



From 'Bon' to 'Bond': The 'Tragic Mulatto/a' and the Repetition of the Plantation Mythology

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ABSTRACT

This essay performs a reading of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* by way of Hortense Spillers. Tracking Spillers' analysis of Faulkner through various essays in the collection *Black, White, and in Color*, I pose a question of how the imaginary figure of the tragic 'mulatto/a' functions within the narrative repetition of the plantation romance. This question is oriented by Christina Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies* in exploring how the spectacularized violence of the scene of the plantation is both obscured and re-presented in the construction of 'post-slavery' subjects. Using Faulkner, Spillers elaborates the role of language as a key link between psychic and social reproduction: as the mythic patriarch writes a narrative in the blood of his descendants, so too do the civilization-founding crimes of incest and miscegenation echo in cultural memory. The figure of the mulatto/a, or in a more contemporary environment the 'mixed-race' person, thus presents a certain problem or site of anxiety for white subjectivity, recalling and repressing the inaugural violence of the age of the plantation.

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As Meta’s algorithms happily reminded me, this past month (March 2022) marked one decade since I first read William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, as a student at a boarding school in metro-Detroit. Then 16, now 26, in the intervening years I have passed over the age of Quentin Compson during the events of *Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury*, including his suicide. So, in the act of re-reading *Absalom*, I find myself reading my younger self. Both of us are quite like Quentin, poring meticulously over this seemingly arbitrary text, reaching for – for *what?* It seems, as Hortense Spillers says, that “one is never quite finished with Faulkner.”¹ Throughout the essays in her collection *Black, White, and in Color*, Spillers looks to Faulkner as “a writer who appears to see his country clearly and does not flinch.”² As she notes in “Faulkner Adds Up: Reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*,” Faulkner’s status as a “Southern writer” renders him as a relatively backwards provincial in the larger “New World” canon. However, might this work to Faulkner’s (or us, his readers’) advantage? Might it be that Faulkner’s South, Spillers asks us, “is liberating the word of its truth and the truth of its word on the nation-ground?”³

Spillers’ own analysis of Faulkner, and the function of race as a *signifier*, seems especially timely as American popular culture proceeds into an ostensibly ‘post-race’ era. In *Monstrous Intimacies*, Christina Sharpe follows Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* in exploring “the ongoing processes of subjectification during slavery and into post-slavery to which all post-modern subjects are made subject.”⁴ Although “post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) black subject,” Spillers’ reading of Faulkner presents a valuable case study in how the construction of this black subject reflects the neurotic compulsions and anxieties of white writers and readers.⁵ It is thus, ironically, the fixation on the gothic, the old, and the dead, that causes me to find Faulkner’s texts as useful sites for thinking about modernity and the (im)possibility of a future after the scene of the plantation.

My goal in this work is to bring together Spillers’ analyses of *repetition* and the figure of the *mulatto/a*, to see how their intersection generates a certain kind of *temporality* for post-slavery subjectivities. Looking at the narrative reconfigurations of the ‘mulatto/a’ to that of the ‘mixed race’ subject, what is at stake for the “post-” in “post-slavery subjectivities”? I begin with “Faulkner Adds Up”, tracking the strata of repetition from the intimate/readerly to the macro/national scales. In the process, I follow Spillers’ linguistic link between the problem of psychic repetition with that of social reproduction, as issues of “keeping it going” or generating a narrative temporality. I then turn to “Neither/Nor: Notes on an Alternative Model”, focusing on the curious and paradoxical temporality associated with the figure of the *mulatto/a*. Finally, I aim to ‘cross-pollinate’ my readings, that is, to pose the question of how the ‘mulatto/a’ structures the repetition of the plantation myth by way of exclusion, or: *how do monstrous intimacies warp and weave the substance of racial purity, and the historical time of the plantation dynasty?*

In “Faulkner Adds Up: Reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*”, Spillers focuses on the function of *repetition* in Faulkner’s work, posing the question of how “we might look at style [...] as a *symptom?*”⁶ *Absalom* is primarily a story about stories, told and retold, structured by Quentin Compson’s repetitions of the Sutpen myth — the story of plantation owner Thomas Sutpen, and the rise and fall of his dynastic ambitions, communicated to Quentin from a variety of sources. In its repeated phrases, contradictory versions of events, and recirculation between timelines, “*linearity* is absolutely ruined here[.]”⁷ The reader takes on the role of Quentin Compson – trying desperately to piece the details together, circling back in the text, straining their memory for the facts. That is to say, the *reader’s* temporality is also thwarted, as the novel is too relentless or overwhelming to casually pick up or put down. Consequently, writes Spillers, “reading Faulkner is not entirely unlike *placing one’s own time on hold* in a state of supreme irritability and aggravation.”⁸ But what’s at stake for all these retellings and repetitions? What’s with the sense of dread and foreboding that it manages to cultivate – foreboding of *what?*

1 Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 33.

