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'HE WENT OUT AND SUBDUED THEM':
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

A Thesis Presented

by

Curtis Browne

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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Thesis Examination Committee:

Helen Scott, Ph.D., Advisor

John Waldron, Ph.D., Chairperson

Todd McGowan, Ph.D.

Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

Abstract

William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* mediates the persistence of the violent history of the US South in the present and grapples with the difficulty of narrating and wresting meaning from it. This violence is embodied by Thomas Sutpen, a man who installs himself as planter and patriarch in the antebellum South, and whose narrative trajectory and fate the various narrators attempt to reconstruct. A peculiar anachronism appears in their attempt, however: in the 1820s, Sutpen begins his rise by suppressing a revolution of the enslaved in Haiti. The existence of slavery in Haiti at this historical juncture implies that the Haitian Revolution had not yet happened, and that Sutpen himself is capable of stopping it. Rather than pass over this contradiction between narrative and history as a relatively insignificant error, I center and theorize it as constitutive of *Absalom, Absalom!* as a whole. In doing so, I arrive at the significance the Haitian Revolution holds for the novel and for universal history as an eruption of Black radicality that tokens temporal rupture, concentration of totality, and dialectical process.

Dedication

“The Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot

“In a revolution, when the ceaseless slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption, the meteoric flares and flights above are a meaningless chaos and lend themselves to infinite caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the sub-soil from which they came.”

- C. L. R. James

“a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation . . . the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance.”

- William Faulkner

“The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption.”

- Walter Benjamin

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One of the great myths perpetuated about writing is that the isolation felt by the writer actually corresponds to an immediate relation to the object. I would not have been able to formulate this project, nor write anything possibly worth reading, were it not for all the scholars and artists with whom I am in conscious or unconscious dialogue—and for the following people: Helen, whose profound advice, penetrating questions, and consistent encouragement have grown my capacity to read, think, and write; Todd, whose theoretical insight and decisiveness—particularly the suggestion to tackle this project in the first place—have proven invaluable; Reid and Grady, the two cohort comrades generous enough to read through early chapter drafts and discuss my ideas; and, of course, Andrea, without whose love, support, and critical acuity this thesis would have collapsed under the weight of its ambition and remained mired in intellectual obscurity.

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Introduction

On August 28, 1955, a Black child named Emmett Till was lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman in Money, Mississippi. About eighty miles to the northeast, in Oxford, Mississippi, shortly after hearing that Till's body had been found, William Faulkner wrote a letter to the *New York Herald Tribune* "in which he said that a society so desperate as to murder children didn't 'deserve to survive, and probably won't'" (qtd. in Gorra 347-8). Faulkner's comments on racism and the civil rights movement fall within a spectrum which encompasses the tentatively progressive and outright reactionary—the latter tendency is epitomized by a statement which he drunkenly made in a *Sunday Times* interview in February 1956, less than half a year after the Till letter: "if it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes" ("Interview" 261). Faulkner would spend much of his remaining years attempting to atone for that statement. That same spring, W. E. B. Du Bois challenged Faulkner to a debate on civil rights. The proposed debate would be held on the steps of the Mississippi courthouse where Emmett Till's murderers had been acquitted. Du Bois was by thirty years Faulkner's senior, but even at eighty-eight he was still more politically active than Faulkner had ever been. Faulkner declined the invitation, claiming in a telegram to Du Bois: "I do not believe there is a debatable point between us. We both agree in advance that the position you take is right morally, legally, and ethically . . . [if recent tragedies like Emmett Till's lynching] are not evidence to you that the position I take in

asking for moderation and patience is right practically, then we will both waste our breath” (“Notes”). Beyond the moral cowardice of Faulkner’s gradualism, it is also highly unlikely that he would have fared well in a debate with Du Bois—and he probably recognized this. Du Bois was a veteran speaker and debater, and he had famously eviscerated the scientific racism of historian Lothrop Stoddard in a 1929 debate. The archive of Du Bois’s collected papers shows that Du Bois received Faulkner’s telegram, turned the paper upside down, and typed a response which he never sent: “Moderation can only exist when there is action. Moderation with no forward movement is surrender. Moderation with murder of the innocent is retreat” (“Notes”). Though he never received this message, perhaps Faulkner also recognized that Du Bois’s position was closer to the truth of the matter.¹

The contradictory views on race that Faulkner held personally were inevitably informed by the interventions of Du Bois and other Black historians and political activists like C. L. R. James, even if he never read their work. Du Bois and James both challenged the historical narratives of racism and raciality that culminated in what was often referred to as the “Negro problem,” and they each contributed to this debate to great extent. In his personal life, Faulkner often shied away from this discussion while tending to view Black people as incomprehensible, if not problematic. Moreover, the capacity of Black people to resist racist subjection and to

¹ For an excellent historical analysis of the Du Bois-Faulkner debate that never happened, see: Moreland, Richard C. “Forward Movement: William Faulkner’s ‘Letter to the North,’ W. E. B. Du Bois’s Challenge, and *The Reivers*.” *The Faulkner Journal*, vol. 30 no. 1, 2016, pp. 79-104.

determine their own history confounded him. As Edouard Glissant writes, Faulkner's Black characters function as "keepers of the suffering, guardians of the temple of the unspeakable, but not . . . an oppressed population that has the simple right to rise up against oppression" (94). In short, Black revolution is absolutely unthinkable for Faulkner.

Nevertheless, in his fiction Faulkner often managed to see *through*—not past or around—his own warped perceptions into the racialized violence and inequality at the heart of the South. His own ambivalence toward the South allows this space to appear mediated in the work as, more often than not, a society crumbling under the weight of its constitutive contradictions. The contradiction between Faulkner's melancholy humanism (in fiction) and casual racism (in personal life) may then be read as that which constituted his own grappling with the open question of "Southern" identity— an implicit task which many critics ascribe to his work. It thus seems fitting that, out of all of Faulkner's works, *Absalom, Absalom!* is the one most endlessly studied and debated by its readers and critics—it is a tortuous maze of a novel, the circuitous form of which illustrates the narrative difficulties concomitant with reaching into the South's past (or any past) to make it signify. *Absalom* was published in 1936, one year after Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* and two years before James's *The Black Jacobins*, two historical studies of the self-emancipation of the Black enslaved: Du Bois studied the US Civil War and its aftermath, while James examined the Haitian Revolution. In Faulkner's novel, amid all the recursive and verbose narrative attempts, the foundation of antebellum Southern society ultimately proves to be the continuous suppression of a slave revolution, even though none of

its narrators seem to realize this.² Instead, they fixate on the forms which pervade such a society and direct the outsized ambitions of the ruthless Thomas Sutpen in his “design” to establish a dynasty: the color line and the “absolute caste system” of the South (*AA* 276).

In contrast to Faulkner’s own steady middle-class status, Sutpen is a social climber who arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi and acquires land on which he establishes a lucrative plantation. Sutpen’s appearance in Jefferson is like that of a sudden apparition—no one knows anything about his past, nor his class origins. As a somewhat mythical figure, Sutpen embodies to absurd proportions the antebellum planter’s ideological fixations on bloodline, whiteness, and sovereignty in relation to the brutal exploitation of the enslaved on whose labor and Blackness the whole enterprise rests. Moreover, the contradiction between the “absolute caste” of plantation aristocracy and Sutpen’s admission into this class discloses a contingency which in turn contradicts the aforementioned ideology of purity and filiation. The material and ideological violences and contradictions of the Southern plantation converge in Sutpen—and it is the gestalt of this history which haunts the attempts to narrate it.

There are four intermingled primary narrative attempts in the novel: Rosa Coldfield’s and Mr. Compson’s during separate hours of a Mississippi afternoon in September 1909, and Quentin Compson’s and Shreve McCannon’s in a freezing Harvard dorm room in January,

² One might also argue that the *postbellum* South structures itself to perpetuate the racist ideology and material exploitation of Black people so that the relations of slavery remain as intact as possible—Saidiya Hartman’s phrase “the afterlife of slavery” comes to mind.

1910. All of them try to compile, construct, and make sense of the rise and fall of Sutpen insofar as it might serve as an allegory for the rise and fall of the South. However, what is *absent* within the narrative of Sutpen determines its significance even more than the narrators' futile attempts to wrestle meaning from it; indeed, this is what determines the futility of these attempts in the first place.

When he arrives in Jefferson with intentions to establish a massive plantation, Sutpen brings enslaved people from Haiti, people who are referred to repeatedly in the novel as his “wild Negroes” or “wild n—s.”³ Sutpen’s experience as the overseer of a plantation in Haiti thus determines his ability to become a planter in Mississippi, and to thereby establish a dynasty: it is in Haiti that he gains control over and realizes the potential of enslaved labor. The former event is dramatized within the novel as a suppression of a slave revolution. Therefore, within the simple declarative statement “he went out and subdued them” lies one of the most famous interpretative problems set by *Absalom, Absalom!*: how does Sutpen’s suppression of a slave revolution in *1820s Haiti* signify? Haiti, the only country in the world to have been established through a *successful* revolution of the enslaved (concluded in 1804), should ostensibly be unavailable for Sutpen to work as an overseer of enslaved African workers. It seems here that the

³ I have made the decision to censor the n-word when quoting from the primary text based on a consideration of the incredible trauma which this signifier may evoke for readers and which it certainly recalls in history. I have also chosen to follow Laurent Dubois’s preference for the term “people of color” over the two terms “mulattoes” or “mixed-race people.” This is because the former is historically limited to a combination of European and African ancestry that was not always the case, while the latter implies the possibility of unmixed or “pure” race (*Avengers* 6).

novel submerges historical record in white imperial fantasy: Sutpen single-handedly suppresses a slave uprising in Haiti at a time in history when slavery would already have been abolished through the emancipatory success of the Haitian Revolution. It has often been pointed out that *Absalom* was published only two years after the official end to the US imperialist occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), the common implication being that the Haitian resistance to a US Marines, many of whom came from the South, allowed Faulkner to immerse his narrative in an ideological Haiti relevant to the US as a colonial theater where the contradictions of racism could be objectivized.⁴ Thus, while engaging with the criticism that has long toiled to explain the implications of *Absalom*'s Haiti, especially in connection with the contradiction between Faulkner's personal and artistic engagements with racism and raciality, I want to work through the historical contexts to further explore the *theoretical* fecundity of this problem.

That no literary critic even noticed the problem until the 1990s is a shameful indictment of US academia and its ignorance of world history, especially that of the Global South.⁵ As John T. Matthews writes: "It is sobering to acknowledge how assumptions of US exceptionalism, imperial indifference to prenational colonial origins, the peculiarization of the slaveholding South by the rest of the country, and other forms of self-conceptual insularity carried over into the neglect of what Faulkner's South shares more broadly with new-world histories and

⁴ See Mary Renda's *Taking Haiti* and my discussion of the occupation in Chapter 2 pp. 44-47.

⁵ The anachronism was first noted, albeit very briefly, in Hortense J. Spillers' 1991 essay "Who Cuts the Border?: Some Readings on 'America.'" *Black, White, and in Color*. University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 319-335.

experiences” (“Recalling” 239). Up to now, critics have been primarily interested in admitting the anachronism’s ambiguity, but trying to find a straightforward explanation for the problem anyway. To paraphrase some examples: Matthews sees it not as an anachronism, but an actual historical possibility; Richard Godden views it as a conscious mistake with implicit revolutionary potential; Wanda Raiford decries it as a reactionary impulse that implicates the reader in Faulkner’s “white imperial innocence”; and Michael Kreyling dismisses it as purely symbolic of an ideological Haiti available in a concrete historical instance.⁶ These readings particularize and close off interpretation of this problem as just another part of Sutpen’s plot or as a fascinatingly ambiguous part of the novel, rather than pursue it as an open question or contradiction constitutive of Sutpen’s story and the novel as a whole. To work through this contradiction, it is imperative to *historicize* it dialectically, so that through the gaps in the text history might speak. Doing so must inevitably also attend to the material conditions mediated in the novel and relate the shifts within distinct modes of production, especially as they relate to the text’s immanent contradictions.⁷ It is here that the historical materialism of James and Du Bois is especially invaluable—the work of both reads against the grain of historicism to excavate

⁶ For these readings, see: Godden, Richard, “*Absalom, Absalom!*, Haiti and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions”; Matthews, John T., “Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back”; Raiford, Wanda, “Fantasy and Haiti’s Erasure in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*.”; Kreyling, Michael, *The South That Wasn’t There: Postsouthern Memory and History*.

⁷ I borrow this phrase from Benita Parry’s reading of the contradictory engagement with imperialism in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a reading which anticipates in many ways how *Absalom, Absalom!* depicts the imperialized space of Haiti. For more, see Chapter 2, pp. 42-43.

the actuality of Black revolutionary agency, that which the novel represses. Furthermore, positing the Haitian Revolution specifically as the repressed *negativity* within the narrative allows for an investigation of the singular theory of narration and historiography that Faulkner's novel comprises.

I therefore examine the Haitian Revolution as the absent center of the Sutpen plot, which itself constitutes the incomplete object of narrative construction and storytelling in the novel. By taking this as a problem immanent to the narrative, I find it necessary to interrogate the dialectic between space and time through which history arrives as narrative synthesis. Thus, I proceed through the problem in three chapters which mirror this movement and its relation to the historical and ideological implications of the absence itself: Chapter 1 views the problem in terms of time and revolution, Chapter 2 through space and imperialism, and Chapter 3 by way of narrative and language. Reading dialectically between *Absalom*'s depiction of Haiti and the historical Haitian Revolution also establishes understandings of the latter in terms of how its repression pervades the novel's form and content. Accordingly, a theoretical understanding of the Haitian Revolution emerges which grasps its formal status in history as a temporal rupture, concentration of totality, and dialectical process.

1 'what he rode upon was a volcano': Time and Revolution

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel about failure. As Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman states, failure is "thematized in the failure of [Thomas] Sutpen's design and textualized in the overwrought, interwoven, and largely speculative narrative that fails to make sense of it" (46). However, the novel's narrative and its failure are simultaneously constituted by a failure to represent the Haitian Revolution. Sutpen could not have become the overseer of enslaved Haitians on a sugar plantation in the 1820s, suppressed a revolution on said plantation, married the planter's daughter, become a planter himself, and so on—the causal events which comprise his rise and fall could not have happened in a historical Haiti that had already abolished slavery in the world's only successful slave revolution (1791-1804).⁸ It would therefore seem that *Absalom, Absalom!* maintains an indomitable "innocence" of history akin to that of its central character. John T. Matthews summarizes this nicely: "Sutpen's 'innocent' 'mistakes' about his West Indian situation exemplify an extensive cultural apparatus dedicated to preserving masterly innocence in new-world colonial Souths, and US imperial innocence in the postcolonial world" ("Recalling" 239). Sutpen's own "innocence," especially insofar as it implicates those who attempt to tell his story, epitomizes the episteme of Euro-American imperialism.

⁸ Foregrounding the Haitian Revolution's singular success does not imply that other groups of enslaved African people did not resist their oppression in remarkable ways, nor diminish the accomplishments of those other rebellions and revolutions.

Even so, this “erasure” of the Haitian Revolution is not just another one of the several narrative errors through which *Absalom* calls attention to its narrative reconstruction of the Sutpen story as merely “true enough” (AA 268). Rather, the revolution’s absence constitutes the Sutpen story, which itself is the absent center of the novel. The narrative inheres around the latter void as *Absalom*’s various narrators attempt to piece together Sutpen’s history and preoccupy themselves with its implications. Their narratives, however, remain “innocent” of the absent revolution within the absent Sutpen. Accordingly, *time* fails in notable ways throughout the novel that point to the constitutive absence of the Haitian Revolution: the time of (plantation) capital becomes the linear, abstract force by which Sutpen forms his dynastic “design” and attempts to begin it in Haiti; this temporality is disrupted in Haiti but then ostensibly reasserted; this reassertion *qua* repression ensures that a repetition compulsion emerges out of Sutpen’s non-experience of the Haitian Revolution; and, finally, this repetition foregrounds the inability of the South to escape its illusions about its own history. In *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, temporality as such remains inextricable from the narrative effacement of the Haitian Revolution.

