

“OF HAVING BEEN COLORED”:

THE RACIAL HYBRIDITY

OF THOMAS SUTPEN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will reveal the potential for racial hybridity in Thomas Sutpen from William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. Using critical theory concerning the presence of mixed-race individuals in 19th and early 20th century America, I will demonstrate that Sutpen falls in the category of the literary trope of the tragic mulatto. I will begin with a thorough review of the criticism concerning race in *Absalom*, while demonstrating the drastic hole left in many critic's dealings with Thomas Sutpen. I will then provide a close reading of various key passages that call into question Sutpen's race and place him within the framework of the socially marginalized African American of the American South. Next, I will demonstrate that Sutpen fits into the mold of many figures that exist solely within the African American Folkloric tradition. By demonstrating the arc of the novel as Sutpen's drive towards self-actualization, I will demonstrate how he takes on the role of both the trickster and badman figure. Finally, I will discuss *Absalom* in terms of narrative theory and demonstrate that the subjectivity by which Sutpen is portrayed reflects a racialized reading of Julia Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic.

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This project began eighteen months ago in the wee hours of the morning as I was frantically leafing through the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*. I was in the midst of writing a seminar paper on the relationship between the pastoral and the tragic mulatto, and decided to include, almost anecdotally, a few pages on the possibility of Sutpen's hybrid body. I must admit that this project would have quickly fallen by the wayside if not for the keen observation of Dr. Yolanda Manora. Without her patience, endurance, and constant encouragement to "press on," I am doubtful I would have completed this project. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Trudier Harris, who took me under her wing and guided me through the preliminary phases of this project. Her availability to act as both my personal psychiatrist (and I am convinced that anyone who studies Faulkner at great lengths will invariably need one) and an indomitable source of wisdom – even in the terminal of an airport – is greatly appreciated. Finally, I would like to thank my very first teacher, my mother, who taught me to read and fostered within me the belief that no matter how many times a book has been read before, it is never exhausted of its ability to teach something new.

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INTRODUCTION

I think that no one 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 all taken 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...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.

- William Faulkner, 1957

I will tell you what he did and let you be the judge.

- Rosa Coldfield

In Faulkner's 'Negro' (1983), Thadious Davis points to an observation General Compson makes about Thomas Sutpen's slaves that "embodies an image applicable to the general presence of the Negro in the novel" (212). The General states that "the shadows they cast were taller than they were at one moment then gone the next and even the trees and brakes and thickets there one moment and gone the next though you knew all the time that they were still there because you could feel them with your breathing, as though, invisible, they pressed down and condensed the invisible air you breathed" (245). Davis concludes that the "main attempts to give meaning to the Sutpen story by solving the mystery of individual motivation are constricted by the Negro" (213). If the presence of the Negro in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is signified by an abstracted and shadowy presence – a presence that even in its indeterminate state confounds white southern norms – then making visible what is "invisible" will bring order to what is largely considered the most confounding piece of literature composed in the 20th century. Davis's position on the Negro in *Absalom* is grounded in the argument that a "black presence

dominates this work as it does perhaps no other Faulkner novel”¹ and that the black presence provides a central focus for an otherwise indeterminate Thomas Sutpen (181-182). I wish to extend the bounds of Davis’s application of the Negro presence in *Absalom* to the paradoxically visible-yet-shadowy figure of Thomas Sutpen. By inverting her central argument that the Negro shapes, motivates, and determines Sutpen’s design “from the beginning” (183) to “from within,” the narrative strategy Faulkner employs gains steadier traction in the discourse of narrative theory. But also, the much larger question of race in *Absalom*, which I argue envelopes *any* discussion of narratology, is expanded in ways that allows for a much more nuanced reading of Sutpen. This reading elucidates the codified language of the white narrators about Sutpen as a linguistic construction of a passing black man. The unity of the narration of *Absalom* is striking in its poignancy when the signifiers of race are applied to Sutpen: as Davis posits, “the images presented of blacks are the creations of whites who are in the position to ‘see’ the Negro – that is, to observe him but not necessarily to know him with insight” (195). The central figure of the novel, the one who confounds and obsesses the sight of each and every narrator and who is described as “a walking shadow” (139), is Thomas Sutpen – a figure whose racial makeup has universally been assumed white and remained unquestioned by all but perhaps one critic – Shreve McCannon. For it is Shreve’s prophecy of a post-race America in the dorm room at Harvard that elucidates a pattern Sutpen prescribes for the “bleach[ing] out” (302) of prejudiced racial paradigms.

The scope of this claim about Sutpen’s racial identity is wide. It calls for an active re-reading not just of *Absalom, Absalom!*, but of nearly every piece of American literature after the Civil War. Much as Carlyle Van Thompson has done in his insightful and provocative work on

¹ Toni Morrison’s profound impact on reading blackness in Faulkner will be explored more fully in section three.

Jay Gatsby in *The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading In the American Literary*

Imagination (2004), we must acknowledge that not only does a “significant amount of American Literature represent a mixture of black and white culture” (2), but also that a significant amount of American culture represents the mixture of black and white. The inter-war period in which Faulkner wrote represents the height of public consciousness about the status of the Negro² and the color line. Faulkner-as-Mississippian then cannot be separated from Faulkner-as-artist. The tension that mounts in his writing reflects the tension of the culture that he lived in – a struggle between the “old south” and what Faulkner blatantly despised, the “new south,” which he often referred to as a foggy copy of the industrial north. Understanding Faulkner’s world in the 1930’s requires a fundamental understanding of the Negro – both as a cultural antithesis to and counterpart of white culture in the South. And as Davis notes, “his art becomes an effort to transcend the tensions and divisions emanating from his cultural heritage, as well as from his position as artist in that culture, that divided world” (4).

“That culture” of the 1930’s represents a dynamic time in both the cultural and literary landscape. With a racist political structure firmly intact and the Jim Crow laws of the segregationist South lobbying for another form of civil slavery, the Harlem Renaissance began a full-fledged exploration of the status of the African American and African American art in America. Simultaneously, groups such as the Fugitives, with contemporaries of Faulkner such as Robert Penn Warren³ and John Crowe Ransom, re-envisioned a south that would lift itself up

² Davis goes to great lengths in defining the “Negro” as explicitly a creation of post-civil war social construction. She writes that “Faulkner never knew or wrote about ‘black’ people as we today know and understand the term. He wrote about ‘the Negro.’ The white man’s own creation” (2). In defining the cultural moment in which Faulkner wrote, she posits that “any mention of Faulkner evokes the South; and the South evokes the Negro, because the two are irrevocably joined in achievement and in despair” (2). The duality or fragmentation of the South mirrors, she argues, the division of Faulkner’s work, which, according to Faulkner, is the main subject of his art: the conflict of the human heart.

³ Warren was assigned the difficult task of locating the position of the African American in the social and economic order of the South. What came out of this, “The Briar Patch,” was not only troublesome for the rest of the Agrarians,

from social and economic depression. Even the appeals for a new south left the African American in a position little better than indentured servitude. Faulkner then, still in Mississippi and composing *Absalom* on the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, was faced with the problem not just of his own potential racial prejudices, but with a dominating culture of white supremacy. It was during the ten-year span from 1926-1936 that Faulkner developed many of his major characters and themes (Davis 5), including *Light In August* (1932), which represents perhaps his most overt dealing with a passing black man in Joe Christmas. That Faulkner's most prolific span of writing, a span that includes *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), mostly concerns itself with race is simply a reflection of the period in which he wrote – a time where the answer to the “Negro Problem”⁴ was at the forefront of social and political questions.

One antecedent that precedes the shadowy figure of the post-war Negro is the passing black man, Creole, or mulatto. While stories of tragic mulattos were being written as early as the 1830's, serious critical discussion of the character generally begins with W.E.B Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks* and his notion of “double consciousness.” He defines double consciousness as the:

Sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One

but problematic for Warren as well. The essay ended up being too liberal a take on the issue for the Agrarians and too conservative – and even slightly inclined to racism – for Warren later in his life. Warren asserted that “the hope and safety of everyone concerned rested in the education of the [sic] negro,” though he argued that this had to be in the form of making African Americans “a competent workman or artisan...giv[ing] him a vocation” (Stand 250). Warren prescribed to the pervading “separate but equal” ideology, but was met with opposition by the group for his continued emphases on complete equality in every arena – especially the justice system – save for social interactions. One of the members of the group even wrote that he was “inclined to doubt whether [Warren] actually wrote this essay” (Blotner 112-113). Nevertheless, the essay was published, causing discord among his peers and placing into writing a stance that Warren would eventually have to repudiate repeatedly. For Warren did endorse segregation, and wrote that the southern African American is a “creature of the small town and farm. That is where he still chiefly belongs, by temperament and capacity” (Stand 260).

⁴ Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), Eric Walrond's *The New Negro Faces America* (1923), and Wallace Thurman's *The Negro Literary Renaissance* (1929) are but a few of many pieces written during Faulkner's period concerning the status of the “new negro.”

ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (Du Bois 38)

Du Bois focuses “on the dynamic of being viewed and, ultimately, racially constructed” (Christiansen 75). In other words, the black individual and mulatto experience a divided self, which results in a lack of ability to form and hold agency for outside perceptions of selfhood and an overall community. Because being “viewed” and “constructed” by a dominant culture impacts notions of selfhood, black consciousness is invariably rendered socially subjective. And while both time and a proliferation of African American critics have dramatically altered and amended Du Boisian philosophy, his concept of double consciousness serves as a useful starting point for a discussion of the tragic mulatto.

Sterling Brown coined the phrase “Tragic Mulatto” in 1937 - a year following the publication of *Absalom* –as a response to an influx of mixed-race characters in American literature. According to Brown, these mixed race characters were tragic because, though they were nearly white, “these intelligent, courageous men and extraordinarily beautiful women were condemned to bondage, making their enslavement seem more unfortunate than that of pure blacks” (Jackson 2). From this genesis, the stereotype Brown implied has been questioned frequently, though the coined term itself has endured. The term no longer applies solely to the offspring of a white master and an enslaved African. While this traditional distinction is still recognized, the term has been broadened to include more modern-day, post-slavery situations, which generally fall into two categories: a black individual passing for a white individual who is eventually discovered, or an individual who believes or appears to be white and lives with relatively few discomforts only to discover or be discovered that he or she is of mixed race.

Of particular import in the critique of the phrase is the emphasis placed on the article, “the.” While mulatto figures all inhabit a generally familiar physical trope, critics have balked at

the suggestion that a single character reappears in every text. Cassandra Jackson notes in her book *Barriers Between Us* (2004) that “the methodological assumption implied by ‘the mulatto’ is contradicted by the diversity of characterization that emerges from mixed-race figures” (3). While seeing the value in this critique, I think that the term acts more as a cosmic umbrella under which many different individuals may gather. In other words, each character a reader or critic examines will fit some bill of a tragic mulatto theme while still retaining individual attributes clearly distinguishable from another character. And, for the purpose of this paper, the “the” is sometimes needed in order to refer not to an individual, but to a generally accepted group of circumstances, events, or forces that wreak cultural, physical, or mental havoc on a mulatto. Annamarie Christiansen also comments on this issue in her article “Passing as the ‘Tragic’ Mulatto: Constructions of Hybridity in Toni Morrison’s Novels,” by arguing that that “the ‘tragic mulatto,’ stereotyped as a solitary anomaly, is a complicated figure who suggests more about the union of races than their separation” (Christiansen 78). Christiansen includes the article, “the,” while drawing attention to the object, “tragic mulatto.” By doing this, the predictability of the character’s fate can be recognized while allowing for issues of eugenics, sexuality, class, vulnerability, and legitimacy, to be discussed independently.

While Brown’s “tragic mulatto” and the ubiquitous “passing” are not synonymous, they are certainly near-of-kin. The tragic mulatto serves more as a literary trope while passing refers primarily to a larger cultural phenomenon (though it is certainly also a recognizable literary trope) that occurs at nearly the onset of the slave trade in America with the appearance of mixed race individuals. The mulatto disturbed the paradigm of black-white social structures and created a middle ground of race. The mulatto’s physical body, if white enough – along with loose hair texture, thin lips and a slender nose – could pass for white. But these physiognomic features were

not the most significant elements for passing as white: one had to pass also into different class structures, education, and language. Passing ultimately required the killing of the cultural black self. It brought along the danger of discovery – the danger brought by the fear of white culture. At once both reaffirming the racist paradigms of white society and yet a ploy for freedom, the passing individual carried with him or her a litany of concerns. Carlyle Thompson notes that the reasons and concerns for passing include:

Escape from oppression, socioeconomic mobility, interracial courtship and marriage, curiosity, the desire for the thrill, and revenge...however, as the literature [of passing] illustrates, the primary motivation was economic...Passing [also] involves a complex set of perplexing social and psychological issues: self division, co-conspiracy with people who conceal the passer's blackness, trepidation about the possibility of giving birth to a dark skinned child. (7)

Paramount to these concerns are the “socioeconomic, physical, and psychological violence of white supremacy” (7). Written into the literature of passing is the ability for black characters easily to recognize another black person passing for white.⁵ However, the consequences of discovery by a black person were mild in comparison with being ousted by “seeing” white eyes. While the fear of social or economic death was certainly present, the constant fear of physical death from passing created a deadly game of cat and mouse. Lynching was perhaps the most common method of white racial violence – and it comes as no surprise that Mr. Compson’s observation about Sutpen’s Negroes evokes the image of suffocation and lynching: “They pressed down and condensed the invisible air you breathed” (245). And while the image is clearly inverted in this scene, this reflects perhaps the impetus for the use of lynching. For Mr. Compson, the presence of the Negro was an almost invisible threat that quiet literally thickened the air he breathed. The same could be said for the larger community of white culture in the American south, whose reaction to this pressing in of blackness often resulted in lynching. That

⁵ Langston Hughes’s “Who’s Passing for Who?” provides an example of this ability. Part of the cultural phenomenon of passing also included the hiring of “spotters,” or black people hired to “out” passing blacks.

the passing black man represents an enigma to white culture is an understatement – the hybrid body occupied by mixed race individuals disrupted both political and social norms and in some cases called for an overhaul of legislation concerning marriage and sexual relationships.

