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Faulkner, Race, and Reactionary Politics

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Abstract

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This thesis analyzes William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) in their relationship to racial discourses and reactionary politics. Treating "race" as a historically contingent technology of governance that is constructed for state management of populations, it situates Faulkner's novels in the production of racial knowledge. Attention to the institutional production of race problematizes the novels' relationship to late 19th and early 20th century American race science, and reactionary politics that turned these theories into political problematics. Examining reactionary readings of Faulkner's novels challenges the accepted interpretation of the novels as fundamentally antifascist, and reveals previously unexamined institutional contexts in which the novels are situated.

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Introduction: Humanizing Faulkner

1.

In contemporaneous reviews of Faulkner's major novels in the early 1930s, critics were nearly uniformly suspicious of Faulkner's morality. Leftist critics in particular claimed that Faulkner was not only a nihilist artist of violence, but also a proto-fascist. Frequently, the charge that Faulkner's grotesque either obscured political consciousness through a gothic unreality, or overtly expressed reactionary hate, relied on the supposed amorality and violence of his fiction as a correlate of its stylistic impenetrability. Granville Hicks, a prominent Marxist critic in the 1930s, claimed that Faulkner's dense strata of narration merely "pile violence upon violence in order to convey a mood that he will not or cannot analyze." Faulkner could not adequately describe life as it actually existed in the South, nor imagine a critique that was more than a bitter dead end.¹ His "burning hatred" (Hicks 266) was obvious at the level of politics, morality, and style simultaneously.

Faulkner's supposed nihilism is the same nihilism that these critics claimed form the roots of fascism. Maxwell Geismar claimed that Faulkner "reject[s]...the modern south, portraying it only in terms of bestiality" and espouses an explicitly reactionary politics, scapegoating women and black people in his indictment of modernity (Geismar 181). For Geismar, Faulkner's antiblackness and misogyny puts him in a "dangerous" position relative to "The Great Hatred...[the] reversionary, neo-pagan and neurotic discontent (from which Fascism stems)" (182).

As Faulkner came to be regarded as a major writer, this politics vanished. The reactionary resonance of his work, self-evident for many of his early critics, was left largely untouched. Faulkner transformed from a "prewar nihilist to a postwar moralist" (Schwartz 9).

2.

Malcolm Cowley, once a prominent Marxist and throughout his career a deeply socially-engaged critic, wrote a famous introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*. According to a common narrative of Faulkner's entry into critical acclaim, Cowley claimed Faulkner as "the most considerable novelist of his generation" by presenting him as a moral Modernist (Cowley 24). In portraying Faulkner as an insightful, empathetic artist who was morally engaged with community and history, he "force[d] a serious reconsideration by other critics" (25), and staved off accusations that Faulkner was a nihilist and proto-fascist. Far from a violently racist ideologue, Faulkner became a moralist who "approach[ed] the human problem from a point of departure where ideology leaves off" (Clark 306).

The adoption of Faulkner as a humanist champion of individual morality is particularly strange in light of the earlier accusation that his novels either actively negated human morality, or were too incomprehensible to speak on it meaningfully. His work changed from a "reptilian art," a "haunted house ... inhabited by spiders and morons" to the exact "source of inspiration for all those who draw their values from Nature" (Hartwick 166). Far from an incomprehensible mass of violence, Faulkner's novels represented an avant-garde with a transparent moral heart.

Lawrence H. Schwartz, in *Creating Faulkner's Reputation*, reads this shift as part of the valorization of the individual, moral subject by the New Critics. Schwartz contextualizes this shift around the need for a "postwar moralist and symbol of solitary literary genius" (Schwartz 29) that could easily represent the "immortal enduring" (Faulkner 1) individual. This was a crucial component of American hegemony in the establishment of the post-war world order. He became an avatar of both morally-oriented art of the individual spirit, and a type of American liberal nationalism that was rapidly being exported.

Faulkner quickly changed from an artist of depravity to a distinctly American humanist icon. His gothic narratives was a regionally-specific, undoubtedly beautiful form of a universal human tragedy. Despite some controversial expressions of a more conservative form of antiblackness, Faulkner's gradualist racial politics were also fundamentally humane.² Faulkner's explicit anti-fascist statements after the war became the default interpretation of his novels' politics. Once Faulkner was critically received a humanist, an artist of universals, a laureate of the "agony and sweat of the human spirit" (Faulkner 1), the previously self-evident proto-fascism of his novels disappeared.

This disappearance of politics was itself fundamentally political. Just as liberalism cloaks racism as an institutional framework, liberal literary interpretation obscures racial discourse in Faulkner's novels in order to maintain his post-1940s status as a humanist. Finding traces of fascist politics is more than a critical exercise; if Faulkner's novels were transparently racist and proto-fascist to his early leftist critics, they would have also been legible "fascist fables" (Follansbee 75) to reactionary readers. Excavating these potential readings offers a political interpretation of Faulkner that was once obvious, and now nearly absent from both serious study of Faulkner and his general reputation.

3.

Questions of race in Faulkner's novels proliferated as he was accepted by the critical establishment. Frequently, critics debated whether Faulkner was an antiblack racist. The New Critics and their immediate successors judged Faulkner's treatment of race in terms of individual morality. Take John Hagopian's two methodological questions in "*Absalom, Absalom!* and the Negro Question:" "(1) which of the principal characters are racists and which are not? (2) does the action of the novel as a whole confirm or condemn a racist ideology?" (377).³ The reduction

of racism to a matter of personal morality squares easily with a reading of Faulkner as an artist of the individual spirit.

Of course, many more nuanced and thorough studies of race in Faulkner have been written since, particularly psychoanalytic and historicist readings of race in his novels.⁴ Since the 1990s, critics informed by critical race theory have read race in Faulkner not as a given system of categorization, but as a construction by mechanisms of power; mechanisms that Faulkner's novels ambiguously dramatize. This is the theoretical and methodological background in which my own work is situated.

Even politically-minded critics frequently ignore the ways the relation between racial power and early 20th century international fascism, or all too readily accept the image of the antifascist, humanist Faulkner that critics produced in the 1940s and 50s. The numerous recent articles on the influence of global fascism on his novels often point out the reactionary overtones of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, but generally accept a fundamental antifascism. A notable exception is Daniel Spoth's "Totalitarian Faulkner," which presents the historical actuality of the Nazi translation and publication of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* to highlight the tangible traces of reactionary ideology in his mid-30s novels.

4.

Critical race theory analyzes the law and state as structures of racial ordering. David Goldberg's *The Racial State* theorizes racial rule as state imposition of a biological identity in order to manage a population. The epistemological grounding of race is historically contingent, a shifting discursive field of what Goldberg calls racial naturalism and racial historicism (Goldberg 88). Theorizing race as a simultaneous production of biological subjectivity and management of

a population relies on Michel Foucault's work, particularly in his late 1970s lectures *Society Must Be Defended* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, on biopolitical rule as an emergent logic of governance the 20th century. Foucault centers his analysis on the multiplicity of governing apparatuses. The medical, scientific, and penal spheres produce the truth of both biology and political subjectivity.

Light in August and *Absalom, Absalom!* were published during a moment of marked change in these sites of racial production. In Chapter One, I analyze the neglected context of eugenics, a simultaneously medical, political, and scientific practice that was prevalent enough to become "common sense" (English 9) in the early 20th century, in *Absalom, Absalom!* In Chapter Two, I interpret Joe Christmas's recognition by the state as first an outlaw, and then a criminal in terms of racialized punitive power. I also identify Percy Grimm's National Guard as a new civil-military technology of racial enforcement, particularly in terms of the strange racialization of Joe Christmas's death.

In its political orientation, critical race theory critiques liberalism writ large. Liberalism here refers to both a real schematic of state and society, and the theoretical foundation of the modern state, a "racial contract" as well as a social contract (Mills 1). On one level, this challenges a historical narrative of racial subordination as an imperfection that the West has overcome. On another, it rejects the modern regime of ostensible racial neutrality before the law, and the illusion of social meritocracy that obscures or denies the reality of racial ordering.

Critical race theory is also vital for understanding explicitly racist, reactionary politics. If we view state racism as fundamentally embedded in, rather than progressively erased by, modern liberalism, then politics that make the mechanisms of state racism into explicit political goals become more immediately explicable. The returns of reactionary racism at various historical

moments is thus neither a direct historical mirroring nor a historically incomprehensible aberration. Rather, it is an alteration of what dimensions of state racism are articulable as a political problematic, according to scientific and social understandings of race that change over time.

Historical analysis of Radical Racism and the imposition of Jim Crow laws (particularly as presented in Joel Williamson's *A Rage for Order*) shows how a system of legal racial hierarchy emerged alongside (and, in many ways, from) a particularly vicious politics of race. I read this surge of 1890s Radical Racist discourse, an ideology wholly centered on antiblackness, alongside early 20th century eugenic discourse, which established a different ordering of race in both 20th century America and the fascist governments of the 1930s. The shifting epistemological terrain of these racial ideologies is perceptible in the layered narration of *Absalom, Absalom!* particularly in its young narrators' obsession with extinction.

Another line of inquiry in literary studies of race with particular salience to Faulkner studies examines the instability of racial categories. There is much critical work on the precarious racial identities of Faulkner's mixed-race characters and the relationship between racialization and legal ordering. Joe Christmas and Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon, two mixed-raced men whose racialization is dramatized in encounters with the law, a process of racialization by apparatuses of the state.

5.

It would be an unfair oversimplification to claim that Faulkner's early leftist critics correctly identified him as a hateful reactionary. Certainly, Faulkner's work does possess a moral orientation that these critics missed, and his initial reputation as a "radical reactionary and a

sentimental traditionalist” (Peavy 13) required a corrective. As Cowley claimed in his introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*, Faulkner’s rejection of nostalgia and his gothic counter to the (lucrative) literary production of Southern romance makes reading him as a traditionalist obviously untenable. The problem is not that Faulkner’s characters can’t regain the past, but that they “cant repudiate it” (Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, 256).

Neither is Faulkner in any way comparable to Radical Racist polemic novelists like Thomas Dixon or Thomas Nelson Page, who posed an explicitly racist reactionary politics in “magnolia-scented portraits” (Sundquist 101). Contrasting the ambiguous politics of Faulkner’s mid-1930s novels with the immensely popular and politically influential genre of reactionary polemical novels clarifies two problems. First, Faulkner’s ambiguous, polyvalent fictions do not resemble the vicious, simplistic novels of racist polemicists who posed emancipated black people as “the cause of the destruction of all [they] held dear” (Geismar 179). Second, Faulkner cannot be situated solely within the context of regional Southern politics. While *Absalom, Absalom!* in particular bears many traces of Radical Racist discourse, these discourses are transformed and refracted by both new standards of racial knowing, and new technologies of racial enforcement. Faulkner’s novels are clearly concerned with a different political and racial problematic altogether. *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* dramatize the emergence of a new reactionary politics, which both echoed the violently biologized antiblackness of the post-Reconstruction South, and reformulated white identity around nationalism.