2 Ibid.

3 Spillers, 340.

4 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

5 Ibid.

6 Spillers, 339.

7 Spillers, 343.

8 Spillers, 342.

The problem of *psychic* repetition for Quentin Compson (qua Hortense Spillers) recalls the question posed by Freud at the beginning of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”: why do we repeat what is unpleasant in order to attain pleasure? Or, operating in a literary or cultural mode; why do we repeat the stories of our traumas even as they reopen the pain in our memory? In the case of Faulkner, the reader might wonder why its miserable subjects do not go *anywhere else* but the old, dead, hot South – but as Quentin reminds us in his Harvard dorm room, leaving the South does not mean the South has left him. Quentin’s compulsions “[exhibit] a perfection and precision of logic [...] repeats as if compelled by law, and it is the law of a missed encounter with reality that repetition is said to commemorate.”⁹ On the one hand, then, repetition re-instantiates a lost origin, stabilizing the subject by deepening the linguistic pathways in which speech operates. However, if repetition serves to stabilize identity, then so too does every repetition involve “an interval between the acts, as it were, in which risk and excess threaten to disrupt the identity being constituted.”¹⁰ As the frame narrative of *Absalom* is overwhelmed by its content, and the repetitive schemas multiply, the anxiety to which the reader is exposed is precisely this foundational lack or finitude. In the final section of the novel, Quentin and his Harvard roommate Shreve continue the narrative repetitions, veering off from the established facts and into their own speculations. Shreve and Quentin’s midnight meeting function as “*bedtime stories* [staving] off the threat of sleep – the little death that the child in the man or woman still remembers fearing and resisting.”¹¹ Repetition, one of the formal games of “the dazzle of language *as a way to keep it going*”, thus simultaneously reproduces identity and defers the anticipation of death, while opening identity to crisis in the silence between utterances.¹²

At the absent center of *Absalom* sits the figure of Thomas Sutpen, and the place where the repetition of the name of the father becomes a wholly literal enterprise of social and bodily reproduction. Here, pushing against the traditional ethnocentrism of psychoanalysis, Spillers links the issue of psychic repetition with Faulkner’s signification of race and the narrative formation of the ‘New World’. In this way, although “the subject of race, as well as that of other economies of victimage, is not really a *pointee* [...] but a *pointer*,” it is “no less dangerous for all that.”¹³ For if Quentin’s compulsive repetitions structure and undermine his own identity, then it cannot be neglected how the *scene of the plantation*, the re-presentation of spectacular brutality as a kind of seduction, makes up the material of his performance. And what this “romance” provides an alibi for is *itself* a kind of repetition: in authoring a dynasty, Sutpen writes a “biotext” through the blood of his (legally claimed) descendants.¹⁴ Moreover, as we learn later in the novel, Sutpen’s time in Mississippi is preceded by a family he has since abandoned in Haiti, Charles and Eulalia Bon. After “winning” Eulalia’s hand in marriage from a plantation owner as recompense for putting down a slave revolt, Sutpen learns that Eulalia has that most undesirable “single drop” of African descent. Summarily deciding that Eulalia (and their child Charles) are unfit for his dynastic aspirations, Sutpen leaves Haiti to start. In this way, the problem of repetition is not “merely” psychic or linguistic, but wholly material – insofar as *flesh* is one of the substances on which the repetitive game is played, and the name of the father inscribed.