Converging in Faulkner’s novel with the passing black man or tragic mulatto is the figure of the Creole, which further complicates the reception of mixed-race people in the Deep South.

In “‘The Direction of the Howling’: Nationalism and the Color Line in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” Barbara Ladd argues that a dynamic shift in the perception of the Creole occurred after the Civil War and that the term “has operated as a kind of traveling (and changeable) stage upon which the national drama of race and nationalism in the Deep South is enacted” (532). Prior to the war, the denotation of Octoroon or Quadroon generally referred to a class of people that contained – even in small degrees – African blood. Important in the delineation between the Creole and the passing figure is that in its genesis, the Creole was seldom associated with African origins – but rather, with a French or Spanish ancestry. During this cultural moment, Creoles were either conceived of as “white Creoles” or “Creoles of color,” and while neither division enjoyed the full freedoms of a white person in America, they were subjected to different caste and social systems than mulattos or light-skinned enslaved Africans. Ladd carefully denotes that in the Deep South,⁶ racial classification was “much more complex than in the Anglo Upper South, where the status of a mixed blood child followed that of the mother...[and was] defined as a slave, a legal/political nonentity” (527). However, prior to the Louisiana Purchase, children of mixed-race blood could inherit from the father’s estate and legalized marriages were possible (527). While still occupying a lesser status, some of their white traits were considered

⁶ The Deep South may be loosely defined as the Caribbean south – encompassing the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, southern Alabama, parts of Texas, and Florida – encompassing not just a geographic location but also including differences in linguistics, dialect, colorism, and economy. The Anglo Upper South constitutes the Carolinas, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, and arguably extends into the northeast as far as Massachusetts.

legitimate – if not generally accepted. However, the deep south post-Louisiana Purchase led to a recasting of the Creole in white culture.

Despite attempts by many upper-class Creoles to maintain their rights, in the mid-19th century, white policy makers, fearing that control of nationality might slip away, stripped the Creole from national life “except through the mediation of former white masters” (Ladd 533). Questions concerning Charles Bon’s status as a Creole, Mulatto, “nigger,” or white have been researched exhaustively. Ladd’s study reveals that first, however, Bon seems to occupy the social body of the colonialist Creole – both with the respected powers and limited rights one would expect from a Creole living in New Orleans. Her argument, however, is that despite the potential for misrepresentation of his race on the part of the inhabitants of Jefferson, Quentin recasts him socially as a “nigger” – reflecting still a deep-seeded fear of miscegenation,⁷ even in the “new south.” What Ladd’s analysis clearly demonstrates is that in *Absalom*, the figures of the mulatto, the Creole, and the passing black man collide. They interweave, dilute, transmute. They are at once biologically and socially connected and constructed. And each revolves around Thomas Sutpen – at once the progenitor and the carrier of the race question in the Deep South.

Criticism on Faulkner and *Absalom, Absalom!* is as wide as it is varied. If anything could be said about the body of work critics have performed on the novel, one might posit that it is as muddled as the plot of the book. However, criticism on *Absalom* could be mapped roughly onto three camps: narrative theory, race and gender, and colonial theory. In generalizing the criticism on *Absalom*, subsets of theory will undoubtedly be left out. In fact, I will give at least a brief nod

⁷ Etienne Balibar’s definition of racism is particularly useful in understanding the anxiety surrounding Quentin’s racializing of Bon. He says that “Racism – a true total social phenomenon – inscribes itself in practices (forms of violence, contempt, intolerance, humiliation and exploitation), in discourses and representations which are so many intellectual elaborations of the phantasm of prophylaxis and segregation (the need to purify the social body, to preserve “one’s own” or “our identity” from all forms of mixing, interbreeding or invasion and which are articulated around stigmata of otherness (name, skin, colour, religious practices)” (emphasis added, 23).

in the first section to what might loosely be called eco-criticism in the racializing of the pastoral in Sutpen's Hundred. But in order to call for an overhaul of the most-debated figure in the novel, I am forced to acknowledge each respected field. For what I hope to demonstrate is that identifying Thomas Sutpen as a racially and socially hybrid figure does more than only satisfy the signifiers often pointed to in race studies. These biological and social signifiers provide a common narrative for those telling his tale – a narrative oft recognizable in post-colonial encounters in the Deep South.

This study is divided into three parts: racial signifiers and the tragic mulatto, demonology and the language of race, and narrative subjectivity/narrative unity. In the first section, I identify the textual evidence that points to the biological implications of Sutpen's heredity as well as the tragic flaw in Sutpen's "grand design." Since race is fundamentally socially constructed, much of the evidence concerning Sutpen's race is derivative of his construction by mostly absent, white narrators. But as Davis highlights, "all of the images [of the Negro] are carefully woven into the larger portrait of a society" (195). And I posit that Sutpen's elusiveness is not just the result of absent white narrators, but also a desire for invisibility from self – a desire to retain agency in the face of the social paradigm of white constructivism. This masquerade is so well cloaked that the biological implications proffered by those that "see" Sutpen are missed even by a white culture highly vigilant to passing black men. So the biological evidence must be accompanied by the social construction of the citizens of Jefferson, without which a racializing of his body would prove meaningless.

In this section, I elucidate a new perspective on the familiar trope of the tragic mulatto – for Sutpen's demise is not attributable to some sort of racial discovery. His tragedy is both a denial of blackness and a failure of achieving whiteness – of being recognized by the citizens of

Jefferson as little more than a phantom of respectability while denying himself the respectability of his black identity, albeit a respectability shackled in enslavement. This section will also address what I perceive to be a few of the major objections to my claim with the problem of the addendum to the novel, the genealogy, the various oblique references to Sutpen's "peculiarly Anglo Saxon" (86) heritage, and his red hair. While I make references to the narrative structure of the novel throughout the study, I leave the supposed problem of Sutpen's narrative of his childhood to the final section, where I look more in-depth at the levels of narrative subjectivity present in one of the few instances where we purportedly hear directly from Thomas Sutpen.

The second section, demonology and the language of race, endeavors to illuminate the constant images of doubling by which Sutpen is characterized. My hope is to situate the specific and specialized linguistic constructs of the people of Jefferson into a larger, historic discourse of racial marking. Sutpen is variously described as both demon and god, brute and husband, wild stock and tame, and farmer and stage director. His design is both anonymous and established, an avocation and a scheme, and grandly ruinous. I argue that the double consciousness of the African American is not just a reflection of the inner consciousness of the African American, but also present in the consciousness of white culture as it "sees" African Americans in the post-war climate of the south. However, instead of seeing blackness as both black and American, the consciousness of the predominate white culture in *Absalom* is blackness and otherness – or, as I argue, otherness and otherness. By illuminating the linguistic narrative of the white narrators in *Absalom*, I place the figure of Sutpen into the larger canon of post-colonial figures in the antebellum south.

Looking specifically at these enslaved and free Africans of the antebellum south, I demonstrate how the doubled images of Sutpen not only reflect the consciousness of white

southerners, but also that Sutpen fits into a larger discourse of African American folklore. I focus on the familiar figures of the trickster and the “badman” or “Bad Nigger” and elucidate the relationship that Sutpen possesses with both. African American folklore and southern folklore often overlap. One finds in both a long tradition of conversing with the devil, of belief systems based on the practice of natural or “black” magic, and of continual stories of self-abasement while maintaining a fierce pride in one’s own culture. The two certainly overlap, but in *Absalom*, if any critical attention has been paid to African American folklore, it has only been made mention of in relation to voodoo practices and the impact of the Creole. I demonstrate that the arc of Sutpen’s early days in Jefferson follows the general tale of the Trickster figure, and that the post-war Sutpen returns to Jefferson as an embodiment of the badman in African American folklore.

The final section focuses largely on the narrative structure of *Absalom*. Reading Sutpen as one codified in the language of the passing black man and tragic mulatto unifies narrative subjectivity and proffers a solution for Shreve and Quentin’s racializing of the story of Sutpen. Shreve is perhaps the very first critic of the story of Thomas Sutpen. His view satisfies the “distancing” required by narrators to submit a reliable narrative and place a story within an objective claim about culture. I demonstrate that by reading Sutpen as a mulatto, the “darkness” of the narrative begins with Rosa’s account and the racializing of Sutpen’s body is solidified as the story is passed from General Compson, to Jason, to Quentin, and culminates with Shreve’s account. For Shreve only does what any critic might do: he bridges the gaps in narrative discontinuity and creates a theoretical paradigm by which we might understand a set of events. Using Julia Kristeva’s notion of the “semiotic,” I look in-depth at the implications of Sutpen’s story about his own childhood, and posit an explanation for his self-purported whiteness. When

looking at Sutpen's childhood narrative as a whole, one might surmise that all he says is "I am *not* black – " and little else. The subjectivity of the narrators actually heightens the racial tension between Sutpen and the inhabitants of Jefferson – for their subjectivity is constantly based on a sense of "otherness." Their telling of his story, while at a distance and impacted by various personal vendettas against the man, actually reflect a linear commonality of racial otherness. Instead of creating discontinuity, it plays into the distorted paradigm of subjective, racial mapping that occurred in the 19th and early 20th century.

One might account for Faulkner's use of the image of the blackbird in reference to Sutpen as no more than literary coincidence. A student at the University of Virginia proffered the question during an interview– and Faulkner entered into the image with little more intentions than to answer a question about the truth behind a story. But the image stands, nonetheless, and Sutpen is no less imaginary than the elusive figure of the blackbird in Wallace Stevens' poem. That Sutpen is related to a *black*-bird, an image of flying darkness, brings to mind the folklore of the flying African – an enslaved person that wisps away back to his or her homeland and leaves behind the anxiety of race-ridden America. But instead of flying to freedom, Sutpen flies into white culture, into tragedy. I do not find it coincidence, however, that the image elicited in Stevens' poem was later used in direct reference to race. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s book, *Thirteen Different Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1998), relates the stories of various black men and how they achieved recognized identity in America. The lives Gates describes are no more real – though certainly not as tragic – as the blackbird of Yoknapatawpha County. As Faulkner himself confirmed, finding objectivity in the past is no easy thing – but by looking at the ways in which subjectivity is manipulated, forced, and coerced, one might find a thread of something called truth.

RACIAL SIGNIFIERS AND THE TRAGIC MULATTO

The narration of *Absalom, Absalom!* and the actual events concerning Thomas Sutpen span two vastly different paradigms of racial construction. Prior to *Plessy vs. Ferguson*⁸ and Du Boisian philosophy, race was strictly biologically determined. In 1833, when Sutpen appears in Jefferson, he arrives in a community where, while the designation of race is not explicitly scientifically determined, the general paradigm for racial classification was based on one's hereditary. It is a community where one's purported bloodline was a premium. Rosa's narration, though suspended in post-19th century time, reflects an eye more perceptive of physical signifiers. However, as Quentin and Shreve postulate in a Harvard dorm room in 1909, their perspective on race is perhaps more socially inclined – giving their narration (and re-creation) of Sutpen's story quite a different perspective than Sutpen's actual peers. As such, we might look for these differences in representation as products of a paradigm shift. But representation of any kind, I might add, is fundamentally a social act. It is no more a claim to objectivity than self-representation. As I build a case for Sutpen's mixed race, I do so fully aware of the limitations of scientific representations and the implications of social representation.

During Rosa's seething first description of Sutpen to Quentin, we learn that Sutpen "came out of nowhere and without warning" (5) and that he held a "name which nobody ever heard before" (9). This represents one of the first steps a person wishing to pass takes – it is fundamentally a creation of a new identity, a new name, and an existence without a past. Later,

⁸ Though *Plessy v. Ferguson* operated under the "one-drop rule," Homer Plessy, by all accounts, was not biologically distinguishable from a white man, which opened the door for discussions of race through social constructs. Through the 1920's, biological theories of racial superiority abounded. The Harlem Renaissance began, however, a larger paradigm shift of America's treatment of race, though it was not until the 1960's, with the Civil Rights Movement, that biological determinism was largely given the backseat in establishing racial identity.

when confronted with the figure of Bon, Jason Compson tells us that he came to Jefferson with “a background of a shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents...[and that] he came into that isolated country household *almost like Sutpen himself*...apparently complete, without a background or past or childhood” (58, emphasis added, 74). Yet we know⁹ that Bon is himself passing. Bon and Sutpen are linked¹⁰ by a shadowed past, yet we know the cause for Bon’s shadows. If they are both described (and inscribed with the same shadowy past) in identical terms and furthermore, explicitly linked together, cannot we infer that whatever situation Sutpen left behind as a young man was similar to Bon’s? It seems that critics have held a double standard in their acute attention to Bon’s racial identity when Bon and Sutpen often double for one another, and when the same racially linguistic paradigms apply to both father and son.