My goal is not to repeat the presuppositions of Faulkner’s early critics using updated critical terminology. Rather, I want to suspend a certain leap that many critics, from the formalists of the 1950s to today’s critical theorists, repeat: the imposition of a retroactive liberalism and antifascism on Faulkner’s 1930s novels. This leap, even where it appears as a

tacitly “normative (antifascist) reading” (Spoth 490) of the text, accepts a fallacious reading of the novels in terms of the author’s publicly-espoused politics. It also makes Faulkner a safely politically-acceptable subject of literary study, offering a liberal condemnation of reactionary politics that even critics to his left tacitly approve of. Finally, the leap to establish Faulkner’s antifascism continues the obfuscation of political discourse and state institutions in his work that started in the 1940s. Refusing to make this leap and instead analyzing the possibility of reactionary readings of the novels situates them in institutional structures of white supremacy and racial reaction that are continually forgotten.

Chapter 1: Horizons of Extinction: Dysgenics and Degeneration in *Absalom, Absalom!*

1.

In *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930*, Patrick Brantlinger locates an early iteration of extinction discourse in imperialism, where it functioned as self-justification for multiple genocidal projects carried out by European empires. Brantlinger claims that extinction discourse naturalizes the process of genocide. The projects of extermination that were so essential to European settler colonialism become displaced as natural, historically-inevitable; “nature, rather than imperialism, [becomes] the primary gardener of people” (Brantlinger 10). Natural inferiority does not only justify subjugation of colonized people, but points to their world-historical role: lacking histories of their own, they vanish through a process of “auto-genocide,” and even without colonialism, would inevitably disappear (190).

The triumph of “white world-supremacy” and extinguishment of “savage rivals” (Stoddard 240) was the logic of global racial ordering in scientific racist literature of the 19th century. Race was an empirically-knowable biological fact: “an original, clear-cut, and permanent inequality among the different races is one of the oldest and most widely-held opinions in the world” (Gobineau 240).¹ The paternalist “white man’s burden” of imperial political discourse rarely appears in these texts; instead, a proto-Darwinian theory of race struggle justifies a teleology of white world domination. The political injunction of the imperial world was to bring government in accordance with the natural law of race. In a dark refraction of classical liberalism, state enforcement of racial hierarchy completes civilized man’s progress from the state of nature.²

In the late 19th century American South, Radical Racist extinction theory arose from a similar set of assumptions and with the same goal of enforcing whiteness as political domination. In the 1890s, scientific articulations of retrogression theory formed a retroactive defense of slavery as a benevolent, paternalistic institution. These arguments were based on a presupposition of innate racial cognitive difference. Nathaniel Shaler, a Harvard scientist, provided one of the first scientific articulations of black retrogression (Williamson 119). Shaler followed the conventional claim of 19th century race science that black people possessed a “remarkable imitative faculty” allowing them to “come nearer molding themselves on the mastering race than has been the case with any other subjugated people” under slavery (Shaler 134). The theory that black people lacked the generative capacity of “advanced” races but possessed the lower capacity of imitation had been popular since slavery (Fredrickson 60), but in the era of Radical Racism served a particular political function: it tied black survival under slavery to the capacity for imitation, and defended slavery as bringing an “imitative” race under the benevolent mastery of a “creative” race. Philip Alexander Bruce, in his anthropological *The Plantation Negro as Freeman*, claims that “the decline of the Negro in morality will be exactly in proportion to the gradations of his withdrawal from contact with the white people” (Bruce 246); this “withdrawal” refers not to autonomy so much as the end of the institution of slavery. Late 19th century Radical claims of racial cognitive inequality gave convenient theoretical grounding to the notion that slavery “improved” black people, and that the end of slavery would introduce a process of degradation.

Retrogression theory also attempted to solidify a science of black behavior post-slavery. A common articulation of this theory compared the behavior of the “New Negro,” the post-slavery generation of African-Americans, to the “Old Negro” who had lived under slavery. Paul

B. Barringer, a Virginian professor of medicine, claimed “the older negroes were usually good, honest, and reliable laborers,” while “the young negro class...[is] absolutely worthless and no industry can be successfully maintained which is entirely dependent upon their labors” (Barringer 14). The black character declines exactly as black labor is less exploitable; the “hereditary forces” leading black people to “savagery” emerge only after the end of their complete material subordination. The obsession with black morality post-Slavery fit into the Radical polemic on the threat of black crime. Williamson cites Frederick L. Hoffman, a statistician for Prudential Insurance, who claimed that under slavery, “the negro committed fewer crimes than the white man” (Hoffman 329), while crime (especially the politically exploitable threat of rape of white women) increased at an unchecked rate. “Morality” in the discourse of black retrogression was inseparable from claims of black physical decline: the innate “race characteristics” of “inferior organisms and constitutional weakness [and] immense amount of immorality” led to “scrofula, syphilis, and even consumption” in the black population (Hoffman 95). Here, an obsession with black sexuality is conflated with a theory of general decline: in the racist imagination, black sexual behavior held both the threat of unchecked population increase, and the source of population decline.

Perhaps the most important scientific backing of retrogression theory was the emergent science of demographics in the late 19th century. Demographics alternately stoked fears of unchecked population growth and articulated narratives of black decline by a new scientific framework. These theories alternated at specific historical moments, and for specific political projects; Fredrickson shows that black extinction was not seen as a historical inevitability in the immediate aftermath of Reconstruction. Rather, in the 1880s, the fear of unrestricted black population growth was concomitant with the fear of “Negro domination.” Bruce argues that the

black population would “expand numerically at an alarming rate.... [so long as] the soil remain cheap and abundant, and the negro be in sufficient demand as a laborer” (Bruce 254). This linkage of the threat of black population growth to specific labor conditions provided “a serviceable reconciliation between the traditional notion that blacks could not survive under freedom and the statistical evidence that they were increasing” (Fredrickson 245). This theoretical and demographic crisis illustrates a central conundrum of race struggle and extinction discourse that persists and transforms in its later manifestations: “how could the ‘unfit’ be doomed if they were swamping the fit?” (Brantlinger 191).

2.

The full fruition of the Radical Racist theory of retrogression and extinction occurred, with the 1890 census, which “coincided with the full triumph of Darwinism in American thought” (Fredrickson 246). This census, showing statistical data of slowed black population growth, provided a tenable scientific justification for the theory that natural inferiority would cause black people to retrogress and die out without the paternalistic protection of slavery. 1890s Retrogression theory rearticulated a Darwinian theory of race struggle in response to the “competitive phase” of post-Civil War southern race relations (255). Race struggle, rather than the Antebellum fixity of societal “place” and hierarchical social harmony, became the explanatory principle for race relations in an era in which black and white labor capacity was often equally exploitable. The science of race struggle transformed theories of racial difference from speculation on the cognitive inferiority of populations to statistical and demographic theories of the survival of population.

The particular political purposes of this narrative of race extinction at first seem to contradict its teleological form. Those who held that the black population would decline due to

moral vice and biological unfitnes were obviously not content to allow these processes to be carried out as uninterrupted, natural processes. Rather, these narratives served to justify emergent Jim Crow laws, updated state constitutions disfranchising African Americans, the expansion of imprisonment, and new forms of extra-legal brutality against black people. Radical Racism alternately politicized the biological processes of birth and death in a population by making them tools of political polemic and biologized political projects, making oppressive laws against black people part of a natural logic of their imminent decline. As successive legislation³ introduced by Radical state governments further disempowered and materially disadvantaged the black population, the narrative of black degradation and extinction both disappeared these measures as political acts, and intensified their discursive position as part of an immutable natural progression. As Fredrickson notes, the material deprivation that racists took as a sign of “degeneracy” and decline of the black population post-slavery reflected a “terrible truth...of white injustice,” as “white Americans could make their crimes against humanity appear as contributions to the inevitable unfolding of biological destiny” (Fredrickson 255).

Radical Racism provided an answer to white material uncertainty and fear of political disfranchisement. Following black suffrage and political empowerment under Reconstruction, the underlying political goal of the Southern Redemption was to remove Federally-imposed “Negro domination” from Southern state governments (Perman 26). The rhetorical goal of reestablishing “white supremacy” against “Negro domination” functioned on one level as a polemic against Northern incursions on Southern self-government, which empowered the “ignorant negro” to aid Republican rule in the South (27). Redemption politics coded black empowerment as an unnatural, entirely political project, occurring from external (white, federal)

policies and inimical to Southern self-government.⁴ To this end, they posited black decline as a *natural* process, only facilitated by state laws made to fit with the natural order.

3.

In the early 20th century, eugenics simultaneously rejected and rearticulated 19th century scientific racism. Eugenic discourse transformed the obsession with the preservation of white purity that marked both institutional practices of white supremacy and scientific discourses that infused them. The white polity became the object of both political concern and scientific research. The political injunction of eugenics purported again to align state practices to natural processes; “the unfit among men were no longer killed by hunger and disease, but they [society] must not blind themselves to the danger of interfering with Nature’s ways...Conscious selection must replace the blind forces of natural selection” (Black 73). In other words, modernity introduces a dysgenic propagation of “unfit” (rendered alternately as the disabled, the immigrant, or the racially other). To prevent the degradation and extinction of the white polity, and to preserve a natural order of white world-supremacy, eugenicists insisted that the state take an active role in breeding its citizens. Racial law was not only enforced through the punitive power of the state, but also through power at the level of the body.

As the scientific racism moved away from the fixity of 19th century racial ideologies toward a more “culturalist articulation” of race,⁵ it became “curiously more intricately tied up with state technologies of governance” (Goldberg 25). IQ tests, increasingly restrictive immigration policy,⁶ and medical practices interested in (particularly reproductive) health of the white population made eugenic thought more intertwined than ever with specific state and institutional practices. The early 20th century saw a renewed surge in anti-miscegenation law: the 1924 Virginia Act to Preserve Racial Integrity established a particularly rigid form of the

one-drop rule, and cases like *Kirby v. Kirby* further determined the status of a rigid binary code of whiteness in American law.⁸ Simultaneously, eugenics introduced forced sterilization as a punitive practice of the state, as seen in the decision of *Buck v. Bell* to sterilize a woman who was determined to be disabled (Watson 24). This transformed the enforcement of racial hierarchy at the level of the individual into a legal field bound to behavioral enforcement. Eugenics updated the epistemological frame of an explicitly biological theory of race, medicalizing and institutionalizing race science.

These changes were concomitant with an emergent American nationalism constructed around an imaginary ideal of the white polity. As racial discourse became bound in a new way to nationalism, it also localized its concerns around the family. The family emerged as the center of both political anxiety and eugenic research in part through the mechanisms of engineering a model population. This was popularized in the emergent discourse of family studies, a simultaneously scientific, political, and even literary genre examining white families in genetic decline. The family studies dramatized the genealogical history of the “bad germ plasm” of “defective progenitors.” These texts arose at the simultaneous institutional implementation of “negative eugenic” (or “dysgenic”) law applied to ability and miscegenation in America (Watson 21). The degraded white family occupied the blurred boundary between whiteness and that which is “beneath” it with a narrative of defective heredity; this was the period in which “white trash” was solidified as a discrete socio-economic category. Eugenic discourse reconciled the reality of white poverty with a theory of the inherent genetic superiority of the white population.

The shift toward the population as object of scientific racism also provided a new articulation for racist reactionary politics. Against a teleology of white supremacy, eugenics formed a narrative of the impending decline of the white nation and civilization, and the

necessity for a white nationalist politics founded on racial knowledge. On one level, this discourse expanded racial politics to include immigration as a political problematic and object of eugenic research. On another level, it simultaneously transformed the familiar antiblackness of American racial discourse, and reflected its earlier instantiations. Under Radical Racism and the broader field of late 19th century racial discourse, black decline naturalized a political program of segregation; in eugenic discourse, the threat of decline shifted to the possible degeneration and extinction of the white polity amid the “threat” of black genetics.

