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Resituating Faulkner: Faulkner, Proletarian Literature, and Post-Depression Culture

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Resituating Faulkner: Faulkner, Proletarian Literature, and Post-Depression Culture

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I. Introduction

At the 1995 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, Faulkner in Cultural Context, John T. Matthews presented an essay titled “Faulkner and Proletarian Literature” in hopes of steering Faulkner studies back to the historical and cultural context of the post-depression years of the 1930s. As he states from the very outset, he intended for his title to be “a little odd” and a little disconcerting for the many Faulkner scholars present and also hoped that it would spark a variety of interests. For many years, through the sedimentation of Faulkner criticism, “Faulkner” and “Proletarian Literature” have been conceived of and accepted as starkly distinct, self-enclosed, and unconnected categories. However, Matthews brackets this critical tradition and attempts to establish meaningful connections between Faulkner’s 1930s texts and “arguably the foremost cultural enterprise of the decade, the widespread effort of artists and intellectuals to imagine and instigate a class revolution in the United States” (167).

Matthews proceeds by taking note of the obvious and seemingly indisputable dissimilarities which has sundered Faulkner from the supposedly more socially conscious and political-minded proletarian writers. First, Faulkner’s public statements demonstrate a firm belief in patient and measured progress, which suggests a conservative worldview at stark odds with the radical and revolutionary fervor that was sweeping through the 1930s and early 1940s. Second, Faulkner openly renounced the types of literature that subordinated stories of individuals to abstract depictions of society. Third and most obvious, he employed modernist techniques and a modernist style to fully develop his stories of individuals. Faulkner’s commitment to a modernist aesthetic conflicted with the many literary prescriptions and manifestos that the proletarian avant-garde were

promulgating. Matthews concentrates specifically on the criticism Mike Gold, a central figure of the proletarian avant-garde and editor of the proletarian magazine *New Masses*, who “insisted that literature portray ‘real conflicts’ of the ‘suffering of hungry, persecuted and heroic millions,’ not ‘the sickly mental states of the idle Bohemians’” (168). This criticism appears to have great merit when considering prominent examples on whose consciousness Faulkner concentrates most penetratingly, namely Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Horace Benbow in *Sanctuary*, and Gail Hightower in *Light in August*. Far from being members of an impoverished working-class, these characters were for Gold prime examples of the Southern bourgeoisie that suffer “the psychic trauma debilitating the guilty heirs of corrupted Southern ideals” (Matthews 168). Given this preliminary sketch of Faulkner’s politically conservative statements, his modernist aesthetic, and the radical social realism of the proletarian writers, there seems to be a real and unbridgeable gap between the two.

However, Matthews questions this accepted belief and argues that both Faulkner’s text and the proletarian literary tradition must be rethought. For Matthews, Faulkner’s fiction “treats so many issues central to proletarianism, and does so with at least a keen sense of the injustices suffered by individuals under plantocratic and later mercantile capitalism” (169). Matthews proceeds to analyze important connections between Faulkner and proletarian literature, introducing ways of thinking outside this received opposition. His essay is important not only for its groundbreaking work in an unrealized and understudied area of Faulkner studies but also because it is a call for more investigation and analysis. As I began my research for this thesis project, I initially hoped to find an area of Faulkner studies that was not exhausted or so thoroughly

analyzed that my work would become a simple review of recent criticism. Matthews' call for research in this direction offers a path for a substantial study that examines how Faulkner both relates and responds to the cultural enterprises that in many important ways defined and shaped the 1930s and early 1940s.

As Matthews notes, both Faulkner's texts and the proletarian literary movement should be rethought so as to establish a relationship between the two, and in order to accomplish this, I have divided this thesis into four sections. In the first section, I will discuss the social and cultural context of the 1930s and early 1940s. I spend time developing this historical narrative because I believe not only that it is important to resituate Faulkner within this historical period but also that the developments of this period affected both his and proletarian writers' texts. In the second section, I will discuss how proletarian literature developed into a cultural formation, with particular attention to its developmental stages. However, while it is important to analyze "proletarian literature" as a dynamic and changing formation, I do not maintain that its borders as a formation are so rigid that writers who are considered "inside" do not relate to writers considered "outside." If this formation is approached as porous, with significant relations to what literary historians have labeled the Modernist movement, then scholarship can begin to examine how a "high modernist" like Faulkner relates to "proletarian" writers. Taking this approach in the two following sections, I will analyze how Faulkner relates to two of the most prominent writers of the proletarian literature formation, Richard Wright and Tillie Olsen. In the third section, I will consider how these writers approach and represent the institution of education, which was a central concern during this period, and in the fourth section, I will examine how each portrays