Keeping Time

An oft-overlooked precedent for the narrative’s distortion of historical time occurs via Shreve’s interruption of Quentin and, by extension, Sutpen’s narrative. The former strains to correct the latter’s attempt to name Sutpen’s actual origins: his birthplace. Quentin has begun “Because he

was born in West Virginia, in the mountains where—” when Shreve leaps into the narrative to dispute this:

‘Not in West Virginia . . . Because if he was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn’t any West Virginia in 1808 because—’ ‘All right,’ Quentin said. ‘—West Virginia wasn’t admitted—’ ‘All right all right,’ Quentin said. ‘— into the United States until—’ ‘All right all right all right,’ Quentin said. (AA 179)

Wanda Raiford points out that this passage “aligns the readers’ sympathies simultaneously with the teller who would tell and against all interruptions . . . that delay revelations and distract from the story” and that “it is through this very mechanism that . . . Sutpen’s account of himself . . . avoids even casual examination” (110). The form of this interruption may indeed condition the reader’s reception of Shreve’s attempt at historical accuracy as just some annoying pedantry obstructing Quentin’s (and Sutpen’s) story. However, it also calls attention to the *constructedness* of the story insofar as it remains unsettled and in motion through time and space, as well as their ineluctable narrative synthesis: history. With his intervention, Shreve forces Quentin to acknowledge that placing Sutpen in the *space* designated as West Virginia disrupts the coherence of *time* as well. The western part of Virginia may well have been called “West Virginia” in the antebellum period, but because West Virginia’s statehood is coeval with the Civil War itself, this mistaken naming disrupts a reconstruction of the past (1808) by imposing a more recent past (1863) retroactively upon it. This interruption, then, foregrounds how temporality shares contingency with spatiality in the text. Indeed, this contingency is the

precondition of historical production. It presents an irresolvable contradiction with which Quentin can only defer confrontation. He thus interrupts his interruptor to repeat (and accumulate) the oblique acknowledgement “All right” as a means of staving off the Real of historiography.

Conversely, Sutpen fixates on linearity as the primary means by which to fortify his “innocence” of historical contingency. Quentin suggests that Sutpen discovers his “design”—the grand scheme by which he can become a rich planter— “all of a sudden” (*AA* 178). Moreover, it appears *ex nihilo*: “He did not even know that it existed to be wanted, to need to be done, until he was almost fourteen years old” (179). While his childhood experience at the Tidewater plantation house door later proves to be the impetus, the emphasis here is on the very *contingency* of Sutpen’s formation of this plan. In this telling, he does not expect it; it simply occurs to him. Still, it is the compression of life-time in this epiphanic moment that compels him toward linear self-progress: “he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life” (178). From the terms set by “the rest of his life,” Sutpen derives an idea of linearity toward death; he thus becomes preoccupied with “all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right” (178). The accretion of ancestral obligation engenders Sutpen’s “obsession with his own bloodline [which] invokes an obsession with linear progressivism, with a uniquely Southern ‘design’” (Aboul-Ela 144). The

temporality of this design not only determines Sutpen's trajectory toward imperialistic "progress" in Haiti, but also is itself determined by his interpellation into capitalist ideology.

The contradictions of historiography inhere throughout the narratives of *Absalom, Absalom!*, but for Sutpen they become increasingly pronounced during his literal passage into the planter capitalist society of Tidewater, Virginia. Sutpen has spent his youth in Appalachia living in a poor, but seemingly pre-capitalist society, the relations of which he theorizes in retrospect of his own ignorance:

he did not imagine . . . that there existed all the objects to be wanted which there were, or that the ones who owned the objects not only could look down on the ones that didn't, but could be supported in the down-looking not only by the others who owned the objects too but by the very ones that were looked down on that didn't own any objects and knew they never would. Because where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say 'This is mine' was crazy. (*AA* 179)

Capitalist ideology is at first foreign to Sutpen—in his naive impressions of the relations of plantation capitalism, he therefore perceives commodities, private property, and even "false consciousness" from an external standpoint.⁹ The drastic change involved in moving to

⁹ The utility of the term "false consciousness" has been rightfully disputed due to its tendency to feature in vulgar Marxist analyses. I use it here with Georg Lukács's words in mind: "The 'falseness,' the illusion implicit in this situation is in no sense arbitrary; it is simply the intellectual reflex of the objective economic structure" (*HCC* 52).

Tidewater thus takes on the character of a sharp descent: he “had hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it” (180). Sutpen’s shock comes from the social totalization of the plantation form; in short, he is confronted by what Paul Gilroy calls “capitalism with its clothes off” (15). Due to this disorientation, the *temporality* of this family journey eludes Sutpen: “He didn’t remember if it was weeks or months of a year they traveled . . . whether it was that winter then spring and then summer overtook and passed them on the road or whether they overtook and passed in slow succession the seasons as they descended” (*AA* 181-2). Sutpen’s inability to cognitively delimit the journey from Appalachia to Tidewater—from pre-capitalism to plantation capitalism—in terms of natural time (seasons) or abstract time (weeks, months, etc.) connotes the temporal upheaval involved in this transition. His confusion stems from his inaugural encounter with the temporal abstraction imposed by the capitalist mode of production, the abstraction required to extract surplus value from labor-time.

To be clear, the Southern form of plantation capitalism is not identical to the forms of capitalism in the northern U. S. and elsewhere. It does, however, resemble a later stage of the mercantilist colonial form—that of which Haiti had been (as the French colony of Saint-Domingue) the Caribbean epitome.¹⁰ As historian Mark M. Smith argues, the dawning of industrialism ushered in developments to which Southern and colonial planters were not

¹⁰ C. L. R. James: “If on no earthly spot was so much misery concentrated as on a slave-ship, then on no portion of the globe did its surface in proportion to its dimensions yield so much wealth as the colony of San Domingo” (46).

exempt: “planters’ adoption of clock time . . . satisfied simultaneously their drive for profit, their desire for discipline and social order, and . . . their claim to modernity” (5). This new temporality also exemplified the combined unevenness of capitalist development: while “in some respects, planters’ use of clock time was more akin to . . . the conception of time embodied in eighteenth century mercantilist orthodoxy” (5), “clock time and natural time were never mutually exclusive in the South. Rather, they were complementary” (11). For Sutpen, clock time in Tidewater does not function as the abrogation of natural time, but as the intrusion of abstraction which defies his ability to symbolically register his passage into capitalist society. Therefore, when Quentin notes that “you couldn’t call it a period because as [Sutpen] remembered it . . . it didn’t have either a definite beginning or a definite ending. Maybe attenuation is better” (*AA* 182), *attenuation* signifies the slippage, or the leakage, of time concurrent with transition into a form of social existence which demands the partial dissolution of the concrete (time of actual events) into the abstract (universalizing time of capital).

Another notable effect of Sutpen’s entrance into the space of plantation capitalism is the conflation of time with space: the passage of the former appears couched in the terms of the latter. On their way to Tidewater, the distortion of space indexes Sutpen’s inchoate awareness of his family’s newly “furious inertness and patient immobility” in class society (*AA* 182). Instead of framing the journey as human movement, he sees “the earth, the world, rising about them and flowing past as if the cart moved on a treadmill” (182). This spatial metaphor for time resonates with the spatialization of time under capital. Even more relevant to Sutpen’s later

experience in Haiti, it is this development that also instills the enslaved's increased capacity for resistance. Smith writes:

For slaves, clock time was important but . . . it was not internalized . . . Masters, however, had much earlier become enslaved by a power they themselves had helped create for the purposes of furthering their profits and their mastery. By 1860 they would have sympathized with Georg Lukács's assessment of the tyrannical nature of clock time in the twentieth century: "Through the subordination of man to the machine the situation arises in which men are effaced by their labor . . . Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most the incarnation of time." (qtd. in Smith 15)

Smith incorrectly cites Lukács here; the passage he finds in *History and Class Consciousness* (89) is a quotation of Karl Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* (127). Nevertheless, by involving Lukács, this error actually enhances Smith's claim regarding planters becoming "mastered" by the temporality they instituted; immediately after citing Marx here, Lukács goes on to argue: "Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' . . . in short, it becomes *space*" (*HCC* 90, my italics). In this crucial underpinning to his reification argument, Lukács gestures towards the exact relationship with time that, according to Smith, Sutpen would have developed through his roles as plantation overseer and planter.

As the overseer of a Haitian sugar plantation, therefore, Sutpen first becomes a *timekeeper*—the violence and brutality he visits upon the enslaved in order to extract surplus

value from their labor-time is also the enforcement of spatialized, abstract clock time. On the plantation, Sutpen functions as the agent of the very temporality which at first bewildered him in Tidewater. Recognizing that Sutpen manages the labor of the enslaved through the imposition of a spatial logic of time also determines his “design.” Thus, not only does “Sutpen’s end com[e] as a direct consequence of his obsessive White, male, linear patrilineality” (Abou-El-El 149), but the internalization of this temporality *qua* space is also a key aspect of his incomprehension of the radical temporality of the Haitian Revolution.¹¹

Black Radicality and Temporal Rupture

As Cedric Robinson contends, the Black radical tradition arises through the enslaved’s unique relationship to the past: “it was the materials constructed from a shared philosophy developed in the African past and transmitted as culture from which revolutionary consciousness was realized and the ideology of struggle formed” (309). Black conceptions of liberation, then, may be legible both as distinct from European abstract freedom and as concomitant with a revolutionary time consciousness rooted in African history and tradition. Moreover, this shared inheritance is honed through collective resistance to the material structures of slavery and

¹¹ Situating plantation temporality specifically in Tidewater also allows for the spatial foreshadowing of revolutionary time which Sutpen attempts to subdue in Haiti. In 1801, over a decade prior to Sutpen’s arrival in Tidewater, the area had experienced a slave uprising known as Prosser’s Rebellion. As historian Walter Johnson has shown, the leader of this revolt, Gabriel Prosser, took direct inspiration from the Haitian Revolution: “Gabriel in Virginia . . . imagined [his] own histor[y] as continuation of the revolution begun in Haiti” (212). This temporal current between the Haitian Revolution and slave revolution in Tidewater implicates the latter as a space where Sutpen first experiences plantation capitalist temporality in the aftermath of a revolution following in the tradition of Haiti. Before he has even set foot in Haiti, Sutpen is already walking through a landscape in which the radical time consciousness of Black emancipation has been repressed.

imperialism. Rather than reliant on an essential distinction between European linear time and African circular time, the temporality of the revolutionary African enslaved emerges out of the contradiction between the two.

The Haitian Revolution developed its own unique temporality through its interrogation of the central contradiction of the European Enlightenment: the ideal of freedom and the material reality of slavery. The enslaved in Haiti achieved human freedom and equality by working through this contradiction, and their revolution thus “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (Trouillot *SP* 73). The Haitian Revolution emerges as unthinkable due to the radicality with which it did what contradicted all dominant narratives of history: the African enslaved defeated the European colonizers and actualized the emancipatory content of Enlightenment thought.¹² This unthinkability would not only run parallel to the unfolding of events in Haiti between 1791 and 1804, but would also retain historiographical purchase for the centuries to come: “in most places outside of Haiti, more than a century after it happened, the revolution was still largely unthinkable history” (Trouillot *SP* 95). The antebellum South is undoubtedly one of the places in which a *successful* slave revolution remains unthinkable. Therefore, the Revolution retains its capacity to explode the equation of history with progress—the dominant historical narrative used to justify

¹² However, it is also important not to impose teleological narratives of the Haitian Revolution: “the shared accounts of time and history for which enslaved conspirators risked their lives and by which subsequent historians have measured their progress along the path from African to American were as much effects as they were causes of the process of revolt” (Johnson 212).

slavery—and thus, by extension, the linear “design” which Sutpen envisions for himself as an aspiring planter capitalist and slaveholder.

The Haitian Revolution takes on the status of a historical-temporal rupture because of its redemption of the oppressed past and its embodiment of universality. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, “human universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits” (133). Out of the particular radicality of the Haitian Revolution, itself a nonlinear form of struggle caught up in the African past, emerges a universality which was illegible to the most radical of Enlightenment thinkers.¹³ Not the abstract spirit, but the concrete reality of the Haitian Revolution is what secures universal emancipation: “Toussaint L’Ouverture’s constitution of 1801, without a doubt, took universal history to the farthest point of progress by extending the principle of Liberty to all residents regardless of race” (Buck-Morss 94). The racism against which the Haitian Revolution acts is the product of the inhuman system of slavery on which European imperialism depended. Therefore, it is fitting when Aimé Césaire asserts that “to study Saint-Domingue is to study one of the origins, the sources of Western civilization”(23). Césaire indicates that the universality of the Revolution *begins* civilization in the West insofar as it actually concretizes human equality in ways that the US American and French revolutions do not. Thus, this rupture is a beginning

¹³ Also important: embodying the universal does in no way guarantee the ultimate success of a struggle. Nothing about the Haitian Revolution was inevitable.

that has already happened—it lays bare the aporias immanent to Western civilization’s self-conception at the time of the revolution. Michel-Rolph Trouillot puts it succinctly: “the historical process is always messy, often enough contradictory. But what happened in Haiti also contradicted most of what the West has told both itself and others about itself” (*SP* 107).

Sutpen’s Retroactive (Non)Experience

Due to the Revolution’s contradiction of the historical narrative to which he subscribes, Haiti itself remains unthinkable for Sutpen even while he is actually there. The US would not officially recognize Haitian independence until 1862 (only once the South had seceded and the Civil War had begun), and thus it exists only as a hazy, indeterminate space for Sutpen in the 1820s, similar to the function of “West Virginia” as his birthplace—notably, however, Shreve does not interrupt to set this particular historical record straight. *Absalom*’s first indication of Sutpen’s exact location in the Caribbean lies in the phrase “besieged Haitian room” (*AA* 199), which implies a violent event already underway. Correspondingly, Sutpen initiates a narrative violence by “telling more of it . . . without telling how he got to where he was nor even how what he was now involved in came to occur” (198). The suddenness with which Sutpen launches into “it”—his story—causes Grandfather Compson great confusion. For him, the narrative arrives in Haiti at a temporal disjuncture between signifier and signified: “he said how Sutpen was talking about it again, telling him again before he realised that this was some more of it” (198). Retroactive

signification appears throughout the Haitian section of *Absalom, Absalom!*; indeed, it exemplifies Sutpen's (in)ability to experience what happens there.

Such lack of clarity does not prevent Grandfather Compson from theorizing the temporal violence of how Sutpen relates the beginning of the plantation uprising in Haiti, when the latter flees from the enslaved who "rushed at him with their machetes": "the getting from the fields into the barricaded house, seemed to have occurred with a sort of violent abrogation which must have been almost as short as his telling about it—a very condensation of time which was the gauge of its own violence" (AA 201). Compson here narrates a precise equivalence between the violence of the space Sutpen traverses between the Haitian sugar cane fields and the plantation house and the span of time which Sutpen allocates to tell him about it. Not only does this recall capitalism's transformation of time into space, but it also suggests Sutpen's inability to register the violence, or at least to tell about it. His fear emerges retroactively: "he was not afraid until after it was all over . . . because that was all it was to him—a spectacle, something to be watched because he might not have a chance to see such again . . . he did not even know that at first he was not terrified" (201). Sutpen's fear contradicts and betrays itself. At first, Sutpen seems to have not been afraid until the end of the revolution—"after it was all over"—because of his passive engagement with it as a "spectacle." Yet it is already clear that Sutpen *actively* engages in resistance to the uprising: "he was now involved in . . . crouching behind a window in the dark and firing the muskets through it" (198). Further, if he does not "at first" apprehend his *lack* of terror, then he must have been convinced of his fear at the time. This confusion, the

retrospective unthinkability of Sutpen's fear as synchronous with the slave revolution, denotes his actual trauma and concomitant inability to symbolically register both the event and its causality.