4.

William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is situated within this shifting field of American, and particularly Southern, discourses of race. The novel follows the life and family of planter Thomas Sutpen, and his ultimately ruined “design” for empire and a hereditary dynasty. The narrative is filtered through several generations of narrators: Rosa Coldfield (Sutpen’s elderly sister-in-law), Jason Compson, and Quentin Compson (Jason’s son and a Freshman at Harvard). Each generation of narrator reflects the modes of racial knowing in their historical context: Rosa narrates with the bitter rage for order of the mid-19th century southerner, and Jason Compson narrates with the nostalgic paternalism of Reconstruction-generation conservatism. The novel ultimately stands, however, as Quentin and his Harvard roommate Shreve McCannon’s alternately pieced-together and imagined version of this narrative. Occupying the novel’s latest historical moment in 1910, Quentin pieces together the failure of Sutpen’s dynasty; he is the Sutpen narrative’s heir.

In “Genealogies of White Deviance,” Jay Watson cites the aforementioned family studies as a lens for understanding racial discourses (and particularly eugenic discourses) in Faulkner. Watson reads the Snopes, Sartoris, and Compson⁸ family as case studies in degraded white

families. For the purposes of this reading, I will focus specifically on Sutpen's black family as a different form of family study: a family that fails to reproduce its whiteness, but rather inverts the system of whiteness as a guarantee for genetic and dynastic reproduction and "descends" into blackness. The Sutpen family's actual history is, on both a formal narratological level and a historical level, inextricable from Quentin and Shreve's postulations. This blurring of historical fact with the narrators' imaginings is the precise location of the novel's most salient (and willfully forgotten) political context.

The Sutpen family becomes a case study, but for two fundamentally opposed scientific discourses. In Quentin and Shreve's imagining, the black Sutpens/Bons become a version of the "vanishing race" (Fredrickson 251) of African Americans that the Southern Radical Racists, and the "rising tide of color" in eugenic discourse, "swamp[ing] whole populations and turning countries now white into colored man's lands" (Stoddard VII). The Sutpen family lies squarely at the site of this paradox: a horizon of extinction for both the degrading black Sutpens, and the self-destructive white Sutpens. These discourses, in their multiple and often simultaneous traces, are inseparable from the world of the novel's narration and key to understanding its initial reception as a proto-fascist text.

The genealogy of degeneration and extinction discourse clarifies *Absalom, Absalom!* both in terms of the novel's polyvocal, often conflicting racial ideologies, and in terms of its ambiguous relationship to reactionary politics. Particularly in Faulkner's mid-1930s, amid the rise of fascism as a political actuality, the novel's embeddedness in narratives of racial and civilizational decline is inseparable from both its literary design and its reception. The novel's most authoritative (and, simultaneously, most factually questionable) narrators, Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon, construct the narrative at a conflicting intersection of racial

epistemologies and political discourses. The novel's ambiguous position in the shifting terrain of degeneration and extinction as both a political and biological question reveals its most disturbing resonances.

An immediate, and often ignored, context of racial discourse in *Absalom* is the popularity of eugenic research at Harvard in the first decades of the 20th century. Quentin and Shreve's Harvard was not merely a major participant in the theoretical formulation of 19th and 20th century race science; it was perhaps its institutional center. Many prominent academic race scientists lectured and wrote at Harvard: polygenist theorist Louis Agassiz in the 1850s, his student Nathaniel Shaler in the 1890s, and eugenicists Charles Davenport and Lothrop Stoddard in the 1910s. This academic environment was a site of intensification in racial knowledge production; Harvard produced the scientific foundations of multiple iterations of race science that would ultimately underpin a new articulation of reactionary politics.

Stoddard's writing is particularly salient to the transformation of eugenic theories of race into a narrative of world history, and a theoretical foundation for fascism (Sussman 98). Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color* grimly describes "colored encroachment" on "white civilization" (Stoddard 13), making the white population the subject of imminent decline and extinction. Stoddard was key in formulating the theories of not only 20th century American racial reaction, but also Nazi conceptions of race and historical destiny. Madison Grant, a Yale eugenicist, articulated a similarly dystopian view of white decline in *The Passing of the Great Race*, and articulated an explicitly nationalist position of "conserv[ing]...that race that has given us the true spirit of Americanism" (Grant ix). The eugenicists' insistence on white supremacy was, of course, hardly novel. However, their transformation of white supremacist politics into a

world-historical narrative, where whiteness was threatened in modernity, was key to a transformation in racial discourse that culminated in the rise of fascism.

These discourses were undoubtedly powerful in Quentin and Shreve's Harvard lecture halls, and their traces on the novel's ideologies of race and history are unavoidable. Quentin and Shreve, the narrators at the greatest historical distance from the Sutpen narrative itself (and with the most tenuous relationship to historical facts), provide the novel's final word on Sutpen family history. This history mirrors the popular eugenicists of the 1910s by transforming the Sutpen family's fate into world-historical metaphor.

5.

Charles Bon first appears in Rosa Coldfield's narration as the "bloody corpse of [Judith Sutpen's] sweetheart" (Faulkner 12), murdered by Henry Sutpen. His murder, and the disappearance of Henry, Sutpen's ostensible heir, becomes "the novel's central mystery" (Ladd 536). Jason Compson posits Henry's discovery of Charles Bon's mixed-raced mistress as the reason for the murder (Faulkner 74). Later, Quentin and Shreve surmise that Bon is actually Thomas Sutpen's son by his first wife in Haiti, a woman Sutpen had "put...aside" (194) and abandoned due to the revelation of her mixed ancestry. As Barbara Ladd claims in "The Direction of the Howling," Bon's black identity is established only on supposition and "misconstrued, or invented" (Ladd 536) histories that Quentin and Shreve assemble.⁹ Bon's transformation from "Charles Bon, Charles Good, Charles Husband-soon-to-be" (Faulkner 119) to the "bloody corpse" of the novel's opening has been the subject of extensive research. Much less work has been done on Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon, son of Charles Bon and his mixed-raced mistress, and illegitimate grandson of Thomas Sutpen.

The story of Charles Etienne explicitly continues the “descent” of the Sutpen’s family, and dramatizes the ways in which discourses of blood are intertwined with the state and the law. Charles Etienne comes with his mother to live in the Sutpen estate, cared for by Judith and primarily by Clytie. Charles Etienne appears first as a “little strange lonely boy,” a “thin delicate child with a smooth ivory sexless face” and “expensive esoteric Fauntleroy clothing” (Faulkner 157-8). Like his father, he is simultaneously feminized and of ambiguous, foreign race and class; he speaks only French, and when visible to the community at all, he is an “incomprehensible” (167) cipher. As he grows older, Charles Etienne “descends” from his initial foreignness and apparent wealth. He accepts Judith and Clytie’s “harsh jeans and homespun ... with no thanks, no comment” (161), and ultimately takes up farmwork on the Sutpen property “with quiet and incredulous incomprehension” (162) of his previous position. This “incomprehension” is simultaneously the purported unthinking animality of the chattel slave-turned-sharecropper, and the growing unfamiliarity with his former life as an unraced foreigner.

Doreen Fowler argues in “Morrison’s Return to Faulkner” that Charles Etienne is also conspicuously absent from Rosa Coldfield’s narration; he is “distanced by layers of white narration” (Fowler 238) and rarely speaks in his own voice. When visible at all, he is unknowable. Quentin and Shreve’s version of Charles Etienne Bon, like their Charles Bon, is attracted to blackness in a way that undermines his apparent whiteness. As a child, he is scolded for “playing with a negro boy about his own size” (158); later in life, he reappears to the community married to a “coal black and ape-like woman” (166), and bears a child with her in a slave cabin. He moves from the ambiguously-raced, foreign creole, outside of community comprehension, to the familiar position of the black sharecropper. He sheds his “silk and broadcloth” for “the uniform- tattered hat and overalls-of his ancient curse” (165), the class

signifiers of an identifiably mixed-raced man in Mississippi. Since Charles Etienne passes as white, his insistence on his own blackness is a contradictory compulsion of blood; he does not “resent...his black blood so much as he denie[s] the white.” This seemingly innate attraction to blackness is itself a cipher that frames his desire; it is either “to save his skin,” or an urge “from sheer besotment of sexual perversion” (167). In Shreve and Quentin’s reconstruction, Charles Etienne’s socially-perceived racial ambiguity contrasts with racial identification at the level of desire, a psycho-sexual attraction to blackness at the level of the body.

Charles Etienne descends not only into the familiar role of black sharecropper who identifies socially with explicitly black space, but also descends into criminality. He reappears in a courtroom after starting a fight at a “negro ball” (Faulkner 163), still sullen and unspeaking. Incapable of existing socially as a white man, he instead is seen as the “white man at the focal point” of a “moiling clump of negro backs and heads and black arms clutching sticks of stove wood and cooking implements and razors” (163).

The courtroom scene dramatizes Charles Etienne’s simultaneous interpolation into the racial order and into the law. Charles Etienne again “refuse[s] to answer any questions, make any statement” (64) before the law. His “olive face” is “bloodless,” unidentifiable as he sits before the law. The judge in his case, disturbed by the violence of a presumed white man in a black social context, delivers a speech on the need for a stable racial order, “the forbearance of black men and the pride and integrity and forbearance of white” (only to haltingly realize that Charles Etienne is not, in fact, white. The judge then questions “*What are you? Where did you come from?*” and Charles Etienne remains silent, “harsh and sullen” (165). The irony between Charles Etienne’s insistence on blackness amid apparent whiteness, and his impossibility and ambiguity before community and law, becomes a drama of blood and law.

6.

In Charles Etienne Bon, we see a continuation and intensification of the “descent into blackness” that 19th century polygenists insisted was an immutable, natural facet of mixed-raced people; a process of “rever[ing] to the original type” (Wallace 3) that occurs through successive generations of miscegenation. The argument was common in Southern racist arguments for a strict legal-racial ordering, particularly in miscegenation law: “One drop of Negro blood makes a negro...puts out the light of intellect, and lights the fires of brutal passions” (Dixon 244). This was enacted most obviously in one-drop laws.

Mixed blood as criminality, the mixed-race person as always-already transgressing the law, is particularly salient to Faulkner’s characters. The figure of the criminal mulatto, haunted by the urge of blood toward blackness even amid apparent whiteness, reveals a claim to race as innate and instinctive that is revealed through its interaction with the law and the state. Charles Etienne’s invisible blood becomes visible through a process of the legal interpolation of the criminal. The judge, with both literal and symbolic authority of state punishment, can ask “*What are you?*” and in this very questioning, interpolate the previously indecipherable Charles Etienne into a racial order. In the fixed and dichotomous form of state racism, law alone can read “black” and “white” in blood, and establish the truth value of race.

The theory of “one drop” was legally applied at the level of the racialized individual subject. “Polygenist” theories of the mid 19th century insisted on the inherent unfitness of “hybrid stock” and the inevitable extinction of the mulatto (Young 131). While this theory was, obviously, scientifically untenable by the late 19th century, it is significant that mixed race in *Absalom* is consistently associated not only with behavioral criminality, but also with physiological weakness. Charles Etienne has “body and limbs almost as light and delicate as a

girl's" and appears with his wife "so severely beaten and mauled...that he could not even hold himself on the spavined and saddleless mule" (166-7). In the absence of a scientifically-based theory of inherent unfitness of mixed-race people, we can also read this as a progression into "unfitness" and disability through blackness that characterized both 20th century discourses of genetic fitness, and the earlier Radical Racist prediction of black extinction.

