

## Faulkner and Race\*

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The following essay examines whether a Southern white writer like William Faulkner can portray the consciousness of a different race; the examination begins with stereotypes and moves beyond them.<sup>1</sup>

“Tell about the South,” the Canadian Shreve McCannon asks Quentin Compson, his Mississippian roommate at Harvard a little more than halfway through *Absalom, Absalom!* “What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all” (174; italics in original). His question echoes Faulkner’s own mission that fettered all his novels—except for *Mosquitoes* and *A Fable*—for the rest of his writing life. Overpassing his model of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, he later remarked, “I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and that by sublimating the actual into the apocryphal I would have the complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top” (Stein 57). But as his most recent biographer points out, the relationship between fact and fiction would be a constant challenge, and the greatest challenge of all would be race (cf. Hamblin).

His first attempt to portray blacks had been Mammy Callie (Catherine) Nelson in his inaugural novel *Soldiers’ Pay*. Set in “Gawgie,” Callie is a stereotypical Southern mammy: “Donald, Mist’ Donald honey [...],” she tells the war-wounded protagonist, “here yo’ mammy come ter you. [...] Don’t you know who dis is? Dis yo’ Callie

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/faulkner-and-race>>.

whut use ter put you ter bed, honey [...]. Lawd, de white folks done ruint you" (168-69). That was written in New Orleans. Back home in Mississippi, he created Yoknapatawpha County based closely on the geography of his own residential Lafayette County. Here he wrote a novel tracking the life of his own great-grandfather, the Civil war hero, railroad builder and entrepreneur Col. W. C. Falkner as the head of the Sartoris family. A minor character, Elnora, a black kitchen servant who is entranced by the preposterous war stories of the young black Caspey, is omitted from the published family genealogies but she is clearly indicated by her position to be derived from Emmeline Falkner, John Sartoris' daughter, based on shadow family of the Old Colonel. She is Faulkner's first fiction of miscegenation, which was unrecognized by the general public but easily identified by Southern readers. Her song first gives her away:

*Sinner riz fum de moaner's bench,  
Sinner jump to de penance bench;  
When de preacher ax'im whut de reason why,  
Says 'Preacher got de women jes' de same ez I'.  
Oh, Lawd, Oh Lawd!*

*Dat's whut de matter wid de church today. (Flags in the Dust 21; italics in original)*

She thereby joins the "animal odor" (108) of blacks in *Flags in the Dust* and anticipates Faulkner's regrettable comparison to the mule: "the nigger who drives him [...] whose impulses and mental processes most closely resemble his" (268) apparently thinking of blacks like Elnora as mulattoes before the word reached common usage among whites.

Barbara Ladd has written that "Perhaps the most fundamental insight of [*The Sound and the Fury*] is *white consciousness*" (208, emphasis added). Race relations in the novel are anachronistic since by the 1920s the number of black household servants was shrinking rapidly. In the novel, Quentin Compson realizes "that a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among" (57). Faulkner tells us that a "rich and unmis-

takable smell of negroes" (189) pervaded the black section of Jefferson.

Quentin's consciousness is the most sensitive, at odds with the idiotic Benjy and the cynical Jason but Faulkner shies away from probing the consciousness of the black Dilsey Gibson, whom he would later call one of his favorite characters. To him she would seem the most impenetrable character in the book, seen by dress and action and occasional remark but never probed in *her* interior consciousness as he did with Benjy, Quentin, and Jason. She is limited to a stereotypical mammy whose primary concern is order and whose life is guided by a repetitive routine. She has been likened to Faulkner's own mammy, Caroline Barr, but she is nothing like her. Caroline Barr was tiny, sinewy, weighing less than 100 pounds; she insisted on wearing starched dresses and aprons and her decisive voice was never questioned; she often visited her own family, who lived across town, sometimes taking the Faulkner boys with her (cf. Parini 20; Sensibar 57-65). Dilsey, by contrast, is a heavy, slow-moving woman noting the rain with "a child's astonished disappointment" (173), lumbering up the stairs with a water bottle for Mrs. Compson, often behind in her duties, often disobeyed. She is introduced with used and faded clothing, even the purple for Easter Sunday, but the rain drives her back unto the house. Like Benjy, who is calmed on trips circling the town square, Dilsey also proceeds in circles—outdoors and back in, upstairs and down, out to church and back home. She is like Benjy largely inarticulate; her one insight, that those who died will rise again in the grace of the Lord—"I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (194)—is her version of Reverend Shegog's sermon, the man Faulkner describes as looking like a monkey. Despite all this, Dilsey is Faulkner's first fully black character given special attention, and we can witness his struggle to appreciate her necessity and contribution to the Compson household, although he cannot bring his understanding of her past to the surface. Her concluding scenes suggest a desire to show her selfless contribution to the family but the author finally relies on exteriority. Unlike the earlier works, *The Sound and the Fury*

shows the need for portrayal of blacks alongside the inability to create a true individual rather than a type.