The cause of Sutpen's trauma is most apparent in the significance the smell of burning sugar cane has for him. When the enslaved commence their revolution, they set the sugar cane fields on fire. This act strongly resembles the historical initiation of the Haitian Revolution: in 1791, after the famous Bois Caïman ceremony, the Haitian enslaved burned all the sugar cane fields in the northern Le Cap region (Trouillot "Fire" 28). Accordingly, Sutpen conflates the horror presented by the unthinkability of the revolution with the smell of the burnt cane:

he said how you could smell it, you could smell nothing else, the rank sweet rich smell as if the hatred and the implacability, the thousand secret dark years which had created the hatred and implacability, had intensified the smell of the sugar: and Grandfather said how he remembered then that he had seen Sutpen each time decline sugar for his coffee and so he (Grandfather) knew why now but he asked anyway to be sure and Sutpen told him it was true; that he had not been afraid until after the fields and barns were all burned and they had even forgot about the smell of the burning sugar, but that he had never been able to bear sugar since. (*AA* 200-1)

The fact that Sutpen involuntarily rejects sugar betrays the primal fear that the experience has for him, of course, but his repeated claim to have "not been afraid until after" also underscores his inability to fully experience this event; that is, to symbolically register it. He only registers it

as a *sensory* event—it defies codification in language. Again, Sutpen’s fear of the revolutionary enslaved emerges retroactively: “he mentioned fear by the same inverse process of speaking of a time . . . before he became afraid” (201). Again, the historical rupture of the Haitian Revolution resists the linear narrative of progress to which Sutpen would like his attempt to enrich himself in the “West Indies” to adhere; instead, Black radical temporality, through its reach into the African past, which for Sutpen can only be understood as “the thousand secret dark years,” unsettles his white imperialist “innocence.”

Suppression, Repression, and Repetition

The stark simplicity with which Sutpen’s suppression of the revolution in Haiti is expressed stands out among *Absalom*’s famously intricate prose: “he put the musket down and went out and subdued them. That was how he told it: he went out and subdued them” (*AA* 204). In contrast to much of the narrative, this part of the story is clearly related as *linear* and *causal*. Within the narrative form in which this crucial information is presented, the possibility of Sutpen’s claim to white, patrilineal sovereignty resurfaces—the linear, causal form reveals precisely to what the content relates. Sutpen first puts down his gun, then he leaves the barricaded plantation house, and only then can he “subdue” the enslaved. The immense understatement of what must have been an exceptionally violent event further implies its non-experience, despite the fact that this erasure of the successful Black revolution reasserts the logic of whiteness and plantation capitalism. Trouillot explicates the fundamental contradiction of

this logic: “On the one hand, resistance and defiance did not exist, since to acknowledge them was to acknowledge the humanity of the enslaved. On the other hand, since resistance occurred, it was dealt with quite severely, within or around the plantations” (*SP* 83). The severity with which Sutpen suppresses the revolution is left completely ambiguous: “Not how he did it. He didn’t tell that either, that of no moment to the story either; he just put the musket down and had someone unbar the door and then bar it behind him, and walked out into the darkness and subdued them” (*AA* 204-5). The dual valence of “moment” here is worth considering further. The way in which Sutpen reverses history and prevents the revolution from spreading to other plantations is not “of moment,” it is not important to the story—and it is simply not of a moment, it cannot be reconciled to the revolutionary temporality contained within the point of historical rupture. The oppressed past lives on in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but it does so in forms (like the “shadowy” presence of Charles Bon) that haunt and ultimately destroy Sutpen and his family. Therefore, in order to tell the story of this haunting, Black radicality is repressed—but it is nevertheless represented in the ways it manages to return repeatedly.

The description of the plantation after Sutpen has put down the revolution foregrounds this repetition: “and then daylight came with no drums in it for the first time in eight days” (*AA* 205). This attention to the lack of drums indicates the absence of Black revolution; earlier, Grandfather Compson claims that as a plantation overseer Sutpen was “hearing the air tremble and throb at night with the drums and the chanting and not knowing that it was the heart of the earth itself he heard” (202). In a perspicacious reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* alongside

memoirs of the US Marines occupying Haiti in the 20th century, Michael Kreyling notes that “like the scent of burning sugarcane that becomes for Sutpen . . . the olfactory metaphor for the ultimately unsubduable chaos of Haiti—rhythms eventually bring [US Marine John H.] Craige . . . to the point of exhaustion. Drums are omnipresent in Craige’s consciousness” (130). Just as for this actual agent of U. S. imperialism in Haiti, drums are also omnipresent for Sutpen—the aural equivalent of the “olfactory metaphor” for Black radical agency. However, Vodou drums are also more than just symbols of Haiti and the grounding of its revolutionary tradition in the African past; they are also aural manifestations of *repetition*. As such, they represent the recurrence of the repressed Black radicality mediated by the narrative. Therefore, if Sutpen unconsciously (in the Lacanian sense of knowledge that does not know itself) hears in the drums the “heart of the earth,” the expression of universality which emerges through the particular struggle of the Haitian Revolution, the silence of the drums after he has “subdued” the revolutionaries still does not entail the permanent silence of the revolution.

Perhaps with this in mind, Quentin’s notion of temporality—“Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks” (*AA* 210)—signifies anew. Quentin speculates here that Southern history, or, more precisely, telling the story of the South, involves not only the possibility of events repeating, but also their accretions and attenuations of meaning. Telling Sutpen’s story spreads its significance such that the narrators themselves—Jason Compson, Quentin, and Shreve—become “Sutpen’s children,” or the ripples to his pebble; therefore, “maybe [it has taken]

Thomas Sutpen to make all of us” (210). However, while the notion that “happen is never once” conveys the repetition of events, the preceding claim that “nothing ever happens once and is finished” also implies the continuity of “nothings” or *non-events*: those events which remain unthinkable and irreconcilable to the symbolic order. This difference is not negligible, and it expands upon the usual Freudian readings of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Faulkner’s oeuvre more generally.¹⁴ As Alenka Zupančič points out, for Freud “what we find at the origin of repetition is a repression of a traumatic event” (107). However, Zupančič, following Ray Brassier, argues for a key complication: “what the compulsion to repeat repeats is not some traumatic and hence repressed experience, but something which *could never register as an experience to begin with*. The trauma which is being repeated is outside the horizon of experience (and is, rather, constitutive of it)” (107). Sutpen’s trauma ensues from the radicality of the revolution which he cannot symbolically register: the Haitian Revolution is his (and the novel’s) aboriginal non-event. The narrative therefore mediates this non-event as an absence, an actual historical erasure.

On the other hand, the repeated fights which Sutpen orchestrates between himself and the enslaved men on his plantation bind the excess generated by this trauma. Through these exhibitions, Sutpen attempts to spectacularly subjugate, and thereby access, the enjoyment of the Black Haitian other: “on certain occasions, perhaps at the end of the evening, the spectacle, as a grand finale or perhaps as a matter of sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of

¹⁴ John T. Irwin’s *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* is the exemplar of such a reading.

supremacy, domination, he would enter the ring with one of the negroes himself” (AA 21). This “retention of supremacy” is sheer illusion—if one of the enslaved were to actually defeat Sutpen, he would surely have them killed. Its purpose is purely symbolic. Richard Godden suggests that Sutpen’s “fights with Haitian slaves embody his recognition that slavery rests on a continuous repression of revolution” (692). Indeed, “the fights . . . mark the return and control of repressed materials” (699). However, Sutpen cannot “control” this material in perpetuity; this “continuous repression” of revolution ostensibly restores linear historical progress—the labor of the enslaved is what Sutpen tries to erect his dynasty upon—but this historical linearity also “cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin 205).

A Historical Vacuum

The homogeneity of time in the space of the U. S. South strikes Shreve as he listens to Quentin. Towards the end of their attempted reconstruction of Sutpen’s story, a frustrated Shreve declares his continued incomprehension of the South and its temporality:

We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the n—s that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and

son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children's children produce children you wont be anything but a descendent of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas?' 'Gettysburg,' Quentin said. 'You cant understand it. You have to be born there.'

(AA 289)

Quentin once more staves off the Real of historiography—like the “All right” with which he responds to the West Virginia correction, the dismissal of Shreve’s understanding guards the contradictions of Southern history by maintaining their obscurity for the uninitiated outsider. Granting congruence to *select* history—placing the right Confederate general at the right battle—covers over the bare incongruence between the brutality of slavery and the romantic “lost cause” fantasy of white gentility.¹⁵ It is the latter “history” that Shreve finds the South intent on never forgetting. Remembering history in this way ensures that the South’s history is not that of the Black oppressed; rather, it preserves itself through the tragic narcissism of *the defeated* whites. Shreve’s parenthetical, his ironic reversal of white Southerners as free in contrast to defeated Black people, hints at this distinction: the material reality of the South inheres in the continued dispossession, disenfranchisement, and violent *oppression* of Black people that continues after the Civil War. However, the fixation on “defeated grandfathers” effaces that past and present oppression such that the latter becomes indistinguishable from the former. The

¹⁵ It is often pointed out that the paradigmatic text of new plantation fiction, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, was published in the same year (1936) as *Absalom, Absalom!*

white South tells itself about those “happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago” in order to maintain its reactionary past as the present because the contradictions of slavery are constitutive of that ideological fantasy of “pride and glory” to which the South still clings. That this temporal collapse between past and present evokes for Shreve a “kind of vacuum” further attests to its homogeneity. Retelling the counterrevolutionary (hi)story of the South disavows the reality of Black self-emancipation, that historical reality of both the Civil War and the Haitian Revolution.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Haitian enslaved whom Sutpen repeatedly “subdues” ultimately emancipate themselves: “all of Sutpen’s negroes had deserted also to follow the Yankee troops away” (*AA* 67), and “the negroes . . . had followed the first Yankee troops to pass through Jefferson” (99). Despite their understatement and disregard for the autonomy of Black people—the enslaved merely “follow” the Union army in this account—these passages recall the famous claim of W. E. B. Du Bois: “Nothing else made emancipation possible in the United States . . . but the record of the Negro soldier as a fighter” (*BR* 104). Further, the history of the Civil War as Black revolution has been obscured by “one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings” (Du Bois *BR* 727), a silencing similar to that of Haiti: “the revolution that was thought impossible by its contemporaries has also been silenced by historians” (Trouillot *SP* 96).

The Haitian Revolution and Messianic Time

Faulkner was always preoccupied with the intransigent temporal experience of history in the South; indeed, the lines from which Faulkner scholars can seemingly never escape best encapsulate this stasis: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (*IV* 535). This famous quote contrasts most productively with Walter Benjamin’s conception of Messianic time in “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Unlike the South’s inability to redeem the past, Benjamin’s “now-time” of revolution both reaches into the past and emerges from it to “blast open the continuum of history” (207). These words on the nonlinear character of revolution resonate with C. L. R. James’s description of Haiti: “the ceaseless slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption” (x). In *Absalom*, however, the temporal rupture of the historical Haitian Revolution has been sublated into the work as an absence constitutive of the narrative of Thomas Sutpen—his imperial “innocence” prevents him from “knowing that what he rode upon was a volcano” (*AA* 202). Nevertheless, this knowledge becomes manifest in the novel by following Benjamin’s charge to “brush history against the grain” (200). Paul Gilroy gestures towards this Benjaminian task when claiming that “the time has come for the primal history of modernity to be reconstructed from the slaves’ points of view” (55). Reading *Absalom* from the point of view of the enslaved, brushing Sutpen’s history against the grain, not only unveils the latent content of the novel, but also reveals how the narrative form itself mediates the contingency and radical instability of history in the text. In other words, history remains radically open and subject to rupture. As James says, “history does move. The thing is to see it” (qtd. in Grimshaw 147).

Indeed, Faulkner's narrative suggests that Sutpen overlooks the very "planting" of the Haitian Revolution: "the planting of men too: the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance" (*AA* 202). In this vivid image of the afterlife of slavery's injustices, the incipient universal radicality of the Haitian enslaved has and will become the rupture, the revolutionary consciousness that breaks open the homogenous clock time of capitalism—the time which appears in forms of abstraction and linearity in *Absalom*. Moreover, *Absalom*'s planting metaphor evokes Toussaint L'Ouverture's parting words to the French counterrevolutionaries: "In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep" (James 334). Reading *Absalom, Absalom!*'s representation of the U.S. South against the non-representation of self-emancipated Haiti proves that the former, unlike the latter, has not yet realized that its "past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption" (Benjamin 197). The South thus experiences time and history as what might be termed a "persistence of happening"—the Faulknerian ethos of both "happen is never once" and "The past is never dead." This atavistic continuum sits opposite Benjamin's "Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (207)—the temporal rupture of the Haitian Revolution.

The various narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!* try and fail to piece together the story of Thomas Sutpen because a revolutionary rupture continues to be unthinkable—the narrative

fails to signify Black emancipation. Sutpen's myth relies on the abstract time of plantation capitalism, the suppression of Black revolutionary time, and the homogenous "vacuum" of Southern time—but the narrative scaffolding of these elements ultimately fails, problematizing linear progress. The novel's vast and tangled narrative reflects this particular failure. "Deferred revelation," Edouard Glissant writes, "is the source of [Faulkner's] technique" (9). *Absalom's* technique, insofar as time and history are concerned, emerges from deferred *revolution*.

2 'the little lost island': Space and Imperialism

The failure to represent the Haitian Revolution in *Absalom, Absalom!* also generates an ideological distortion of historical space which is consequent with the repression of this revolution's temporal rupture. The novel renders the space of Haiti in ways which evoke the actual historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism contemporary to its French colonization and anachronistic to the 1820s, thereby intermingling the historical and ideological spaces in which Thomas Sutpen's rise as a plantation capitalist takes place.¹⁶ The depiction of Haitian space in Faulkner's novel is also symptomatic of the same objective conditions under capitalist modernity which determined the representations of colonial and imperialized spaces in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*: the European and US imperial interventions abroad contemporary to the production of these works. These same conditions also betray the impossibility of conceiving social totality under such a modern world-system. Nevertheless, the Haitian Revolution, as an event embodying the enslaved's grasp of historical totality, continues to inform Faulkner's text through its absence.

¹⁶ In this essay, I understand *imperialism* with Edward Said as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (9), but ground this understanding in the material basis for the practice itself: capitalist accumulation. I thus try to avoid the "main problem" which the Warwick Research Collective identify in Said's work: he "presents imperialism as a *political* dispensation rather than as a *process of accumulation on a world scale*" (31). I also find the terms "core" and "periphery" more useful than "metropolitan center" and "distant territory" because of their ability to simultaneously include and supersede nation-state relations, and because of their spatial analogy to the combined unevenness of capitalist development.

Hosam Aboul-Ela has found the significance of space vis-à-vis time in *Absalom* “another means of subverting the unity of a monolithic temporal line of history, and the geohistorical inequalities that determine the true nature of relationships between spaces play a heightened role” (136). However, he also claims that the narrative bears a spatial relation to history itself: “political history and political economy infiltrate the narrative through glancing but repeated references that often play determinative roles at the margins” (136). I would suggest instead that history does not in fact “infiltrate” the narrative. History is not something external to the narrative, but is rather already present in, mediated by, and constitutive of the textual object. It is by immanently working through the object that history becomes objectivized. Aboul-Ela is conscious of Haiti’s contradictory presence via the Haitian Revolution’s absence, but he characterizes the narrative’s mediation of this particular space as between the novel and history, rather than within the textual object: “Not only is the description of what happens in Haiti brief and vague, but the novel continually refers to its incompleteness . . . The space of the West Indies hovers above the reconstructed narrative, supplying a cohesion that temporality cannot” (148). Rather than something “hovering above,” *Absalom*’s depiction of Haitian space is an ineluctable aspect of the incomplete center of the Sutpen narrative, which is of course the absent center of the novel itself.