Importantly, "one drop" also offered a theory that familial and civilizational descent-through-miscegenation was the inevitable result of legal equality. In another of Thomas Dixon's clumsy repetitions of the language of racial law in *The Leopard's Spots*, "one drop of your blood in my family could push it backward three thousand years in history" (Dixon 398). This discourse of the threat of civilizational "descent" through mixed blood operated as a rationale for the fixity of racial hierarchy, and its enforcement at the level of sex and family. In the context of Sutpen's family narrative, this theory has multiple and perhaps contradictory resonances with several racial-scientific discourses. The black Sutpen-Bons simultaneously descend into unfitness, and persist beyond the self-extinguishing white Sutpens.

The fact that Charles Etienne appears only in Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of the Sutpen narrative places him squarely at the confluence of conflicting discourses of race and history. Just as Charles Bon's mixed race is potentially a "misconstrued, or invented" (Ladd 536) rhetorical construct to render Sutpen family history decipherable, Charles Etienne's criminality and the orientation of his sexual desire toward blackness is formed mostly by narrative conjecture. Since only Quentin and Shreve reconstruct Charles Etienne's life, he also becomes a sort of racial-anthropological case study. He is comprehensible only through the scientific-racial discourses that, among *Absalom's* narrators, are uniquely at Quentin and Shreve's disposal. The Sutpen family becomes a caricature of the dysgenic theories that were emerging in Shreve and

Quentin's era at Harvard. As Madison Grant argues in *The Passing of the Great Race*, "any similar or suppressed trait [of an inferior race] is not lost to the germ plasm, but reappears in later generations of the hybridized stock" (Grant 14). Dysgenic discourse has subsequent generations of mixed race people become progressively more black through the reappearance of "suppressed traits," and consequently progressively less fit. The black Sutpen/Bons dramatize this process, and Quentin and Shreve ponder its fundamental paradox: in the "descent" of a white family, will the white family extinguish itself into blackness, or will the black family self-extinguish through genetic unfitness?

7.

The novel's most famous, and most explicit, evocation of racial extinction and civilizational collapse comes in Shreve's final remarks on Jim Bond as both the final Sutpen, and the inheritor of Sutpen's colonizing drive:

I think that in time 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)

In Shreve's racial dystopia, the degeneration of Sutpen's family line results in the extinction of whiteness. In an inversion of turn-of-the-century Darwinian notions of race struggle, the "unfit" conquer the earth, extinguishing racial differentiation, a fantasy "pulled from the pages" of early 20th century eugenic science (Cannariato 124). Shreve's vision of Jim Bond is positioned at a discursive crossroads; the discourse of the degeneration of African-Americans until their ultimate extinction, and the threat of nonwhite people to "swamp the fit"

(Brantlinger 181). Jim Bond is simultaneously world conqueror and “the last of his race” (Faulkner 300), a “race” that is ambiguously the degenerated Sutpen dynasty of *Absalom*, or the degenerated result of miscegenation. Shreve’s future is the same fantasy that Stoddard and Grant employ as political polemic: a future in which “white civilization” is vanquished by “the world of color” (Stoddard 2).

The often-repeated interpretation of Shreve’s vision as ironic fundamentally misunderstands its relationship to eugenic discourse. The claim that Shreve offers a “tongue-in-cheek commentary against the theory of eugenics” (Bachman 56) or “bitterly mock[s] Southern racism’s] inevitable victory with heavy irony” (Hagopian 381) misses that this fantasy is nearly indistinguishable in its language, tone, and theoretical assumptions from 1910s eugenic literature. Certainly, there is an irony in Shreve’s comment: the irony of reversals of history, the same irony that leaves Thomas Sutpen, the attempted founder of a landowning dynasty, dead at the hands of poor white tenant Wash Jones, with his white descendants dead or vanished and his black descendants tending his ruined plantation. Shreve’s irony is the tension between the white polity as historically-destined master race, and as a race that will soon vanish. This is not irony as negation of a political stance; it is a political stance that starts as a joke, and ends as a genocide.

Quentin and Shreve never make the leap into articulating these visions, and their inextricable context in eugenic discourses and practices, as an explicit political position. Obviously, searching for an explicitly avowed fascism in statements from a fictional 1910 is a historical anachronism. But the potential for a reactionary political reading of Quentin and Shreve’s narration is particularly unavoidable in the context of Quentin’s suicide, which occurs shortly after Shreve’s dystopian vision. The narrative tells two stories of white self-

extinguishment: the Sutpen family's extinction and dynastic failure due to its sons' self-destruction, and Quentin's suicide. Jim Bond "conquer[s] the Western hemisphere" just as the white heir, both to Sutpen's story and a landholding family of his own, kills himself. Thus, the simultaneous "race suicide" (Grant 47) of both *Absalom*'s primary narrator and its primary subject, and the "passing of the great race" (1) as explicitly symbolized in Jim Bond, links the novel's ending to a nascent reactionary politics of white extinction and civilizational decline.

8.

Readings of *Absalom, Absalom* in terms of the political context of the 1930s frequently focus on Thomas Sutpen as "Great Dictator," a proto-fascist offering "strong leadership" and "promise to reconstruct order from the detritus of catastrophe" (Atkinson 169) post-Civil War. Jessica Baldanzi further identifies a proto-eugenic motivation in Sutpen's obsession with bloodline. Concomitant with the dynastic-imperialist impulse of Sutpen's "design" is a drive to "engineer his entire family" at the level of blood and genetics (Baldanzi 73). Sutpen tries to "erase the more sordid elements of his own family history" as "white trash," or as black through marriage. As Jason and Quentin Compson's narration of *Absalom* shows, Thomas Sutpen's position as dynast is never a given, despite his continual effort to establish a line of heirs. Similarly, his design closely resembles the problematic of 20th century eugenics: not to "reproduce" a master race, but to *create* one, from the very precarity of his own formerly impoverished, rural whiteness.

Sutpen's "engineering" is relevant not only to his familial design, but also to his interaction with land and community. Post-Reconstruction, Sutpen transforms from the figure of the rapacious colonist into a blood-and-soil redeemer. His reaction to Reconstruction in the form of a reclaimed mastery of land becomes a "Reichserbohofgesetz: a eugenic tool" (Spath 250). In

Faulkner and the Great Depression, Ted Atkinson reads Sutpen as “Great Dictator” in an “antifascist allegory” (Atkinson 163), to be read in the context of American writers’ emerging opposition to fascism in the mid-1930s. Atkinson argues that it is the failure of the codes of white supremacy, genetically-engineered dynasty, and mastery of land that leads to Sutpen’s demise; his failure as a ‘great dictator’ becomes, for Atkinson, an allegory projecting the failure of fascism itself. “Sutpen’s failure as a ‘great dictator’ complicates and interrogates theories of racial purity and white supremacy essential to...fascism” (Atkinson 170).

Yet failure of Sutpen’s design cannot be settled as antifascist so easily. To read Sutpen’s failure as a type of moral payment for his obsessive quest of purity and dynasty assumes a “normative (antifascist) reader” (Spath 248), eliding both the novel’s historical position and its reception. Daniel Spoth’s “Totalitarian Faulkner” contextualizes the reception of *Absalom* in Nazi Germany, where it was one of two Faulkner novels translated and, Spoth claims, deemed acceptable to Nazi standards of reading. Nazi censors took the novel’s (and Faulkner’s) “regionalism as Nazi blood-and-soil ideology; thus they took Faulkner for a conservative Agrarian¹⁰ whose *Absalom, Absalom* argued in favor of racial purity and against miscegenation” (Wolter 146).

As Jeanne Follansbee argues, Sutpen’s demise was certainly intelligible for a 1930s audience as “the tragic result of racial amalgamation” (Follansbee 75). She acknowledges the potential reading of the novel as a “fascist fable” in which Jim Bond triumphs over Sutpen’s imperial design, the final result of his “crime” of miscegenation. In this context, the novel’s unignorable anxieties about the modern racial and class order are not glossed over, as they often are in readings of *Absalom* as antifascist. Rather, this interpretation opens these anxieties onto a more salient interpretation of the novel’s politics.

Even Atkinson concedes that despite his claim of an antifascist *Absalom*, the novel “retains the sense of dominant-class anxiety informing earlier representations of fascist themes” (Atkinson 170) in 1930s American literature. For Atkinson, this anxiety remains an innate, given psychological phenomenon within a precarious ruling class. This reading largely ignores the network of eugenic discourse, state racism, and the reactionary problematic of a racial-historical civilizational decline that pervaded both Shreve and Quentin’s 1910s academic landscape, and Faulkner’s 1930s political landscape.¹¹ Quentin and Shreve’s narrative reconstruction is inseparable from the epistemologies of early 20th century scientific racism and an emergent politics of imminent civilizational decline. Rather than elide these politics to claim *Absalom* as a legibly antifascist text, closer attention to the reactionary undercurrents of Quentin and Shreve’s narrative makes visible the institutional, legal, and discursive framework in which both their story and the novel’s broader context are situated. Quentin and Shreve construct Sutpen’s narrative out of a more subtle anxiety in the reactionary imagination, and indeed in the “common sense” (English 33) of a 1930s American audience: specifically, the anxiety of white degradation and the horizon of race extinction, the infamous “passing of the great race,” through the forces of modernity-as-miscegenation.

Follansbee places Quentin and Shreve’s historical-racial anxieties in a more immediately political context, claiming that “the narrators’ obsessive concentration on Sutpen’s failed dynasty - particularly on its “pollution” by black blood displaces their anxiety about the loss of economic and social primacy onto a racialized, fetishized other” (Follansbee 73). While Follansbee acknowledges the real and pressing economic and institutional precarity of *Absalom*’s younger narrators, this reading again turns these anxieties into a form of semi-conscious psychological projection. This “internalization” of Quentin and Shreve’s racial dystopia again

conveniently makes the novel antifascist. The “corrosive effects of obsession with Sutpen” (Follansbee 84), seen both explicitly in the narrative and implicitly in Quentin’s suicide, make the reactionary undercurrents of Quentin and Shreve’s narrative into an allegory of fascism as psychological self-destruction.

But Quentin and Shreve’s displacement of their precarious positions is hardly a psychological invention. Rather, it resonates with a contemporaneous, emerging narrative of racial and civilizational decline, dramatized (or, perhaps, scientifically reproduced) through the case study of the Sutpen family. To render the racist, proto-fascist narrative of civilizational decline in Quentin and Shreve’s narrative as a psychological construct largely ignores its actual existence as an institutional practice and scientific ideology. In absolving *Absalom* of an ambivalent proto-fascism, Follansbee indirectly absolves the novel’s most immediate intellectual and political context.

9.

Quentin and Shreve, the conflicted, deeply pessimistic young heirs to ambiguous histories, do not nostalgize a bygone past, or idealize the South that Quentin, in the closing pages of the novel, insists he doesn’t hate (Faulkner 302). Faulkner’s rejection of “the South’s most singular tradition - the tradition of stupefying nostalgia” (Sundquist 99) was also a rejection of the literary construction of an idealized Antebellum South. Eric Sundquist claims that *Absalom*’s refusal to take part in the literary production of southern nostalgia (most famously, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, also published in 1936) makes it a gothic, and as such a resolute rejection of southern romance (Sundquist 111). Faulkner’s rejection of nostalgia and construction of history as tragedy and failure is a refusal to romanticize a deeply violent past, but it also

shows a troubling orientation toward futurity; specifically, Quentin and Shreve's dystopic futurity.

