are violent and lethal

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<sup>2</sup> West, Lindy. "I See White People: Hunger Games and a Brief History of Cultural Whitewashing." *Jezebel*. Gawker Media, 27 Mar. 2012. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. <gawker.com>.

i.e. the gun in Zimmerman's hand or in the minds and voices of moviegoers. Regarding the Zimmerman/Martin case and its connection to the reception and tweets above the majority of our population holds images in its minds despite and/or because of what has formed individual imaginations – individual imaginations that are tied to that of a collective (and collectively violent) one – and it is the mutual relationship between the collective and the individual that is culturally relevant for its dangerous outcomes.

What the tweeting teens and Zimmerman (the latter, allegedly) have in common are their imaginations that were triggered by mismatch, by a movement or a subject not fitting in the space it's withheld in. In one instance, despite the author's own remarks and the novel's language, many white Americans refused to personally accept a black person embodying and portraying a character who's portrayed in literature as, at the very least, not white when they witness this portrayal on screen. In the other scenario despite his being unarmed with a deadly weapon or the fact that he, too, lived in the same gated community (in essence, a space of privilege where walking while black can occur) a black minor was possibly killed for not fitting the imagination of George Zimmerman.

The latter situation is, of course, more charged because a young man is dead. But, couldn't Zimmerman share the same imagination as those who refuse to physically accept a black body portraying a body already pre-determined as white? Zimmerman's ethnicity has been called into question because only a white person can commit a racist act. While it is true only a member of the oppressive majority can be racist, that does not, necessarily mean only the majority can commit a racist act. Anyone can do so due to the encompassing racist imagination that no one is immune to as it is both individual and

collective; and given that it's borne from the core of racism no one remains untouchable from its grasp.

This project has questioned what makes up the collective imagination at the forefront of our critical attention, inquires into the conditions and ramifications of guilt, racism, and the boundaries of social and individual identity and action. Although it focuses on early twentieth-century works of American fiction, it generates and addresses questions that resonate beyond that particular historical and literary framework. This project has addressed canonical literature in a new light and puts it in a more contemporary context that is imperative for how we come to address and understand it in higher education and for our cultural development today.

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“You’re my brother.”  
“No I’m not. I’m the nigger who’s going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me.”<sup>3</sup>

“What I killed for, I *am!*”<sup>4</sup>

In these few lines William Faulkner and Richard Wright reveal the fragile core of American history: slavery and its consequences to the American present. The racial tension between these imagined brothers remains our collective cultural conundrum for centuries long after the Civil War: the spontaneous existence of property and man in one

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<sup>3</sup> Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom! the Corrected Text*. New York: Random House, 1993, 286.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, Richard. *Native Son: The Restored Text by the Library of America*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005. 392.

being and his conflicted relationship to his owner/fellow-citizen/possible relation. Essentially, the Civil War brought to the surface the uniquely American human condition: how does my property become my brother? William Faulkner's literature articulates and sheds light on this query. Richard Wright's later works *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Native Son* (1940) serve as a kind of racially reflective mirror to Faulkner's work and, most importantly, both authors of different races and eras (but of similar geographical backgrounds) were actually working from personal places of guilt. This guilt – exposed on the pages of their works – exposes unresolved pain, anger and even self-loathing in each of the author's psyche, respectively.

*The Hunger Games*'s Rue went from dark-skinned to white to black to “nigger” and, thus, worthless in the white imagination; Trayvon Martin's black body was in a gated community creating a shocking mismatch in the imagination of George Zimmerman -- needless to say, the story of the racial imagination is not solely about the body, nor is it about "the past" as such, but it does pose questions about the limits of narrative (personal or literary) to account for the body and its transformation(s). Finite answers are most likely not to be found (nor desired) but the pursuit, itself, is a clear necessity and a great addition to the scholarship of black and cultural studies.

The works of Richard Wright and William Faulkner are mirror images of each other and each illustrates American race relations in distinctly powerful and prescient ways. While Faulkner portrays race and American identity through sex and its relationship to the imagination, Wright reveals a violent undercurrent beneath interracial encounters. The spectacle of the interracial body anchors the cultural imaginations of our collective society and, as it embodies and symbolizes American slavery, drives the



violent acts of individuals. Interracial productions motivate the narratives of Wright and Faulkner through a system of displacement of signs. Though these tropes maintain their currency today, they are borne out of cultural imaginings over two hundred years old. Working within the framework of the imaginary, This project places these now historical texts into the twenty-first century's discourse of race and American identity.

This project has drawn from the intellectual contributions on the literary tropes of race, interracialism, literature and psychoanalysis and constructs a new reading practice for analyzing racialized language, which I call oppressive speech. Such speech and its surrounding imagination systematically examine the variety of racialized, but not necessarily racist, meanings that the racialized protagonist produces in the popular imagination. Ultimately, my dissertation concludes that racial speech makes visible the oftentimes unnamed racial fictions that shape the collective American imagination. In poking fun at racial stereotypes, emphatically insisting on their own pleasures, and undermining difference narratives, black protagonists upset the very racial fantasies that oppressive speech relies on. By challenging normative scholarship on interracialism and literature, and by analyzing how race and seeing work together to produce historically specific meanings, *Violent Disruptions* contributes to existing scholarship on visual culture, psychoanalysis and race.

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