Plantation Space and Haiti

Sutpen begins telling Grandfather Compson “more of it, already into what he was telling yet still without telling how he got to where he was nor even how what he was now involved in . . . came to occur” (AA 198). The ellipsis here elides a parenthetical statement which compensates for the stated lack of information provided by Sutpen, which it accomplishes by relating scattered details about the situation in which Sutpen is “involved.” These details provide the very first glimpse of Sutpen in *Haitian* space, though it is not yet identified as such: “(obviously at least twenty years old now, crouching behind a window in the dark and firing the muskets through it which someone else loaded and handed to him)” (198). This image serves first to evoke an indeterminate (though presumably “West Indian”) space in which Sutpen has matured into an adult of twenty, and in which he is now engaged in a conflict against an unseen, unseeable enemy alongside “someone else” who provides him with weapons. This space is marked only by the liminal space of the window—all else is dark. This initial tension between whether Sutpen is inside or outside the building in which the window must exist recalls Sutpen’s traumatic episode when as an indigent child he is told by a Black butler to remain *outside* the Tidewater plantation house—Sutpen himself consciously calls attention to how his “design” to become a rich planter begins as a result of this symbolic relegation to the exterior: “now he would take that boy where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it: and not at all for mere shelter but so that that boy . . . could shut that door himself forever behind him on all he had ever known” (210). However, here the tension between inside and outside is finally resolved when that space first becomes *Haitian*. Through the act of narration,

Sutpen is “getting himself and Grandfather both into that besieged Haitian room” (198-99). The preposition *into* and the participle *besieged* signify together that Sutpen and Compson are within the structure rather than outside of it—they have traveled again to this space via the narrative. The structural significance of the room becomes clearer when the sentence later clarifies that as “overseer or foreman or something to a French sugar planter, [Sutpen] was barricade in the house with the planter’s family” (199). The window, room, and house are thus structural components of what is finally revealed to be a *plantation*. The narrative unfolds retroactively into the plantation; that is, the sentence’s form “backs” Sutpen into a space that emerges first as the site of a window which separates two battling factions, then as a *Haitian* edifice implied by its room, and lastly as the plantation house in which a French family (if not Sutpen) presumably lives and now fights. Sutpen’s situation in Haiti, as the initiation of his “design,” functions as the first narrative negation of his childhood rejection by the plantation, the attempted reversal of this loss. Through his defense of the planter’s family, prior to and concomitant with his suppression of the revolution, Sutpen first begins to operate from within the structure of the plantation.

Sutpen’s position inside the plantation house and his active defense of it thus allies him with property, which in turn confirms his whiteness. While as a poor white in Virginia he could not enter the front door of the Tidewater plantation house, as an overseer in Haiti he not only has access to the house, he fights on behalf of its symbolic authority. Because of his alliance with property, the entirety of the space which he traverses in his work as the French plantation

overseer still eludes his comprehension. Sutpen does not perceive the imminence of the revolution on the plantation—he remains “innocent” of the enslaved’s capacity for resistance and desire for emancipation. His initial understanding of the profit to be had in Caribbean space continues to inform and *limit* the extent to which Haiti functions as anything more than a site abroad from which value can be extracted.

The Ideological Mapping of Haiti

Sutpen claims to never have even learned the geographic location of the “West Indies” prior to going there; rather, what stirs his ambitions is learning “that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn’t matter how, so long as that man was clever and courageous” (*AA* 195).¹⁷ Within the ideological heft of individual bootstrapping determination, this vision of imperialist extractionism clearly denotes that the ethics involved in accumulation do not objectively “matter”—the imperial subject need only be “clever and courageous” irrespective of the social consequences of their actions. Moreover, the “poor men in ships” involved are implicitly racialized; once again, whiteness and purported *access* to property are ideologically aligned and defined against the determination of Blackness by the appropriation of the Black body as property via enslavement. Eric Williams describes this

¹⁷ As Aboul-Ela has also pointed out (153), Sutpen’s knowledge accords perfectly with C. L. R. James’s description of the opportunistic “small whites” that flocked to Saint-Domingue: “From the underworld of two continents they came, Frenchman and Spaniards, Maltese, Italians, Portuguese and Americans. For whatever a man’s origin, record or character, here his white skin made him a person of quality and rejected or failures in their own country flocked to San Domingo, where consideration was achieved at so cheap a price, money flowed and opportunities of debauchery abounded” (33). It is almost as if James were theorizing an “international Sutpen” here.

relation succinctly: “Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (4). Within the actual plantation economy, the “poor men in ships” very rarely became rich themselves—the men who owned the ships, the maritime bourgeoisie, merely enriched themselves further through the profits generated by the plantations on which they themselves rarely resided. The “poor men in ships” instead reaped the ideological wages of whiteness. All of these unconscious aspects of Sutpen’s knowledge of the West Indies are immersed in racial ideology and ultimately determined by the logic of capitalist accumulation. Sutpen’s formulation might then be revised as: “there was a place called the West Indies to which poor white men went in ships and in attempting to become rich by whatever means possible, they participated in, enforced, and profited from ruthlessly exploited the labor of the Black enslaved.”

When the topic of Sutpen’s limited knowledge of the West Indies is raised again later, Quentin interjects a parenthetical into the narrative: Grandfather Compson’s own interpretation of the idea of Haiti as “the place where money was to be had quick if you were courageous and shrewd” (AA 201). Compson first calls the signifier “shrewd” into question: “[Sutpen] did not mean shrewdness, Grandfather said. What he meant was unscrupulousness only he didn’t know that word because it would not have been in the book from which the school teacher read. Or maybe that was what he meant by courage, Grandfather said” (201). What in the earlier formulation had appeared as “clever and courageous” now becomes “courageous and shrewd” before Compson finally clarifies that *both* signifiers do not have the signifieds that Sutpen actually intends (or what Compson believes he should mean). Rather,

unscrupulousness might have substituted for either, thus signaling that the actual “skill” involved in capitalist accumulation within Haitian space is the unrestrained embrace of the violent exploitation of enslaved labor. However, Sutpen’s ignorance seemingly prevents him from knowing that he means unscrupulousness, just as he remains oblivious to the signs of revolution on the plantation and also to the fear this revolt engenders in him.¹⁸ Yet this ignorance, this “innocence,” which is ascribed to Sutpen almost as often as he seems to mention his famous “design,” is both the byproduct of and catalyst for the design insofar as it resembles an imperialist paradigm. As Matthews writes, Sutpen “overlooks what he oversees” (“Recalling” 253). Sutpen can remain strategically innocent of the consequences of the brutal system in which he participates by “not knowing that he was overseeing it” (*AA* 203).¹⁹ Therefore, in the narrative, “he did not even know that he had found the place where money was to be had quick” *because* he also must repress the knowledge he would have gained first-hand that “high mortality was concomitant with the money and the sheen on the dollars was not from gold but from blood” (*AA* 201-2). Compson’s words here unveil the relations of not only the French regime of plantation capitalism in Saint-Domingue but also of the entire colonialist and imperialist history in which the US is also complicit.

¹⁸ The retroactivity by which Sutpen experiences (and does not perceive) this fear stems from the trauma the Haitian Revolution produces as an unthinkable non-event which cannot be symbolically registered. See Chapter 1, pp. 19-21.

¹⁹ Wanda Raiford terms this specific form of Sutpen’s ignorance his “imperial innocence” (103).

This violence is explicitly mapped onto Haitian space through formal association: “not from gold but from blood—a spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself” (AA 202). In the lines that follow, Quentin relates Grandfather Compson’s description of Haiti as a “theatre” which, while “a little island set in a smiling and fury-lurked and incredible indigo sea,” contains an immense quotient of “violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty” (202). Whether a “spot of earth,” “theatre,” or “island,” Haiti is also a *fallen* space, a once-Edenic location symbolically and materially corrupted by the greed unleashed by the unrestrained exploitation and degradation of the enslaved in the interest of extraction and accumulation. Just as when Sutpen “had hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it” (180)—the spatial metaphor for his passage from pre-capitalist Appalachia into plantation capitalist Tidewater—Haiti has been “set aside by Heaven” and designated as a kind of hell on earth into which Sutpen now *chooses* to fall. By perpetuating this hell through “subduing” the slave revolution, he manages to emerge from this space with a wife and “property” (the enslaved he brings with him to Mississippi).²⁰ Fittingly, then, for a man whose ‘rise’ begins in a kind of “hell,” one of the prominent sobriquets for Sutpen throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* is “demon.” The very first direct identification of Sutpen in the novel is “man-horse-demon” and the accompanying “sulphur-reek” (4). “Demon” replaces the signifier “Sutpen” in numerous instances throughout *Absalom*, particularly when Rosa Coldfield

²⁰ See Chapter 1, p. 13 for a discussion of Sutpen’s “fall” between Appalachia and Tidewater.

narrates—although Shreve adopts it too, interrupting Quentin at times to identify “the demon” as the particular actant in question (181). Given the frequency with which Sutpen’s actions are thereby deemed demonic, it seems reasonable to conclude that it is his participation in the space defined by “satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty,” abstractions of the concrete abuses of the enslaved through which plantation capitalism in Haiti turns obscene profits, which first transform him into a “demon.”

Grandfather Compson relates the history of this obscenity through metaphor and abstraction which both rely uniformly on *space*. He first places the “little island” on an explicitly ideological map as “the halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization” (AA 202). The phrasal qualifier “what we call” seems to fetishistically disavow “the jungle” and “civilization” as ideologically contingent concepts. In acknowledging these two concepts this way, Compson proves to be aware of the key contradiction of which Sutpen is “innocent”: the violence in Haiti is the product of “civilization,” not the barbarism which the West maps onto places like indigenous spaces such as “the jungle.” Yet he characterizes Africa in ways which appeal to this ideology even as they tease the lie on which it is founded: “the dark inscrutable continent from which the black blood, the black bones and flesh and thinking and remembering and hopes and desires, was ravished by violence” (202). The darkness and inscrutability of Africa as a continent (and the essentialism of it as simply a continent, which erases an incredible diversity of social forms) embodies the way that European empires viewed

it in order to justify the violence they rendered upon it.²¹ Before mentioning this rapacity, however, Compson first identifies as Black the corporeality of African peoples (blood . . . bones and flesh) *and* subjectivity (thinking and remembering and hopes and desires). Therefore, when “ravished by violence” arrives, it is clear that this violence is a crime against Black human subjects, not barbaric and inferior “beasts.” The space in the sentence between the subject, Africa, and the phrase denoting the external violence which “ravishes” it allows for the latter to signify as the crime *against* Black people who are still more than their corporeality, more than the biological—even though racist ideology reduces them to this.²² *Still*, according humanity to the African enslaved does not prevent Compson from rendering them as the ontologically racialized Other: Black and unknowable.

Haiti thus functions in *Absalom* similarly to Conrad’s Africa in *Heart of Darkness*—as a space of the racial Other: an “ideologically-saturated [space] which to some intents and purposes [is] the imperialized place” (Said 67). In addition, *Absalom* does examine the material conditions involved in the aforementioned violence. As an elaboration of the earlier image of the bloody “sheen on the dollars,” the narrative reiterates the space of Haiti as a “little lost island” with “soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers and sugar

²¹ This characterization may also be read as an allusion to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

²² Frantz Fanon explicates this racist figuration clearly: “The black man represents the biological danger . . . for the black man is nothing but biological” (143).

cane sapling size and three times the height of a man” (AA 202). The natural beauty of Haiti here, in a neat reversal of the actual environmental devastation monocropping initiated, starkly contradicts the ugliness of the abuses which occurs there. The regal stature of the cane is inescapably the result of the obscene plantation system which exists to cultivate it: the cane is “valuable pound for pound almost with silver ore, as if nature held a balance and kept a book and offered a recompense for the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not” (202). Here the impersonal force of nature seems to provide the only semblance of justice in Haiti, a perspective which makes freshly obscene the slaveholders’ profit on sugar yields: they benefit directly from nature’s compensation for the violence enacted against the enslaved workers. The unmentioned direct agents of this violence, the planters and overseers, therefore clearly depend on the sugarcane’s exchange-value (indicated in the comparison of its value to silver ore) as opposed to its use-value (though the impressive proportions of the cane imply its material abundance). Indeed, the spatial arrangement of imperialism here assigns pure exchange-value to the sugar commodity in the colonial space in order to then situate most of its use-value among the colonizing powers in Europe, where the sugar is consumed. This makes *Absalom*’s Haiti an emphatically *capitalist* economic space, albeit one in which surplus value is ultimately extracted brutally from the labor-time of enslaved Africans, who are metonymized here as “torn limbs” and “outraged hearts.” This brief description thus maps precisely the relations of plantation capitalism.

Nevertheless, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is this very web of relations that has also produced, or “planted,” the resistance of the enslaved: “the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance” (AA 202). If, as Hughes Azérad claims, “close examination of the Haitian passages reveals a striking lucidity regarding the island’s ‘two hundred years of oppression and exploitation’” (172), this is because Faulkner manages to show through Compson’s narrative of history and ideology how the material practices of plantation capitalism in Haiti created the conditions in which the Haitian Revolution was perfectly logical for the enslaved, even as it remained unthinkable (or unseeable) for the imperialist powers. The obscenity of colonial profits and abuses are on full display, but Sutpen, by virtue of his position as plantation overseer, overlooks the violences in which he is fully complicit—he instead is “riding peacefully about . . . not knowing that what he rode upon was a volcano” (AA 202).²³ Concluding the summary of what Sutpen does not see in Haiti with the assertion that the blood of the dead cries for retribution against the oppressors *from within the earth* explicitly locates a revolutionary practice within a geographical and discursive space that is inaccessible to the white planter capitalists and their allies. However, in implying that *the revolution has yet to occur*, it absents the historical Haitian Revolution from that very space.

Imperialized Space(s)

²³ The metaphor which ties volcanic eruption to revolutionary rupture has already been examined in Chapter 1, p. 28, but I return to it here to now understand Haitian *space* as the volcano itself, the set of spatial inequalities coeval with imperialist relations out of which the possibility of the temporal disturbance of revolution emerges.

Haiti's spatial affordances within the narrative also relate to imperialist conceptions of social space, particularly when read alongside *Heart of Darkness*. Comparisons between this novel and *Absalom, Absalom!* do not constitute a new phenomenon, and Conrad himself is "among those few authors whose influence [Faulkner] would acknowledge" (Ross 199).²⁴ Benita Parry's reading of *Heart of Darkness* elucidates how the novel's registration of imperialist ideology simultaneously condemns its reality while accepting its premises, thus requiring a dialectical reading: "to proffer an interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* as a militant denunciation and a reluctant affirmation of imperialist civilisation, as a fiction that exposes and colludes in imperialism's mystifications, is to recognise its immanent contradictions" (39). Moreover, the narrative form of Conrad's novel, through its framing and layering, calls into question the act of narration itself in ways much like *Absalom, Absalom!*. Therefore, in reading the two novels together through the immanent contradictions present in each novel, imperialism's relation to social space and narrative space emerges through the ways in which Faulkner and Conrad respectively mediate it. For example: "For Marlow, Africa is the negation of his own humanly-dominated and dynamic social order, a domain where archaic energies are rampant" (Parry 32), a similar process to the one by which Compson situates Haiti as "the halfway point between

²⁴ Ross's article cites Richard P. Adams and Albert Guerard, among others. Joseph L. Blotner's seminal biography of Faulkner and Cleanth Brooks's critical oeuvre have also engaged this subject at length.

what we call the jungle and what we call civilization” (AA 202). Parry’s interpretative findings seem to apply to both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Heart of Darkness* more generally:

Because the fiction does not dramatise a political struggle between coloniser and colonised—indeed the human material for such a treatment is absent as the blacks are not functional protagonists but figures in a landscape who do not constitute a human presence—the confrontation between Europe and Africa is realised wholly as the conflict between two polarised and incompatible epistemologies, an encounter which displays the insufficiencies of positivism without endorsing metaphysics as an alternative” (33).

The similarity between the characters of both novels is what most critics usually seize upon, perhaps at the expense of the shared spatial dynamics.²⁵ There is no “outside” to imperialist ideology in either narrative through either set of narrators: “if we must . . . depend upon the assertive authority of the sort of power that Kurtz wields as a white man in the jungle or that Marlow, another white man, wields as narrator, there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable” (Said 24). However, extradiegetic attention to the positions of the authors themselves remains important. What Said claims about Conrad is equally true of Faulkner: “because Conrad also had an

²⁵ Echoing Cleanth Brooks, Michael Gorra makes the comparison between Sutpen and the former: “in his mixture of grandiloquence and greed Sutpen has more than a bit in common with the ruthless ivory-hunting Mr. Kurtz” (182). For Brooks’s own characterization of this comparison, see *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, Yale UP, 1963, p. 308.

extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality, he quite carefully . . . qualified Marlow's narrative with the provisionality that came from standing at the very juncture of this world with another, unspecified but different" (24). In other words, the author's peripheral position may allow them to register the extremity of the unevenness of capitalist modernization—for Faulkner on a national scale, while for Conrad on a world scale—even as they mediate this incongruity (and also racialize it) by setting their novels in peripheralized colonial spaces.²⁶

Especially given the relative contemporaneity of the US military occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), which officially concluded two years before the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner may also have seen in Haiti another space incorporated as peripheral by the US.²⁷ Indeed, Haiti's history is one of incessant peripheralization by core imperial powers—perhaps most famously by the enormous indemnity France extorted in 1825 as compensation for slaveholders' loss of property in the revolution. Later in the nineteenth century, however, US banks began to take on Haitian debt in order to secure claims to natural resources, such as timber. It was thus a financial interest in Haiti's political stability that gave the US government

²⁶ Conrad's uneasy identification as "English" and Faulkner's ambivalence towards his status as an "American" author respectively result from the spatial inequalities between Poland and Europe, and the US South within the US.