Faulkner's most famous comments about extinction were in his 1949 Nobel Prize speech on human endurance and the artist's concern for the individual in a world where "there is only one question: When will I be blown up?" (Faulkner 1). Against the very real possibility of nuclear annihilation, literature had to rediscover an aesthetics of "the human heart in conflict with itself," purporting to exist both beyond and before ideology. This humanist vision of endurance contrasts sharply with Shreve's narrative of extinction, which predicted black endurance with a racist pessimism that bears undeniable traces of proto-fascism. It cannot be understood as an ironic expression of antiracism nor a coherent political position, but rather in its full ambiguity as a refraction of the dark teleology of extinction.

Chapter 2

Raceless Outlaw, Black Criminal: Power and Racial Indeterminacy in *Light in August*

1.

When Joe Christmas first appears in Faulkner's *Light in August*, he is incomprehensible:

“Joe Christmas is worse than any real name could be, for it indicates not only that he has no background, no roots, no name of his own, but that he is regarded as a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet of paper on which anyone can write out an identity for him and make him believe it” (Kazin 131)

Christmas's name is a cipher with no discernable history. His skin is “parchment-colored” (123); his identity is a *tabula rasa*. Yet neither the Jefferson community whose murmuring covers the novel nor its critics are content to let Christmas remain unknowable. Critics of *Light in August* frequently debate Joe Christmas's racial identity as if to find a “truth” of his race, but he confounds any definitive reading.¹ Throughout the novel, Christmas lives on the shifting, often contradictory margin of white and black, defying interpretation at every level.

Critical exercises in reading the “parchment” of Christmas's skin inevitably repeat the mistakes of the novel's speakers, reifying the novel's recurring fiction of “blood” as a way to interpret Christmas. However, turning toward a theoretical interrogation of the construct of race itself offers an interpretive framework that, rather than definitively marking Joe's identity, instead analyzes the political contexts that inscribe this *tabula rasa*. Avak Hasratian, in “The Death of Difference in *Light in August*,” reads Christmas as a “multiple body” (Hasratian 72) who seems to elude difference and categorization by race at the same time as he is inscribed by multiple racial codes. Christmas is a racial assemblage that defies a fixed, single identity.² His

“parchment-colored” (Faulkner 123) skin is an inscriptive surface on which race is written in contradictory and unreadable traces, but his body has no stable, knowable race.

The assemblage theory of racial identity draws from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the assemblage as a “multiplicity . . . of many heterogeneous terms” which crucially “keeps heterogeneous elements together” (Deleuze and Parnet 69) and allows various relations to exist amid their contradiction. Difference is an interplay of various forces in the assemblage. Counter to knowable categories of identity, the heterogeneity of the assemblage is irreducible and unknowable. Theorizing Christmas’s race as an assemblage of external relations rather than a set identity allows us to interrogate the varied and contradictory codings of Christmas’s race, rather than fixing him with a single, set identity. Reading Christmas’s racial indeterminacy as an assemblage both bypasses the essentialist impulse to “solve” his race, and foregrounds the role of state power in Christmas’s racialization.

2.

Speculation about Christmas’s race emerges in fragments, both in quotes in the text and in a collective, anonymous gaze of the workers who attempt to identify him. These “voices, murmurs, whispers” (Faulkner 98) present him as a contradiction: Christmas appears at the mill inappropriately dressed to work in an “arrogant hat” (33) and city clothes, with a “dark, insufferable face and [a] whole air of cold and quiet contempt” (32). His labor is ambiguously racialized; he assumes a “negro’s job” (35) and works without stopping to eat or acknowledge the other workers. The disjunction between Christmas’s appearance in formal clothes and his sullen, unceasing labor elicits speculation about his racial identity. Christmas is an apparently white man working in the role of a post-Emancipation black laborer, as Joe Brown, Christmas’s white coworker, describes the mill workers as “slaving bastards” (44) who make white men do

black men's work.³ One worker claims Christmas could only be a "foreigner"; another worker replies, "did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?" (33). In an unbearable suspension of racial knowing, he appears at the mill as both white and black, categories held together at the same time as they negate each other.

The workers' conflicted view of Christmas's identity at the mill also introduces his criminality. Throughout the novel, Christmas's criminality and racial identity are inextricable. The community whispering and "veranda-talk...makes the truth of Joe's crime" (Godden 236) and simultaneously constructs his identity. Criminality puts his indeterminate identity into a relation with both social racial ordering and the underlying power of the law. Christmas does not appear at work one day; Joe Brown, the white man who works with Christmas first at the mill and later as a bootlegger, arrives in a new car. Workers are immediately suspicious that "they got rich too fast" (Faulkner 41). Brown then quits working at the mill, and he and Christmas only appear in town as "dissolute and enviable and idle" (45) bootleggers. Christmas is thus positioned in Jefferson initially as an ambiguously-raced outlaw. He is enmeshed in crime, but not yet a criminal or explicit object of the law; he appears as a white man, but his racial identity is suspended and unknowable. We learn that Brown and Christmas live in a cabin near Joanna Burden, a Yankee and purported "lover of negroes," but hear no more speculation about Christmas's identity. The community imagines Burden's "dark and outlandish and threatful" (46) house as a disturbingly racialized space; it is another doomed "dark house," projected as a site of sexual and racial transgression.

The tenuous linking of Joe's criminality, his race, and his relationship with Joanna Burden becomes more explicit when millworker Byron Bunch recounts the death of Burden to Gail Hightower. Burden is found dead, her house burning, and Christmas and Brown are

missing. Brown reemerges in the Jefferson sheriff's office, claiming that Christmas murdered Burden. As Brown describes the crime, he explicitly attributes a race to Christmas for the first time in the novel: as a black criminal who "fooled [the community] for three years. Calling him a foreigner for three years" (98). As he accuses and attributes a race to Christmas, Brown appeals to his own whiteness as a declaration of innocence. "Accuse the white man that's trying to help you with what he knows" (96) while Christmas, explicitly coded as black, gets away free. Before the sheriff, Brown appeals to the familiar Southern racist fantasy of black criminals evading the punitive system while white people are punished; Christmas's freedom, once he is coded as black, is an exploitable threat to community order. Brown's accusation to the sheriff is the novel's first "trial" of race before the law, transforming Christmas from a raceless outlaw to a black criminal.

3.

Joe Christmas's own experience and understanding of his racial identity is, like the community's imagining, contradictory and indeterminate. The narrative focalizes Christmas's perspective just before the murder of Joanna Burden with a physical fight with a drunk Joe Brown in their shared cabin. Brown identifies Christmas as black and claims his own whiteness as defense as Christmas beats him. Christmas then stands in the dark hearing:

myriad sounds of no greater volume-voices, murmurs, whispers; of trees, darkness, earth; people: his own voice; other voices evocative of names and times and places - which he had been conscious of all his life without knowing, which were his life, thinking *God perhaps and me not knowing that too*" (103).

Even after the narrative shifts to Christmas's perspective, a multiplicity of anonymous voices narrates behind and around him. Joe both hears these voices "without knowing," and they

generate a “not knowing” at the level of identity. The community produces events and identities through hearsay and conjecture, and “approximates” (Godden 153) in a way that obscures both narrative veracity and characters’ identities.

Christmas leaves the cabin and walks through Freedman Town, a predominantly black area of Jefferson. Here, Christmas is “surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible negroes...murmuring talking in a language that was not his.” This murmuring, unlike the white community’s murmuring, does not project or attempt to inscribe Joe as a racial subject. Rather, “the black life, the black breathing” disturbs and alienates Joe at the level of the body; he runs, “panting, glaring” away from Freedman Town. He moves toward the “intent and sharp white faces” of a predominantly white area, thinking “that’s all I wanted ... that don’t seem like a whole lot to ask” as he becomes the scrutinized yet unknowable object of the white gaze (114).

Throughout the novel, Christmas consistently outs himself as non-white to those who perceive him as white. He repeats to a woman he sleeps with that he has black blood (196), reintroducing his indeterminate position even when he seems to pass as white without ambiguity. As noted before, Christmas also refuses the identity of an interracial man, itself an intelligible identity position for the community and legal system in which Christmas lives. His identity is an assemblage and racial multiplicity, black *and* white *and* ambiguously foreign, invalidating racial categorization and accepted forms of difference in the community (Hasratian 74).

Christmas’s references to his black ancestry explicitly in terms of blood reflects a paradoxical tension in the legal system of racial categorization in the early 20th century South. As I examined in the previous chapter, the tension between “race as clear-cut identity (with ever-present possibility of deception)” and “race as ever-shifting category (with the ever-present possibility of confusion)” (Gross 16) was litigated and instantiated in law with new fervor after

the 1890s.⁴ Particularly with one-drop legislation, blood became the truth condition of a person's race; this ostensibly "more reasonable" (Klein 264) system of racial categorization fixes race as a rational category that legal power can determine. Christmas confounds the supposed rationality of this system with his insistence on his black blood in situations where he is interpreted as white or "foreign." As this discourse of blood shifted to a knowable legal category, it also became a "deterministic...biologized...sovereign" force at the level of the individual (Watson 137, 147). Christmas, then, appeals to his blood in a play on this legal-biological paradox; his insistence on an inner "black blood" reinforces his unknowable racial surface. Rather than "look[ing] for an identity by deliberately provoking responses that would let him be someone" (Kazin 131), he asserts that he is no one, a collection of contradictions, community fantasy, and indecipherable difference.

Far from celebrating Joe's indeterminacy, or anachronistically viewing this breakdown of the categories of black and white as a purely liberating rupture of racist illusion, Joe's refusal to be coded as black or white leaves him in a unique subject position relative to state and social power: the position of the outlaw. This exteriority from legal and social knowing troubles the biological position of Christmas's life: "the absence of a category in which [Christmas] could settle poses a fundamental problem, one that troubles the category of the human itself" (Hasratian 68). Hasratian applies Giorgio Agamben's theory of "bare life" to examine the limit state, the margin of his status as human, in which Joe lives. To exist in a state of bare life is to exist outside of fixed identity, and also outside of the legal realm of rights and state protections, a status "little more than biological life" (Agamben 38).⁵ For Christmas to be recognized as human, even in a system of racial subordination, he must be classifiable, knowable; he eludes and defies the codes that seek to recognize and organize him as fully human.

The status of life as a biological fact in the absence or failure of social coding relates to Agamben's theory of *Homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* in Agamben is a person excluded from political subjectivity, the "banned man" (Agamben 52) whose position as an outsider from legal protection and recognition as a state subject allows him to be killed legally. *Homo sacer* is created through exclusion: the state can imbue life with protections and privileges, and those who elude the coding that creates a political subject are excluded from this recognition and protection. In Christmas's defiance of racial coding, he exists in what Agamben calls a "zone of indistinction" (Agamben 64). He cannot be recognized by state or social power as a white subject or a black subject (Hasratian 63). Christmas is excluded in a literal, legal sense. He is unintelligible, and insists on his unintelligibility, to social and state power; he is an impossible subject, a subject who rejects racial subjectivity. Falguni Sheth, in *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*, claims that racialization "channel[s] an element it perceives as threatening to the political order into a set of classifications" (Sheth 10); in this way, Christmas is marked as a discernable member of an "unruly" (9) group who can be managed, identified, and prosecuted by the state: a black criminal.