After relating Sutpen’s abrupt and mysterious appearance in Jefferson, Rosa continues to expound on the rippling effects of his arrival and pinpoints the exact nature of his grand design. What Rosa identifies as the impetus for his design – respectability – is perhaps the least critically disputed motivation of Sutpen. While power, stability, accumulation of wealth, and even children might all be viable motivations, they all fall under the umbrella of respectability – of completion of self. Rosa identifies a distinct absence of respectability and division of self in quite explicit terms. She tells Quentin that “He wasn’t a gentlemen...he sought the guarantee of reputable men to barricade him from the other...then he needed respectability, the shield of a virtuous woman, to make his position impregnable even against the men who had given him protection” (234). I

⁹ Again, Bon’s past is disputable. I lean on Ladd’s assertion that Bon should at least be considered a Creole. While space does not allow for a full discourse of Bon’s potential as either white or mixed, I will operate under the belief that Bon is at least a Creole, at most a mulatto, and undeniably racialized by Quentin and Shreve’s discourse – regardless of Sutpen’s racial makeup.

¹⁰ My intent in this essay is not to pass explicit judgment on Faulkner’s intentionality, but here he clearly ties Sutpen and Bon’s past together.

will leave the narrative explanation of the cause of this fragmentation in Sutpen's life – his encounter with the “Monkey Nigger” as a child– for section three, but this moment is not, as critics have suggested, a moment of caste recognition; this moment is a racial awakening. It is the moment when Sutpen, under the knowing eyes of the house slave, realizes a deficiency – a lack of respectability. What Sutpen realizes as a child is that his model for overcoming his perceived deficiency is a model of a specific kind of whiteness – to be a Pettibone. Davis recognizes this moment as the impetus for Sutpen's grand design. She argues that “Sutpen's understanding of completion is literally a body fitted to the prescribed mold of Pettibone's kind, his design has at its ultimate goal the heir, the male figure, a replica of the model, which is again Pettibone's kind” (186). Even though Davis does not racialize this moment, she realizes the physicality of the moment by referencing the bodily Pettibone mold. And later, as Jason Compson discusses the story with Quentin, he adds that Sutpen was “not concerned: just watchful, like he must have been from the day when he turned his back upon all that he knew – the faces and the customs” (40). If Sutpen was simply leaving behind a marginalized white family, then the faces mean nothing. Abandoning customs would suffice. But Sutpen could not leave behind just his childhood; he had to leave behind the physical faces that would threaten his design and pursue the physical mold Pettibone embodies.

Sutpen, therefore, does not desire to establish an isolated identity, but one that stretches back into history and projects itself – in his esteem – far into the future. He wishes to create new faces. Rosa notes that Sutpen “called it Sutpen's Hundred as if it had been a King's grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather – a home, position: a wife and family which, being necessary to concealment, he accepted along with the rest of respectability” (10). Sutpen establishes a lineage – more than just an established presence – but the respectability that comes

from an unbroken line of the highest kind of whiteness. He constructs a self-image with “land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with” (238). That his vision projects itself as the antithesis of black – for he is not combating Pettibone or lower class whites, but his slaves – reflects Sutpen’s fear of his former self. The image of the plantation house contains all the emblematic features needed to subjugate what, to Sutpen, is an inferior race. What Rosa perceives but cannot name to be necessary for concealment is blackness, his fear, his former self. Or, in Rosa’s own words, “what he fled from must have been some opposite of respectability *too dark to talk about*” (emphasis added, 10).

Rosa’s representation of Sutpen is not completely biological; in fact, her biological commentary on Sutpen often leads to a commentary on his social role in Jefferson. In “Skin, race and space: the clash of bodily schemas in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” Steven Pile notes that passing often involves layers of bodily schema, “the abstract epidermal schema associated with wealth and power...and the kaleidoscope of skin colors: corporeal schemas that can be seen in a spectrum [of colors]” (33). Rosa might more readily see the corporeal schemas of Sutpen, but her instances of “seeing” Sutpen reflect an abstracted, but perhaps far more telling, social schema. Rosa first “sees” Sutpen when he and Ellen ride into town, and this “vision of [Rosa’s] first sight of them [she carried] to [her] grave” (16). She sees “Ellen’s high white face...and the two replicas of his face in miniature flanking her, and on the front seat the face and teeth of the wild negro who was driving, and he, *his face exactly like the negro’s* save for the teeth (this because of his beard, doubtless)” (emphases added, 16). Rosa’s attention to faces reflects an acute awareness of colorism in mid 19th century America. That she denotes her sister’s face as “high white” heightens the racial and social tension inherent in her comparison of Sutpen and his slave. Rosa clearly identifies her sister with

a distinctly pure racial, biological identity. She is not overtly interested in a social, symbolic caste distinction; her vision of faces is a discourse of color.¹¹ Davis notes of this scene that “the driver look[ed] exactly like Sutpen” (191). But in phrasing the resemblance this way, Davis has unintentionally inverted the scene. For it is not the driver that looks like Sutpen, but Sutpen himself whose face is identical to the Negro. This distinction is important, for if Sutpen’s face is a reflection of blackness – or Sutpen an extension of his Negroes in general rather than his Negroes as an extension of his grand design, then we must pay close attention to any interaction between Sutpen and his supposed subordinates. Noting Rosa’s biological annunciation of Ellen and Sutpen’s faces causes us to note the racialized social space of this moment. For while Ellen and her children (who, consequently, are “two replicas of his face in miniature”) are sitting *in* the carriage, Sutpen is on the outside, sitting with the Negro. The position inside the carriage carries the connotations of the “high white” face of Ellen, or of cleanliness. Inside the carriage, Ellen is immune to the “dust” churned up by the “fury of wildeyed horses” (16), while Sutpen, whose driving force behind his grand design is respectability, has undoubtedly soiled his clothes with dust and mud.

The specific attention each narrator of *Absalom* gives to physical faces is prolific. This polychromatic array of faces reflects Faulkner’s own fascination with “the problem of how individual characters respond when that one constant natural human element comes in – and the racial categories that contain them all” (Towner 13). Ellen’s face is “high white” and “unblemished” (16, 54), Clytie’s is “coffee colored” (109), Judith and Henry’s are “out-of doors faces” (51) that were “two replicas of his [Sutpen’s] face in miniature (16), Bon’s octoroon

¹¹ Steve Piles carefully maneuvers the sometimes dangerous waters of biological determinism. He cautions that locating race in skin hints at racist grids of meaning, but that “thinking through skin, thus, means acknowledging the surface of the body, materially, psychologically and experientially: a dense surface where the social, the psychological and the fleshly are inseparable” (28).

mistress's is "magnolia faced" and her son's is "smooth ivory" (157), the "monkey nigger" is "another balloon face, slick and distended" (189), the French architect's is a "grim, harried Latin face" (26), Shreve's is "moonlike [and] rubicund" (147), Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon's has a "faint olive tinge" (161), Wash's is "gaunt [and] malaria-ridden...a face that might have been any age between twenty-five and sixty" (69), and Bon's is a "shadow" (118). While critics have used these descriptions to delineate the fluctuating color line in *Absalom*, they have largely ignored Sutpen's face. Chapter two of *Absalom* begins with the unnamed narrator's¹² providing a synopsis of Sutpen's early days in Jefferson. The narrator describes Sutpen as:

A man with a big frame but gaunt now almost to emaciation, with a short reddish beard which resembled a disguise and above which his pale eyes had a quality at once visionary and alert, ruthless and reposed in a face whose flesh had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven's fever either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay. (24)

That Sutpen's hair is red represents an interesting twist in the phenomenon of passing. For while lighter skin color is the ultimate and necessary qualifier for an individual desiring to pass, hair texture and hair color play a significant role in decisions to form a new identity. In the 19th and early 20th century, long hair, or Caucasian-like hair, was considered "good...righteous...and kind," while "short and nappy hair [was] bad...tight...and kitched" (Thompson 11). While red hair is not consistently associated with people of African descent, there is certainly literary and cultural precedence for this.¹³ And this is perhaps why Sutpen's beard so "resembled a disguise." For if Sutpen was light enough to pass, then the most disalarming hair color possible would be the one least likely suspected on a person of African descent. But interestingly, a strong textual tie to another passing individual with red hair exists *within* the text: Sutpen's first wife. While

¹² Some have referred to the unknown narrator as Faulkner's narrative voice, though I argue that if one must look anywhere for Faulkner's own voice, it is likely found in Quentin.

¹³ In Toni Morrison's *Sula* (2004), one of the Dewey's foster children has red hair and in Dolan Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* (2011), Mawu has a "bush of red hair...that sprayed out like a mane" (4).

Sutpen's hair is initially referred to as "red," it is later described as "iron-riddled hair" (281), and Sutpen's first wife, Eulalia, is said to also have a "rope of lank iron-colored hair" (244). Much like the manner in which Bon's shadowy past has not been associated with Sutpen in racial terms, this clear link between a woman who is nearly uniformly understood to be passing¹⁴ and Sutpen has been ignored. "Iron colored" is an uncommon and rather unique description of someone's hair. It is itself an inter-textual signifier of both Faulkner's awareness of the various hues and colors of race, and of the possibility that Sutpen may share more in common with Eulalia than just Charles Bon.

Sutpen's red beard – itself a signifier of racial passing – disguises a face that "had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored," with the qualifier for "having been colored" being the "oven's fever." The oven, in this case, can either refer to the cultural or social moment in which Sutpen was born or lived, or, quite literally, to his mother's womb – for it is again qualified by "either of soul or environment." If Sutpen recently spent time in Haiti, then he doubtless would be exposed to intense and elongated periods in the sun, resulting in darkened skin. Yet his appearance is said to be "deeper than sun *alone*," which points to more than an environmental darkening. That the possibility of "having been colored" is clearly not limited to his environment, but instead could be the result of the "soul,"¹⁵ opens this poignant description of Sutpen's face to discussions of heredity. Regardless, in this instance Sutpen is at very least described socially as a non-white other, and at most, as both socially and physically, quite literally, not white.

¹⁴ Cleanth Brooks argues that there were many viable reasons why Sutpen divorced his first wife. He posits that Sutpen may have discovered that his first wife was not a virgin when he married her – that Bon was not Sutpen's heir-direct, that she may have carried an inheritable mental deficiency, or that she was "embarrassingly over-sexed for a socially ambitious man like Sutpen" (82). Of course, all of these are just as much a matter of conjecture as her potential for mixed race ancestry, which I still hold as the most viable option.

¹⁵ This word is also faintly reminiscent of Mark Twain's *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), where Negro Tom's mother comments that "It's de nigger in you, dat's what it is. Thirty-one parts o' you is white, en on'y one part nigger, en dat po' little on part is yo' *soul*" (139).

Thompson notes that “the absent or deceased parent is a common paradigm found in the novels of racial passing” (88). The sole mention of Sutpen’s mother in the text occurs in a parenthetical note, almost as an afterthought. Quentin tells Shreve that “(he [Sutpen] said something to Grandfather about his mother dying about that time and how his papa said she was a fine wearying woman and that he would miss her; and something about how it was the wife that had got his father even that far West)” (180). The “about that time” refers to the moment when Sutpen’s father moved his family down from the mountains and back “to the coast” (180). If Sutpen’s mother is the impetus for the family leaving the coast in the first place, and that only at her death could they move back, then one must question the circumstances of their move. For later, we find that the move “to the coast” represented a move back to slave plantations, a place where Sutpen “learned the difference...between white men and black ones” (183). Sutpen’s “wearying” mother represented a period of solidarity and concealment. Because Sutpen associates the tidewater area with race, the family’s move was fundamentally a move away from race, a move towards anonymity – thus opening up the possibility that Sutpen’s parents were a mixed race marriage fleeing to the less populated area of the Appalachians.

The only other mention of Sutpen’s mother (though not even a direct reference) comes in the chronology and the genealogy. It would be easy enough to dismiss the addenda to the novel due simply to the vast amount of errors in time and date calculation alone. Estella Schoenberg even argues in *Old Tales and Talking: Quentin Compson in William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! and Related Works* (1977) that “the chronology and genealogy Faulkner devised were put together hastily after the manuscript of the novel had been in the editor’s hands for some time. The novel was intended to stand without these crutches, *and neither should be considered part of the book*” (emphasis added, 76). But interestingly, even in the genealogy, Faulkner seems

to play with the mysterious birth of Thomas Sutpen. For those in the genealogy whose birth and parentage are well established, Faulkner is very clear on the details of their birth, identifying them with clear parentage and place of origin.¹⁶ However, Thomas Sutpen's insert in the genealogy is the only example (excluding Goodhue, Wash, and Shreve, of whom absolutely nothing is said of their past) that does not explicitly read "Daughter of," "Son of," or "Grandson of." The description of Sutpen merely reads "Born in West Virginia mountains, 1807. One of several children of poor whites, Scotch-English stock..." (307). That the insert does not explicitly read "Son of..." is strangely absent. This opens the possibility that Sutpen could have even come from a different marriage, or be an illegitimate child – perhaps himself representing the impetus for the family's move to the mountains. One must also acknowledge that any information at all about Sutpen's past ultimately proves illegitimate, something of which Faulkner was ultimately and keenly aware. The genealogy is explicit only in regards to the date and location of his birth, but earlier and within the actual text, Shreve notes that "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...West Virginia wasn't admitted...into the United States [yet]" (179). Shreve's commentary on Sutpen's story arrives at a different date of birth and supplies a critical reason to question his place of birth: it did not exist yet.

