



Incest, Miscegenation, and (Non)Linear Time in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Of One Blood*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration – though by no means a resolution – of the complex ways in which incest and miscegenation carry the potential to trouble heteropatriarchal, Western colonial concepts of linear time, especially as it relates to the family tree and dynastic futurity, all demonstrated through the lens of two 20th century American novels – William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood*. Referring to the plot of both novels, I lay out one potential understanding of the relationship between incest, miscegenation, and time. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of arborescence is used as a theoretical basis, with further arguments taken from Hortense Spillers and Jared Sexton.

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He looked at the two huge rotting gate posts in the starlight, between which no gates swung now, wondering from what direction Bon and Henry had ridden up that day, wondering what had cast the shadow which Bon was not to pass alive; if some living tree which still lived and bore leaves and shed or if some tree gone, vanished, burned for warmth and food years ago now or perhaps just gone¹

Time plays an important role in both William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*. In the former, it is broken, nonlinear and tangled like a clump of roots, a rhizome, weaving this way and that and emerging from the earth at random intervals to grow into seemingly unrelated shoots. This fractured timeline seems to stand as a repudiation of everything Thomas Sutpen believed in: the linear progression of dynasty and empire through generations, the future as legacy, marked forever with his name and traceable back to him in a straight line. Instead the narrative that we get is one that, while still centered on Sutpen, goes in every direction from the taproot of his person, back into his past which he seeks to forget, forward into the future which is nothing like the one he dreamed of, and to the sides into the lives of his family which were destroyed by him, and destroyed him in turn.

In *Of One Blood*, the past and future both haunt and bless Reuel, his clairvoyance and his heritage being intricately linked. He sees brief visions and glimpses of the future which lead him to both love and despair, and he is ultimately defined by his past – or, more accurately, the past of his blood; both in the sense that his biracial identity, if made public, circumscribes his chances in America, and in the sense that he is heir to an empire he did not know existed and which will define his future. It is also his past – his *other* past, the past of his white side – which reaches out, in the form of Aubrey, to attempt to destroy him. Dianthe has no past or future – her story begins with her loss of a past in the form of amnesia, and it ends when she rediscovers it and it leads to her death.

Both of these stories are about miscegenation and incest, but they are also both about time, the future, and the past. These themes are linked to each other, interwoven like Faulkner's many narratives, which brings us to my question: how do miscegenation and incest fit into western conceptions of linear time? Do they fit at all, or do they instead contradict them?

As I ponder these questions I find myself drawn, again and again, to Deleuze and Guattari's seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, which introduces the concepts of *arborescent* and *rhizomatic* thought. The authors being who they are, there is no simple, one-sentence definition of these terms to be found anywhere in the text, but the gist of this plant-based metaphor is this: arborescent thought follows the structure of a tree; it has a central idea, or concept, or binary, that all other thoughts must flow from, like branches out of the trunk of a tree, or roots out of the central taproot, all subservient to the central whole. Rhizomatic thought is modeled on the rhizome – a root structure where roots spread out horizontally, with no central point and with the potential to break through the earth and bud at multiple locations, creating a network of seemingly independent plants with no fulcrum which are nevertheless all interconnected underground.

Deleuze and Guattari describe Western culture as arborescent, entrenched in these linear, centralized models of perceiving the world. They give the example of the standard evolutionary model – linear, “arborescent descent going from least to most differentiated”² – but the same pattern can be seen elsewhere. What is colonialism if not arborescence inscribed upon geography, the world conceptualized as a single, imperial trunk, with everything else being either already branches and roots of that trunk, or destined to become such? What is Freudian psychoanalysis if not the human mind conceptualized as centered on the literal trunk of the phallus? This model can be seen repeated again and again, when one knows what to look for. In particular, I want to posit that our cultural perception of time is a prime example of arborescence in action, with the single, linear “trunk” of time growing only ever in one direction. More importantly for us here, however, is that this model of time is reflected in that most iconic of arboreal imagery – the family tree. A central trunk, representing the linear passage of time, with branches and offshoots going in many directions, but always *up* and *out*, pushing forward through time in time with the main trunk while also growing out of it, spreading its shadow

1 William Faulkner. *Absalom, Absalom!* (Distributed Proofreaders Canada, 1936), 354.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 10.

and influence ever wider, all the while growing out of deep roots the remembrance of which is central to the function of family trees.

It is this tree that Thomas Sutpen built his plantation to nurture, the tree of Dynasty and Empire, made up of heirs to carry the Sutpen trunk forward and up, into the heavens. It is this tree, metaphorically speaking, whose roots were first planted in Sutpen's mind as a child when he made his fateful decision, sitting in a cave "with his back against the uptorn roots" of a literal tree.³ It is also, albeit less directly referenced, this tree that haunts Aubrey, Reuel and Dianthe, branches that think themselves separate but end up being drawn back by the trunk and, in the case of Aubrey and Dianthe, consumed by it. And it is this tree that can be used to illustrate the ways in which incest and miscegenation trouble our conceptions of linear time and futurity.