²⁷ Aboul-Ela makes convincing arguments in *Other South* for understanding Faulkner's impressions of the US South as a colonial space; utilizing the studies of historian C. Vann Woodward, Aboul-Ela points to "an ongoing transition from agriculture to industry as the foundation of the economy, widespread monopolization of Southern industry by Northern corporate magnates, and the emergence of a class of Southerners willing to do the bidding of the Northern corporate elite" (4).

an excuse to invade and occupy in order to further extract resources. The ideological justification for invasion revolved around the idea that a paternalist and “civilizing” invention was necessary to save the Haitians from their own political incompetence and social backwardness, both of which were thoroughly racialized. Depictions of Haiti as a cultural backwater, an African nation displaced in the Caribbean, continued to develop alongside the actual military occupation by US marines, many of whom came from the US South.²⁸ In response, the Haitians drew on their revolutionary tradition to resist the Marines, especially the forced labor *corvée* system which the US attempted to impose. The Caco Rebellion, led by Charlemagne Pèralte, fought against all such forms that resembled the relations of slavery and pushed the US troops to the brink before eventual defeat in 1919. It therefore seems possible for Faulkner to have sensed that Haiti, as a peripheral space where the Black oppressed struggled against their white, and often Southern, oppressors, might be particularly relevant to a novel about the contradictions and impossibilities of Southern history.

Mary Renda’s seminal study of the US occupation of Haiti contends that during this time “U.S. Americans who presided over, visited, or read about Haiti found opportunities to reimagine their own nation and their own lives as they appeared to be reflected by and refracted through Haitian history and culture” (20). The occupation, by integrating Haiti as a US imperial subject but maintaining its racial and cultural otherness, allowed for depictions of

²⁸ Such Marines were recruited specifically because they were presumed to know how “to control the black population” (Dubois *Haiti* 226).

Haitians *in a foreign Haitian space* that could lend white characters coherent identity through (mis)representations of what Toni Morrison would call “the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others” (25). Indeed, literary and artistic representation of Haiti exoticized it specifically to “incorporate the foreign into American culture, while at the same time inscribing its marginality and otherness” (Renda 22).

The historical proximity of Faulkner’s creation of *Absalom, Absalom!* to the occupation of Haiti leads Elizabeth Steeby to read Sutpen as a “U.S. marine, an ambassador of U.S. military and culture, who looks to Haiti to provide resources and raw materials in the service of U.S. empire-building” (152).²⁹ In a complementary reading, Michael Kreyling, noting a resonance between occupying US Marine John H. Craige’s memoir *Black Baghdad* and *Absalom*, finds that “in the context of U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean in the 1930s, Sutpen’s racism seems as contemporary to the first third of the twentieth century as it does to the antebellum South” (131). Kreyling also makes a related claim that is worth quoting at length as an expression of the general critical consensus on Faulkner and the Haitian occupation:

If it may be argued that much of Sutpen’s context as a fictional character is contemporary to the occupation (rather than retrospective, dredged up from a southern collective memory of plantation mastering), then the charge that Faulkner erred in

²⁹ See Leigh Ann Duck, “From Colony to Empire: Postmodern Faulkner” in *Global Faulkner*, pp. 24-42, for an adjacent suggestion: Sutpen’s experience resembles that of Faustin Wirkus, “the Marine who had reportedly been crowned king,” in William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island*, perhaps the most influential literary sensationalist account of Haiti contemporary to the US occupation.

dating the Haitian revolution could be reduced. We could say that Faulkner did not have to remember Haiti correctly or in the historical order; he was saturated in the full paradigm of the Haiti of the symbolic. (130)

In this formulation, Kreyling correctly identifies the ideological basis of Faulkner's Haiti, a relation similar to that which Said maps between Conrad and the Africa of *Heart of Darkness*. However, he underestimates the degree to which Faulkner's error is still primarily about *the Haitian Revolution*. If Faulkner's depiction of Haiti simply relied on racist caricature and "Voodoo," and if it were a place through which Sutpen simply passes, Kreyling would be right about the paradigm he proposes. But Sutpen does not just pass through Haiti; rather, his suppression of the slave revolution in Haiti is specifically what *constitutes* his rise (and fall), and thus his narrative. In order for Sutpen to suppress this diegetic revolution, Faulkner has to repress the historical Haitian Revolution. In other words, the Haiti of *Absalom, Absalom!* is still essentially a *revolutionary space*, a space where the Haitian Revolution is erased but remains as a kind of palimpsest through the narrated resistance of the enslaved to the white imperialists. Furthermore, during the occupation the armed resistance of the Cacos to the US Marines often appeared in the news as such—and the Cacos often explicitly drew on the traditions of the Haitian Revolution.³⁰ The relation between this contemporary struggle and the Haitian

³⁰ "The Cacos who confronted [US] forces sought to draw on Haitian military traditions that stretched back to the slave insurrection of 1791. Like Haiti's original rebels, they avoided open and direct engagements with the superior firepower of their opponents, opting instead for guerilla warfare" (Dubois *Haiti* 229).

Revolution is the means by which the occupation context impacts Faulkner. On one hand, as Barbara Ladd glosses: “there is little doubt that Faulkner wrote *Absalom* out of a deep familiarity with the political and cultural situation in New Orleans and in Haiti, especially as it was perceived by and important to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century southerners” (142); yet, on the other hand, Faulkner does not *only* replicate a received ideological idea of Haiti as a backward and primitive space; rather, he mediates it through the layered narrative of the novel as the product of an imperialist intervention in which both he and the US South are implicated, and as a space of incipient, if not perpetual, revolution.

The Haitian Theatre

It is difficult to discern what Faulkner actually read or engaged with, and thus a challenge to document his presumed familiarity with Haiti. Beyond identifying the influence of Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*, critics have generally not connected the Haiti of *Absalom, Absalom!* to other depictions of imperialized space with which it might be in dialogue. However, there is one cultural representation of Haiti with which Faulkner must have been familiar: Eugene O’Neill’s 1920 play *The Emperor Jones*. Faulkner’s knowledge of this play is certain for the simple fact that he wrote about it: the young, as yet unknown Faulkner mentions the play in a 1922 essay entitled “American Drama: Eugene O’Neill.” To begin the piece, Faulkner notes two exceptions to the provinciality of artistic production: Conrad and O’Neill. Claiming that both are “anomalies” in this regard, he finds that Conrad “has overturned all literary tradition in this point” before

averring that O'Neill "though young as he is . . . is already a quantity to make one wonder" (86).³¹ Faulkner's admiration for the singularity of Conrad and O'Neill's work attests to his familiarity with their respective challenges to periodization—neither strictly adheres to conventions of realism, naturalism, modernism—and also suggests that he might admire their appropriations of colonial contexts as a means of avoiding narrow provincialism. He above all finds the form of their writing powerful: "[what] made the 'Emperor Jones' rise up and swagger in his egoism and cruelty, and die at last through his own hereditary fears . . . [is] clarity and simplicity of plot and language" (88). This summary of Brutus Jones' rise and fall could apply equally to Sutpen's own trajectory—both are opportunists who in Haitian-coded spaces are able to advance their material interests and statuses, but whose respective empires disintegrate through the ideological foreclosure of succession. Both O'Neill's play and Faulkner's novel could be characterized in the way Renda does the former: "a dramatic representation of the consequences of one man's imperial grab for power in the Caribbean" (187). The most crucial difference between the protagonists of the two works is that of race—Jones is Black and Sutpen is white—while their narrative methods are disparate: *Absalom* has likely never been said to possess "clarity and simplicity of plot and language."

The plot of *The Emperor Jones* centers on an African American man named Brutus Jones, an escaped convict who, by claiming to be exclusively vulnerable to silver bullets, has

³¹ O'Neill was Faulkner's senior by nearly nine years.

become the emperor of a Caribbean island. The play chiefly portrays the events which ensue from when Jones, sensing an imminent coup against him, flees from his palace and undergoes progressively worsening hallucinations that evoke the nightmarish “exotic primitivism” of the Haitian setting. The signifier “Haiti” is absent from the play itself. However, as Renda points out, O’Neill’s prefatory note to *The Emperor Jones* draws directly from James Wheldon Johnson’s ironic title for his critical 1920 essay on the US occupation of Haiti: “Self-Determining Haiti” (198). The note reads: “The action of the play takes place on an island in the West Indies as yet not self-determined by White Marines. The form of native government is, for the time being, an Empire” (O’Neill 3). This reference along with the playwright’s extensive studies of Haitian history when writing the play documents the certainty that O’Neill had Haiti in mind as the setting of *The Emperor Jones*.

Through Brutus Jones, O’Neill calls into question the stability of US American identity as such. While racialized unambiguously as a “full-blooded negro,” Jones is also identified “with American frontier masculinity” (Renda 204). As Faulkner writes, Jones is full of “swagger in his egoism,” performing a version of the archetypal white American opportunist, lying his way into becoming Emperor. Like the prefatory note which ironically allows White Marines to “self-determine” a foreign country, the equation of an African American character with “self-reliant frontiersmen . . . opened up the troubling question, Who and what is an American?” (Renda

206).³² In fact, Faulkner’s positioning of these character traits—Jones’s bravado, ruthlessness, and self-reliance—in the white figure of Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* functions as an imaginary resolution to this specific contradiction.

Yet along with the elements which critique (racialized) national identity, imperialism, and capitalism, *The Emperor Jones* also participates in an exoticism of Haitian space, thereby colluding in similar imperialist mystifications to the ones Parry points out in *Heart of Darkness*. The immanent contradictions of the text are coeval with the tension here between critique and condonation. O’Neill presents the native people of the “West Indian island” as primitive dupes of Jones who exemplify a “barbaric” culture: spears, chanting, drums, and depictions of witchcraft are utilized throughout. Faulkner may have drawn inspiration from these exoticizing elements of the play—for example, the following stage direction: “From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts at a rate exactly corresponding to normal pulse beat—72 to the minute—and continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point uninterrupted to the very end of the play” (22). O’Neill here figures the drum as an aural symbol of the native people in pursuit of Jones and also as a heartbeat. The same conceit appears in *Absalom* when Sutpen is “hearing the air tremble and throb at night with the drums . . . not knowing that it was the heart of the earth itself he heard” (202). For both Faulkner and

³² Moreover, the play critiques the contradictions of capitalism which had been (and still are) severely racialized in the US: “For de little stealin’ dey gits you jail soon or late. For de big stealin’ dey makes you Emperor and puts you de Hall o’ Fame when you croaks . . . If dey’s one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca’s listenin’ to de white quality talk, it’s dat same fact” (O’Neill 13). The incarceration of Black people for minor offenses and systemic sanction of white-collar *white* offenders—it sounds all too familiar.

O'Neill, then, the drum functions as a metaphor for indigenous resistance, designating such resistance primitive and symbolically African even as it evokes the pivotal function of the Vodou tradition for the Haitian Revolution.³³

The Emperor Jones is a play that Renda regards as paradigmatic of how, during the US military occupation, Haiti became “an object of cultural fascination—indeed, an object of desire, a valuable commodity” (185). US imperialist intervention in Haiti had rendered it even more available for appropriation as a *space* in which US Americans could negotiate the discursive uncertainties of race and national identity. Said, paraphrasing the Haitian critic J. Michael Dash, historicizes the spatial dynamic of this ideological affordance: “almost from the moment Haiti gained its independence as a Black republic in 1803 Americans tended to imagine it as a void into which they could pour their own ideas . . . [thus] the island and its people came to represent degeneracy and of course racial inferiority” (289). The Haitian occupation’s coincidence with the rise of mass culture in modernity simply allowed the “pouring” and dissemination of these ideas to exponentially increase. *The Emperor Jones*, however, is more nuanced than the typical (mis)representation of Haiti: much like *Heart of Darkness* and *Absalom, Absalom!* it is “a complex and contradictory text . . . [that] conveyed a radical critique of imperialism as economic

³³ Drums serve for Sutpen as a metaphor for the repeated repression required to stave off this resistance; see Chapter 1, pp. 23-24. The role of Vodou in the Haitian Revolution is complex, but it served to facilitate communication among the enslaved as well as a syncretic cultural form through which people from many different African religious and cultural traditions could find solidarity. Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes: “In the whirlwind of Saint-Domingue, Vodou helped the class of slaves in two ways: it gave them more conviction to fight [and] it allowed them to organize themselves” (“Fire” 30).

exploitation even as it participated in the discourses of civilization and exotic primitivism” (Renda 187).

Sutpen, Faulkner, and Spaces of Capitalist Development

However, suggesting direct causality between works, much less a semi-linear trajectory of influence through *Heart of Darkness*, *The Emperor Jones*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* may be a tendentious maneuver insofar as the tracing of influence can mystify the *objective conditions* in which Conrad, O’Neill, and Faulkner worked out the correspondence of their spatial projections and narrative mediations to actual manifestations of imperialism. As Fredric Jameson writes of the comparison he draws between the work of Conrad and Sartre: “the superficial similarity . . . ought to direct our attention first to the similarity of the social situations and historical conditions in which, as symbolic gestures, they are meaningful” (259). Indeed, Faulkner finds in Haiti a means by which to spatialize the relations of plantation capitalism and source the rise of Sutpen there in order to represent an immanent development within the capitalist mode of production—the transition from mercantilism to industrialism—which in turn serves as allegory for the economic upheavals Faulkner himself experienced from in his own lifetime.

The movement from mercantilism to industrialism is itself metonymized in the distinct crops grown on the plantations to which Sutpen lays claim in Haiti and Mississippi, respectively. In Haiti, *sugar* is absurdly profitable—“valuable pound for pound almost with silver ore” (*AA*

202)—but the colonizing power claims absolute right to these profits: “The French, like every other Government in those days, looked upon colonies as existing exclusively for the profit of the metropolis. Known as the Mercantile system in English, the French called this economic tyranny by a more honest name, the Exclusive” (James 46). The French bourgeoisie, whose profits on sugar were limited by such regulation, of course resented the Exclusive, and when the French Revolution eventually devolved into Bonapartism and the bourgeoisie secured power for themselves, they abolished it in favor of free trade. By then, however, the Haitian Revolution was already well underway, and France lost their primary sugar-producing colony. Nevertheless, the rise of the bourgeoisie throughout Europe in the Age of Revolution spelled mercantilism’s doom: industrialism was emerging. The sugar plantation in Haiti where Sutpen works as overseer for a French planter thus would have already been a relic of a different stage of capitalism by the 1820s, the decade in which Sutpen arrives there. However, given the presence of slavery (not to mention the French), it presumably functions as a colony beholden to the Exclusive. Yet when Sutpen abandons his wife, child, and holdings in Haiti and moves to Mississippi (1831-1833, according to *Absalom*’s “Chronology” on p. 305), he becomes a planter of *cotton*. Cotton, as Eric Williams writes, was “queen of the Industrial Revolution” and market capitalism (83-84). In the 1830s, Sutpen rejoins historical record in planting what would have been the most lucrative crop at the time, especially in Mississippi. What Faulkner does in the novel, then, is situate Sutpen in two spaces—Haiti and Mississippi—that appear (despite and because of historical record, respectively), through the relation of the crops grown there to the

stages of capitalist development implied in these spaces, to be the two most profitable places in the world to run a plantation.