While Rosa and the unknown narrator's construction of Sutpen's physical body grants due reason to question Sutpen's hereditary background, Rosa's narration is ultimately one of feigned closeness. It is difficult to discern when her commentary on Sutpen might come from first-hand experience, or pure conjecture. But whether reliable or not, her commentary on Sutpen

¹⁶ "ELLEN COLDFIELD
Daughter of Goodhue Coldfield. Born in Tennessee, 1817..."
"HENRY SUTPEN
Born, Sutpen's Hundred, 1839, son of Thomas and Ellen Coldfield Sutpen..."

reflects an unrecognized uneasiness concerning his race. In the following scene, it perhaps makes the most narrative sense that Rosa only heard this story from the men that would venture out to Sutpen's Hundred to witness organized fighting between Sutpen's enslaved Africans. As such, Rosa overlays a confluence of biological determinism with a social event that simultaneously reflect Sutpen as a mulatto. In describing the fight, she says:

The white faces on three sides, the black ones on the fourth, and in the center two of his wild negroes fighting, naked, fighting not like white men fight, with rules and weapons, but like negroes fight to hurt one another...and Ellen seeing not the 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. (20-21)

Before engaging this passage on a critical level, I wish to step back and acknowledge the role of the pastoral in *Absalom*, for several important levels of interpretation accompany the fighting scene. Sutpen's Hundred was "a hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country" (26). This is Sutpen's pastoral. Assuming the role of the shepherd retreating into the land, he has found a virginal land where he can escape his identity as a mixed-race individual and construct for himself a white identity. Instead of herding sheep, however, he drives "a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down singlehanded because he was stronger in fear than even they were in whatever heathen place he had fled from" (10). The connection between Sutpen's enslaved Africans and the land follows the general stereotype of the Ham figure. They are, in a sense, just as much a part of the land as the soil, trees, and animals that inhabit it. The slaves could "creep up to a bedded buck and cut its throat before it could move" and the coon-hunter, Akers, "claimed to have walked one of them out of the absolute mud like a sleeping alligator" (27). The slaves did not need conventional necessities for surviving in Sutpen's Hundred – they did not even need "blankets to sleep in" and drove the swamps like "a

pack of hounds” (27). The slaves, consequently, become members of the pastoral landscape. Following this, any interaction Sutpen engages in with the slaves is an interaction with Sutpen’s Hundred – the virginal pastoral – and, as I will demonstrate, the fighting scene a reflection of Sutpen as a mulatto.

The strongest connection between Sutpen and his slaves – if not in its directness, but in its scope – is that Sutpen brought his slaves from the “dark swamp” of the Caribbean (16). Whatever past the slaves might claim is intrinsically tied to a swamp. And Sutpen, whose indeterminate past is more convoluted than his slaves, is also described as emerging from a swamp (131). The scope of this connection is profound because it bridges Jefferson to the larger colonial community of the Caribbean, and specifically, to Haiti, a place General Compson describes as “a little island...which was the halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization, halfway between the dark and inscrutable continent from which the black blood...was ravished by violence, and the cold known land to which it was doomed” (202). This community’s most profound influence on the Deep South – and primarily Louisiana and Mississippi – is its responsibility for the influx of white and colored creoles. So Sutpen and his slaves both came from a “place too dark to talk about” (10) and pulled the mirage of Sutpen’s Hundred out of the swamp as “he and the twenty negroes worked together, plastered over with mud... distinguishable one from another by his beard and eyes alone” (28). Sutpen’s design, his very plantation, is an extension of a physical location whose substance one might consider “mulatto soil,” or “dark colored clay” (OED).

Several signifiers of Sutpen’s identity are then made evident in the fighting scene. First, following the argument that Sutpen’s slaves are a part of the Sutpen Hundred pastoral, and that the Sutpen Hundred pastoral is a part of Sutpen’s “grand design” for a white identity, then the

wrestling scene clearly depicts the mental stress of the social, cultural, and psychological pressures exerted on a mulatto. Sutpen is physically fighting his own design. Sterling Brown notes that, traditionally, literature concerned with the mulatto presence depicts the figure as one who possesses the passions of the mind of the white parent and the base desires of the black parent, and that “from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his negro blood come his emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery” (Brown 13). Following this traditional lens, Sutpen is drawn into the fighting simultaneously by the desire to “reta[in] supremacy [and] domination” as a white man and to join “the spectacle” as a black man (13).

And second, Sutpen’s actions make him complicit in rather token and pejorative depictions of the behavior of slaves. Frederick Douglass comments that his fellow slaves “engaged in such sports and merriments as wrestling, running foot-races...and drinking whiskey...[which was] most agreeable to the feelings of our master” (2104). In fact, when Douglass tried to hold a church service instead of “wrestling, boxing, and drinking whiskey,” his master “rushed upon [the slaves] with sticks and stone” because they would much rather “see [the slaves] engaged in those degrading sports, than to see [them] behave like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings” (2107). By all accounts, Sutpen joins the ranks of his slaves, unable to suppress an urge to join in the fights (a key signifier in Brown’s estimation of period literature concerned with passing figures). He encounters a psychological confusion that Marjorie Garber defines as a “category crisis”: “a failure of definitive distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable” (18).

Sutpen trespasses the social boundaries that slave-owners usually strictly manage, and by fighting against his slaves, he fights against his own design. But this scene also highlights a

racialized social space. Rosa, again focused on faces, describes the boundaries of the fight with acute awareness of black and white space: “the white faces on three sides, the black ones on the fourth” (20). Yet Sutpen is in the middle, betwixt and between both the color line and the social paradigm. He is “naked and panting and bloody to the waist,” exposing his physical body and potentially his grand design. Mulattos disturbed the presence of racial discourse in the 19th century, and as Thompson notes, “self-consciously manipulated the hegemonic boundaries of race” (4). As Sutpen fights his slaves, a simultaneous act of subordination to white culture and retention of his supremacy over his subjects, he physically represents the manipulation of race and bodies.

Rosa’s construction of Sutpen is clearly racialized, though she never allows for it in explicit terms. It is her continual attention to his face that exposes a white paradigm of racial “othering.” At one point in her conversation with Quentin, she proffers that “anyone could have looked once at his face and known that he would have chosen the River and even the certainty of the hemp rope, to undertaking what he undertook” (11). If Sutpen is white, and merely a fleeing member of a lower social class, why is the image of lynching necessary? What retaliation would Sutpen have to fear if he is simply traveling to Haiti? Rosa, along with other citizens of Jefferson, use for control tenets of white supremacy in order to classify people. Rosa seems to be making an oblique reference to the laws found and enforced in both the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, where national and state governments were given responsibility for the capture of runaway slaves, and the 1857 *Dred Scott v. John Sandford* decision,¹⁷ which pronounced that the founding fathers had never intended any people of African descent to be viewed, in any way, as equals to whites, and that escaped slaves (whether by the deception of passing or otherwise) could be

¹⁷ The Dred Scott decision occurred after Sutpen arrived in Jefferson, but before Rosa meets with Quentin to tell Sutpen’s story. Rosa’s comments seem to cover a broad swath of racist political structures of the 19th century – structures she was no doubt keenly aware of.

pursued, arrested, and face penalties as severe as the former master decided. Because race consumed both political and social circles, white people, with racist white ideology, sought to protect a vision of purity and were constantly on the lookout for intruders. Rosa also reflects the latent fear of white men concerning sexual relations between black men and white women. Whereas the discovery of a passing black male did not always lead to physical death, Thompson notes that miscegenation involving a black man and white woman “often led to the lynching of black men” (14). That the course of Rosa’s fear of Sutpen eventually arrives at the image of lynching both reflects the subjectivity of white culture’s hegemonic linguistic pattern and a deep-seated mistrust for that which is “other.”

And this is perhaps why, as Mr. Compson narrates the story to Quentin, the townspeople of Jefferson:

Believed even yet that there was a nigger in the woodpile somewhere, ranging from the ones who believed that the plantation was just a blind to his actual dark avocation...to the ones who believed apparently that the wild niggers which he had brought there had the power to actually conjure more cotton per acre from the soil than any tame ones had ever done. (56-57)

The pejorative phrase, “nigger in a woodpile” came into currency in the mid-19th century to refer to “some fact of importance [that had] not been disclosed” (Klerk 10). While no clear evidence for the origin of the phrase is determinable, it is assumed that the phrase derived from the practice of smuggling slaves to free states in railroad cars. The reference could possibly be applied to Bon, Sutpen’s son, but no evidence exists that Mr. Compson was completely aware of Bon’s mixed race. Again, I must posit the question, if the townspeople of Jefferson felt uneasiness about Sutpen and feared the darkness – the “nigger” – in his avocation, why must his race remain unquestioned? The darkness continually associated with Sutpen and his scheme plays an enormous role in the novel, and in *Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! and Interpretability*

(1985), Christine de Montauzon argues that “Negroes and darkness tend to come together” (169). Whether this darkness stems from Sutpen’s ontological insecurity of self – and subsequent inability to distinguish his slaves from that self – or from the collective social conscious of the white townspeople of Jefferson, it invariably comes back to Sutpen and signifies on his mixed-race body.

Sutpen is most concerned with the elimination of the remnants of his former self and establishing respectability in his grand design– a theme Quentin unknowingly stumbles upon. Quentin tells Shreve that “it must have looked fine and clear ahead for him now: house finished, and even bigger and whiter than the one he had gone to the door of that day and the nigger came in his monkey clothes and told him to go to the back” (209). The tragedy of Sutpen’s design, though, is that he “projected himself ahead like a mirage” (128). His endeavor to establish an unblemished legacy fails because Sutpen fails at achieving a specific kind of respectability. Sutpen is not discovered. The trope of the tragic mulatto achieves an inversion of tragedy – instead of failing to remain concealed, Sutpen fails at fully achieving a certain kind of whiteness. What lasts of Sutpen is a legacy of mixed blood – itself not a tragedy, but a failure of Sutpen’s peculiar design. Sutpen’s failed marriage and devastated family is survived by “whatever dragon’s outcropping of Sutpen blood the son might sow on the body of whatever strange woman would therefore carry on the tradition” (148) of his failed design. The tradition that begins with Sutpen’s own mixed blood is therefore perpetuated by an “othered” race.

FOLKLORE, DEMONOLOGY AND THE LANGUAGE OF RACE

In the introduction to *Afro-American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*, Roger Abrahams characterizes the nature of folktales in the African American tradition as “stor[ies] that ha[ve] no end...we are thrown into the middle of an impulsive action being carried out for its own sake...there is no before and after here, only a clever trick” (3). Abrahams’ characterization of folktales is useful in that critics have argued over whose “story” *Absalom* actually belongs to: many have posited that because of *Absalom*’s close relationship to *The Sound and the Fury*, it is actually a non-linear continuation of Quentin’s story. But Quentin’s story has already come to an end before the reader even opens *Absalom*. It is Shreve’s prophecy at the end of the novel, one that haunts Quentin and many that read the novel, that fundamentally centers the story around Thomas Sutpen and his progeny – namely, Jim Bond – and makes it a story “with no end.”

Because the African American community was largely marginalized in the 19th and early 20th century, “tale gathering was carried out by individuals who did not live in the communities in which the tales had been maintained” (Abrahams xv): those who transcribed these stories into print were often non-black. This is a useful point of departure for a discourse of African American folk figures in *Absalom*. At no one point does Sutpen ever fully possess his own story – it is influenced, ad-libbed, constructed, and reconstructed by a spectrum of white narrators. The process employed by those who gathered Sutpen’s tale reflects the pervasive and unrelenting fear of a select group of white narrators that stands proxy for the overall sentiment of the social perception of the color line in the 19th century.

The reader is privy to Sutpen's own consciousness only through diluted and transposed narration. Because of this, one may only understand black consciousness in *Absalom* through the somewhat murky consciousness of certain select white southerners; by conjecture and observation of specific actions we may be able to identify a general, qualified consciousness of Clytie, Bon, Sutpen, and even perhaps Sutpen's slaves. But what *Absalom* may lack in direct insight into black consciousness, it more than makes up for in the inner workings of the predominate white culture's consciousness of blackness, or how the white community perceives blackness. As I will discuss in section three, Toni Morrison's observations in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) on the presence of blackness in American literature are crucially important in a racial reading of *Absalom*. Morrison advocates that even in cases where the presiding narrator is white, we may focus on a type of "writerly reading" and deconstruct the subjectivity of white consciousness in order to reveal an underlying blackness.

By briefly stepping away from *Absalom* and looking to *Light in August's* Joe Christmas, we find a striking example of Faulkner's hand in creating a space where the underlying presence of blackness is seen through portrayals of white consciousness. With Christmas, one might find at first glance a very stereotypical depiction of the "black beast" or "badman." That Christmas violated some aspect of white femininity – in the public opinion of white Yoknapatawpha county – might quickly relegate Christmas to the oft identifiable "badman." Yet Christmas-as-badman is problematized with, as Judith Wittenberg argues, a lack of any "significant character who is identifiably African American...[which] emphasizes the text's predominant concern with race as a linguistic and social construct rather than a biological given, its focus more on the concept of race than on actual race relations" (27). Neither Christmas nor the community in which he lived could know with certainty his race. He was neither identifiably black nor white; and therefore,

according to standards set by a society that functioned around racial identification, he became black and other. Yet whether Christmas is consciously passing or not, Faulkner implants him¹⁸ within African American folkloric tradition in a convincing manner. In *William Faulkner and Southern History* (1993), Joel Williamson notes that Christmas:

Careened through life, disastrously, destructively, half out of control, a tortured mind and a tortured body tragically vulnerable to the use that other people would make of them. Yet Joe would not simply destroy himself and cease to be. He struggled to breathe, to act, to exist. Like some Flying Dutchman¹⁹, he roved the world, searching for a haven of rest and peace...for practically everyone [in the south], there was no such thing as defining oneself independently of the community, no such thing as living there and opting out of the role prescribed. (405-406)

Sutpen, much like Christmas, represents a character that is passing and simultaneously embedded within a tradition unique to African Americanism. Sutpen also enters Jefferson with a destructive, enigmatic flare. His mind carries the weight of his encounter with the “monkey nigger,” his moment of racial awareness and development of a fractured self. Sutpen’s will does

¹⁸ While white southerners could not by experience fully understand the cultural trauma that either transposed older African folktale traditions into the African American experience or created traditions unique to the African American folkloric canon, the imaginative capacity and sensitivities of men and women like Faulkner – especially those confronted with the horrors of race relations in the south – were privy to a much closer perspective than much of popular culture at large. In *In the Shadow of the Black Beast* (2010), Andrew Leiter notes that:

When Faulkner was ten, the lynching of Nelse Patton – a black man accused of murdering a white woman – occurred only a few blocks from his home...Faulkner may have witnessed the mob violence and that, at the very least, Faulkner’s memory of the circumstances surrounding the lynching informed the creation of Joe Christmas. (111)

Leiter also points to the claims Joel Williamson and Joseph Blotner¹⁸ make that Faulkner’s “great-grandfather had a black ‘shadow’ family in addition to his acknowledged white family...[and that Faulkner’s] wife Estelle Oldham broke off an early engagement because the man purportedly had African American ancestry” (111-112). That the events of Faulkner’s life involve first-hand and potentially even familial experience with race does not necessarily qualify him as one capable of passing on and contributing original stories to the African American canon of folklore. But this closeness to the race issue for someone so socially and intellectually invested in the impact of race on the south (as seen through his depiction of Yoknapatawpha county) certainly garners a level of literary and cultural respect. This respect is most easily observable by the critics who associate Faulkner’s work with modern African American authors whose work makes up the corpus of literature on the phenomenon of passing. Eric Sundquist notes that “the more conventional treatments of passing in such works as Charles Chesnut’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) or Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), as well as the penetrating analysis in James Weldon Johnson’s novel of ideas, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912)...are subsumed into the texture of *Light in August*” (71).