That Faulkner knew that race was central and unavoidable to his "own little postage stamp of native soil" (Stein 57) is confirmed by his next major novel. In *Light in August* he is aware of his own shortcomings in an accurately probing representation of Negroes. His attempt this time in his fettered need is to understand a person who is partially white. It may be no accident that this novel was begun in August of 1931 when in Harlem a number of stories and novels such as Nell Larson's *Passing*—in her case autobiographical—were about light-skinned blacks, whose aim was to join the white culture and who were more or less successful. And 1931 was also the centennial anniversary of the bloody rebellion of Nat Turner in Southampton, Virginia, when racism turned violent. "*Light in August*," writes Jay Parini, "is a searing novel that meditates on racial hatred in the South" (178).

Joe Christmas suspects that he has mixed blood. In the South, where blood is the first designator of identity, Joe does not know who he is and does not know how to find out although it is essential that he know. We first meet Joe in an unnamed orphanage where as a baby he is left anonymously on the doorstep at Christmastime. He is subsequently closely and mysteriously observed by the janitor, who will much later be identified as the one who introduced him to his new home. Joe's lack of identity isolates him. His constant adoptions, only to be returned to the orphanage each time, confuse him. When he accidentally sees the dietitian having intercourse and she calls him "nigger" (*Light in August* 114), he accepts this as his station in life. In time relief comes when he is adopted by the McEacherns, who have longed for a son. They are strong Calvinists who insist on ritual and prayer and immaculate behavior. Mrs McEachern sneaks him extra food but, on another level, the familial—Mr McEachern is a stern judge with physical punishment; Mrs McEachern is a motherly provider of food—rather than the individual confuses him. So he begins escaping from his room at nights, attending local dances, looking on, and eventually meeting and hoping to marry Bobbie Alien.

She was a waitress in a small, dingy, back street restaurant in town. Even a casual adult glance could tell that she would never see thirty again. But to Joe she probably did not look more than seventeen [...]. (161)

One visit she offers him free coffee with his pie, and his courtship begins. Soon he is walking or running the five miles to see her whenever he can escape the McEacherns. But it takes him some time to realize she is also a prostitute. To claim attention, he tells her "I think I got some nigger blood in me" (184), and she runs away screaming that she thought him white, respectable. So far, for a man seeking an authentic black character, nothing here guarantees such an insight which Joe so desperately needs.

He was in the north now, in Chicago and then Detroit. He lived with negroes, shunning white people. He ate with them, slept with them, belligerent, unpredictable, uncommunicative. He now lived as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving. At night he would lie in bed beside her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. (212)

Rather than characterize one blood from another, Faulkner once more withdraws from racial portraits. Instead, the mode is persistently existential. Discontented, disgusted, unsuccessful in finding a racial characteristic that is telling, he returns to Yoknapawpha where the necessity for food drives him into the house of Joanna Burden some distance from Jefferson. She is partial to blacks, recruiting for a Negro college. They have a torrid love affair but when she calls a halt to send him off to school after praying with him, confession is bound with contrition echoing the treatment of Mr McEachern, against which he rebels. Joe pulls a gun, a replica of the War of Northern Aggression; later her body is discovered, her throat slit. Just as Joe's race is unclear, bringing him closer to white people Faulkner knew better, so her murderer is unclear as well as the identity of that arso-

nist who set fire to Joanna's house. Joe runs around the countryside until he is exhausted. An old Negro gardener tells him "You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You'll live and you'll die and you wont never know" (363). Joe runs through the countryside, through a black church. Finally, Joe seeks refuge in the kitchen of the defrocked Revered Gail Hightower where a crew of racists led by Percy Grimm run him down.