Incest is simpler. It is a branch of the tree twisting back around and growing into itself, or even growing backwards in the case of inter-generational incest; if it produces offspring (which all incest does, symbolically, for it is the offspring of incest that are most feared, rather than incest itself) those offspring cannot be neatly drawn on the family tree. They cannot be merely another branch growing *up* and *out*, because they are simultaneously growing *down* and *in*. Incest threatens dynastic futurity, even as it reinforces its purity by keeping it contained within the family, because it renders linear lines of descent into a confusing, tangled mess. We see this non-linearity of incest in *Of One Blood*, where the climactic reveal of the book (that of the incest, and almost-incest, between the three main characters) disrupts the otherwise largely linear time of the book, suddenly thrusting us back into the past, but also thrusting the past forward into the present to collide with the protagonists.

Miscegenation is messier. It is tempting to think of it as merely the combining of two "racial trees," much like two families are combined through marriage, but, in the hegemonic white supremacist worldview which still dominates racial discourse, there is no "Black tree." Whiteness is the trunk of the only tree there is and there can be no parallel, or, god forbid *equal*, trunk outside of it. Only whiteness is given the right of a past and a future. With whiteness conceptualized as total purity, which can be rendered non-white, and therefore without future, through even the slightest mixing of blood, miscegenation presents a clear and obvious threat to dynastic futurity – its offspring can seemingly continue the linear growth of the tree while rendering that growth invalid, unacceptable as continuation of the bloodline. In *Amalgamation Schemes*, Jared Sexton writes about how interracial relationships are only seen as valid when their offspring are, in turn, validated as acceptable carriers of the future⁴ – i.e. once the perceived threat to futurity is alleviated. Until such a time, the multiracial person is cut off from both past and future – denied access to a legitimate claim on their heritage on either side, and seen as an invalid continuation of the family tree. Hortense Spillers writes: "Time passes for him, over and around him, but it has no subjective properties that he might call his own."⁵ Miscegenation does not *inherently* disrupt the linear structure of the family tree, as incest does, but it is *made to do so* by the arbitrary racial lines in the sand that circumscribe the fragile tree of whiteness. We see an example of both this and the opposite in *Of One Blood*, where the dynasty of Aubrey's father is ultimately ended by Reuel, his biracial child, but the ruling dynasty of Telassar welcomes its biracial offshoot as a legitimate heir, thus securing its futurity. This could be seen as a consequence of the different ways whiteness and Blackness are conceptualized – whiteness as purity which must be preserved, Blackness as potentially carried even by those of extremely diluted blood – but it can also be seen as offering an alternative model, one in which the family tree is not bound by racial anxieties (or linear progression, for that matter – there is a centuries-long interruption in linearity between Reuel and his ancestry in Telassar, but he is still recognized as king).

I began with a quote from *Absalom, Absalom!* about the death of Charles Bon. It is a question posed near the end of the book, when Bon's arrival has already uprooted the Sutpen family tree – not through his almost-incest with his half-sister, but through the revelation of his racial origins, the bringing-into-the-present of a past Sutpen wished to bury. This, too, is a disruption of linear time – the past curving forward around decades of time to strike down the future.

3 Faulkner, 226.

4 Jared Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 159.

5 Hortense Spillers. "Notes on an Alternative Model–Neither/Nor," in *Black, White, and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 304.

The same thing happens again shortly after the passage in question, when a different part of Sutpen buried past – Clytemnestra, his other biracial child – burns what little is left of the family tree to the ground, leaving only one heir to the Sutpen dynasty, an heir denied both past and future by the very structure of linear dynastic descent. The tree that cast the shadow which killed Charles Bon is also the family tree, which he, in turn, killed, dynastic linearity devouring those who defy it, but also crumbling in the face of that defiance. It is no accident that Sutpen made his fateful decision leaning on the upturned roots of a tree – it is the deep rooting of his own family tree that he sought all his life, and it is that very desire that ended up uprooting it.

Of course, this is only one possible answer, and not one without problems. While the idea of interracial reproduction as the bane of white dynastic futurity resulting from its own rejection of the racial other is an appealing one, it is also one that potentially feeds into hegemonic white supremacist narratives, as Sexton notes. Likewise, this narrative risks conflating incest and interracial relationships, which carries with it its own host of troubling implications if done in bad faith or without proper care. I also did not have time, within the scope of this paper, to touch on the extremely complex interaction of queerness with linear time as reified in the family tree. Thus it is important to note that the narrative I propose here is not meant to definitively answer my question, nor is it even necessarily the answer I would personally give. It is merely an answer, which in true rhizomatic fashion, is only one of many possibilities.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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