In “Neither/Nor: Notes on an Alternative Model”, Spillers focuses instead on the figure of the tragic mulatto/a, and his/her function as “an alibi, an excuse for ‘other/otherness’ that the dominant culture could not (cannot now either) appropriate, or wish away.” The tragic mulatto/a appears to exist “out of time” with the narrative rhythm of the plantation; “time passes for [the tragic mulatto], over and around him, *but it has no subjective properties that he might call his own*.”¹⁵ Charles Bon appears, for Sutpen, as if from another lifetime, a “return of the repressed” whose presence in the narrative signifies both the hidden origins and looming end of the dynasty.¹⁶ With respect to the *sterility* implied by the etymology of ‘mulatto’, Bon

9 Spillers, 356.

10 Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. (Routledge, 1993), 317.

11 Spillers, 362.

12 Ibid.

13 Spillers, 348.

14 Spillers, 328.

15 Spillers, 304. Emphasis added.

16 Spillers, 306.

(and the name's transformation into *Bond*), provide one possible pointer to the fear of oblivion (or loss of purity) that motivates and finally consumes the patriarch's reproduction of his legacy. However, if in the formation of the 'mulatto/a', one observes "the *theft* of the dynamic principle of the living that distinguishes the subject from his/her objectification," a function to recontain and secure 'pure' racial lines (and the anxiety over the failure to do so), then the *mulatta* presents a unique promise and problem as a doubly-excluded figure.

Quentin's father, Jason Compson, concedes that amongst his three categories of "ladies, women, and females" – marriageable daughters, child-rearing mothers, and chattel – the existence of the third category is what secures the virginity of the first, and their summary progression into the second. Enslavement (or its codification in the color line) constitutes the condition of immobility from which narrating historical movement becomes possible. The "mulatta," Spillers suggests, is excluded precisely because she would allow a recombination of "woman" with "female" – and, it would seem, the "full" and "empty" stages of femininity in the process.¹⁷ Compounding the mystery, the name of Charles Bon's mother, "Eulalia", is only provided by the seemingly parodic timeline and list of characters included in the back of the novel. That the silent and absent character is named "well-spoken" is perhaps another hint that this is merely "displacement for a proper name, an instance of the 'paradox of the negative' that signifies what it does not mean."¹⁸ If Bon, as the tragic mulatto, points towards Sutpen's "original sin" of miscegenation and ultimate downfall — then what does this shadow, this absence of a woman named 'Eulalia' lead us toward, if not the "actual" subject underneath?

The question I want to pose, at this stage of my reading of Spillers-reading-Faulkner (-writing-Quentin-reading-Sutpen), is: *where is the mulatto/a figured into or excluded from the reproduction of the plantation dynasty and the narrative repetition of its mythology?* When Charles Bon is first introduced in Rosa Coldfield's narration to Quentin, he only signifies the *end*, the prophesied doom of the Sutpen line. It is only later, when we learn about Charles' mother, that the reader (along with Quentin) turns backwards in time to the crime of the dynasty's foundation. In other words: the violated prohibition of incest/miscegenation does not only stand at the *downfall* of the dynasty, but also at its *inception* (although we might observe that Sutpen's "original sin" here is less his marriage to Eulalia than his bloody suppression of a slave revolt). In the conclusion of "Neither/Nor", Spillers makes reference to the ambivalent status of the mulatta, whose invention has "virtually assured [the master's] success," and yet exposes the master to the temptation of incest – the discovery "of his daughter [...] in the bed of his wife."¹⁹ If the mulatta "heals the rupture at the point of wounding," does this mean the exclusion of the mulatta signifies precisely the silence between utterances – the empty space between repetitive acts, which is *both* their ruination *and* the condition of possibility for a new beginning?²⁰

If "[l]ike the *pharmakon*, the blood is both the antidote and the poison", it is because *blood* itself is a kind of writing or technomnesia by which memory is simultaneously extended and destroyed.²¹ *Extended*, in that "blood" is how the mythic founding patriarch inscribes himself into human memory through his descendents; but *destroyed* in that the myth of a "pure line" must obscure and repress the means by which the "noble" line is selected and differentiated in order to maintain its legitimacy. As it stands, I have only provided an answer for my own question within the limited context of *Absalom* and the character of "Eulalia Bon." Extending this question, of the exclusion of the mulatto/a, into the present day would require a more careful examination of contemporary discourses on racial admixture and futurity. What might it mean to invert the question – to, instead of asking about *mixture* as the loss of racial purity, consider the *undifferentiated flesh* as an entity with its own positively-defined existence?

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

17 Spillers, 308.

18 Spillers, 304.

19 Spillers, 318.

20 Spillers 308.

21 Spillers, 318.

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