¹⁹ The Flying Dutchmen could perhaps be loosely tied to the African American folkloric figure of the Flying African. Both are displaced from home, and both have little hope for return. This is a connection that Amiri Baraka potentially made when composing “The Dutchman” (

not permit him to be destroyed by the war, and, like Christmas, he travels the world. And Sutpen understands the paramount import of being accepted into the Jefferson community, as the identity he most desperately seeks is contingent on a strange mixture of communal acceptance and fierce independence.

Andrew Leiter recognizes the thriving cultural and literary enterprise of the presence of African American Folklore set amidst a predominate white culture. Leitner notes that, especially in *Light in August*:

Faulkner intertwines the thematic concerns of Harlem authors of passing texts with the white South's racial fears...In a broad sense, Faulkner addresses thematic elements of passing literature as well as the psychological anguish of the tragic mulatto figure...More specifically, however, Joe [Christmas] embodies the trickster figure as an interracial sexual threat...and he resembles the badman characters found in the works of Johnson and Toomer. Joe does not fit tidily into African American folklore types; rather Faulkner conflates characteristics of these figures in Joe with attention to the interracial sexual anxieties they created for the white South. Faulkner's perspective as a white southerner lends itself to an extensive, although still subjective, consideration of southern white society as a force that constructs racial identity where it does not visibly exist. (111)

And though I have to this point largely avoided the links between *Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury*, the primary narrator of both novels, Quentin, realizes in *The Sound and the Fury* that “a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among” (106). This type of racial anxiety and, as Sundquist notes, “masking,” is inevitably “hallucinatory to the extent that, from a white perspective, “[it] manifests the interiorization of racial trauma that led Faulkner, among others, to recognize that ‘nigger’...describes not a person but a projected image” (67). It is this projected image that emanates from a culture largely oppressed in the 19th century of which – even through the lens of white narrators – we may briefly catch a glimpse.

If Quentin sees blackness as an “obverse reflection,” then we might think of white consciousness in Faulkner as a kind of demented cousin of Du Boisian double consciousness. Blackness, as it functions as a projected image from white consciousness, is not “black and American,” but rather, an unequal counterpart to whiteness: a “non-white other.” Yet Faulkner begins to toy with white consciousness in the body of Joe Christmas, who inverts the envisioning process of white consciousness by occupying a culturally black body with physically white skin. The existence of Christmas’s inverted body brings about chaotic and frenzied events to the citizenry of Jefferson, whose process of white consciousness is disrupted by a man whose bodily schema does not fit into their mode of racial marking. Sundquist posits that Christmas is a “figure embodying at once an image and its opposite, a full measure of equality and its absolute denial” (71); Christmas represents then a doubled image.

These images of doubling are common characteristics in much of African American folklore, where the sacred and the secular are not split – they are contained within the same body. Images of a figure doubling for hero and dog, god and the devil, mule and man, and others abound in literature involving African Americans. These doubled images signify on the double consciousness of the black figures they contain – and in Faulkner’s work, operate as extensions of white consciousness towards African Americans. For in *Absalom*, bereft of narration from Sutpen, one can still, by observation of the images constructed by those whose envisioned demarcation of blackness is at best hallucinatory, find in Sutpen a figure who, like Joe Christmas, occupies a body that is not readily racially identifiable but whose presence still disrupts the prevailing social milieu of Jefferson.

In deconstructing white consciousness in *Absalom*, one can quite clearly discern the presence of figures from African American folklore in the creation of Sutpen. I will demonstrate

that Sutpen reflects the common paradigm of racial “othering” through the eyes of white narrators by Faulkner’s use of doubled images, such as the relationship between god and the devil and a farmer and stage actor. Sutpen also embodies, primarily in the section of the novel that occurs before the Civil War, the tradition of the trickster figure. Before the war, tricksterism is a ploy for self-preservation; but after the war, Sutpen returns to Jefferson a broken man, yet still clinging to his grand design. When Sutpen returns, he bears the markings of the “badman,” or the “Bad Nigger.” His design takes a darker turn, with Sutpen brazenly reaching out in simultaneous acts of sexualized and racialized violence. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine sets out to “abandon the popular formula which has rendered black history an unending round of degradation and pathology” by undermining the “desire to see in the oppressed only unrelieved suffering and impotence” (xi). In other words, Levine sets out to reveal a double. By abandoning the “popular formula” (x), Levine deconstructs white sentiment surrounding black consciousness and reveals a culture that is capable of producing a hero and villain, an oppressed and empowered, and a fragmented yet cohesive identity.

Perhaps the most prevalent image attributed to Sutpen is that of the devil²⁰. Rosa begins her pathological demonizing of Sutpen early in her conversation with Quentin, and Shreve riffs nearly endlessly on this image as he re-creates the tale. In many slave tales, the devil often stood as a surrogate for the white man – at times comical but always oppressive and evil. And through trickery, the enslaved Africans often bested this representative of evil. But interestingly, enslaved Africans also depict the devil as a conjure man,²¹ a figure slave masters often associated with their enslaved Africans. The existence of this duality is remarkable, but the perpetuation of the

²⁰ Though casting an individual as the devil is not exclusively limited to the domain of African American folklore, Sutpen’s recasting later as god quite swiftly brings him into the African American tradition as one who doubles as both the sacred and the secular.

²¹ From one old spiritual, “Old Satan is a liar and a conjurer, too; / If you don’t mind, he’ll conjure you” (Harvey 59).

connection between these enslaved individuals and the occult is, as Carlyle Thompson notes, due to the “tacit agreement among literary scholars that because American literature has been the preserve of white male genius and power, blackness usually becomes marginalized and *demonized*” (emphasis added, 11). That the source of this demonization began in the literature of slave plantations reflects an historical context in which the conjurer was a source of great fear for white slave owners, as “magical folk beliefs did give many slaves the courage and determination to indulge in acts they otherwise would have had difficulty committing: standing up to the master, moving freely about the plantation, conspiring to escape, even in some instances rebelling itself” (Levine 75). The figure of the devil doubling as both representative of the enslaved and the oppressor is interesting enough, but the association between the conjurer, the devil, and blackness collide in *Absalom* in ways that signify on Sutpen’s race.

Rosa’s first vision of Sutpen reveals her overriding sentiment of Sutpen’s “otherness” to Quentin. She relates that:

Out of a quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair, clothes, and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed... Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, created the Sutpen’s Hundred, the *Be Sutpen’s Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*. (4)

Appearing abruptly, almost as if Sutpen possesses the ability to conjure invisibility, is a power reflected in old slave tales – tales of which whites, though they did not necessarily believe in them, were certainly aware.²² This “otherness,” or the ability to conjure oneself invisibly out of thin air, with the “sulphur” still reeking from whatever source Sutpen used still clinging to his

²² In 1842, Reverend Charles C. Jones notes of conjurers that “they might go any where and do any thing they pleased and it would be impossible for them to be discovered or known” (Jones 128).

hair, marks the beginning of a long, pathological demonizing of Sutpen by Rosa. But Quentin, imagining at the same moment as his hearing, envisions a more cosmic conjuring. His mind jumps forward in Sutpen's story before Rosa has even told him that Sutpen raised Sutpen's Hundred from nothing (most likely because, growing up in Jefferson and as Grandson of General Compson's, he was already generally aware of Sutpen's story), and places the entire scope of Sutpen's rise to wealth within a grand scheme. When Quentin (and Rosa, among others) perceives Sutpen's plan as a scheme rather than a design, he demonstrates how the white inhabitants of Jefferson viewed Sutpen's "Grand Design" in polarizing terms.

Later, as Quentin's father picks up the story of Sutpen, he asserts that:

There were some among his fellow citizens who believed...that the plantation was just a blind to his dark avocation, through the ones who believed that he had found some way to juggle the cotton market itself and so get more per bale for his cotton than honest men could, to the ones who believed apparently that the wild niggers which he had brought there had the power to actually conjure more cotton per acre from the soil than any tame ones had ever done. He was not liked...but he was accepted.²³ (56-57)

Whether a "scheme" or "dark avocation," the general sentiment of the white populace concerning Sutpen is riddled with fear – a fear that they can only explain by reference to a figure in African American folklore. The townspeople believe that Sutpen not only held power over his slaves, but also could exert his control over the economics that provided balance for social class systems and traditionally prevented drastic upward mobility. Rosa also implies in her first description of Sutpen that he was able to conjure the form of his slaves from a more a primitive "beast half tamed" to "upright men." Traditionally, white consciousness could only conceive of conjuring being limited to a primitive belief system. That Sutpen and his slaves are relegated to the same set of beliefs in the minds of the townspeople does more than signify on Sutpen's social

²³ While this passage is used almost in its entirety earlier in the thesis, I felt it necessary, due to the application of a drastically different type analysis, to supply the passage again.

caste. He is clearly placed within the slave tradition as a member, not an overseer, and as the source from which voodoo, conjuring, and spiritual power emanates.

The connection to African American folklore goes deeper than type-casting Sutpen as a conjurer. His association with the devil is accompanied by a god-like status. Sutpen doubles as both god and demon. Quentin alludes to this doubling in nearly the same breath as he imagines Sutpen conjuring “house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap[ping] them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific” (4). Notwithstanding the reference to black magic and his scheme being akin to a card trick, Quentin goes on to comment that this action is reminiscent of the creation story in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that Sutpen’s actions carry the same cosmic weight as the spoken word of God. Whereas Quentin imagines Sutpen as God only in retrospect, one of Sutpen’s contemporaries, Wash Jones, in his pallid squalor, also imagines Sutpen as god-like. He thinks, when wondering about the apparent inequality of men, that “*If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that’s [Sutpen] what he would aim to look like*” (226). The connectedness between Wash’s vision of Sutpen-as-God and Rosa’s vision of Sutpen-as-demon are striking in their polarity. Both visually place Sutpen on a horse, with Rosa observing that he was “man horse demon” (4), and that “he came here with a horse...fiend blackguard and devil” (9-10) while Wash envisions him riding through Sutpen’s Hundred as God might have ridden through Eden. This distinction between the two images is both overt, suggesting an inter-textual link, and key to Sutpen’s hidden racial identity. Rosa, along with the rest of what might be considered “respectable Jefferson,” is highly tuned to a certain kind of respectability. And, as demonstrated in the first section, Sutpen’s design was to attain a very specific mold of whiteness – whiteness occupied by the likes of the Coldfields, not Wash Jones. Wash and Rosa both see Sutpen on a

horse, but their “seeing” is through a different social lens. Though the two cannot visibly see Sutpen’s race, Rosa sees “other,” and her vision of Sutpen as “man horse demon” signifies on the African American tradition of the conjurer whereas Wash sees Sutpen as the ultimate representative of symbolic order.

When considered under the arc of Sutpen’s Grand Design – or Grand Scheme, depending on perspective – Sutpen also doubles as a farmer and an actor on a stage. Sutpen certainly did not stand by as a passive observer during the formation and maintenance of Sutpen’s Hundred. Quentin’s father observes that “he and the twenty negroes worked together,” but this image is complicated in that he and his “negroes” were “distinguishable one from another by his beard and eyes alone” (28). Something, in the gaze of the townspeople, was not quite right. Sutpen fit the monetary mold of white opulence prevalent in a plantation setting, but as Quentin’s father observes, the uneasiness of Jefferson reflected a “public opinion in an acute state of indigestion” (35). Mr. Compson, commenting on this public opinion of Sutpen, posits that while Sutpen was “playing the scene to the audience, behind him fate, destiny, retribution, irony – the stage manager, call him what you will – was already striking the set and dragging the synthetic and spurious shadows and shape of the next one” (57). This doubling of farmer and farm-actor brings into dialogue the term “mimicry,” which often transposes itself into a number of African American folktales as well as 19th and early 20th century stage productions.