In Mississippi, Sutpen becomes “the single biggest landowner and cotton-planter in the county” (AA 56). However, the profits of his plantation, Sutpen’s Hundred, are associated with the “wild” enslaved people he has brought with him to Jefferson. Rosa Coldfield notes when first mentioning the “man-horse-demon” that “wild n—s” accompany him, and the townspeople of Jefferson find the Haitian enslaved figures of preternatural menace (4). Ultimately, they theorize that it is the Haitians who bring about the profits of Sutpen’s Hundred by witchcraft (the allusion to Vodou here is practically unmissable): “[some people] believed apparently that the wild n—s which [Sutpen] had brought there had the power to actually conjure more cotton per acre from the soil than any tame one had ever done” (57). This power is directly attributed to the African space from which the enslaved must have come via Haiti: “anyone could look at those negroes of his and tell that they may have come (and probably did) from a much older country than Virginia or Carolina but it wasn’t a quiet one” (11). The terror which strikes the white citizens of Jefferson resonates with the abject fear that the white South had of Haiti after the revolution and is reflected in Rosa’s characterizations of the enslaved as “a good deal more deadly than any beast he could have started and slain in that country” (28), and “human beings . . . of whom it was believed (or said) that they could creep up to a bedded buck and cut its throat before it could move” (30). Moreover, this terror resembles closely the French planter’s reaction to the imminent revolution: “what he took to be the planter’s gallic rage was

actually fear, terror” (203). The success of Sutpen’s Hundred, by virtue of the presence and labor of Haitians as well as its own spatial relation to Jefferson as an “island” (79), is still caught up with the Sutpen’s experience in Haiti.

This success predicated on Sutpen’s movement from Haiti to Mississippi, which itself depends on the correspondence between plantation spaces and crops which metonymize the gains of mercantilism and industrialism, is the inverse image of the failure to which Faulkner was a contemporary witness in the US South. During the 1930s, from his vantage point in a peripheral region of the US, Faulkner lived through the Great Depression and registered the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and ensuing recession as the result of the increasing dissolution of “real” into “fictitious” capital rather than as the economic crises constitutive of capitalism.³⁴ He was thus aware of the shift within modernity of industrialism’s uneven movement from the core to the periphery, but perhaps more so of the upheaval in the labor relations of Southern agriculture caused by the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Program.³⁵ Faulkner most immediately registered the US South as a (semi-)periphery in which archaic economic and social forms antedating industrial capitalism persisted alongside modern forms. In Faulkner’s South,

³⁴ Aboul-Ela writes: “where in one generation [Faulkner’s] family had transitioned from landed gentry to banking, [he] then watched the South become increasingly urban and industrial, with economic development dependent on Northern investment . . . Faulkner seems to have internalized this historical phenomenon early in life, as a sort of class envy that manifested itself more in terms of spatial politics than in terms of traditional Marxist conceptions of social class. As a consequence, he connected elite power centers with his incessant personal indebtedness” (5).

³⁵ For an excellent gloss of this development, which effectively provided financial incentive for landowners to abandon their obligations to sharecroppers, see Richard Godden’s *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words* pp. 2-4.

sharecropping and oral storytelling practices prevailed at the same time as mass logging and New Critical literary movements (e.g. the Fugitives).³⁶ This South, as an economic periphery, simultaneously maintained its own residual relations and features along with the new “modern” ones generally imported from the core—the “traditional” becomes legible as such through the spatial inequalities within modernity. Flem Snopes in *The Hamlet* constitutes Faulkner’s primary representation of a class specific to the modern periphery, one which Aboul-Ela terms the *comprador*: this class “owns the means of production in a peripheral economy or occupies a prime location in trade relations but almost inevitably does not see its fortunes as tied to its local context” (70). In other words, the *comprador* maintains its status by funneling value from the periphery to the core.

Yet it is Jason Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) who prefigures Snopes as the typical subject of capitalist financialization. Jason, a man who steals from his niece in order to invest in the stock market, avers that “money has no value; it’s just the way you spend it” (*SF* 194). This fetishistic disavowal of course only enables Jason to continue to treat money as if it does have intrinsic value, a clear irony given his diegetic standpoint in 1928—one year prior to the Crash. It seems congruent, then, that his denunciation of US *imperialism* is also fetishistic.

³⁶ This school of writers, poets, and critics founded at Vanderbilt University included Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom. The Fugitives, also associated with the Southern Agrarians, advocated for resurgence in Southern art and literature, but were largely reactionary in their response to criticism of the South (see their manifesto “I’ll Take My Stand”). Faulkner famously did not see eye to eye with the Fugitives, even though they admired his work.

In the wake of floods which have destroyed the cotton crops in which he has vested interest, Jason exclaims: “Let it wash a man’s crop out of the ground year after year, and them up there in Washington spending fifty thousand dollars a day keeping an army in Nicaragua or some place” (234).³⁷ By denouncing imperialist presence abroad, Jason disavows his own investment in the US imperial intervention into foreign markets on which his financial speculations rely in the first place. Nevertheless, through Jason, Faulkner depicts the spatial inequalities of modernity here: the US government’s interest lie with the metropolitan core—metonymized by “New York,” the exchange on which Jason consistently loses the money he steals—and with their imperialist interventions in foreign states, not with the internal (semi-)peripheries like Mississippi. Moreover, Jason’s exasperation with the cost of “an army in Nicaragua,” also mediates an inability to conceive of *totality*.

Imperialism, Reification, and Totality

Imperialism itself may be understood as an ideological solution, or what Jameson calls a “strategy of containment” (53), to the problem of social totality. As an organizational method, imperialism constitutes a false “whole”—a world of empires—insofar as it reifies nation-states and the relations between nation-states in order to make the capitalist world-system appear internally coherent and objectively complete. This world-system, as a false totality, provides the

³⁷ The US did indeed occupy Nicaragua—from 1909 to 1933—roughly around the same span of time as the occupation of Haiti. Jason could well have bemoaned the cost of keeping Marines in the latter.

ideological limits to narrative that Said senses in *Heart of Darkness*: “the almost oppressive force of Marlow’s narrative leaves us with a quite accurate sense that there is no way out of the sovereign historical force of imperialism, and that it has the power of a system representing as well as speaking for everything within its dominion” (24). The idea of “no way out” relies on the constant repression of capital’s constitutive contradictions, like the combined unevenness that capitalism produces rather than smooths away, “systematically and as a matter of course” (WReC 12). However, working through these very contradictions allows for glimpses of *totality*. Anna Kornbluh attests to this in her lucid definition of the term as:

an ensemble for organizing the whole of existence, and for reproducing that constellation of relations into the future, that is marked by its contingency, its incompleteness, its possibility of being otherwise. Totality is not ‘all the things’—it is the contradiction between a specific situation and other possibilities, and the principle of thinking this contradiction at this level. (28)

It is by thinking contradiction, by working through the discontinuities or fissures within the representable unity (such as an empire), that totality may emerge—but only insofar as the contingency of this totality becomes apparent. For Lukács, for example, the standpoint of the proletariat can access totality by virtue of its position in class society: it can “see society from the centre, as a coherent whole” (*HCC* 69). Yet this access is exclusively possible through the collective action of this class, which must simultaneously realize that class society has been the

product of the proletariat's collective action (its labor) all along and can therefore be transformed into something different.

Reification, or the immanence of commodity logic to subjectivity and social forms, forecloses the apprehension of totality. Indeed, mistakenly grasping totality as "all the things" exemplifies reified consciousness: it reflects the domination of the quantitative and the reduction of relations to an (ever expanding) network of particulars. Increasing reification is coeval with modernization, and thus with modernity. The notion of imperialism exemplifies the reification of geopolitics codified in an ideology, one which is inextricable from forms of racism, orientalism, and, of course, nationalism. As abstractions, modernity and imperialism both involve the preclusion of social totality by reification. Faulkner's modernist form therefore mediates both his lived experience from within a (semi-)periphery and the concomitant impossibility of thinking totality from within the increasingly reified social relations of modernity.³⁸

The attempted reconstruction of the Sutpen story in *Absalom, Absalom!* is thus on the level of form incapable of functioning as an allegory for the totality of Southern history, especially as the reconstruction of this history means working through the modern capitalist and imperialist developments (i.e. reification) contemporary to Faulkner. In order to conceive of the

³⁸ Jameson historicizes the narrative form of *Lord Jim* similarly: "the objective preconditions of Conrad's modernism are to be found in the increasing fragmentation both of the rationalized external world and of the colonized psyche alike" (236).

South's historical social formation—that is, its foundational violence and exploitation, and the constitution of this historical space by its participation in colonialism and imperialism through its material reliance on the labor of the enslaved—this history must be reified. Yet it remains impossible to seal this false totality off from the other historical spaces and spatial relations which make its very formation possible: the trans-Atlantic slave trade, imperialistic expansion West, the rise of the British empire and its industrial textile production. The figure of Sutpen, then, necessarily reflects the objective contradictions of imperialism for the South and the US *beyond these spaces* in much the same way that Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* reflects them *beyond* the British empire: “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Conrad 49). In Haiti, Faulkner finds what Conrad had found in Africa: an exoticized space reminiscent of the colonial past which has damned the present.

To open up the narrative to accommodate this space, the text fails to represent one historical event which directly shows how this past could have been otherwise, an event which concretizes how it once was possible to apprehend totality: the Haitian Revolution. The enslaved Africans in Haiti, through their collective action, saw the entire constellation of relations organized around their labor and realized its contingency by engaging in the struggle to transform this totality. The dialectic between their thought and action built solidarity between multivarious African pasts and the organizations of society therein, thereby collapsing the cultural divisions among them in order to actualize freedom within the space of Haiti. The Haitian Revolution thus constitutes what Walter Benjamin calls a *monad*: “Where thinking

suddenly stops in a constellation pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad” (207). A monad is a “concentration of historical totality” (Löwy 95). By eliminating this monad from the narrative space of Haiti, Faulkner allows for an ideological distortion which encompasses the whole of *Absalom, Absalom!* and locates the antinomies of colonialism and imperialism in the plot of Sutpen. However, this specific contradiction between Haitian history and imperialist ideology also opens up the interpretative space necessary to understand the novel dialectically, through Benjamin’s famous formulation: “a document of culture . . . at one and the same time a document of barbarism” (200).

3 ‘that meagre and fragile thread’: Narrative and Language

In interpreting *Absalom, Absalom!* as a document, it becomes necessary to attend to both its structure and language as a novel. The novel, as a literary form, corresponds to the objective epistemological limitations of modernity which, as discussed in the previous chapter, are also inextricable from imperialism. The contradiction between representation and social totality dialectically gives rise to the novel form. As Lukács writes in *Theory of the Novel* (1915): “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (56). Lukács here has in mind the nineteenth-century realist novel, but his claim holds equally true for Faulkner’s modernist novel. Given Lukács’s famously dogmatic criticism of modernism (and his debates with Theodor Adorno on the matter), the following may seem a strange assertion: had he read Faulkner, he may have discovered present in his work a mediation of objective conditions similar to that which he lauds in Dostoevsky. On the latter, he writes: “‘Suddenly’ there appeared from an underdeveloped country, where the troubles and conflicts of contemporary civilization could not yet have been fully unfolded, works that stated—imaginatively—all the problems of human culture at its highest point” (“Dostoevsky” 146). As the WReC claims, “Lukács heralds Dostoevsky’s social location as fundamental to his ability to invent a new form that . . . gestures to the actuality of capitalism as an unevenly integrated world-system” (61). Furthermore, “Dostoevsky is able to parlay the sense of backwardness and

incongruity into a source of literary innovation . . . processing the co-presence of the archaic and the new into a modern form that has few parallels elsewhere in nineteenth-century literary space” (62). Again, the (semi-)peripheral position which Faulkner occupies in the US South proves to be crucial for understanding the form and content of his work. If Dostoevsky depicts the incongruity of the urban, then Faulkner certainly limns the backwardness of the rural.³⁹ Yet Lukács’ notion that the former’s work traverses cultural points (from low to high) resonates with how the latter’s also embeds the low in a prose style which aspires to modernist heights of aesthetic experimentation and autonomy.

Although Faulkner held a small but influential French readership—Jean-Paul Sartre among them—the currency of his work abroad was never that of Joyce or Proust, at least until a resurgence of interest in his work in the 1940s. Fellow modernists tended to dismiss him as provincial and aesthetically clumsy—Wyndham Lewis, for one, mocked Faulkner’s verbose prose style and supposed propensity for melodrama, deeming him “a moralist with a corn-cob” (64).⁴⁰ By the time *Absalom* appeared in 1936, “modernism,” in its Eurocentric conception, was already somewhat on the wane. However, Faulkner’s novel manages to embody a culmination of the modernist project by at the same time admitting its failure—admitting, moreover, the

³⁹ The literary traditions of both Russia and the US South have had to negotiate the unevenness of capitalist development and starkness of spatial inequality, especially insofar as the *peasant class* is impacted. Southern writers such as Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor have cited the influence of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, etc.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, Lewis also notes: “More than half of [Faulkner’s] text belongs, as far as the genre of the writing is concerned, to the ‘psychological’ method of Conrad (or the translations of the great nineteenth-century Russian authors)” (44).

failure of the novel form itself. The plot of *Absalom*, as Peter Brooks has noted, “both sums up the nineteenth-century tradition of the novel—particularly its concern with genealogy, authority, and patterns of transmission—while subverting it, working this subversion in a manner that reaffirms a traditional set of problems for the novel while disallowing its traditional solutions” (286). Faulkner’s novel thus cancels (*Aufheben*) the traditional novel’s “equations of consanguinity, property, ambition, and eros” while nonetheless maintaining them as “a backdrop, an equation that ultimately doesn’t add up” (302). Sutpen’s own “design” is the most obvious manifestation of this equation, but Charles Bon also “appears as the hero of romance with a simpler and more absolute design”: he vies for Sutpen’s recognition (302). Yet while *Absalom, Absalom!* is “modernist” insofar as it is the dialectical mirror-image of nineteenth century realism, it is still not modernist in the sense of the modernism which Adorno sees as possessing an immanent aesthetic capacity to *resist* modernization. Little in Faulkner’s work suggests active resistance to modernization or commodification; indeed, he sometimes wrote in ways which he regarded as inferior and sensationalist (e.g. the “potboiler” novel *Sanctuary* and the Hollywood screenplays he co-authored) in order to make money. Nevertheless, *Absalom* exemplifies a modernism of which it is necessary to think, with the WReC, as the *registration of the combined unevenness of capitalist development*. In other words, the disjunctions within and between simultaneous forms of social existence, inequalities which inhere in capital’s uneven integration of a world-system, are registered and mediated by the disjunctive form(s) of art created at the margins of this system. This understanding of modernism therefore upends the

usual assumptions of its periodization (the early 20th century) and localization (Western Europe), opening up interpretation of novels produced within a capitalist world-system as world-literature and their formal peculiarities as *irrealist*:

Anti-linear plot lines, meta-narratorial devices, un-rounded characters, unreliable narrators, contradictory points of view, and so on, have all been identified as the techniques and devices characteristic of the distinctive (and restricted) Euro-American literary formation typically addressed under the name of ‘modernism.’ But we understand these techniques and devices more broadly as the determinate formal registers of (semi-)peripherality in the world-literary system, discernible wherever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism’s bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation). (WReC 51)

Perhaps even Lukács would have been more receptive to such a “modernism,” despite his Eurocentrism.

It is in this world-literary, irrealist sense that *Absalom*, and Faulkner’s oeuvre in general, should be read. Doing so facilitates readings of imperial spatial relations like those examined in Chapter 2, and of temporal-historical contingencies and ruptures like those discussed in Chapter 1. In *Absalom* these of course dovetail with understanding the Haitian Revolution as a *temporal rupture* and *concentration of totality*—a world-historical event. However, it is also necessary to historicize the novel as a genre within this context. As Susan Buck-Morss writes: “If on the one hand, the anomalies of the Haitian experience are seen as its progressive moments,

on the other hand, the brutalities of slavery prove to be historically routine” (149). The novel, as a *modern* form, participates in these brutalities: “the history of Caribbean society is that of a dual relation between plantation and [novelistic] plot” (Wynter 99). Sylvia Wynter writes predominantly about Caribbean literature, but her point remains that the novel *as such* is constituted by the taint of plantation slavery. The narrative form of *Absalom* is not an exception to this historicity, but neither is it uncritical of the taint it bears. The narrative of sovereignty and lineage which Sutpen attempts to write for himself through his ascendancy to planter status ultimately proves as untenable as the various attempts to reconstruct his story. Indeed, *Absalom* can be read as a reflexive deconstruction of the novel, or a novelization of the impossibility of narrative. However, the condition of possibility for this novelization of the impossibility of narrative is that its absent center (Sutpen’s story) does not, or cannot, signify the Haitian Revolution. Therefore, this essay contends that *Absalom* is certainly a novel about the instability of narration, the inseparability of the text from the act of reading it, and *history itself* as such a narration and such a text. Yet the singular narrative structure of the novel also corresponds to its repression, ideological foreclosure, or negation of the Haitian Revolution in the text. Both as an aesthetic accomplishment and theory of language (narrative, plot, signification, etc.), *Absalom* functions through this failure, which is *not quite* an “erasure” because it does not efface revolution in Haiti completely—rather, it maintains it as the point of *negativity* around which the story of Sutpen coheres.