4.

Kazin aphoristically claims, "Joe Christmas is an abstraction seeking to become a human being" (Kazin 135). His marginal position denies him a reality as a political subject and a biologically-knowable body. Yet Christmas is also a rejection of abstractions, a body that defies category, an intolerable suspension of the symbolic world of race. Taking Joe's refusal of racial categorization as an active move of resistance counters the assertion, both from the novel's narrators and Faulkner himself at a 1957 lecture, that Christmas's "tragedy" was "not knowing

what he was” (Blotner and Gwynn 27). Christmas’s inability to be configured in the racial system was his undoing; he “evicted himself from the human race because he didn’t know which he was” (27). Yet even in this interpretation, the fact that Christmas “evicted himself” troubles the notion that he is haunted and ultimately undone by his racial ambiguity. Rather, he continually, actively asserts his unknowability against a community murmuring which, by the end of the novel, becomes the violent racial “knowing” of the state.

Unable to settle in a specific location, Christmas exists solely on an endless street, “with imperceptible corners and changes of scene, broken by intervals of begged and stolen rides, on trains and trucks, and on country wagons the driver of the wagon not knowing who or what the passenger was and not daring to ask” (Faulkner 223). He travels in a zone of spatial indifferentiation, always moving yet never in a new place, anonymous and unidentifiable. This outlaw existence is Agamben’s “bare life” of the unidentifiable, excluded person in a particular form; the precarious position of a person who remains uncoded by and unrecognizable to power. This exclusion from the law’s protection is not yet, however, Christmas’s death sentence.

Christmas’s identity as a zone of indistinction shows how his indeterminate race and his status as an outlaw are mutually generative. However, he *is* ultimately inscribed by social and legal power with a discernible racial identity position, but only after he is no longer present in the community. After he is identified as both a black man and the murderer of Joanna Burden, he is raced in the imagination of Jefferson society and law enforcement. Christmas’s status in the final sections of *Light in August* as a criminal, rather than an outlaw, is a retroactive racial coding of his previously indeterminate, unraced body.

5.

While he flees the law, Joe's status as a criminal creates his identity as a black man for the Jefferson community, "revers[ing] the common pattern of whites assuming that the accused is guilty because he is black, and instead emphasiz[ing] that the accused is black because he is guilty" (Leiter 115). The crime, and the production of Christmas as an absent, criminal subject, finally gives him a knowable identity in community imagination. First in Joe Brown's testimony to the sheriff, and later through community recollection, Christmas transforms from the uncoded outlaw into a figure who can fit easily into Jefferson's imagined narrative of race and crime. Joe becomes, as Andrew B. Leiter illustrates in "Sexual Transgressions and the Battle at the Racial Border," the "black beast" (Leiter 8), the feared (yet identifiable, and legally knowable) black sexual criminal of the white imagination.⁶

Christmas eludes and contradicts any form of set identity when he is physically present in the community, but an imagined identity stabilizes in his absence. This identity is set, from its first articulation in Joe Brown's confession to the sheriff, as a drama of race before the law and the state. The state attempts to establish a stable set of epistemological standards for identity, against the transgressive act of defying the truth value of race. In positioning himself toward an increasingly marginal exteriority to the law, Christmas poses the crisis of the unknowable assemblage to state power, which responds with a simultaneous act of knowledge and violence.

Joe both defies racial categorization and lives as a blank "parchment" (Faulkner 123) of racial potentiality. Prior to being interpreted as a black man running from the law, Joe's blackness is a potential that exists within his ambiguous identity, a threat repeatedly configured in terms of blood. Inextricable from this racial potential is criminal potential. Joe's ambiguous and indecipherable appearance is constantly associated with criminal abnormality. For

authorities in Jefferson, both Christmas's racial identity and his status as someone on the margin of the law is finally "solved" with the murder of Joanna Burden, which "coalesces the threat of invisible blackness with the threat of the black beast into a single entity" (Leiter 110).

After retroactively inscribing Joe with race, the community imagines his punishment in a violent, explicitly racialized way. The state and legal enforcement also intensify and focus their violence from the exclusion of the outlaw to the pursuit of the criminal. When the sheriff expresses incredulity to Joe Brown about Christmas's race, saying that Brown "better be careful what [he] is saying, if it's a white man [he's] talking about" (97), the sheriff acknowledges that the system of criminal justice fundamentally changes when the accused is black. The black criminal, especially the black sexual criminal, is uniquely subject to extralegal mob violence; in a transformed iteration of Joe as the *Homo sacer* figure, his murder is now not only legal, but mandated by the community.

Just as Joe Christmas is inscribed with race in the imagination of Jefferson society and law enforcement, the crime itself, and the sexual relationship surrounding the crime, is also retroactively racialized in order for it to become intelligible. To understand the crime, law enforcement and the community need to explain Joe and Joanna's relationship according to aforementioned "mythical roles of the black beast and violated white femininity" (Leiter 115). Joe's crime is simultaneously racialized and sexualized; the community imagines "an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro...hop[ing] that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward" (Faulkner 287). Here again, Christmas can finally embody abstraction; he finally fits the mold of a political metaphor. A man who defied racial coding becomes, later in the novel, an avatar of a particularly

sensational, racialized form of crime. The community's racist fantasy is reified, becoming the legal reality of Christmas's crime.

Joe's murder of Joanna Burden also transforms his victim from a figure in the social margins into an intelligible victim. She is no longer a Yankee "lover of negroes" (Faulkner 133), sympathetic toward black people and suspected of having black lovers, but a "violated white woman" (Al-Barhow 54). The community imagines Burden was raped and murdered by a black sexual criminal. Racialization and sexualization of the crime are inscriptions on both murderer and victim that make the crime intelligible, community fantasies that become juridico-biological realities.⁷

6.

A voice in a crowd pursuing Christmas, insisting that he should be lynched instead of tried in court, asks if Christmas "gave that white woman a fair trial" (Faulkner 354), coding the perpetrator as black in order to make specific types of mob punishment justifiable. Significantly, Joe's execution does not come at the hands of a parochial, racist mob of white Jefferson men. Rather, Joe is killed by Percy Grimm, a member of the Mississippi National Guard and Faulkner's avatar of a new, frighteningly modern form of state violence. Grimm's racism is inextricable from his violent nationalism; he believes "the white race is superior to all other races, and the American is superior to all other white races, and that the American uniform is superior to all men" (451). Grimm's violence is not the violence of the racist mob, but that of the calculated, ruthless state. Grimm kills Joe not merely as white authority, but as white state authority in its emergent fascist form.

Chuck Jackson, in "American Emergencies: Whiteness, The National Guard, and *Light in August*" situates Grimm in the context of the National Guard as a militarized defense of white

supremacy. The National Defense Acts Amendments of 1933, establishing the National Guard as a permanent, domestic wing of the American military, created a permanent paramilitary presence at the local, domestic level. “Militaristically patrol[ing] the nation during times of national emergency,” the National Guard “assisted in disciplining and federalizing a whiteness that belonged to the masses” (Jackson 192-3), assimilating the familiar figure of the lynch mob into a pseudo-military force. The National Guard produced a “homeland” of whiteness that was constantly under threat. “[T]ransform[ing] this local southern region into a site of national pride” (Jackson 203), Grimm makes rural law enforcement into a wing of the American military. Simultaneously, Grimm and his men also produce the civil emergencies that justified the defense of this nationalized homeland. As the previously provincial is rendered national, criminality emerges as a coherent problematic for security.

This transformation of power is inextricable from the production of Grimm’s subjectivity. “The new civilian military act... saved him...suddenly his life opened definite and clear” (Faulkner 450). In this way, Grimm is an almost transparent production of a legal and civil transformation; he is “freed now of ever having to think or decide” (451) by recognition within a paramilitary force. Grimm is simultaneously driven by an explicit allegiance to whiteness, and its legal instantiation. “We’ve got to preserve order,” Grimm tells his men, “We must let the law take its course” (Faulkner 451).

The new institutionalization of the violent enforcement of law and (racial) order also reconfigures Joe Christmas as a subject. After Percy Grimm and his team of officers shoot Christmas, Grimm castrates him, a lesson to “let white women alone, even in hell” (Faulkner 463-4), determining the specific technologies of a brutal punishment based on racialization of the criminal and the crime. The power of the state, gathered and organized in Grimm’s National

Guard, eliminates the transgressive potential of Christmas's blackness even after his death. As Christmas dies, Grimm watches his body "collapse fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush out of his pale body" (Faulkner 463-4). The spectacle of Christmas's death is a reification of his newly-decipherable race; his "black blood" is rendered visible and finally knowable as it rushes from his impossible body.⁸ The violence of the state functions as a tool of racial knowing at the same time as it exacts punishment.

7.

Gavin Stevens, a Jefferson lawyer, describes Christmas's death to a local professor as a drama of conflicting blood:

But [Christmas's] blood must would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his body save itself. Because the black blood drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it...

It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept up into that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment. Then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. He did not kill the minister. He merely struck him with his pistol and ran on and crouched behind that table and defied the black blood for the last time... (448)

Jay Watson, in “Writing Blood: The Art of the Literal in Faulkner’s *Light in August*,” describes the transition, starting from the mid-19th century, of blood from “a function of one’s ancestors” to “a motive force behind the formation and transmission of racial characteristics. As blood became an increasingly litigated legal category, it also made race “no longer an inert quality of the body, but an active element at work within it. (Watson 140). This precisely describes Gavin Stevens’s interpretation of Christmas’s self-contradicting struggle of blood. The struggle of blood occurs during the realization of state violence that had remained implicit in the rest of the novel, with constant reference to Christmas’s criminality.

Stevens imagines Joe Christmas undone as a law-abiding subject by his blackness, yet constantly conflicted by the urges toward lawfulness of his whiteness: “the white blood would not let him fire [the pistol]” and kill his pursuers. Blackness in this sense becomes Christmas’s orientation toward death; his seemingly self-undoing violence is thus explicable at the level of race. At the same time, Christmas’s body occupies a curiously neutral position in Stevens’s narration. Christmas’s body (rather than his warring bloods) has the capacity to “save itself” (448); we can read this as the formerly-unraced body that, while abandoned by the law and social structure, also contains a self-sustaining force. His body itself is bare life, *bios*, unincorporated within social or racial systems. Yet “blood” is a confluence of strange forces operating within this neutral body, shifting him in and out of conflicting interpretations by the law, driving him toward violence. In this sense, we can read “blood” as an abstracted, naturalized motive that finally becomes real before the law.

In terms of its narrative placement, Stevens’s interpretation of Joe’s conflicting blood is particularly noteworthy; the following section describes Percy Grimm’s proto-fascist militia and its pursuance of Joe. On its surface, the Grimm narrative is a mirror of the Christmas narrative,

shifting perspective from the death of a criminal to the process of criminal justice. However, something more subtle occurs in the juxtaposition of these two narratives. The last days of Christmas's life, which Stevens interprets as a struggle of blood, happened, at every turn, with the pursuit of a violent National Guard; in Stevens's narrative, it was "not pursuers, but himself" (Faulkner 448) that finally kills Christmas.