In acknowledging that the townspeople of Jefferson thought of Sutpen as a stage actor, they unknowingly allude to the linguistic paradigm of passing. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi L. Bhabha notes that:

Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres to the dominant strategic function of colonial power,

intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledge and disciplinary powers. (86)

That Sutpen posed a threat to the citizens of Jefferson seems all too obvious. But the common underlying reason posited and left relatively unquestioned by critics – that of class differential – seems all too insufficient. Undoubtedly, if Wash Jones had experienced some form of drastic upward mobility he too would have been met with the scornful gaze of Rosa and others, but Rosa’s demonization and the townspeople’s distrust call to mind not cleaned up “white trash,” but rather, white-faced blackness. Thompson notes that “by aping the speech, behavior, and physical features of whites, mimics cross over to wear the mask of whiteness and become the unfortunate victims of the nervous insecurity that plagues imposters” (16). Sutpen’s anxiety is left completely on display for the citizens of Jefferson. Quentin tells Shreve that “all his time for spare talking [was] taken up with furthering that design which he had in mind, and his only relaxation fighting his wild niggers in the stable where the men could hitch their horses and come up from the back” (202) to watch. Sutpen’s audience is both entertained and afraid. They are aware that they only see a copy, but are unsure of the true nature of what they see.

Audiences of 19th century minstrel shows, however, were usually aware of the source of their entertainment. Before African Americans were allowed on stage, white minstrels in black-face would act out the common stereotypes of enslaved Africans or African Americans. When African Americans were allowed on stage, the “white reaction was commonly one of amused derision, seeing the effort as simply one more bungled black attempt to imitate white cultural practices” (Abrahams 12). But Sutpen’s imitation of white cultural practices is far more serious and quite troubling for the people of Jefferson because they are unaware that Sutpen is figuratively wearing whiteface. This inversion of minstrelsy, where the audience watches in bemused anxiety rather than amused derision, is the result of the phenomenon of passing, where

identity is erased and created anew. It is not quite that the white citizens of Jefferson necessarily recognize racial passing, but they become aware of the performative nature of Sutpen and his stage, Sutpen's Hundred.

The image of the black stage actor or black minstrel filtered into a plethora of different figures in African American folklore. One preeminent figure in African folklore that travelled across the Atlantic and rather seamlessly morphed into the African American tradition was the trickster figure. One major change from the African to African American tradition was that, while still very much alive and present,²⁴ the trickster figure of African folklore was largely limited to animal figures. When enslaved Africans faced situations of unprecedented oppression, "the animal trickster, though vicariously pleasing, did not offer African Americans a model of emulative behavior and certainly did not threaten the *status quo*" (19). Enslaved Africans had to create a new model of heroism that physically embodied their situation in the form of a human trickster figure. The role of this new trickster figure revolved around the difficulties of living within a rigid social hierarchy and offered hope for survival. Lawrence Levine succinctly expresses the change in the tradition of this figure when he states that "marginality presupposes alternatives" (139). The African American trickster had to take the form of a human because the stakes were higher. The marginality was more cosmic, and older traditions had to be revised. This trickster no longer had to deceive in order to provide entertainment or teach social lessons to a community. It had to deceive in order to live.

I will suggest that in passing, Sutpen extends the bounds of trickery to the farthest margins. Tricksters were primarily confined to situations involving still-enslaved people. While

²⁴ Most notably in the Brer Rabbit tales.

not cast as ubiquitously physically weak,²⁵ they attained their agenda through wit and guile rather than authority. Though Sutpen is not physically weak, he does, in a sense, perform the ultimate trick. Tricksters are fundamentally concerned with self-preservation. Sutpen desires self-actualization. Sutpen bore the markers of the trickster figure in his early days, but Faulkner was interested in pushing the boundaries of racial illegibility, and the hybrid body of the mulatto pushed every boundary available to the 19th and 20th century white person in the south.

In Roger Abrahams' study of black culture in Philadelphia, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1970), Abrahams notes that the trickster figure is traditionally childish, perhaps pathologically reckless in the way a teenager might think and behave, and altogether lacking a certain sophistication or stability present in other folk heroes. This is a useful point of departure for an analysis of Sutpen as a trickster figure, for in his pre-war state, Sutpen is characterized by both a fierce and determined cunning spirit and a childlike ambivalence towards cultural norms. Even his fiery entrance into Jefferson lacks a degree of credibility one could expect from a man intent on achieving a certain kind of whiteness. Sutpen's early years in Jefferson were characterized by drinking, gambling, and fighting. According to Mr. Compson, Sutpen even wore the same set of clothes for five years by choice and only ironed them with heated bricks when he entered town (31). By all accounts, his period of bachelorhood was exactly that – rogue, immature, and lacking in sophistication. Even Sutpen's marriage to Ellen, calculated and deliberate as it was, was precipitated by his “deliberate siege” on Mr. Coldfield – hardly the mature way to approach a man with “puritan uprightness” (32). And at their wedding, Sutpen's juvenile taste for over-reaching opulence resulted in “a half dozen of his wild negroes wait[ing] at the door [of the church] with burning pine knots” (39).

²⁵ Brer Fox, Elephant, and Wolf all represent strong trickster figures. The enslaved sometimes used these tales of physically powerful figures in a didactic function in order to avoid being a powerless victim.

Sutpen, despite his juvenile tendencies, still demonstrates the wit and guile of the trickster figure. His silence, both as a result of the narration of the story and also his overall silence towards the community of Jefferson, reveals his continued endeavor to trespass and infiltrate a protected identity. But though Sutpen was able to improve his childhood situation through racial deception, trickster figures were seldom in complete control of their situation. Sutpen still relied on acceptance into the community of Jefferson – something that was granted – but with begrudging and halting petulance. As I will argue in the third section of this paper, Faulkner, through Shreve’s prophecy, eventually casts a post-race vision of America. But Faulkner understood that the realities of the system in which the enslaved lived limited their social and cultural mobility – calling for a figure such as the trickster to emerge in his novel. Yet a figure like Sutpen, or any figure that passes from one racial line to the next, subverts this system in measures so drastic that, like trickster tales that made white masters look foolish, the inherent hypocrisies in racist ideology are exposed. But Sutpen, like some tricksters, is caught. His racial identity is not exposed, but after emancipation, Sutpen returns to find his grand design in ruins. He attempts to pick up where he left off, but this time inhabits the body of the badman, continuing in the mold of African American folklore.

While the trickster figure often transgresses the socio-sexual boundaries surrounding white women, sexual prowess and sexual deviance are not necessarily ubiquitous trademarks of this figure. The “badman” in African American folklore, however, represents the pinnacle of virility and sexual prowess, often the source of fear and loathing for white culture. The ubiquitous “badman,” or “Bad Motherfucker,” “Bad Nigger,” and later, the “pimp,” is a figure whose origins are unique to the antebellum slave experience. Daryl Dance notes that the badman “is and always has been *bad* (that is, villainous) to whites because he violates their laws and he

violates their moral codes. He is *ba-ad* (that is, heroic) to the Black people who relish his exploits for exactly the same reasons” (*Jivin’* 224). The badman revolts against anything that restrains him; he is one who ultimately fears nothing, and respects only his own volition. In the tradition of the black badman, the figure’s “lawlessness serves as a normative response to oppressive conditions created and maintained, in most instances, by the law or, at the least, the socio-political system that it upholds” (Roberts 175). The badman relates to other men through violence, and asserts his manhood through sexual exploits with women. Dance posits that badman figures are “sexual supermen, but their women are enemies to be conquered, humiliated, and controlled rather than partners to be loved” (225). While the genesis of these tales is found in the pre-civil war south, post-emancipation times brought about a noticeable rise in the number of stories featuring badman figures. As communities of black slaves transitioned into new communities (albeit still socially limited communities), black people experienced physical and social mobility that was heretofore unavailable in antebellum situations. This perhaps figures into the decline of the number of trickster figures in stories after the civil war; their “invisibility” was not longer relevant to a community that could come and go as they pleased. But this did not change the specter of violence that exuded from the badman and the retaliatory violence that emanated from white culture towards the badman. Roberts notes that “by the late nineteenth century, being the victim of a lynch mob was the most likely consequence of being branded a dangerous ‘bad nigger’” (179). And in the case of Sutpen, this “lynch mob” is none other than Wash Jones, who instead of brandishing a hemp rope, is armed with a scythe.

At work within *Absalom* is a strange confluence of this hyper-visual badman and the often invisible figure of a passing black man. While the badman is ultimately and aggressively opposed to anything “white” that crosses his path, his violence is relatively indiscriminate – both

directed towards members of the black and white community. It is ultimately a projection of several centuries of repressed and restricted black masculinity in an effort for black men to achieve both self-respect and a sense of self-actualization. It is a hyper-realized power expressed through violent efforts for possession and ownership. So while Sutpen is always and ultimately passing, his methods for achieving “completion of self” change. In many ways, the trickster figure morphed into a version of the badman after the war. And Sutpen, upon returning from the war and finding his nearly complete design in ruins, changes his approach to infiltrating white culture. His was always a fight against blackness in order to achieve whiteness, but it was also a fight against white culture in order to be accepted within it. His actions upon returning to Sutpen’s Hundred take on a more forceful approach – his once relatively contained sexual prowess is more visible, and his design is brought to the ground in violence.

One way of looking at Sutpen’s decision to pass for white, especially in the context of the badman, is that because he transgressed both the socio-sexual laws forbidding intermarriage and usurps the various civil laws used to oppress individuals of mixed-race backgrounds without receiving punishment, Sutpen maintains a certain level of “lawlessness.” But while breaking these laws without immediate retribution, the passing black person finds agency in no longer being held under laws that existed solely for the purpose of racial subjugation. However, the lawlessness of the figure passing for white is quickly inverted by the feigning of law-abiding citizenship. The laws, once usurped, are then absorbed into praxis – thus Sutpen forbidding Bon to marry Ellen, despite his own ability to marry a white woman. The lawlessness of the badman experiences no inversion. It is retaliation solely for the sake of retaliation. Sutpen first married – during what would be his “trickster years” – not for love, but for the “stainless wife and in the unimpeachable father-in-law, on the license, the patent” (39). He broke the laws of

miscegenation, but simultaneously achieved a certain amount of “stainlessness.” But when Ellen dies and Sutpen returns, his courtship of Rosa is less formal and more driven by a sexual desire than for the perfect wife.

Rosa remembers her courtship by Sutpen as being little more than “*that ogre...held out its hand and said ‘Come’ as you might say it to a dog and I came*” (141). Sutpen’s transition from a demon to an ogre in Rosa’s mind echoes the difference in the early years of Sutpen-as-trickster and Sutpen-as-badman. A demon, less a physical presence than a haunting specter, is perhaps more closely akin to the trickster, whose guiles and deceit are often not visible. But an ogre represents a grossly objectionable physical presence. It is a “man-eating monster” (OED) whose voracious physical and sexual appetites wreak actual, physical damage on humans. The ogre is the “badman” of the fairy-tale world. But Rosa denies this ogre the pleasure of sex because, as Shreve notes, he “suggested they breed like a couple of dogs,” and flees to Jefferson, not to return until after his death. Sutpen’s appetites turn to Milly Jones, Wash’s granddaughter. Upon learning that Milly gives birth to a daughter and not a son, Sutpen abandons all responsibility for the two, who both die a short time later. And in a final act of violence, Sutpen fights Wash only to be killed. His final years at Sutpen’s Hundred are marked with desperate violence and an overt sexual drive. Though it is a hopeless endeavor, a hopelessness of which Sutpen was aware, he, like the badman, lashes out one final time against the culture that had, with finality, rejected him.

These figures – the badman, the trickster, the stage-actor, the demon – all find their way into *Absalom* through the figure of Sutpen. His social body, one that is divided and incomplete and represents all the anguished strivings of the passing black man, fits into a markedly black corpus. Sutpen comes alongside a long list of figures that, in the 19th and early twentieth century,

began to solidify a literary and cultural canon of black heroes and heroines. His rise in the Jefferson community is achieved through the guiles of a trickster figure and his violent fall is representative of the fate of many badman figures. But Sutpen is more than an archetype or a stock figure. Like Christmas, Sutpen represents Faulkner's willingness to subvert even his own potential prejudice in order to subsume these problematic figures into the South's social milieu. Sutpen, as folkloric figure, as a black man with white skin, can both evoke the fear of white culture and represent the potential solution for an otherwise insoluble social situation. Sutpen's progeny, contrary to his own design for whiteness, become representative of a post-race world where "the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere...[and] they wont show up so sharp against the snow" (302).

NARRATIVE SUBJECTIVITY/NARRATIVE UNITY:
UNMASKING THE SEMIOTIC OTHER

In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Toni Morrison advises critics to “avert the[ir] critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers” (90), noting that the “fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (17) require the reader to focus on the consciousness of the storyteller as a signifier of race as much as the actual object of discourse. This theoretical framework is supremely important for critics of *Absalom*, for while Sutpen is the main “object” of the story, he is never the “describer” of himself. The subjective consciousness present in the narrative strategy of *Absalom* renders every story concerning Sutpen a failure of authoritative account. Faulkner’s nuanced use of narrative highlights the futility of maintaining any control over how the past is constructed – both for those telling Sutpen’s tale and for its active readers. Duncan Aswell notes in “The Puzzling Design of *Absalom, Absalom*” that despite this futility, the “yearning to make logical sense out of events is a compulsive, inescapable need...of the human soul” (93). Critics have noted this compulsive need in each of the narrators of *Absalom*, in varying degrees. But the presiding sentiment of critical work is that it is not until Shreve takes over the narration of *Absalom*, thus demonstrating his “need,” that the story takes on an overtly racial tone. I noted in the introduction that discussions of race in *Absalom* envelopes any discussions of narratology. This seems counterintuitive, as the actual story is technically subsumed within the various narratives. And if one subscribes to the notion that Shreve is the only narrator to racialize the story, then the narrative function might indeed be of greater importance. But what I hope to have demonstrated

in the first section is that by focusing, as Morrison stipulates, on the tellers of Sutpen's tales – and primarily Rosa – one invariably sees that each narrator's account is particularly charged with racial undertones. Shreve most overtly expresses his need for “logical sense” in terms of race, but his racializing does not materialize from thin air. Race underscores each narrative. It fills the narratives up, balloons them into existence, and eventually presides as the impetus for each narrative and stands as the grandly-arching theme of the novel.