Negativity, Signification, and World-History

In the latter half of the 20th century, Faulkner criticism turned from the New Critical interpretative methods epitomized by Cleanth Brooks to post-structuralist readings. The most influential of these are arguably John T. Matthews' *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (1982), Andre Bleikasten's *The Ink of Melancholy* (1990), and Edouard Glissant's *Faulkner Mississippi* (1996). None of these works address the absence of the Haitian Revolution in *Absalom, Absalom!*, although Matthews would later write his 2004 article on the matter after it finally rose to prominence in scholarly circles. However, in retrospect these seminal readings of Faulkner seem to provide ample space for this absence to have been theorized, particularly Matthews' and Glissant's. The former admits that "[i]deas, conceptions, the facts of the past, and so on are never fully recovered by language in Faulkner" (*PFL* 30), while the latter sees that "Sutpen tried to establish himself in Haiti (his choice of both country and time was poor, the Haitian Revolution had already taken place) and found himself faced with the most radical impossibility of all: that of mixed blood" (110). Importantly, these near-misses are somewhat theoretically proximate to a framework which might more conclusively theorize the absence of the Revolution: Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁴¹ Instead of the endless "sliding" of signification, the celebration of particularity, and the assignment of causality, a Lacanian hermeneutic prioritizes the *negativity* at the heart of the symbolic order, the universal, and constitutive lack. While somewhat of a tautology, it is

⁴¹ Broadly speaking, Matthews' study is deconstructivist (à la Derrida) while Glissant's utilizes some Deleuzian methods and concepts, particularly the rhizome. Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze were, of course, famous theoretical interlocutors with Jacques Lacan.

through the negative that the absence of the Haitian Revolution in the novel can be thoroughly assessed, if not precisely understood.

Joan Copjec has provided sharp critiques of the deconstructivist view of signification and subjectivity, but her two most relevant points here are those which address the former. Rather than seeing the real as enmeshed in a web of signification and endlessly deferred, Copjec sees representation positioned differently: “Lacan is certainly *not* offering an agnostic description of the way the real object is cut off from the subject’s view by language, of the way the real object escapes capture in the network of signifiers . . . [contra Derrida] Lacan argues, rather, that beyond the signifying network . . . there is, in fact, nothing at all” (Copjec 35). Lacan’s own aphorism “There is no metalanguage” sums this point up nicely. However, the deeper underlying issue is that deconstruction (and poststructuralism more generally) refuses to think *totality* while nonetheless basing its own conceptual integrity upon it. Jameson shows how “such perceptions . . . must be accompanied by some initial appearance of continuity, some ideology of unification already in place, which it is their mission to rebuke and shatter . . . [and thus] reconfirm the status of the concept of totality by their very reaction against it” (53). This reaction usually appears as a form of the idea that the “notion of the whole . . . always disguises the infinite play of difference” (Copjec 59). Yet totality is nevertheless inscribed into the infinite sliding of signification because of the paradox which Copjec unveils:

only a closed totality can be considered infinite; only a limit guarantees that the production of meaning will continuously be subject to revision, never ending. Rather

than baring the device of difference behind the illusion of totality, Lacanian theory reverses these terms and shows the infinite play of difference to be dependent on a limit, a closed totality. (60)

The limits of a novel, for instance, seal its narrative(s) into a totality which allows for the continuous generation of meaning. The limit itself therefore implies closure and infinite signification. As Lukács claims, the novel continues to think totality both despite and because of the attenuation of meaning in life concomitant with the increasing lack of immediate relation to social totality. If the novel fashions a totality, such a concentration of totality (i.e. monad) as the Haitian Revolution would be absent because it exceeds the novel's own limitations.

As previously discussed, *Absalom, Absalom!* mediates the Haitian Revolution for Sutpen as the absent cause of a primary trauma (recall his aversion to sugar, for example).⁴² The relation between absence and trauma here situates the Revolution in the Lacanian order of the Real, outside of the Symbolic. Lacan describes the Real as “‘that which is always in the same place,’ as the ‘excluded’ Thing that is ‘at the heart of me; as something strange to me,’ the ‘prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget’ or to remember” (qtd. in George 76). The Real also corresponds directly to the “unthinkability” of the Haitian Revolution which Michael-Rolph Trouillot has articulated. Within a symbolic structure historically determined by the objective forms of social existence—in this case, plantation capitalism—a revolution of the

⁴² See Chapter 1, p. 21.

Black enslaved cannot be symbolized. Yet the US South's profound fear of this event, its historical encounter with the Real, in fact constitutes "the South" as a signifier.

W. E. B. Du Bois, in his early work *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States* (1896), a study based on his Harvard doctoral dissertation, describes this political fallout of the Haitian Revolution in the US as "a wave of horror and fear [that] swept over the South" (71). This wave, then, tokens a *movement* of reaction to the event that resembles the movement of its (non)signification, its refusal of the symbolic. The South, in turn, attempts to signify itself through the negation of what is already absent. As a master signifier (S1), or a signifier without any clear signified, "the South" slides endlessly—much in the way deconstruction theorizes. However, "the South" finds its *point de capiton*, or "quilting point," in "the North," itself another master signifier—it can then appear comprehensible, though not completely. Yet the achievement of this act of signification relies upon the *absence* of the missing signifier (S2). This signifier must remain absent in order for the symbolic order to constitute itself. It will soon become apparent how the actual history of the South vis-à-vis the Haitian Revolution *and* the absence of the Revolution in *Absalom, Absalom!* are legible through this heuristic. In the former instance, during and immediately after the Revolution, the Southern states passed numerous legislative acts which restricted immigration and the importation of enslaved people. Du Bois later notes, in *Black Reconstruction* (1935), how "the whole white South became an armed and commissioned camp to keep Negroes in slavery and to kill the black rebel" (12). A contemporary observer of the US Civil War named Karl Marx also saw clearly the

symbolic constitution of the South: “It is not a country at all, but a battle slogan” (55). Historically, the South absents (or represses) the memory of the Haitian Revolution by arranging and constituting itself so that, in theory, this event *could not happen there*. The symbolic impossibility of a slave revolution in the South is thus inscribed in the Real—the Haitian Revolution becomes its absent signifier.

As Copjec claims, “in order for the symbolic to evict the real and thereby establish itself, a judgment of existence is required; that is, it is necessary to *say* that the real is absented, to *declare* its impossibility” (121). In the actual history of the South, this declaration is evident—but is this also the case in *Absalom*? In the novel, Sutpen “went out and subdued” the enslaved and thus quells the revolution. The narrative thereby provides a symbolic *reversal* of the Haitian Revolution in order to situate it within the Real. Accordingly, the successful Revolution, as the absent signifier, allows for the novel to mediate a version of the ideological fantasy in which the actual South historically engaged: that the Haitian Revolution could not have occurred *there*. Therefore, the preoccupation of *Absalom*’s narrators with understanding the history of the South through the story of Sutpen cannot be severed from the possibility, however superficially effaced, of a specifically Haitian resistance to the story they tell.⁴³

⁴³ This preoccupation is omnipresent. Rosa Coldfield wants the story of Sutpen told (by Quentin) so that an audience can know “why God let us lose the War”(6). Shreve’s fascination with the South also signals to the reader that Sutpen’s narrative is ultimately about the South. He asks Quentin: “Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all” (142). Later, in response to the story, Shreve exclaims: “Jesus, the South is fine, isn’t it. It’s better than the theatre, isn’t it” (176). Finally, at the novel’s end, he says: “The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years” (301).

The Lacanian emphasis on negativity not only allows for an understanding of the Haitian Revolution as an absent signifier, but also elaborates on how the Black enslaved constitute the negativity within the (plantation) capitalist system itself. When Alenka Zupančič extends the Lacanian non-relation to the political sphere as a “bias” or non-neutrality of social being, she arrives at Marx’s critique of political economy: “Marx saw it perfectly: in order for the non-relation to be economically productive and profitable, it has to be *built into* the very mode of production” (33). Zupančič then comes to a Hegelian insight couched in Lacanian terms: “the proletariat is not simply one of the social classes, but rather names the point of the concrete constitutive negativity in capitalism, the point of the non-relation obfuscated and exploited by it. The proletariat is not the sum of all workers, it is the concept that names the symptomatic point of this system, its disavowed and exploited negativity” (34). It therefore becomes clear that for the plantation capitalist system the enslaved are the symptomatic point. Indeed, both C. L. R. James and W. E. B. Du Bois emphasize the resemblance of the enslaved to a proletariat: the former claims that the enslaved of Saint-Domingue “working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain . . . were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time” (86); the latter refers to the enslaved as “the black worker” in order to foreground this laborer as the “founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world, who brought civil war in America” (*BR* 15). The proletariat—workers sell their labor power as a commodity—and the enslaved—workers whose very *being* is reduced to a labor-power

commodity (and its reproduction)—occupy the same symptomatic point of capitalism which Zupančič describes, but together they also represent a *split* within the symptom. This split is maintained both through the pervasiveness of racist ideology, and how the system of slavery itself becomes split into the objective conditions of oppression that persist: Jim Crow, the carceral state, etc. However, the Haitian revolutionaries present a singular historical instance via their *embodiment of the exploited negativity within the system*. They possessed what Hegel would call “necessity,” that which Robespierre and the Jacobins ultimately lost: “Hegel’s critique of Jacobinism relies on the undoubtedly correct supposition that they did not understand themselves to be the historic embodiment of absolute negativity” (López 325). Yet the Haitian enslaved, who James famously calls the *Black Jacobins*, crucially possessed this self-understanding that the French Jacobins themselves did not.⁴⁴

Narrating History

It thus seems oddly congruent that *Absalom* inscribes the Haitian’s self-conscious historical embodiment of absolute negativity as the negative point within the narrative of Sutpen. In doing so, the novel itself admits a certain contingency to signification and thus also to historiography. This vexation of narrative clarity and authority has not escaped notice. Brooks, echoing similar claims made by Matthews and Bleikasten, writes that in *Absalom* “ultimately narrative itself is

⁴⁴ To be clear, *absolute negativity* entails freedom from any final determination—a radical uncertainty and incompleteness. Absolute Spirit in its absolute negativity is the very opposite of the resolution of all contradiction and a state of rest at the end of some linear *telos*, despite the ubiquity of this (mis)reading of Hegel.

the problem” (290). According to Matthews, *Absalom, Absalom!* is “Faulkner’s most accomplished, moving, and sustained meditation on the act of fabricating meaning” (*PFL* 115). History and language are both complicit in such fabrication: they frustrate all attempts to access “what really happened” but create meaning anyway. In the novel, Mr. Compson explicates this frustration, or, rather, the frustrative capacity of signification and historiography:

It’s just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that’s it: they don’t explain and we are not supposed to know . . . They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (*AA* 80)

Matthews suggests that the narrators of *Absalom*—the cynical Mr. Compson perhaps more than the others—are aware of “the impossibilities of conclusive accounting and the need to proceed with speculative fabrication anyhow” (*PFL* 119). Historiography remains necessary, then, as an symbolic act that emplots a series of events and imbues them with meaning in a narrative. Yet

this process does not proceed like a chemistry experiment; to borrow Mr. Compson's metaphor: using a "formula" does not work. Assembling the available texts and "bring[ing] them together in the proportions called for" does not make immediate sense of the "horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs." Still, this is not to say that *no* sense is made at all; rather, what signifies is simply constituted by what is already absent, as well as by what is left out or could be emplotted differently.

Paraphrasing Claude Lévi-Strauss, Hayden White writes: "We can construct a comprehensible story of the past . . . only by a decision to 'give up' one or more of the domains of facts offering themselves for inclusion in our accounts. Our explanations of historical structures and processes are thus determined more by what we leave out of our representations than by what we put in" (90). White's insistence on the historical text as a literary artifact, that "history has no stipulatable subject matter uniquely its own; it is always written as part of a contest between contending poetic figurations of what the past might consist of" (98), figures historiography as a dialectical process analogous to that of literary creation: the fictive and the real both achieve "sense" for the writer and reader via the same forms and constructions. *The Black Jacobins* and *Black Reconstruction in America* exemplify this well—through these historical studies, James and Du Bois respectively redress the emplotments of Black history by white French and US historians, and situate their own narratives against them. They make explicit through material analyses both the Romantic transcendence of the enslaved's successes and the tragic trajectories of bourgeois greed and reactionary backlash. Thus, through

historiography, “*knowledge* of the past may increase incrementally, [even if] our *understanding* of it does not (White 89, my italics).

Unraveling the Narrative: Framing the Haitian Revolution

If narrative is indeed a socially symbolic act, then *Absalom, Absalom!* contains several such acts to unravel. The novel contains both frames and layers of narrative (to distinguish between the two in spatial terms: the former encompasses a narrative within it, the latter sits atop another), and there are several narrators possessing distinct motives for attempting to tell Sutpen’s story. Nevertheless, the investment these narrators share in Sutpen’s story allows for a single voice to run through the novel: “every reader notices that the tellings are not set off by wholly individualized voices. Tones, emphases, topics, and manners may differ, but there is an essential sameness to the baroque prolixity, the nightmarish breathlessness, and the Latinate polysyllabism of the novel” (Matthews *PFL* 121). Moreover, there is only one point of access to the story Sutpen tells about himself and his time in Haiti: Chapter 7. This chapter is layered on three or four levels: Quentin narrates to Shreve (and the reader) according to the version of the story Sutpen has told Grandfather Compson, though Quentin himself has perhaps received this tale through Mr. Compson.⁴⁵ It seems possible, then, that a mediated version of Sutpen’s own

⁴⁵ The (possible) layering of the story of Sutpen’s origins in Chapter 7: Sutpen — General Compson — Mr. Compson — Quentin — Shreve/the reader. However, Quentin repeatedly interjects “Grandfather said” into the narrative, so it remains possible that he heard the story directly from General/Grandfather Compson—but equally likely that he repeats this to emphasize what Mr. Compson identified as Grandfather Compson’s own elaborations and comments on the story.

voice accounts for a quotient of the “sameness” which Matthews finds running through the novel— the “baroque prolixity” noted by the latter matches the former’s routine use of “bombastic phrases” (AA 194). Nevertheless, the peculiar manner in which Sutpen abruptly launches into the *Haitian* portion of the story strikes Grandfather Compson as one which strains toward a calm objectivity:

he telling it all over and still it was not absolutely clear—the how and the why he was there and what he was—since he was not talking about himself. He was telling a story. He was not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would still have been the same story if the man had had no name at all, if it had been told about any man or no man over whiskey at night. (199)

Before examining the affect (or lack thereof) with which Sutpen imbues his narrative, the framing of this narrative “over whiskey at night” deserves note for how it informs the story it contains. Compson and Sutpen are sitting beside a campfire near a swamp and drinking whiskey, taking a break from their pursuit of the French architect, the only other person Sutpen initially brings to Mississippi besides himself and the enslaved Haitians. Sutpen recruits the architect from Martinique to design the plantation house on the hundred acres he acquires outside Jefferson—what will become known as “Sutpen’s Hundred.”⁴⁶ This architect runs away

⁴⁶ In designing the plantation house, the architect “manage[s] to curb the dream of grim and castlelike magnificence at which Sutpen obviously aimed” (29). In other words, he keeps Sutpen from having a house which

from the building project into the swamp “in the second summer, when they had finished all the brick and had the foundations laid” (177). His motivations for doing so likely stem from his dissatisfaction with the circumstances under which he works. Compson claims that the contrast between his “formal coat and his Paris hat” and the wilderness with which he is surrounded symbolizes his “amazement . . . at the inexplicable and incredible fact of his own presence” (28). Regardless, once he finds the architect gone, Sutpen gathers Compson and other neighbors, and makes the enslaved men track the fleeing Frenchman.