It is only by the omission, or simply the absence, of the National Guard's pursuit of Joe that Stevens can read the narrative of his death as a drama of blood. The agent of both Joe's death and his criminality becomes his race. Race can only function as a biological force for Stevens through the omission of the institutions that produce it. Stevens's omission occurs just pages after Christmas's "black blood" is spilled. Stevens renders natural and internal something that is rather a technology of criminal justice: this is, precisely, race.

The litigation of race occurring in early 20th century fixed the law as something that could determine "what blood won't tell"; in other words, if physiology *failed* to make a person's race obvious, racial determination would fall into the purview of the law. However, Faulkner's treatment of mixed-raced characters before the law undoes this illusion of discrete spaces of legality and biology, and shows how the legal system is instead deeply involved in generating racial identity. This account of the visibility of race before the law mirrors another mixed-raced character, Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon, when he appears in court in *Absalom, Absalom!* Charles Etienne, an unruly and unknowable outsider, is silent as the judge asks him, "*What are you?*" Similarly, Joe Christmas confounds and refuses any attempts to interpret him. Yet in Christmas's case, the law is able to exact a physical truth of his race through state violence. This mirroring continues in terms of its narration. Quentin and Shreve theorize a drama of Sutpen blood as Harvard undergraduates; Gavin Stevens imagines Christmas's warring bloods as a

Harvard graduate and lawyer. In both cases, these amateur race scientists refract a dark political meaning in their retellings; Quentin and Shreve imagine the dystopia of the reactionary imagination, while Stevens renders the forces of fascism invisible to give blood a truth value.

8.

In a 1945 letter to Malcolm Cowley, Faulkner claimed that in Percy Grimm, he had created a “Nazi before [Hitler] ever did” (Faulkner 3). When questioned about Grimm at a University of Virginia lecture in the 1950s, Grimm was still a “Nazi Storm Trooper,” but he could be found “everywhere, in all countries, in all people” (Gwynn and Blotner 41). The shifting interpretation of what Grimm embodies, either a specific historical, political subject or a universal archetype, is precisely the line on which political interpretation of the novel is situated. Joe Christmas is either an archetypal pariah, or a historical and political subject coded by several layers of racial knowing. Faulkner can be a humanist, an artist of universals, a laureate of the famous “agony and sweat of the human spirit,” or an author situated in a historically specific political context.

The humanist reading of *Light in August* makes the novel easily reconcilable with a liberal reception; Grimm becomes a “monstrous” manifestation of an internalized essence of fascism, with Faulkner unambiguously “decrying [Grimm’s] actions” (Spoth 240). This dehistoricization and claim to universality accompanied Faulkner’s enshrinement in the American canon. While this humanist, moral reading defended Faulkner from the early accusations that his gothicism simply reflected a reactionary “Great Hatred” (Geismar 241) of the other, it also disappeared the political from his novels. Percy Grimm is not a moral category; he is the terrifying avatar of a new form of state violence. Grimm could not possibly appear

“everywhere.” He could only appear, as he does in the novel, at the precise moment of the historical emergence of fascism.

Of course, Faulkner’s statement is not merely a negation of Grimm’s historical specificity; it is also a warning about the possibility of American fascism. He continues, “I would say there are probably more of [Percy Grimm] in the White Citizens Councils⁹ than anywhere else in the South” (Gwynn and Blotner 41). In this sense, Faulkner not only maintained the importance of the novel’s historical specificity, but publicly interpreted it as explicitly anti-fascist.

Daniel Spoth claims that taking this expression of antifascism at face value misses the real, historical presence of reactionary readings of *Light in August*. If we accept Gavin Stevens’ fantasy of bloods as “authorial voice...translating race from a cultural to a genetic issue,” *Light in August* “becomes less of a denunciation of the dangers of white supremacy and more of a narrative of the necessity of racial purity and the dire effects of miscegenation” (Godden 240). The fascist violence that Grimm embodies becomes the efficient execution of a reactionary racial ideology. The “Great Hatred” that early critics identified in the novel was not only suspicious to leftist critics, but also easily legible to the far right as the novel’s politics. As Spoth shows, the novel’s actual translation and appearance in Nazi Germany “trouble[s] the interpretation of *Light in August*, as Faulkner seemed to attempt later in his career, as a warning of the burgeoning seeds of European fascism” (Spoth 241).

The historical fact of reactionary readings troubles the novel’s purported universalism, but is not a condemnation of Faulkner or his mid-30s novels as fascist. Rather, attention to the novel’s reception brings to light the shadow of fascism over Faulkner’s 1930s novels that so easily disappears from its critical reception. *Light in August* makes fascism into a drama of the

homeland; it shows a distinctly American fascism, appropriating and transforming reactionary politics of the late 19th and early 20th century South into new epistemological and biopolitical technologies.

Conclusion: Irony and Fascism

I began researching the first chapter of this project on a summer grant in 2017, amid the shocking, atavistic return of an explicit politics of blood and nation in America. The paper focused on discourses of race extinction and antiblackness in *Absalom, Absalom!* and their resonance with the contemporary Alt Right¹ discourse of “white genocide.” By the time the grant had ended, fascists at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville had murdered Heather Heyer.

Reading Faulkner alongside Critical Race Theory made this violent return of reactionary politics clearer. The scope of the project shifted from a comparative study of political discourse to an analysis of the historically specific relationship of Faulkner’s novels to reactionary politics. I did not come to Faulkner looking for “a combination of Thomas Nelson Page, a fascist and a psychopath, gnawing his nails” (Warren 328). Faulkner never constructs monuments to Confederate heroes, but his novels shed light on the men who surrounded a statue of Robert E. Lee chanting, “*You will not replace us*” in 2017.

Replacement haunts Quentin and Shreve’s narration in *Absalom, Absalom!* The death of white Sutpens and endurance of black Sutpens becomes a vision of the annihilation of whiteness at the end of the novel. This reflects the discursive shift from black Americans as “vanishing race” to white Americans as the victims of a “rising tide of color.” But this discourse itself is inextricable from the institutional intensification of white supremacy in the early 20th century. *Absalom* becomes legible at a shifting point in racial epistemologies, and a new type of state power that not only enforced subordination of the black population, but also socially and biologically engineered the white polity.

The Alt Right conspiracy theory of white genocide that initially led me to this project poses a horizon of white extinction by a different epistemological framework. Contemporary

racist reactionaries claim that nonwhite immigration leads to the “dispossession and replacement of the global white population in their own homelands” (Kessler 1). This is euphemized in more mainstream discourse as “population replacement.” Miscegenation reemerges as a political issue; for the Alt Right, interracial sex leads to the disappearance of whiteness. The possibility of black descendants and a projected future of a nonwhite population becomes the death of whiteness.²

On one level, this discourse betrays whiteness as an institutional construct as it tries to uphold it. If “whiteness” can disappear through the “globalist” political regime or multiculturalism, then it is certainly embedded in economy and politics rather than a natural category. The Alt Right responds by violently rearticulating race as a fundamental, biological category, and race extinction as a literal possibility. It revives “genetically-inherited, biologically-determined, race-based differences in intelligence, criminality, self-control, and creative initiative” (Gardiner 61).³ From this framework of racial knowing, reactionaries weaponize the narrative that genetically-inferior nonwhite people will “conquer the earth” for political programs ranging from stricter state control of immigration to a white ethnostate.

2.

It is tempting to search for historical continuities between the dark overtones of Faulkner’s novels and contemporary neo-fascism. Percy Grimm’s National Guard undoubtedly enforces racialized homeland security with same style of violence as ICE; Shreve’s vision of an apocalyptic future of miscegenation resembles the anonymous fantasies of a “cucked, dysgenic” future circulated by young white men on Alt Right internet forums. Rather than directly correlate two historically-distant forms of fascism say, it is vital to analyze the conditions for their

articulation. Fascism brings the apparatuses of state racism into the sphere of the politically articulable.

This returns to the question of irony in Shreve's vision of Jim Bond at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve, throughout his narration, is a well-read, referential, and humorous speaker, offering often sarcastic bafflement at Quentin's stories of "Southern Bayard[s] or Guinevere[s]" (Faulkner 142). The claim that Shreve is "mocking" (Hagopian 381) Southern racism conveniently forgets the historically real discourse of "dysgenic" civilizational decline in order to keep Faulkner at a safe distance from fascism. It also misunderstands how fascism is articulated. Rather than negating fascism, "ironic" fantasies of racial extinction introduce fascism to the sphere of what can be said with an evasive effectiveness that a racist polemic could not. Quentin and Shreve construct a historical-racial narrative that, by the time Faulkner published *Absalom*, was a theoretical foundation for fascist governments.

If there is any historical correlation to be drawn, it is at the margins of the utterable. Today's young white heirs anonymously circulate racist theories that also start in a position of irony, at a boundary of what can be said. The Alt Right poses the genetic determination of racial hierarchy first as an offensive, puerile joke.⁴ These positions appear so rooted in 19th and 20th century race science that their absurdity is obvious. But closer analysis shows that this racist discourse is as new as it is atavistic: it updates race science as a science of demographics and populations, a Bell Curve that naturalizes race more efficiently than a phrenologist's calipers ever could.⁵ The recent surge of reactionary racism is incomprehensible if we ignore its institutional context, or take its irony as a negation of its meaning.

Faulkner's novels only illustrate ideological formation of fascism if we suspend a retroactively antifascist reading of their politics. This does not make the author a fascist;

imposing authorial politics on the text would repeat the mistakes of its liberal (and, often, leftist) critics. Unquestioning acceptance of liberal interpretations of *Absalom, Absalom* and *Light in August* makes the novels safely confirm critics' own antifascist politics. Excavation of fascist interpretations of the novels reveals forgotten dimensions of their relationship to state racism and the politics of white identity.

Notes

Introduction

1. In the 1930s, critics often opposed Faulkner's labyrinthine fictions of hate to the clarity and political engagement of socialist realism, which many these early critics remained committed to. At the same time, Faulkner's style looks like the very definition of the "decadence" that later became intolerable to fascist censors, though the actual treatment of Faulkner by fascist governments was more welcoming (see Spoth, "Totalitarian Faulkner"). Only post-war liberal humanism could fully situate Faulkner's style in a coherent political ideology. This is the frame that contemporary readers and critics have, in large part, inherited.
2. For an in-depth treatment of Faulkner's personal views on race and the Civil Rights movement, a frequent topic in his later interviews, see Charles D. Peavy's *Go Slow Now: Faulkner and the Race Question*
3. Hagopian's conclusion for this experiment is that Rosa Coldfield and Henry Sutpen are the novel's "only two genuine Southern racists" (379), and Quentin and Shreve "sho[w] the tragic consequences of racism rather than affirm[ing] or unconsciously assum[ing] it." Hagopian claims (Seiden 684) that Shreve's vision of Jim Bond at the end of the novel "clearly is irony," envisioning "the Negro's bitter response to white bigotry" and "bitterly mocking [Southern racism's] inevitable victory with heavy irony" (381). Explicitly acknowledging the earlier claim that irony only "sweeten[s] the smell" (Seiden 684) of a scene with disturbing reactionary overtones, Hagopian claims "there is no smell that needs sweetening" (380). This is a prime example of the ways in which the proto-fascist themes of the text are willfully forgotten and

obscured in the interest of moralism. I will return to a discussion of irony in Shreve's vision in Chapter One.