the film industry and its influence on the viewing public. Ultimately, the intent of this thesis is to rethink the relationship between Faulkner and “proletarian writers,” which will illuminate important ways in which Faulkner, like his “proletarian” counterparts, can be understood as significantly responding to the revolutionary social and cultural movements of the 1930s and early 1940s.

II. A Turn to the Left

The 1930s and early 1940s was a period of great disruption and agitation, a time when a large portion of the American public questioned many of the American social structures and institutions. During this period, many Americans began to reshape their political standpoints, fostering a broad leftist sensibility.¹ An interesting question that arises from this trend and which I wish to analyze is why the left had such a mass appeal. Generally, two main historical events have been credited with this turn: the Great Depression and the international rise of fascism. The impact of these two events have explained not only the cause and effect of this turn but also its conclusion, for if the turn was an effect of the impact of these two events, then the seeming defeat of fascism and the stabilization of the American economy would be the end of this turn. Nevertheless, I will approach the Depression and the fear of fascism as the initial catalyst for this turn to the left, which will allow me to further analyze how this turn was sustained and further catalyzed by an emerging left culture. Thus, I will provide a general account of this emergence and examine the mechanisms by which it gained such wide appeal.

¹ By left, I mean what Michael Denning terms “the tradition of radical democratic movements for social transformation” (9).

I would like to acknowledge beforehand that in constructing the narrative that follows, I am generally indebted to Michael Denning's comprehensive study of this emerging culture *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture* (1997). From the outset of his text, Denning urges that the 1930s and early 1940s was a unique period in that a large portion of the cultural producers and those within the culture industries and institutions were affiliated with the social movements and initiatives of the left. Through their combined efforts, a new left culture gradually emerged. Denning approaches and explains the emergence of this culture by analyzing two broader social transformations of American life: first, "the appearance of a powerful mass social movement, the Popular Front, based on the unprecedented organization of industrial workers in the new unions of the CIO;" second, "the remarkable development ... of the cultural industries of mass entertainment and the state cultural institutions" (4).

The first of these social transformations, the Popular Front, has been shrouded in obscurity, mainly because discourse has hinged on a discussion of and an obsession with Communism. However, for Denning, this cannot and has not produced an adequate analysis of this powerful mass movement: "The Popular Front, we are told, was made up of Communists and fellow-traveling liberals; the center was red, the periphery, shades of pink. ... A fixation on the Party ... has left enormous gaps in our knowledge of the radical past" (5). Instead of focusing on the question of Communism, he analyzes this movement first in terms of its material base, namely the large numbers of unions produced by the CIO, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and second its political and cultural superstructure that came to define its general hopes, values, and interests.

By the 1930s, American unionization had become a persistent trend among laborers. Although there are instances of unionization and union strikes much earlier in American labor history, this period stands out for the national solidarity and mass support for unionization. A major catalyst for both the unionizing efforts was the Great Depression. For many, the years immediately following 1929 had become a strong indicator that American capitalism and the American way of life were virtually in ruins. Moreover, it gradually became more evident that the plight and powerlessness of laborers in this capitalist system, a plight that many groups, such as the socialist and American communist, had previously tried to raise before public consciousness, became a central, unavoidable, and obvious element of 1930s American life. With guidance and reassurance from these once maligned groups, many laborers in a variety of industries, gradually began to believe that the obvious response was to gain necessary bargaining power by developing and strengthening unions through their resolute membership.