He was not a member of the American Legion, but that was his parents' fault and not his. But when Christmas was fetched back from Mottstown on that Saturday afternoon, he had already been to the commander of the local Post. His idea, his words, were quite simple and direct. "We got to preserve order," he said. "We must let the law take its course. The law, the nation. It is the right of no civilian to sentence a man to death. And we, the soldiers in Jefferson, are the ones to see to that." (427)

Percy Grimm pulls a knife and emasculates Joe, holding his genitals high while Joe bleeds to death. At every point, then, this novel is poised on ambiguity; even Grimm's murder is not the lynching usually required of dangerous blacks but the punishment given to sexual predators of any race. Still uncertain of how to portray the black consciousness, Faulkner relies on the white consciousness he knows intimately to explore them both.

Faulkner's next novel takes up the issue of miscegenation directly. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, young Thomas Sutpen's life begins when he comes down from the hills of western Virginia to Virginia cotton plantations and is turned away by a black household servant:

[H]e stood there before that white door with the monkey nigger barring it and looking down at him in his patched made-over jeans [...] [T]he nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back. (232)

In response, he is motivated to build his own mansion with black servants and establish his own aristocratic family line. He goes to Haiti during a civil war to raise money for his "design" (260). He marries Eulalia Bon, the daughter of a wealthy owner of a sugar plantation by whom he has a son and daughter, Charles and Clytem-

nestra (Clytie). In between those two “designs,” he learns that Eulalia has black blood and that she and the children are mulattoes. Realizing this would destroy the possibility of establishing his own plantation, he abandons his family.

In 1833, Sutpen, with no known past and no possessions, arrives in Yoknapatawphan to start over. He spends his last coin on registering a deed of ten square miles just outside Jefferson—Sutpen’s Hundred—and disappears again only to return with a wagonload of wild French-speaking Negroes with whom he builds his mansion. This takes five years. Then he marries Ellen Coldfield, the daughter of a successful local merchant, by whom he has a second family, Henry and Judith. In 1859, Henry enters the University of Mississippi where he establishes a close friendship with Charles Bon, a handsome, sophisticated and well-to-do gentleman from the French quarter of New Orleans. They spend Christmas at Sutpen’s Hundred. Charles has identified Sutpen as his father and wants a son’s recognition; Henry wants Charles to marry Judith so he will be a part of their family forever. But Sutpen refuses to recognize his first son while Judith proceeds towards an engagement. On a second Christmas visit Sutpen orders Charles not to marry Judith, envisioning miscegenation and rival inheritance. The War between the States interrupts all their lives. Thomas goes off to lead troops with Col. Sartoris; Charles and Henry participate as soldiers; Judith, her half-sister Clytie, and Rosa Coldfield, Ellen’s older unmarried sister, manage to keep the plantation going. The latent powers of miscegenation are released during the Civil War, the battle of brother against brother, when Henry learns of his relationship to Charles. They fight, Henry upholding the supremacy and purity of his white father, and Charles, claiming elder status. Charles’s challenge is firm: *“I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry”* (358; italics in original). When they return to Sutpen’s Hundred, Henry shoots his half-brother and runs off. Judith then goes to New Orleans to fetch Henry Etienne Saint Valery Bon, Charles’s son by an octoroon, and brings him to Sutpen’s Hundred; both die later in the historic epidemic of yellow

fever. Henry returns to Sutpen's Hundred and is kept by Clytie in an attic bedroom fearful that the police will come for her half-brother for killing her brother. When Ellen's sister Rosa Coldfield, hears of Henry's murder, Clytie bars her from the door to the bedroom where Charles's body lies and later once more when Henry, her half-brother by Sutpen, lies there before burning them and the house to the ground to protect him. All that remains of Sutpen's aborted design is Jim Bond, Charles Etienne's son by an extremely dark woman. He is an idiot who continues to "lurk around those ashes and those four gutted chimneys and howl until someone came and drove him away" (376). At the basis of the ruined house on the failed plantation, man has proceeded into animal. We do not have here the origins of the howling beast but only his representation. Faulkner has faced miscegenation in a wider scope than he did with Joe Christmas but much of it is still from the outside. The canvas has widened but the work lets the plot do the job of an interior consciousness.

Or at least so it would seem in the Sutpen family biography, the inner story of *Absalom, Absalom!* But this is really the way fragments and rumors and probabilities—conjectures—make the fundamental narrative about four white people: Rosa Coldfield, who finds friendship in the end; Mr Compson, who reports on what Thomas Sutpen told his father; and Shreve and Quentin. They remain to shape the narrative.