4. Joel Williamson, whose historical writings form a large basis of my first chapter, provides a particularly thorough treatment of Faulkner's regional political context in *William Faulkner and Southern History*

Chapter One

1. Arthur de Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races* constructs a world history determined by racial difference that greatly shaped both 19th century racial thought, and the 20th century eugenic invention of a "master race." Gobineau's teleology of white triumph claimed that "an original, clear-cut, and permanent inequality among the different races is one of the oldest and most widely-held opinions in the world" (Gobineau 36). The (liberal, Christian) claim that "All men are brothers" is a weak "political axiom." This seemingly prescient reading of race science as race politics immediately returns to a strict biological determinism: Gobineau asks, "Would you like to hear its scientific form?" (37)

2. See Charles's Mills critique of Rousseau and Locke in *The Racial State*.

3. For example, Louisiana's 1898 "grandfather clause" and South Carolina's "understanding clause."

4. A lucid early example of post-Civil War appeals to states' rights to justify racist policy.

5. Robert Young takes up the seemingly contradictory explanations of race as inextricable from culture and as genetic fact in *Colonial Desire*. For Young, the "complicity of culture" (Young 3) in racist discourses makes culture not necessarily a more progressive, non-biological view of race, but rather a construct that simultaneously encodes and enforces racial difference. "Culture"

as generative of difference certainly became the dominant mode of racial knowing in the latter half of the 20th century. However, reading this solely as progress from a biological to a cultural understanding of race misses both historical context of theories of “cultural inferiority” under colonialism, and the potential intersection of a politics of blood and genetics with cultural difference.

6. In 1921, eugenicist Harry H. Laughlin argued for the imposition of specific genetic standards for immigration before the congressional Committee on Immigration and Naturalization:

“immigrants should be examined, and the family stock should be investigated....to prevent any deterioration of the American people due to the immigration of inferior human stock” (Laughlin 4-5). This language linking degeneration to nonwhite immigration furthered the link eugenics made between national identity and a biologized racial hierarchy

7. Watson reads the story of the Compson children in *The Sound and the Fury* as a type of “family study:” Caddy’s promiscuity, Quentin’s depression, Jason’s instability, and particularly Benjy’s disability make the Compsons a type of case study of various forms of white genetic degradation that preoccupied family studies. Consistently, Compson genetic unfitness is concomitant with the threat of the loss of whiteness. Particularly significant here is Benjy, the eldest Compson child and “posterchild for feeblemindedness in American literature,” and his subsequent sterilization, which Watson claims is “Faulkner’s [response] to the public discussions of eugenic sterilization legislation in Mississippi” (Watson 35). Faulkner’s critical treatment of sterilization and institutionalization of the weak is perhaps the most inarguably anti-eugenic theme in his early-middle period novels.

8. Peggy Pascoe examines *Kirby v. Kirby* as a turning point within scientific racism. The court’s indeterminacy over a married couple’s racial identity based on their appearance was ultimately

determined on the basis of their heredity. The court made race determinable based explicitly on heredity rather than physiology. This points to an underlying epistemological shift toward biology and genetics in the legal knowing of race. In this way, “the legal system does more than just reflect social or scientific ideas about race; it also produces and reproduces them” (Pascoe 47).

9. The fact that both Bon’s race and his ostensible incestuous relationship emerges in the narrative of his death is frequently used in readings of *Absalom, Absalom* as an unconscious projection of Quentin’s sexual anxieties. Linking Quentin’s fantasies about his sister Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* to Bon telling Henry, “it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, that you can’t bear” (Faulkner 285), the Henry-Judith-Charles relationship becomes a projection of his own desire. Little has been made of how this anxiety could also relate to the Compson family’s increasingly ambivalent position within whiteness (Watson 37).

10. *The Fourth Ghost* by Robert H. Brinkmeyer contextualizes the interplay between fascist interpretations of Southern Agrarians and their often ambivalent relationship to Nazi reception.

11. Credit is certainly due to the numerous psychoanalytic readings of *Absalom, Absalom!* Eric Sundquist’s *Faulkner: A House Divided* is a particularly compelling reading of how the anxieties surrounding miscegenation in *Absalom* functions as national metaphor and reveals an underlying political subconscious of the post-Civil War South. My goal here is not to fault psychoanalytic lines of inquiry, much less claim that these readings are valueless. Rather, my work refocuses attention on the discursive, legal, and scientific practices that imbue the novel. Particularly in light of post-1990s critical race theory and its orientation toward state practices of racism, this reading opens the novel onto contexts that frequently elude even its more politically-oriented critics.

Chapter Two

1. See Cleanth Brooks's argument that Joe's black blood is a fictional construct in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County*.
2. Of course, mixed-race people in the early 20th century South did occupy a knowable identity position; the question of Christmas's identity, like that of other mixed-raced people, is determined around the legal backdrop of "one-drop." However, much of *Light in August* follows the failure of this seemingly binary racial logic to encode Christmas as an identifiably mixed-raced man; rather, he is simultaneously black and white, and is received as a "foreigner" (Faulkner 44) to Jefferson's system of categorization.
3. Richard Godden's *Fictions of Labor* analyzes Faulkner's novels in terms of Southern labor history. Godden relies on the Marxist-Hegelian theoretical frame of recognition-denial in the master-slave dialectic; his reading of Thomas Sutpen's life as first a denial of recognition by a slave at the plantation owner's door and then his own denial of Charles Bon provides a fascinating link of race, labor relations, and Sutpen's tortured design. Godden does not analyze the numerous workplace scenes in *Light in August*, though both the suspended racial "recognition" of Christmas as laborer by coworkers and the interplay between images of chattelry and wage labor in this scene could be analyzed in Godden's frame.
4. See Williamson's *The Crucible of Race* for a historical analysis the post-Civil War racial ordering, particularly its focus on the role reactionary politics in the instantiation of Jim Crow laws.
- 5.. We see Christmas in a position of bare life in his relationship with his foster parents, the McEacherns. Joe's relationship to his violent, brutally religious foster father shows the failure of

power to code Joe into a recognizable subject. To the McEacherns, Joe is the “outlaw to which the law does not apply and so must be applied” (Hasratian 60). Yet power over Joe continually fails to apply law, in this case, both familial norms and literal religious law. McEachern is continually unable to inscribe Joe with an identity in any determinate way. In failing to fit Joe into fixed categories, McEachern, embodying the atavistic, brutal form of the rural white Christian identity, exerts violence over Joe. This violence changes forms in the novel, later as the violence of community exclusion of the *Homo sacer* who remains uncategorized, and finally as the violence of the state on the racialized criminal subject. Hasratian uses the scene where Joe rejects the food the McEacherns prepare for him as an instance of a break from the social coding of the family. Joe chooses to eat “like a savage, like a dog” (Faulkner 155), rejecting (white) ritual and sociality (Hasratian 67) in a seemingly autonomous, if not fully conscious, defiance of coding by power. Joe lives, in his early years with the McEacherns, on a margin where he is merely alive, resisting all codes that would recognize him as a complete, intelligible subject.

6. The figure of the “black beast” was a particularly prominent component of 1890s Radical Racist thought (Williamson 90). The image of free black men as rapists was both a popular cultural image in the post-Reconstruction disrupted racial order, and an exploitable political tactic. For an example of the former, take Thomas Dixon’s “New Negro” in *The Clansmen* and the subsequent portrayal of black sexual criminals in *The Birth of a Nation*. For an example of the latter, take Georgia senator Rebecca Felton’s foregrounding of black sexual violence as a political plank and desire to “lynch a thousand black men a week, if it becomes necessary” (Williamson 95) to prevent an imagined community of threatened white women.

7. I draw here from Foucault’s interpretation of the biologization of criminality in *Abnormal*, which focuses on the interplay of state power and medical power in modernity. Foucault’s theory

of a simultaneous production of biological and political subjects have been useful for critical race theorists; see Robert Bernasconi's writing on the "biopolitical" regime of state racism. The legal knowing of a biologized criminal subject is precise what occurs in *Light in August*. Both indirectly in lawyer Gavin Stevens's fantasy of blood, and more immediately militia leader Percy Grimm's killing and castration, the law produces Christmas's status as a racial, biological subject.

8. In "Writing Blood: The Art of the Literal in Faulkner's *Light in August*," Jay Watson argues that the moment of Christmas's death "restores literal meaning to the long-familiar figure of "black blood" that startles, forcing us to confront rather than evade the material body" (151). I will add that the metaphorical and material meanings of blood only coalesce in the novel at the hands of a violent, organized, modern state racism. The state makes the "blood" it uses as a legal construct literal through making bleed.

9. White Citizens Councils were violently anti-integration white supremacist political group particularly concentrated in Mississippi. Faulkner brings them up again to illustrate a problem in organizing Southern anti-racist solidarity: "the liberal in Mississippi, he's hemmed in more or less by the sort of people that burn crosses and whip negroes and compose lynching parties, and he's afraid to say anything. But if he found out that there were people in other states that felt the same way as he does, just as the people that—that form Citizens Councils and the KKK, they find out that there are people in other states that—that feel the same way, so it builds them up. I think that's what we need" (Gwynn and Blotner 44).

Conclusion

1. Alt Right stands for several phenomena at once: is both a reactionary movement with real political power, and a style of discourse originating on 4chan, an anonymous internet message board. The young white men of the Alt Right anonymously theorized a white nationalist politics that at first claimed to be ironic; particularly after 2015, it emerged as a serious tangible force. It rose to mainstream visibility during the 2016 election of Donald Trump, culminating in Steve Bannon, former editor of “platform of the Alt Right” Breitbart, attaining a prominent position as a White House advisor.

On its more moderate end, the so-called “Alt Light” is composed of figures like Jordan Peterson and Stefan Molyneux. Their rejections of “Cultural Marxism” as a force of civilizational degradation and coded defense of gender and racial hierarchy have become massively popular.

On its more extreme end, the Alt Right stands for Identity Evropa, the Traditionalist Workers Party, and the other white nationalist groups. Richard Spencer is perhaps the most visible public advocate of the Alt Right as an explicitly white nationalist movement. Spencer’s antiblackness rivals the most rabid 1890s Radical Racist, and his public statements on racial destiny echo Oswald Spengler’s.

2. For some on the Alt Right, this is a symptom of the decadence of modernity and insufficiency of liberalism; for others, it is part of a Jewish world conspiracy.

3. Take another recently-coined euphemism, “human biodiversity,” which essentially restates the 18th century polygenist argument that race is a biological difference at the level of species with updated scientific tools. Or, more explicitly, take Richard Spencer’s claim that “race is somewhere between a breed and a species” (Nagle 51).

4. Given the novelty of the Alt Right as a political presence, there are few in-depth academic studies of its new articulation of racial politics. Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies* controversially read the Alt Right as both an expression of white male discontent, and an extreme form of the rejection of political correctness. Nagle's work is valuable for its attention to the murky, anonymous context from which much of the Alt Right emerged, and the relationship of this politics to an often-neglected origin in transgressive humor. However, as many readers have suggested, her relatively conservative position on speech issues validates the reactionary rejection of 21st century liberal race discourse.

5. Michel Foucault's claim the Nazi system of race in *The Birth of Biopolitics* codifies the "population as political problem...at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem" (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 245). Arguably starting with Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*, contemporary racist reactionaries found race science on statistical information. Particularly note the Alt Right's obsession with IQ, a technology of the state in both its creation and deployment, as a cognitive basis for the naturalization of racial hierarchy.

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