Faulkner seems to call unavoidably for the type of reading that Morrison would advocate some sixty years later. For example, Bon's murky biological heritage and the possibility that he is unduly called “nigger” highlights Morrison's principle that even with the lack of clear-cut evidence for the presence of blackness, the narrators still tend to racialize their subject. In other words, Shreve's racialization of Bon reflects simultaneously on Bon's subjectivity in the eyes of Shreve and on Shreve's own racial consciousness – a consciousness that is perhaps just as informative on issues related to the racial line as a direct representation of an indisputably African American character. As Theresa Towner notes in *Faulkner on the Color Line* (2000), Faulkner's intent racialization of the white narrator's imagination is “even more telling than his [overt] representations of black characters” (11). Perhaps the most “telling” scene of this principle at work within *Absalom* occurs when Rosa, instead of looking within the coffin to verify Bon's death, “tried to take the full weight of the coffin to prove to [her]self that he was really in it” (151). Rosa dares not look inside the coffin to verify Bon's presence, but is satisfied with merely feeling the weight of his body. She knows that, as long as Bon is inside the coffin, she can make of him what she pleases, even without direct sight. Rosa does with Bon's body what we must do as readers. Because of narrative subjectivity, we cannot rely – similar to those characters that narrate the story – on always having access to direct sighting. Yet we can use

other senses, other techniques. It is in this vein that we must interpret and acknowledge blackness in *Absalom*. By observing the ways in which white consciousness functions, we can more confidently surmise a general paradigmatic truth about the narrative in *Absalom*: that the one binding thread between the seemingly disjointed narratives is race; this thread, guided by the strong hand of Faulkner, gains greater visibility through Shreve's consciousness, but its presence is felt (as Rosa felt Bon) from the very beginning. By examining each narrator's racialized consciousness and not limiting the racialization of the narrative to Shreve's voice, and by, as Rosa did, picking up the proverbial coffin of the narrative and feeling the weight within, we find that each narrative signifies on Sutpen's "otherness."

Since race is a social construct, it is presented in literature through language, or the linguistic constructs of narrative. Specifically in *Absalom*, one sees at work two diametric functions of language: to create both presence and absence. In the remaining pages, and with Morrison's theoretical framework acting as a lens through which an Africanist presence is revealed, I will offer an alternative to J.G. Brister's reading of the "semiotic" and "symbolic" in his article, "*Absalom, Absalom!* and the Semiotic Other." In parsing out the differences in Julia Kristeva's "semiotic" and Jacques Lacan's "symbolic," Brister, paraphrasing Kristeva, notes that "language is comprised of oppositional elements: sound and sense, rhythm and meaning, intonation and communication – the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic'" (39). According to Leon S. Roudiez, the symbolic "refers to the establishment of sign and syntax, paternal function, grammatical and social constraint, [and] symbolic law" (6-7). The symbolic holds a position of power and dominance, and, as Brister argues, whiteness (43). It is capable of sustaining direct relationships of authority with objects and represents order and consciousness.

Standing opposite or before the symbolic is the semiotic. Kristeva argues that:

The kinetic functional stage of the semiotic precedes the establishment of the sign; it is not, therefore cognitive in the sense of being assumed by a knowing, already constituted subject...the semiotic is articulated by flow and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering in a pulsating...rhythmic but nonexpressive totality. (*Revolution* 27, 40).

In short, Brister suggests that the semiotic “designates the repressed, pre-Oedipal instinctual drives that underlie and transgress the symbolic linguistic order” (40). Brister argues that often the semiotic distresses both the “social order” and the “individuated subject” (40). While the semiotic and symbolic were previously used to describe the feminine and masculine roles of language in literature respectively, Brister effectively argues for their close theoretical relationship to race studies, citing both Gates²⁶ and Morrison’s critical work as analogues for the race-centered approach to the semiotic and symbolic. The semiotic then, instead of acting as the feminine voice, represents blackness. Instead of pre-oedipal and maternal, it is a slave – the silent, unseen, and dark force behind American literature.

Brister argues that Sutpen is the “ego, the repressive agent with control over darkness” (42), and that Sutpen embodies the symbolic. If we were to use Morrison’s terms, Brister argues that Sutpen is the “describer and imaginer” (90), and if we were to use Gates’s term, the “signifier.” But Lacan, speaking of language, notes that the “development [of the symbolic] only takes place in so far as the subject integrates himself into the symbolic system, acts within it, asserts himself in it through the use of genuine speech” (“Conversation” 86). Rosa, Quentin, Jason, and Shreve, make up the narrative voices in *Absalom*, along with the unnamed narrator. Conspicuously missing from this list is Sutpen. As I will demonstrate later, when we purportedly hear from Sutpen, it is always transposed through at least two layers of narrative subjects before it reaches the pages of *Absalom*. So Lacan’s qualification that the symbolic is characterized by

²⁶ Primarily in the relationship between the “Signifier” and the “Signified.”

“genuine speech” problematizes any designation of Sutpen as “describer” or symbolic from the start, for Sutpen is never able to produce any representative self-articulation. We are not privy to a trustworthy account of Sutpen’s words – they are, in fact, disingenuous. Even Bon, who is arguably a representative of the semiotic, is able to at least preserve some form of “genuine speech” through his written letters. While some of Sutpen’s actions, as Brister elucidates, do characterize him at times as the symbolic, Sutpen also bears striking similarity to the semiotic forces of blackness that are antecedent to the symbolic. I will propose that Sutpen is caught in a liminal state. As a passing black man, he bears the markers of both the symbolic and semiotic. He does, as Lacan posits, “integrate himself into the symbolic system,” but loses agency because he has no rule or authority over the narration of his story. At most, Sutpen may be constructed as a failed symbolic figure; but Sutpen is unable, as Brister argues, to fully “control [the] darkness” (42).

Brister notes that “the repressed drives [of the semiotic] that underlie and effectuate signification also threaten to return, to destabilize the linguistic social order – and the individuated subject” (40). Brister first turns to Sutpen’s relationship to his slaves as a metaphor for symbolic order, citing the fighting scene as a microcosm for the interworking of the symbolic and semiotic. He argues that this scene clearly depicts Sutpen’s conscious drive to “demonstrate his power of blackness” (43). But Brister fails to acknowledge this passage in its entirety. Brister’s logic would follow if all that he quoted, “Ellen, seeing not the 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 eye’s” was all that Ellen saw. But the remainder of the passage throws a major kink into the symbolic system when Rosa provides the anecdote: “as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too” (20-21). As

mentioned both in section one and observed by Brister, these scenes do indeed signify on Sutpen's desire for "retention of supremacy [and] domination" (23), but when the true embodiment of the symbolic, the narrator, observes the fight, she sees Sutpen as a reflection of the blackness of his slave. This passage should be read, then, as Sutpen's fight to move *into* the symbolic, but Rosa (and potentially Ellen, too) sees through his design. As I noted in section one, when Sutpen descends from the ranks of whiteness and participates in these fights, he is responding to urges inside of himself to rejoin an abandoned identity, urges that may be tied to his racial split. However, within the terms we are now discussing, he is expressing the "repressed urges" of the semiotic in the eyes of the white narrators, and the "repressive" urges of the symbolic only in his own eyes.

Another aspect of the fighting scene that proves problematic for Brister's Sutpen-as-symbolic claim is that Sutpen is not in the position of viewing or envisioning. He reflects the same "'throbbing and trembling' pulsational rhythms of the semiotic" (43) as the black slave he is fighting. By placing himself *within* the ring – a ring that is comprised not of ropes or boards, but of flesh, Sutpen forsakes the position of the symbolic. Brister notes that Sutpen "stag[es]...the grotesque, violent slave fight[s]" (42). But textually, this is not clear. While slave masters often encouraged this sort of behavior, we cannot know for certain that Sutpen instigates these nightly fights. But we do know that he voluntarily enters the spectacle, and that the audience is both a mixture of his slaves and the white men of Jefferson. His is in a penultimate position of authority: while he might assert his dominance over his slaves, he is subjected to the consuming symbolic gaze and linguistic narrative construction of the white narrators. He is "naked and panting and bloody to the waist...and the negro just fallen...[is] bloody too" (21). While Sutpen might at times stand as the image of the symbolic, it is only relative to his

immediate surroundings. When he is exposed to a white audience, he is still physically and socially likened to his slaves and is subject to the determinate gaze of the white spectators who hold the ultimate position of the symbolic.

Brister aligns this fighting scene with the more cosmic subduing of the slave revolt in Haiti. This section of *Absalom*, it must be noted, is founded on a conversation Sutpen had with Quentin's grandfather, who relates the story to his son, Jason, and makes its way into the novel as a conversation between Shreve and Quentin. When Brister notes that "Sutpen claims," he is jumping to the conclusion that we have access to Sutpen's "genuine speech," when the nature of Sutpen's words is that they are mediated many times over. But as Quentin narrates this story to Shreve, he positions General Compson as the creator of the story, not as the one simply transmitting Sutpen's story. Immediately before General Compson claims that Sutpen "walked out into the darkness and subdued them" (205), he notes that "He [Sutpen] didn't tell that...that of no moment to the story either" (204). As he relates the story to Jason, General Compson is himself the one who viewed the events of the slave revolt firsthand, implying that he was somehow present, watching and recording Sutpen's actions. When General Compson claims "Sutpen said," we should understand him as saying "this is what Sutpen *might* have said," thus positioning himself as the symbolic, the "imager" of Sutpen's tale. And one should note that when Quentin says "He stopped talking, telling it" (205), it is unclear if he is referring to General Compson or to Sutpen. One cannot know the moment when Sutpen stopped telling the tale to the General, or when the General stopped telling the tale to Jason (or even when Jason stopped telling the tale to Quentin).

Of particular import in the slave revolt scene, and eerily similar to the fighting scene, is the musing that General Compson provides during the moment when Sutpen finally subdues the

slaves. He notes that “maybe at last they themselves turning in horror and fleeing from the white arms and legs shaped like theirs and from which blood could be made to spurt and flow as it could from theirs and containing an indomitable spirit which should have come from the same primary fire which theirs came from” (205). It is telling that General Compson did not specifically relate that the slaves turned and fled from the “white man,” but the “white arms and legs,” as if General Compson could not bring himself to acknowledge Sutpen as fully white. He is, in the scene, only white in bits and pieces. He is shaped and inspirited like the fleeing black slaves. It is only after Sutpen subdues the “throbbing darkness,” the semiotic representation, that his own “spirit” is likened to the revolting slaves. This spirit, it should be added, Sutpen is able to suppress. But it is this same pulsating semiotic spirit that seems to rise and become visible to Ellen, Rosa, and the townspeople when Sutpen arrives in Jefferson and fights his own slaves.

If “whiteness is aligned with order [the symbolic] and blackness with the unconscious” (Brister 43), then Sutpen cannot be unequivocally aligned with the symbolic. For while he might bring order to the one hundred square miles of virgin territory he subdues and calls his own, his arrival in Jefferson marks a clear disruption of social order in the white community. The community’s “public opinion” of Sutpen was “in an acute state of indigestion” (35). Sutpen’s arrival caused discomfort, suspicion, and discord. Sutpen was, for these citizens, the arrival of the semiotic, the unseen force²⁷ that supplants the modes of subjectivity upheld by the symbolic. His temporary power over blackness, both of his own blackness and that of his slaves, can only be acknowledged in the narrative as symbolic insofar as one acknowledges that the forces of the semiotic eventually disrupt Sutpen’s own design. It is always useful to look at the proverbial “last man standing” in order to gain perspective on the overall effect of an event. I argued in

²⁷ Calling into recollection the traits of the Trickster, who often moved invisibly, or whose guiles were less physical and more represented as unseen acts of speciousness.

section two that *Absalom* is a “story with no end” because Sutpen’s biological legacy survives and presses into the future. But it is the figure that represents Sutpen’s survival, Jim Bond, who represents the inarticulate “howling” of the semiotic, which disrupts Sutpen’s paternalistic, symbolic endeavor. Sutpen is not survived by a representative of the symbolic (ideally his “pure” son, Henry). Henry is swept away by the undercurrent of the semiotic that follows in Sutpen’s wake. Sutpen, therefore, does not bring order. He represents chaos to the social and linguistic systems of Jefferson and eventually destroys his own fight for symbolic order.