So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, and Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Henry; and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon. So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it? (377-78)

Or this, at least, is the most pointed Shreve and Quentin can be with what information they have *and feel*, as they build an analogy between Quentin's love for his sister Caddy and the close bond between Shreve and himself. Shreve moves to be cruel to be kind.

—So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear. Henry doesn't answer. (356; italics in original)



Shreve persists.

"[...] Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?"

"I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; [...] *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; *I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!* (378; italics in original)

That miscegenation is worse than incest may seem an extraordinary statement but not after writing the story of Joe Christmas nor just after, two close Oxford friends of Faulkner told me, he had recently learned that his maternal grandfather had eloped with a black woman. Along with Emmeline Falkner, William Faulkner learned he had descended from miscegenous acts on both sides of his own family.

Miscegenation, then, was not only increasingly practiced in the South but also in the North, but it was a way of approaching black consciousness. The concept and term were actually introduced in 1863 on the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation. The term imploded in December 1863 with an anonymous incendiary pamphlet entitled *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races* written by a racist posing as an abolitionist. "Mulatto" was a white contribution which propagandists for abolition developed into the stereotype of the tragic mulatto whose inherited strength came from a patrician white father. William Faulkner had been born into decades of racist fictions. Weekly newspapers such as *The Issue!* published such stories as "Sexual Crimes Among Southern Negroes Scientifically Considered" and "The Negro: A Different Kind of Flesh." Faulkner's first-grade teacher Annie Chandler gave him a copy of Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s *The Clansman*. The culture thus prepared an audience, as well as Faulkner, for portrayals of biracial characters, by quadroons and octoroons. There are only five mulattoes in *Absalom, Absalom!*, all of them Bons—Eulalia, Henry, Judith, Henry Saint Valery, and Jim—but the novel's sequel, *Go Down*, is awash with them. Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin spawning two other family lines, the black Beauchamps and the white Edmonds.

The seven episodes that constitute this novel are all versions of hunting. The first, "Was," recounts the ritual hunt of Tomey's Turl, a servant to Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy McCaslin, Lucius's twin sons. Tomey's Turl has to escape the household to see his girlfriend always pursued by Uncle Buck. His agility and youth, his craftiness in refusing to run a straight path and his ingenuity in hiding challenge Uncle Buck, who is in turn pursued by the older maiden Sophonsiba. Caught the next morning, Turl wins his freedom by helping Uncle Buck to win a poker game where Sophonsiba is at stake. Faulkner says nothing directly of the treatment of Tomey's Turl nor does he note that Old Lucius impregnated his slave Eunice to produce Tomey and then impregnated Tomey to conceive Tomey's Turl: Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy thus poorly treat their own cousin. Feeling both sorry and responsible after the War of Northern Aggression, the twins move out of the McCaslin manor house to make room for their Negro servants and, furthermore, allow them to go out at night so long as they are back in the house each morning. As with Tomey's Turl, they live by their own consciences, which also reveals their inner thoughts. Thus Faulkner turns to unexpected actions and decisions as they depart from the norm in an attempt to understand a black consciousness. Still ashamed, they triple their father's thousand-dollar legacy to three thousand for Tomey's Turl's living children: Lucas Beauchamp, James, and Fonsiba. Lucius's white grandson Ike accepts money and initially the plantation but James has disappeared and Fonsiba's husband denies the offer. Once more, their reactions help us see that Lucas must fight for recognition, for what he considers his inheritance. He is especially challenged when he loses his wife Mollie, nursing his child, to his white cousin Cass to nurse his. At a showdown with Zack he speaks out.

"I'm a nigger," Lucas said. "But I'm a man too. I'm more than just a man. The same thing made my pappy that made your grandmaw. I'm going to take her back." (*Go Down, Moses* 47)

This sudden revelation of suspicion, of fear, of pride and responsibility and self-worth is far more complex than Dilsey's remarks, or Joe's or even Charles's.

"How to God," he [Lucius] said, "can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife? And even if he could ask it, how to God can the white man promise he wont?" (59).

At last, Faulkner has fathomed a Southern mulatto man's thoughts. The same is true of a mulatto woman when the white Isaac has his epiphany. It occurs while everyone else in the hunting camp has left him to kill deer. Suddenly, a woman with a baby enters his tent. She is new to the South, having for years been a teacher at nearby Alauschkuna,

[...] because my aunt was a widow, with a big family, taking in washing to sup—"

"Took in what?" he said. "Took in washing? [...] You're a nigger!"