This frame narrative thus engages two historical paradigms at once: pursued by a posse into a swamp, the fugitive white architect is in the position of an escaped enslaved Black person; however, in recalling that his trackers are themselves from Haiti, this chase also comes to resemble the dynamic between the Haitian revolutionaries and the French planters. Moreover, the visual stimulus for Sutpen’s first attempt to talk about his time in Haiti (he tells the story of his upbringing in Virginia on the first day of the chase) is the sight of the enslaved carrying pine knot torches: “the n—s . . . with their pine torches smoking and flaring above them and the red light” (AA 198). A phantasmagoric relation between the presence and absence of the enslaved unsettles both Grandfather Compson and Sutpen as they see “shadows . . . at one moment then gone the next though you knew all the time that they were still there because you could feel them with your breathing” (198). Then, suddenly, Sutpen begins “talking about it again, telling him

would reflect the grotesque proportions of his outsized ambition. The significance of the plantation *house* in the novel is worthy of future study.

again before he realised that this was some more of it” (198). The referent of “it” here is the story of Sutpen’s life before Mississippi, while the “more” turns out to be the revolution Sutpen suppresses in Haiti. By reading this passage with Haiti in mind, it seems obvious that Sutpen relates his story to Compson as an attempt to stave off the fear the sight of the Haitian enslaved (especially in connection with fire) *continues* to engender in him. Therefore, Sutpen dissociates from his own story in the act of telling it—“he was not talking about himself” (199)—in order to consign to the Real the *continued* possibility of slave revolution, the negation which constitutes the symbolic act of his narrative.

It would also be a mistake to ignore the tension between the diegetic *orality* of the narration (as a precapitalist, pre-novel form of storytelling) and the objective *textuality* of *Absalom* as a novel. As another way in which Faulkner registers the combined unevenness of modernization in the (semi-)peripheries, the coexistence of oral tradition with modernist literature also brings into question how the mode of historiographic invention might matter. Does the fact that Sutpen tells Grandfather Compson about Haiti “over whiskey at night” while sitting around a campfire signify a different narrative potentiality in comparison to the written narration of history? Indeed, all the narrators of *Absalom* tell the story to another person out loud—except for Charles Bon’s letter to Judith, nothing is written down. However, both written and oral narration involve emplotment of events within a form. This form, then, is what might vary. Sutpen thus tells his story as a “campfire story,” a kind of legend (or myth), and he decides where the story begins and ends based on his perception of Compson’s receptivity to it.

When he stops, Sutpen “just stopped, Grandfather said, flat and final like that, like that was all there was, all there could be to it, all of it that made good listening from one man to another over whiskey at night. Maybe it was” (*AA* 205).

Quentin’s frame narrative goes on, however—and the resolution of the escaped French architect plot still signifies in relation to the repression of the Haitian Revolution. Reconciliation with the French architect comes when Sutpen’s posse of slaveholders and the enslaved trap the former in a cave by a river. When the architect finally relents and tacitly agrees to return to Sutpen’s Hundred, Grandfather Compson describes seeing “eyes in the gaunt face, the eyes desperate and hopeless but indomitable too, invincible too, not beaten yet by a damn sight . . . just a will to endure and a foreknowing of defeat but not beat yet by a damn sight” (*AA* 207). Compson’s repetition here—that the French architect is “not beaten by a damn sight . . . not beat yet by a damn sight” clearly evokes another repeated statement of resilience in *Absalom*: the Confederate lost cause as summarized in Wash Jones’s refrain: “they ain’t whupped us yet, air they?,” which first appears on page 150 but recurs five times in the novel.⁴⁷ The reconciliation between the Southern planters and the French architect in the symbolic “lost cause” context indicates their shared bond: both represent the forces that have fought and lost (in the Haitian

⁴⁷ Jones is described in the “Genealogy” as: “Squatter, residing in an abandoned fishing camp belonging to Thomas Sutpen, hanger-on of Sutpen, handy man about Sutpen’s place while Sutpen was away between ‘61-’65” (308). “They ain’t whupped us yet, air they?” functions as Jones’ “catchphrase,” in a sense—it repeatedly strains to identify him, a poor white, with what he imagines to be the nobility and perseverance of the Southern planter aristocrats (i.e. Sutpen) leading the Confederacy, who are ultimately fighting to uphold the form of capitalism in which Jones’s class position is at least better than that of the enslaved. See Faulkner’s short story “Wash” (1934) for the very first appearance of Thomas Sutpen within the Yoknapatawpha Extended Universe.

Revolution) and will fight and lose (in the US Civil War) to the forces of Black emancipation. Furthermore, the refusal to acknowledge defeat tokens the continuation of violence, the whites' perpetual reaction to Black emancipation even after it has been realized.

Of course, this refusal also relates directly to the contingency of historiography, and thus to the contingency of *language* as well. Returning to Mr. Compson's claim—his finding that “the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves” are what “does not explain” (*AA* 80)—with Haiti in mind illuminates some of the ideological presuppositions at stake therein. The shapes of language are “shadowy inscrutable serene,” a combination of descriptors that evokes the figure of Charles Bon, who is deemed “shadowy” in many instances throughout the novel. Indeed, Bon is linked directly to the phantasmagoric, in a way obviously similar to the Haitian enslaved: “shadowy: a myth, a phantom: something which they engendered and created whole themselves, some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all” (82). It is hardly an original claim that Bon, the child disowned and abandoned by Sutpen because of the possibility that his mother (the daughter of the French planter in Haiti) is a woman of color, embodies the return of the repressed in the novel. Yet more than just miscegenation fear, the repressed which Bon represents can also be characterized as the *Creole*.⁴⁸ Through the significance of the Creole as a comingling of forms unique to the New World,

⁴⁸ Bon hails from New Orleans (via Haiti), and the narrators (particularly Mr. Compson) ascribe a certain contradictory, fluid, and decadent essence to this city which code it heavily as Creole: “foreign and paradoxical, with its atmosphere at once fatal and languorous, at once feminine and steel-hard” (86). For Shreve's speculative insight into Bon's ambivalent relationship to Haiti, see *Absalom*, p. 239.

Absalom's negation of the Haitian Revolution, the latter itself being an emphatically Creole enterprise, informs the theories of language espoused by the characters.⁴⁹

The Creole and the Real

From the historical standpoint of 1910, the Creole Caribbean appears to Quentin and Shreve as the imperial playground of the US. Thus, when Shreve refers to Charles Bon's home as "that Porto Rico or Haiti or wherever it was" (*AA* 239), this "innocence" of an exact signifier attests to the lack of care and attention paid to the subjugated nations of this region.⁵⁰ Indeed, the choice of the Anglicized spelling "Porto" as opposed to "Puerto" ensues directly from the transfer of the colony into the possession of the US in the Spanish-American War (1899)—the US changed the spelling from the latter to the former in the Treaty of Paris agreement with Spain, and maintained it until the people of Puerto Rico successfully advocated for its reversal in 1931. That Faulkner makes sure his 1936 novel does not use a spelling anachronistic to Shreve's moment might speak to how cognizant of the Caribbean he may have been. However, while writing one particular passage in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner struggled to spell "Haitian" correctly: the revisions of the manuscript show him using "Hataiean" and "Haitiean" in two separate drafts before finally arriving at "Haitian" (Langford 262). In the US, the spelling of Haiti had been "Hayti" until the 1880s, but this does not account for Faulkner's repeated

⁴⁹ See Dubois's *Avengers of the New World*, p. 34 for a definition of "creole" contemporary to the Haitian Revolution.

⁵⁰ Recall also how finicky Shreve is about "West Virginia" in contrast. See Chapter 1, pp. 10-11.

mistakes—there is no confusion here between “y” and “i.” Nor does he seem to have made this spelling error anywhere else in the text. To place this instance of “Haitian” in its specific context: “[Sutpen] and the father fired at no enemy but at the Haitian night itself, lancing their little vain and puny flashes into the brooding and blood-weary and throbbing darkness” (*AA* 204). Then, four lines down from this passage, Sutpen ends the revolution—he has “[gone] out and subdued them” (204). Faulkner’s struggle with the signifier *Haitian*—in the full context of his intentional spelling of “Porto Rico,” the opacity of Black-coded space in the passage, and Sutpen’s imminent suppression of the revolution—likely results from his apprehension (whether conscious or unconscious) while writing it that a repression of the Real of this signifier’s most famous collocation was nigh: the Haitian *Revolution*.

The tension exemplified in this evident grappling with the signifier also relates to the Real of the Creole in the novel. Charles Bon embodies both the Haitian other and *unknowable* Creole identity that Sutpen fears most. For a “design” hatched on the ideological basis of specifically white grandeur, the prospect of racial admixture is tantamount to failure.⁵¹ Yet ironically it is the Creole *language* which Sutpen learns and utilizes to further his plan. If Sutpen’s Creole, as Glissant suggests, “represents the very thing he wants to kill in himself” (84), it is still the very thing which enables his design to work at all: in Haiti “he discovered . . . he

⁵¹ Sutpen certainly perceives this. When confronted with the prospect of Bon marrying his daughter, Judith, he sees two possibilities: 1) “destroy my design with my own hand” or 2) “let matters take the course which I know they will take and see my design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such fashion as to be a mockery and betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away and for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived” (220).

would have to learn to speak a new language, else that design to which he dedicated himself would die still-born” (*AA* 200). By learning Haitian Creole and French, Sutpen becomes able to use language as a tool by which he can control the enslaved and can access the French planter (and his daughter). This specific enterprise is the only information Sutpen gives about the time which elapses between his setting out for the Caribbean and the revolution on the plantation: “the only mention he ever made to those six or seven years which must have existed somewhere, must have actually occurred, was about the patois he had to learn in order to oversee the plantation, and the French he had to learn, maybe not to get engaged to be married, but which he would certainly need to be able to repudiate the wife after he had already got her” (199-200). The languages which Sutpen learns in Haiti, then, are caught up in his scheming for power, but they also undermine it. In the Haitian Creole which Sutpen speaks, which historically emerged through the capacities of the African enslaved to form bonds of solidarity in communication, exists the continuous possibility of resistance and emancipation.

Any explication of Mr. Compson’s musings on how language “does not explain” is also incomplete without a consideration of the framing of General Compson’s own theory of language by Sutpen’s capacity for learning Creole:

And he overseeing it, riding peacefully about on his house while he learned the language (that meagre and fragile thread, Grandfather said, by which the little surface corners and edges of men’s secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard

and will cry for the last time and not be heard then either), not knowing that what he rode upon was a volcano (*AA* 202)

As a “meagre and fragile thread,” language seems to possess the capacity to fleetingly bond its speakers together—a symbolic structure—but which is always undergirded by a primal “darkness”—that which is negated and unavailable for signification: the Real. The fragility of language does not gainsay its affordance of power, but it does leave those (like Sutpen) who would invest in its absolute ability to “subdue” still vulnerable to emancipatory possibility because language can also provide the means by which to find solidarity in what is absent, and in this negativity find bonds of equality and resistance. The verbosity of Sutpen’s narrative, then, constitutes an effort to stave off this possibility as well as an attempt by Faulkner to mediate an inchoate sense of the *lack* immanent to language: “Language speaks voluminously in positive statements, but it also copiously speaks of its own lack of self-sufficiency, its inability to speak the whole unvarnished truth directly and without recourse to further, exegetical speech. Some elision or negation of its powers writes itself in language as the lack of metalanguage” (Copjec 9). Crucially, learning Creole does *not* allow Sutpen to know “that what he rode upon was a volcano” (*AA* 202). Language does not speak the whole truth, the truth of the enslaved’s revolutionary agency and of Haitian history. Neither is there a metalanguage which can positively signify this truth—hence the unthinkability both of the volcano and its eruption.

The Signifier and the Dialectic of Revolution

As Azérad writes, “Languages (aural, gestural, and written) are the most purloined of all ‘letters’ in *Absalom*” (174). Indeed, the position of the ‘letters’ available to the narrators within the symbolic structure of the novel determines their (in)ability to make sense of Sutpen’s narrative, even as this effort in turn proves incapable of conclusively signifying “the South” and how exactly Sutpen embodies its failure. Because Quentin views “the South,” a master signifier, as a *transcendental signifier*—or the point of ultimate meaning beyond signification—he is tortured by the prospect of never escaping from it. Quentin from the beginning contains “backward-looking ghosts” and “defeated names” (*AA* 7), yet by the end he has still not managed to negotiate an escape from these signs of Southern history. As if to press the issue to him in a highly tendentious way, in the last lines of the novel Shreve asks him why he “hates” the South: “‘I dont hate it,’ Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I dont hate it,’ he said. *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!*” (303). Delimiting the novel at this point accomplishes several things at once: first, the febrile despair which ultimately drives Quentin to suicide (known to readers of *The Sound and the Fury*) is not only engendered by his unconsummated incestuous desire for Caddy, his sister, but is also at least compounded by his inability to reconcile himself to the impossibility of signification vis-à-vis the South, its history, and his own embodiment of both no matter where he goes (even Harvard); second, the form of this passage—its repetition, transition from

statement to exclamation, and turn from external to internal monologue—shows an insistent disavowal that, via its increase in intensity, exemplifies the noncoincidence of what Quentin says with what he means or unconsciously knows, which in turn epitomizes the noncoincidence, or lack, which constitutes signification itself; and, finally, as a limit to the novel which partially constitutes its totality, this passage sutures the narrative failure (to signify the South through Sutpen) to a failure to avow that which is repressed within “the South.” By claiming to not hate the South, Quentin continues to repress the constitutive absences within this signifier’s history. To put it in Freudian terms, he cannot work through it.

Chief among these constitutive absences is, of course, the Haitian Revolution. As a successful revolution of enslaved Black people against the white slaveholders, it embodies everything that the South *needed* to repress within itself. In *Absalom, Absalom!* this repression takes the form of Sutpen’s suppression of the revolution local to the Haitian plantation which he oversees, a reversal of an ideologically-mediated version of the historical event. Yet what Sutpen, Faulkner, and many critics also overlook is that the failure of this attempt, this particular negation at work within the text, does not fully eliminate the possibility of revolution within the totality constituted by the text. Sutpen leaves Haiti, as do Eulalia and Charles Bon, and—in another flourish of imperial “innocence”—no one takes interest in what happens there after they depart. The historical Haitian Revolution had many precursors, many attempted uprisings that failed. The revolutions of Mackandal, Ogé, and Boukman did not succeed, and, in a very specific sense, neither did Toussaint’s—he was too trusting of the French and too aloof from the masses

themselves to contend for Haiti's absolute independence as a free nation-state in the way Dessalines did.⁵² Nevertheless, all of these failures are canceled (*Aufheben*) and present in the ultimate success of the Haitian Revolution. This dialectical logic of revolution is the very same which Rosa Luxemburg expresses in "Reform or Revolution" in her refutation of idea that the revolution of the proletariat must wait for the correct "objective conditions" to arrive:

it will be impossible to avoid the 'premature' conquest of state power by the proletariat precisely because these 'premature' attacks of the proletariat constitute a factor, and indeed a very important factor, creating the political conditions of the final victory. In the course of the political crisis accompanying its seizure of power, in the course of the long and stubborn struggles, the proletariat will acquire the degree of political maturity permitting it to obtain in time a definitive victory of the revolution. Thus these 'premature' attacks of the proletariat against the state power are in themselves important historic factors helping to provoke and determine the point of the definite victory. (96)

Premature and failed revolutions are the conditions of possibility for a successful one. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Sutpen does benefit directly from his ostensible defiance of such a "premature" attempt on the part of the enslaved. However, Sutpen's suppression of the revolution is not, and could never be, a *permanent* negation of the possibility of emancipatory struggle on both diegetic and extradiegetic planes. Faulkner's novel cannot eliminate the

⁵² For more on this difference between Toussaint and Dessalines, see James, p. 333; pp. 361-5.

dialectical movement of revolution itself; indeed, the failure to represent the Haitian Revolution as an event is not a failure to represent it as a process. If the howl of Jim Bond—direct descendant of the Haitian Creole Charles Bon—the wordless cry accompanying the conflagration of Sutpen’s plantation house, signifies as anything, perhaps it is as “the vocal expression of nominal freedom, the hope and the frustration of inhabiting in time and place the line between enslavement and emancipation” (Abdur-Rahman 56). Thus, when Shreve comments ironically that “the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere” (*AA* 302), he certainly means more than he says or knows.

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