Nevertheless, the largest wave of nationally based unionization did not occur until after June 16, 1933, the signing of the National Industrial Recovery Act. As part of Roosevelt's expansive New Deal program, the intent of the NIRA was to stimulate economic growth, recovery, and stabilization. Although the U.S. Supreme Court would eventually strike down the NIRA as unconstitutional in 1935, the American Federation of Labor, a group that developed during the 1920s, and the Trade Union Unity League, a unionist organization led by the Communist party, took advantage of this legislation by recruiting an unprecedented number of laborers. With this influx and a confidence in the solidarity of unionized laborers, these two organizations were extremely instrumental in the events of 1934, the year of the largest and most inclusive general strikes in American

history. Describing the general strikes in the textile and agricultural industries, Denning writes:

A new militancy and solidarity among American working people appeared as the battles of San Francisco's longshoremen, Minneapolis's teamsters, and Toledo's auto-parts workers won the allegiance of citizens and neighbors. General strikes brought each city to a halt, figuring, however briefly, a cooperative commonwealth. In September 1934, a national textile strike became the largest strike in a single industry in American history, involving 400,000 workers from Maine to Alabama. Strikes in California's factories in the fields were the largest agricultural strikes in American history. (xiv)

In 1935, inspired by the general success and solidarity of the 1934 strikes, the CIO first began to develop as an offshoot unionist organization from within the AFL ranks. Three major unions provided the foundation for this group: the United Mine Workers and the two largest needle trade unions, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. What was once a fledgling organization, the CIO quickly became the largest and most powerful federation of industrial unions. Moreover, as the CIO continued to flourish, it became ever more inclusive. The composition of the CIO movement marked a novel period in the history of the American proletarian class, for never before had there been such unity and class recognition, despite pronounced racial and ethnic diversity. With the combined effect of the large influx of immigrants entering industrial industries, Southern blacks migrating from the Jim Crow South, and the CIO unions gaining in popularity, the 1930s witnessed the emergence of a working class that began to recognize its power and increasing

solidarity. Furthermore, the CIO movement also attempted to unite and establish a cooperative relationship with a new middle-class that was emerging from within the ranks the cultural industries. Many of these middle-class professionals began to organize into unions that gradually began to gain membership into the CIO. Although this inclusion of middle-class laborers evoked much controversy and internal divisions within the proletarian movement, this seems to be where it was the most ambitious and idealistic. Thus, the American working class was not only taking on a novel form but also was establishing significantly cooperative relationships with newly emerging middle-class laborers.

This new working class, with its cosmopolitan composition, rising self-recognition, and incipient relationships with a new middle class, became the base of the Popular Front movement. The laborers of the CIO unions generally petitioned for three important issues: “laborite social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching” (Denning 4). The Popular Front, the broad social movement of 1935, organized around these concerns and developed initiatives which took on three public forms: “a social democratic electoral politics; a politics of anti-fascist and anti-imperialist solidarity; and a civil liberties campaign against lynching and labor repression” (Denning 9). In its development, the Popular Front was able to unite “industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists” (Denning 4), and it also sought to continue the initiative of establishing an alliance between these groups and the new middle-class laborers in the cultural industries.

This leads directly into the second social transformation that Denning analyzes as fueling the emergence of the 1930s left culture, namely “the remarkable development ...

of the cultural industries of mass entertainment and the state cultural institutions” (4).

The Popular Front movement, while promoting itself as a national people’s movement, took on distinct forms, depending on the regional location. The focus of the movement in these regions was influenced by the specific labor unions and cultural industries.

Depending on the region, the Popular Fronts concentrated on the major mass cultural industries, such as the film production, radio broadcasting, music production, newspaper and magazine publications, publishing houses, theaters, art galleries and museums.

Although many regions were not “cultural centers,” the laborers of these regions made important contributions. On the one hand, desperate for work, many artists and rank and file workers migrated to centers in hopes of finding work in the cultural industries. On the other hand, those who were not directly involved in the production sphere, such as the CIO laborers in industrial and agricultural centers, constituted a majority of the consumers of these products. Thus many cultural producers and general workers, with some type of connection to the Popular Front movement, began to infiltrate the cultural industries and institutions, greatly affecting the cultural products being produced, and thereby providing many CIO laborers and those turning toward the left with cultural productions with which they could intimately identify and sympathize. In this instance, the Popular Front initiatives were continuing to catalyze the emergence of and support for this left culture.