"Yes," she said. "James Beauchamp—you called him Tennie's Jim though he had a name—was my grandfather. I said you were Uncle Isaac." (360-61)

Her lover was Roth Edmonds, Ike's younger cousin, the last of the McCaslin line, who had taken over the McCaslin plantation and had fathered the mulatto baby, although he wanted to be rid of her now. Roth instructed Ike to give her money and a farewell note. Ike attempted to give her General Compson's old hunting horn and she thanked him. But Ike was not done.

"Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That's the only salvation for you—for a while yet, maybe a long while yet." [...]

"Old man," she said, "have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?"

Then she was gone [...]. (363)

Nothing anticipates flashing moments like these between mulattoes and whites in Faulkner's fiction. But these are not black characters.

Yet, *Go down, Moses* is where, for a moment, Faulkner succeeds. The fully black man is Rider, and his episode is, ironically, "Pantaloon in Black." The chapter opens with Rider furiously digging his wife's

grave, pushing others aside to manage it alone. Abruptly leaving the cemetery, he declines an offer from friends and the woman who raised him to join them in their homes preferring to go instead to the home he shared with Mannie, his wife, before her youthful, inexplicable death.

The house was the last one in the lane, not his but rented from Carothers Edmonds, the local white landowner. But the rent was paid promptly in advance, and even in just six months he had refloored the porch and rebuilt and roofed the kitchen, doing the work himself on Saturday afternoon and Sunday with his wife helping him, and bought the stove. (137)

He is large and strong and, at twenty-four, the head of a timber gang walking four miles to work each day by sunup. Now his house meant nothing to him; it seemed to belong to someone else. His large dog greets him but skitters before the empty house. Rider wills Mannie's ghost before him but it fades. He sets the table but cannot eat the food. What Faulkner gives us is the interiority of indescribable grief.

Then there is change as thought transfers to action. Rider sleeps outside and then reruns to the mill. He reaches in a lard bucket for a morning biscuit. He tackles large logs, greets his uncle who delivers lunch and an invitation home.

"She wants you to come on home. She kept de lamp burnin all last night fer you. [...] You aint awright. De Lawd guv, and He tuck away. Put yo faith and trust in Him. And she kin help you." (145)

But he returns to work and then, with the dog, he goes to a shack where he drinks heavily. Now his aunt invites him to her home, pleads with him to pray. Still Mannie's unexplained absence goes unmentioned. "Efn He God, Ah dont needs to tole Him. Efn He God, He awready know hit. Awright. Hyar Ah is. Leff Him come down hyar and do me some good" (150). But he will not pray to an unfeeling God. Instead, he returns to the mill where he joins a game of dice. Suspicious—or knowing—he forces the white man rolling the dice to open his hand to reveal a second pair. "[T]he white man wrenched free and sprang up and back and reached the hand backward toward the pocket where the pistol was" (153). Rider pulls the knife handing

around his throat killing him. At last, he explains one thing inexplicable: the diceman's success with black victims who will lose no more. The inexplicable winning streak is clarified and finished, its victims freed. Rider returns home to sleep off the moonshine and is captured by the brothers of his victim, the Birdsongs, and lynched. He has exposed evil and defeated it, giving some purpose to his suddenly purposeless life. Now he may reunite with Mannie.

*Go Down, Moses* remains Faulkner's most layered, most complex, most *personal* novel with its countless resonances and inner correspondences. Behind all the episodes lurks Sam Fathers, the Chickasaw chieftain with red, black, and white bloodlines; it seems appropriate, then, that his father is called Doom. After this, there is a falling off. Lucas Beauchamp returns in *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner's novel in the civil rights era, a detective story in which an elderly woman and two boys prove Lucas was innocent of murder. It is the same Lucas—proud, independent, arrogant, self-assured, defiant. He annoys Jefferson residents by his haughtiness, sporting the gold chain of old Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin as his ancestor; but he is also innocent, well-mannered, and businesslike. On the other hand, the remaining black character, Nancy Manigoe, Temple Drake's black fellow prostitute, is another Dilsey—she will surrender her life to save Temple's. Together his characters consistently support Faulkner's claim at the close of his major essay "Mississippi": "you dont love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults" (43).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This essay builds on my earlier publication: "Faulkner and Racism" in *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/1994): 265-78; <http://www.connotations.de/article/arthur-f-kinney-faulkner-and-racism/>. Recent criticism has only selectively been taken into account.

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