As alluded to in previous sections, Sutpen’s childhood encounter with the “Monkey Nigger” is the lynchpin of my entire argument. And though one could analyze this scene through a myriad of critical or cultural lenses, the narrative function of the semiotic and the symbolic in the “Monkey Nigger” scene provides the best insight into Sutpen’s mixed race. Much like the revolt scene in Haiti, Sutpen does not, narratively speaking, hold the key position of “describer.” He does not construct himself, nor does he hold the power of the symbolic. Within the micro-story recreated by General Compson about Sutpen’s childhood and the crucial moment at the door of Pettibone’s mansion, Sutpen might make moves toward the symbolic. But even the story that Sutpen relates to General Compson is only “a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would still have been the same story if the man had no name at all, if it had been told about any man or no man over whiskey at night” (199). That Sutpen even apparently removes himself from his own story, as if he hides behind a caricature he has created, positions him as the semiotic. He is the silent, unseen, throbbing force behind an image that he projects. But notwithstanding the skeptical nature of Sutpen’s own story, the General acknowledges his own active participation in re-imagining Sutpen. As the General relates his conversation about Sutpen’s childhood, his narrative is riddled with anecdotal admissions of his

role in changing the story. Quentin notes that “he [Sutpen] did not mean shrewdness, Grandfather said. What he meant was unscrupulousness only he didn’t know that word because it would not have been in the book from which the school teacher read. Or maybe that was what he meant by courage” (201). The General quite literarily puts words into Sutpen’s mouth. His is an act of the signifier, the imaginer, the symbolic. Whatever we might, by conjecture, glean from this story about Sutpen must be read under the admission that this is not Sutpen’s story. From a narrative perspective, this limits the extent to which we might definitely place Sutpen into the role of the symbolic.

But Brister’s claims concerning the events that unfold in the childhood scene are interesting in that he acknowledges the dual presence of the semiotic and the symbolic during Sutpen’s encounter with the “Monkey Nigger.” Brister notes that “specular recognition initiates the formation of the ego,” citing this moment as an example of Lacan’s mirror stage (44). Brister posits that “in recognizing ourselves in a mirror, a chasm opens between our minds and our bodies” but that instead of recognizing a reflection of himself, Sutpen recognizes a “racial ‘other’” (44). But if this is, indeed, an instance of Lacanian mirroring, then Brister’s hypothesis, that “Sutpen’s sense of self is not born out of an identification with the white plantation owner...but out of the realization of racial difference” does not follow Lacanian philosophy: as Brister notes, “Faulkner significantly revises this topology” (44). Yet I see no need to revise this typology, especially if we open the possibility that Sutpen is a mixed-race child. Sutpen “didn’t even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be” (183). So Sutpen would have no frame of reference in order to distinguish between the darkness of the “racial other” and the whiteness of the Pettibones. If he is, indeed, “innocent,” then when he encounters

the “Monkey Nigger” and has a moment of revelation, it can only be because he sees himself in the house slave’s blackness. He would have no preconditioned reference for pronouncing “other.” And one must logically conclude that if Sutpen sees himself mirrored in the “Monkey Nigger,” then his resentment and envy of the Pettibones began when he realized the racial difference between himself and the plantation owners, not between himself and the “Monkey Nigger.”

Brister acknowledges that Sutpen “is comprised of heterogeneous forces: signified and signifier, conscious and unconscious, symbolic and semiotic” and that he undergoes a psychic split (45). But in citing Carolyn Porter, who argues that “Sutpen’s traumatic transformation from boy to man [which is] registered like so much else in the novel, by the shifting relations between two voices caught up in dialogue” (184), Brister implicitly rescinds his previous association between Sutpen’s split and race. He likens this split, as does Porter, to the division between manhood and boyhood. So when Brister argues that “Sutpen has internalized the ‘other’ and is learning to repress,” he is arguing that Sutpen is learning to suppress his boyhood innocence and has crossed into the threshold of masculinity. But Sutpen does not, if one follows the trajectory of his childhood story, find himself in the liminal space between boy and man, but black and white. This particular narrative drips with conversations about race. Sutpen’s psychic split has little to do with manhood and everything to do with his decision to repress that which the “Monkey Nigger” saw in him and he saw reflected in himself: his blackness. The “other” cannot be class, cannot be masculinity, cannot be caste: those designations simply do not follow the Lacanian logic of the scene. Sutpen sees himself in the face of the “Monkey Nigger” and what he sees is blackness. And it is in this moment that Sutpen decides to mold himself after a particular

kind of whiteness. Sutpen decides to pass for white, to never have to be sent around to the back of the mansion because of his race, and to repress the semiotic forces at work within him.

For Sutpen, Pettibone's mansion comes to represent the manifestation of the symbolic, and perhaps even, his completion of self. Quentin notes that "it must have looked fine and clear ahead for him now: house finished, and even bigger and whiter than the one he had gone to the door of that day and the nigger came in his monkey clothes and told him to go to the back" (209). The conflation of Pettibone's mansion, the scene of Sutpen's racial awakening, and Sutpen's own mansion becomes particularly important as we watch the demise of Sutpen's Hundred. In one of the final scenes of the novel, where Quentin and Rosa break into Sutpen's mansion, Brister notes that "this final confrontation between whiteness and blackness culminates in the destruction of Sutpen's design: Clytie sets fire to the house, killing herself and Henry. Thus, the semiotic and symbolic have collapsed into each other" (51). Sutpen's mansion has for its entire existence housed both the semiotic and the symbolic and, as Brister argues, they collapse into one another. If the house calls to mind for Sutpen his childhood and outwardly stands as the pinnacle of whiteness, what might Brister's inference tell us about Sutpen? If Sutpen's mansion is an extension of Sutpen himself, then the "bigger and whiter" house might be applicable to Sutpen's body. But the house, we come to find, is a mixture, it is only outwardly white. It is, as Faulkner nearly called the novel, a *Dark House*. Sutpen's body has housed the semiotic and the symbolic from the moment of his racial awakening onward. He has worked to repress one and heighten the other; but like his mansion, he and his design collapse and fail.

I have mentioned previously that Shreve's final prophecy carries hopeful undertones of a post-race America and that Shreve acts as the first critic of Sutpen's story. As a critic, Shreve bridges the narrative gaps between a few moments of history and provides a commentary on

what *he thinks* we should learn from them. As Marta Puxan states in “Narrative Strategies on the Color Line,” Shreve “perceive[s] the conflict represented in the story from a drastically different perspective so that the family ingredients that had been in the foreground move to the back of the stage, at the same time as the racial ones dispersed throughout the novel are illuminated to become the central axis of the story” (553). Shreve is able to satisfy the distancing required for one to act as a critic and not as a fellow performer in Sutpen’s story. It is fitting that he is from the north, a stranger to the tale and to the south. He can look at the story more objectively than can Quentin. He is, in a sense, the very first reader of the novel. Shreve, with the ability to take in the story as a whole, not in bits and pieces as the other narrators had, can introduce his own final verdict on the scope of Sutpen’s story. And this is why, I argue, that his prophecy at the end of the novel is not a piece of overt racist ideology. It does not reflect the same fear – that of miscegenation – that plagued Sutpen and the inhabitants of Jefferson and even came to plague Quentin himself. Shreve merely offers his hypothesis on the direction Sutpen’s story will take.

And it is Shreve’s final prophecy that perhaps even hints at his knowledge of Sutpen’s race. As he describes Jim Bond, the “one nigger Sutpen left,” Shreve speculates that “you cant catch him and *you don’t always see him* and you will never be able to use him. But you’ve got him there still” (emphasis added, 302). Shreve, in one sense, knows that he has revealed the unseen, semiotic forces at work within Sutpen’s story. Shreve posits that:

I think the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. (302)

Shreve, since first picking up the story, has realized that though Sutpen’s design was one for whiteness, and though that particular design was doomed to failure, his legacy would continue.

The process that Sutpen began on the doorsteps of the Pettibone mansion, with the “Monkey Nigger” staring down at him, would transform the western hemisphere. In identifying that Jim Bond, the continuation of Sutpen’s legacy, would one day “not show up so sharp against the snow,” Shreve acknowledges that the signifiers of African ancestry would one day be absorbed into the praxis of American culture. But in identifying himself as one who would absorb the semiotic, “I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings,” Shreve acknowledges that he would be “bleached” as well, and that all races would be absorbed into a unification of the symbolic and the semiotic.

CONCLUSION

I stated in the introduction that my goal in this thesis was to demonstrate that the African American presence in *Absalom* shapes, motivates, and determines Sutpen's design "from within," implying, of course, that a shadowy blackness not only imbues every page of the text, but also exists within Thomas Sutpen. The entire scope of *Absalom*, then, is permeated with the African American presence – even those years before Sutpen's childhood narrative begins. His indefinite origins that exist outside the pages of the text become a part of the subliminary consciousness of American culture²⁸. He is, in a sense, every "othered" child that exists, but exists without definite identity, limited to a liminal existence on the fringes of a hegemonic white culture. But his appearance, his "abrupt[ing]...out of a quiet thunderclap" (4) echoes the social upheaval of previously unchallenged positions of authority brought about by the troubling appearance of mixed-race individuals who demanded social recognition in the 19th century.

Much of Faulkner's work – especially his earlier work – has at its core the issue of race. He was, much like the narrators of *Absalom*, in the business of dialoguing about the problems surrounding the color line. And his corpus provides a meta-narrative of the social and cultural rise of "the Negro" during turn-of-the-century America. As I concluded in section three, the

²⁸ This type of reading, I believe, will begin to open much larger cultural doors. I recently had the privilege of listening to Dr. Maryemma Graham speak of her recent visits to Haiti at the Robert Milton Young Memorial Lecture at The University of Alabama. Her lecture, "The Post-Gaze: New Domains for Literary and Critical Studies," chronicled her work in compiling the oral histories of one of the most historically impoverished and abused communities in the Caribbean and offered a new approach to post-colonial discourse. I was able to converse with Dr. Graham afterwards, and asked her if the collective Haitian consciousness had any notion of their culture's enormous impact on the global south, particularly from a literary perspective. Her answer was simple and definitive: "No." While it might be a stretch to posit that some day every young Haitian scholar will be able to point to Sutpen's time in Haiti as the foundational stages for his grand design, unveiling Sutpen's blackness might draw more attention to the field of post-colonial studies, thus opening the door for more active groundwork *in*, as opposed to *about*, the global south.

narrative of *Absalom* is concerned throughout with race, and, as Shreve postulates, “it’s the miscegenation, not the incest” (285) that drives the story of Sutpen. But Shreve is not, as many critics have argued, the first of the narrators to identify “that which [they, the collective group of narrators,] cannot bear” (285) as race. The discussion of race begins, as it were, in the very beginning, with Sutpen’s arrival in Jefferson and Rosa’s racialized narration of his presence.

Whether or not Faulkner was conscious of his choices in his description of Sutpen’s physical body seems to matter little when the evidence of those descriptions is aligned with the potential for a racially hybrid body. The textual evidence is at least poignant enough to garner more critical attention than it has previously received, and, at most, compelling enough to call for a complete overhaul of decades of scholarship that has ubiquitously identified Sutpen as the symbol of white masculinity. But when one pays close enough attention to the physical signifiers of Sutpen’s body, an overwhelming realization that an Africanist presence exists in all facets of Sutpen’s mysterious life occurs. By following these physical signifiers, Sutpen’s entire existence is inverted and begins to follow cultural figures that are only present in African American folklore. Like Joe Christmas, whose troubling body exhibited a conflation of varying folkloric figures, Sutpen’s drive towards completion – towards self-actualization – resembles the actions of the trickster and the badman.

The troubling narration of *Absalom*, if we begin to take note of the constant and abiding racializing of Sutpen, becomes far more linear. As Brister notes, the semiotic and the symbolic are powerfully at work within the narrative. But the semiotic, the throbbing pre-paternal presence of blackness, is perhaps far more active than previously acknowledged. From the moment of Sutpen’s arrival, Sutpen does what the semiotic is apt to do: he disrupts the standards set by a subjective, white system. His drastic rise in Jefferson’s social structure causes disorder and

brings about fear. Yet he is ever cast as the semiotic, one who is never able to tell his own story. He is relegated to the confines of the narrative shadow the white “storytellers” of Jefferson cast. And while Sutpen’s grand design for whiteness fails, the pattern he set forth – that of darkness entering into white culture – Shreve recognizes as a lasting enterprise.

Faulkner’s poignant advice to the young student at Virginia should be the starting point for any foray into *Absalom, Absalom!*: the critic must acknowledge that whatever one says about the novel is simultaneously true and false. We must concede that we are no different than Shreve – we see “something” in Thomas Sutpen, but that may at best only be verisimilitude. Brister’s claim that Sutpen stands resolutely as the symbolic, then, is not falsified because I see in Sutpen the semiotic. In fact, the ability for these seemingly mutually exclusive claims to coexist only bolsters the effectiveness of Faulkner’s work. Faulkner is digging at the fundamental issues surrounding the narrative, and by consequence, the way men and women are constructed. In a sense, Faulkner invites the reader to become a part of the story as a final, arbitrary narrator who, like Shreve, he beckons to draw what conclusions one may – for none are definitive. So when I argue that Sutpen is passing, in no way am I arguing that all other scholarship on Sutpen is wrong, only that this is another way of “looking at the blackbird.”

But this practice, this unveiling of the semiotic is, I believe, a useful practice. It is in the vein of Morrison’s query whether or not “the major and championed characteristics of our national literature...are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (2). Many of the canonical authors of American Modernism might then bear the markers of the racial semiotic. When one looks at the politics of the pastoral in Willa Cather, one begins to note an eerie resemblance to the political marginalization of the mulatto figure in 19th century America. As Carlyle Thompson has shown us, one can no longer read Jay Gatsby without questioning his

race. In fact, one can look at most of the literature of the American south and begin to question whether we have uncovered all there is to uncover – for nowhere has the fear of racial miscegenation suppressed and repressed the truth behind an individual’s ancestry more fully. I do not want to be mistaken for calling on a vast revisionist history. This practice has little to do with *changing* the past and everything to do with *uncovering* the past. It calls us to look at literature that may at first glance have little to do with the African American experience and ask how that invisible experience has shaped literature and, by consequence, American culture. And this practice will perhaps, as Shreve prophesies, move American culture closer to the moment when collectively we see people not in difference, but in similarity.

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