The Popular Front’s focus on these cultural industries also points to a shift in American culture, specifically how the technological and industrial advances in the means of production and distribution radically transformed American culture. With the rise of mass-produced and mass-distributed cultural artifacts , the popular arts produced

in the cultural industries took on a new significance in American culture. Denning comments on this phenomenon:

[The years between the early 20th century and the 1930s] had witnessed the emergence of narrative films ... and the Hollywood studio system that manufactured them. They had seen the invention of broadcasting, the unprecedented provision of free mass entertainment in the home, paid for by incessant advertising, a form that was entirely unexpected by the inventors of radio communication and that would come to dominate television communication as well. The development of sound recording had put popular musics not only on the radio but in the home and on the local jukebox, transforming an industry that based on the sale of sheet music into one based on sale of 78s. The tabloid, the weekly newsmagazine, and the newsreel transformed mass journalism, with Henry Luce's empire – the weekly national newsmagazine *Time*, the photojournalism of *Life*, and the radio and film newsreels *The March of Time* – leading the way. Popular fiction came to be dominated by the symbiotic relation between the pulp magazines and pulp magazines and radio serials and soap opera.

(39)

These mass entertainment industries became the locus of American culture and thus culture could no longer be understood as something reserved for an elite and educated class. What had previously fallen under the rubric of “high culture” was now mass produced and readily and cheaply accessible for much of the population. Moreover, the cultural products of the working-class, immigrant, and African American artists were also now available to these educated, leisured classes. This entwining created a unique

situation in the history of American culture, one that had as its basis the “‘popularization’ of high culture and the diffusion of ‘proletarian’ and ‘folk’ culture” (42).

However, I must mention that I do not intend to suggest that the Popular Front movements simply and immediately gained the means to production because they had infiltrated these industries. In actuality, the ability to produce was a location of great struggle and political conflict, depending, in large part, on like-minded producers and independent studios and distribution companies. This suggests an important point: although working- and middle-class American consumers were devouring these productions at an increasing pace, a few powerful capitalists and capitalist corporations were currently in control of the most powerful and influential industries. The likelihood of the Popular Front movement, therefore, having a significant effect on these industries was quite slim and would probably have remained on the margins. However, the New Deal federal intervention program, the Works Progress Administration, entered into this struggle, on the one hand, by creating jobs for many of the Popular Front artists and workers and, on the other hand, providing them with means to produce alternative artifacts outside the influence of these capitalist industries. For example, the WPA had also established its own governmental cultural programs: “The cultural projects ran orchestras, theaters, and community art centers, and produced thousands of public murals and radio programs, over eight hundred plays, and the famous *America Guide* series of tour books” (Denning 45).² Thus, this federal relief program seriously threatened the hegemony of the cultural industries by entering the struggle over productive power, which as a result seriously altered these industries during the 1930s.

² While the WPA projects created many jobs for artists and workers, these jobs were specific and monitored. Similar to the cultural industries but to a lesser extent, there was also much struggle over artistic license.

This “cultural war” dominated the 1930s and early 1940s, which may be one reason why such energy was expended on theorizing about this intersection of economic depression, mass unionizing, mass entertainment, and the expanding number of cultural laborers. Critics focused on various issues: Lewis Corey recognized the importance of a new class of mental laborers; Kenneth Burke attempted to develop a politics for the new working class; the émigré Marxists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued that the new forms of mass entertainment degraded culture and developed a passive, resigned audience. Although these critics took different, often contradictory positions on the new class of mental laborers, the development and effects of mass entertainment, and the Popular Front itself, each critic was attempting to assess and understand the emergence of and struggle over cultural production. During the 1930s and early 1940s, this new left culture was thriving, with a strong base of informed CIO unionized workers and a growing number of active and influential cultural producers, who were steadily gaining access to the means of cultural production. Although some argue that the revolutionary fervor of this period was solely dependent upon the economic instability of the Great Depression and the increasing threat of fascism, it seems more likely that these external factors initially catalyzed the public’s dissatisfaction with the status quo, which helped union organizations and the cultural industries to further catalyze the emergence of an influential left culture. By the end of the 1930s, this emerging culture was self-sustaining and struggling alongside the dominant American culture, a struggle that was disrupted not by economic stability and the end of fascism but by a war and the homogenizing mechanisms that accompanied it. Thus, despite the debate that surrounds the Popular Front, it is clear that artists, intellectuals, and cultural producers and workers from

various classes, influenced by the recent labor initiatives of the left, began to produce cultural projects for a growing audience turning toward the left, which continued to catalyze the general turn to the left by gaining support from and uniting broad, diverse audiences.

III. (Re) Forming Proletarian Literature

A significant and constitutive part of the emerging left culture was the cultural formation of “proletarian literature,” a formation that has practically escaped contemporary American memory.³ According to Denning, in literary studies that actually had focused on proletarian literature, critics suggested that proletarian literature was a peculiar formation, a seemingly dark age of American literature, which only took a matter of time for writers to move beyond. This critique coincides with the similar belief that the radicalism of the 1930s and early 1940s was simply a brief effect of the Depression and the rise of fascism, or more specifically, that these events produced a short-lived, public anxiety, which led to this transitory writing style. Narratives of this type make it quite easy to ignore proletarian literature, for, by these standards, it was a transient and isolated cultural phenomenon that had neither a significant effect on nor sustaining connections with the history of American literature. According to this account, proletarian literature is simply a semblance of or sideshow to the “real” literature that constitutes the American literary canon. However, proletarian literature should be reexamined, not as a peculiar phenomenon that should be repressed or swept away from the gaze of critical analysis but as an integral component of not only the emerging left

³ By reviewing the critical studies of proletarian literature, I found that until the late 1980s and early 1990s, proletarian literature did not receive critical attention from literary or cultural critics, which suggests that for a long period it was practically forgotten and simply ignored.

culture but also the history of American Literature. In my approach to “proletarian literature,” I will initially borrow from Denning’s analysis of it as a formation but will then move away from his arguments because he focuses solely on “proletarian literature.” However, Carey Nelson insists on considering proletarian literature alongside Modernism and suggests that important relations exist between the two, which is quite helpful in my attempt to analyze how Faulkner relates to Wright and Olsen.

Many questions abound as to how one is to begin an examination of “proletarian literature.” Should it be treated as a genre? If so, what is the basis of this genre? Is it based on authors, subject matter, or the audience? Does an author have to be from the working class? Does he or she have to write about the working class and for the working class? Despite these seemingly endless questions, Denning offers a helpful solution to approaching and understanding proletarian literature:

“critical attempts to define “proletarian literature” as a genre all fail because they treat genres as abstract and ahistorical ideal types; they forget that genres are literary institutions that have grown out of particular social formations and must be understood not as a class of objects but as the products of those formations... rather than ask “What is proletarian literature?” or “What is a proletarian writer?” one would better ask “What was the proletarian literary formation?”. (202)

Relying on the work of Raymond Williams, Denning proceeds to define what he means when he claims that “proletarian literature” was a cultural formation:

Proletarian literature was a formation in Raymond Williams’s sense, an alliance of writers, editors, agents, publishers, reviewers, political activists, and readers who came together in formal and informal clubs, magazines, contests,

conferences, schools, and public lectures, as well as at political rallies, in May Day parades, and on picket lines. (202)

In order to analyze a formation like proletarian literature, Denning argues that one must look to the combination of the formation's cultural politics and aesthetic ideology. By cultural politics, he means its "infrastructure, ... the necessary world of publishers, galleries, salons, patrons, and reviewers by which artists and audiences are recruited and mobilized," and by aesthetic ideology, he means "the conscious and unconscious ways of valuing that a cultural formation develops and inculcates, its 'aesthetic,' its sense of what is good, true, and beautiful" (202). Thus, following this lead, I will analyze "proletarian literature" as a cultural formation in terms of its "cultural politics" and its "aesthetic ideology."⁴ However, this formation did not remain static but responded to specific social changes, which I will analyze in two general stages: first, how the proletarian avant-garde responded to the effects of the Great Depression, which was the catalyst for the initial, formative stages; and second, how the formation responded to the relief projects of the WPA.

The cultural politics or infrastructure of this formation was initially founded upon the influential, New York based magazine *New Masses* that was edited by Mike Gold.⁵ Mike Gold was a central figure of the proletarian avant-garde: he was an editor, a writer, and a critic, who from the inception of *New Masses*, was establishing manifestos and recruiting authors, theorists, and critics. During the initial stages of this formation, Gold

⁴ In James F. Murphy's text *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature*, he provides an insightful and thorough analysis of how American proletarian literature initially stemmed from a Russian and then German movement. This is important because it not only traces the formation's initial and international roots but also that this transnational movement did not receive broad attention until the years following the Great Depression.

⁵ *New Masses* was founded in 1926 as a hope of continuing the influence of the older and out-of-print magazine *Masses*, whose editors were also on the editorial board of *New Masses*, until Mike Gold became the sole editor after initial financial struggles.

envisioned many projects that would help promote proletarian art. Recent critic James Murphy describes one these initiatives: “After converting the *New Masses* into an organ of proletarian literature in 1928, he advised young writers to find their material by ‘working as a wage slave around the cities and prairies of America’” (67). Gold does not explicitly set out a criterion for proletarian literature, but he does place heavy emphasis on writings about working class conditions by working-class writers and warns against the tradition of bourgeois writers.⁶ Although he did not set forth or promote a definitive definition of a proletarian aesthetic or proletarian literature, Gold and his *New Masses* instead published many manifestos that were impassioned pleas to encourage members of the proletarian class to write. Increasing in popularity in the early 1930s, *New Masses* more importantly became a national magazine that was giving impoverished writers initiatives to write and an avenue for publication. Thus, *New Masses*, under Gold’s direction, established an important network between its writers and audience.⁷

Moreover, in 1929 the staff of *New Masses* was also responsible for initiating the first John Reed Club in New York, which by the early 1930s became a national reading group that created publications, afforded a location for the intersection of various cultural producers and like-minded consumers, and provided its members with educational opportunities.⁸ The Reed clubs are marked by their recruitment of many young artists who were enflamed with a radical fervor to change their impoverished condition and who

⁶ This is important for my later attempts to establish connections between “proletarian” texts and those of Faulkner. Even Gold himself, who is often seen as the most influential, radical, and anti-modernist critic, did not set forth definite standards, which proletarian writers could and should follow

⁷ Denning provides a good anecdote that illuminates how working-class readers and possible contributors reacted to *New Masses*: “the young Joseph North, the son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants, stated, ‘Mike Gold was Isaiah. ... The monthly *New Masses* arrived at my mailbox in a Pennsylvania city and I could not wait until I tore the wrapper off’” (205).

⁸ Denning states, “in September 1934, after the summer of the general strikes, there were 30 clubs with 1,200 members” (205).

were attempting to perpetuate this commitment through their cultural productions. In the early 1930s, before the implementation of the WPA projects, these Reed clubs provided its members with a necessary network of emotional and material support. While demanding some form of subsidy or relief from the government, they were simultaneously raising funds to support the productive efforts of their members. For the newly forming avant-garde “proletarian” writer, this effort culminated in the publication of small-scale magazines.⁹ Thus, alongside the national and most influential magazine *New Masses*, these clubs were attempting to publish and educate impoverished writers and to put them in contact with an audience on a local level.

Alongside the *New Masses* and the Reed Clubs (and their small publications), politically and financially independent magazines were also sprouting out across the nation in the 1930s, which were more influential in creating the formation’s aesthetic ideology.¹⁰ Unlike the Reed Clubs and the *New Masses*, these publications operated strictly through the mail, or more specifically, the contributors, editors, and readers meet each other in person. Instead, relationships were mainly achieved through the texts. These magazines were substantially different from *New Masses* and the Reed clubs because they were not interested in local politics or movements but instead were mainly interested in publishing literary works. This does not mean, however, that these magazines were not interested in labor struggles and labor movements or more specifically the base of laborers of the emerging left culture: these magazines were

⁹ Denning provides a list of the many JRC magazines that sprung up across the nation: “The Reed club magazines included *Red Boston*; the *Hammer* from Hartford; the *Revolt* from Paterson, New Jersey; the *Red Pen* and *Left Review* from Philadelphia; the *Baltimore John Reed Club Bulletin*; the *John Reed Review* from Washington, D.C.; *Red Spark* from Cleveland; *Midland Left* from Indianapolis; *New Force* from Detroit; *War ...* from Milwaukee; the *Cauldron* from Grand Rapids; *Proletcult* from Seattle and Portland; and the *Partisan Review* from Hollywood ... and New York’s *Partisan Review* and Chicago’s *Left Front*” (209).

¹⁰ Denning terms these magazines, “Mushroom Mags” (211).

simply more concerned with publishing and advocating “proletarian” literature. A simple comparison of the advertisements in these independent magazines and the *New Masses* and the Reed clubs’ bulletin, clearly illustrates the difference: “Whereas the Reed Club bulletins offered lists of events and news of local strikes and political rallies, these proletarian literary magazines featured ads for each other’s journals and current books” (Denning 211). Thus, while the *New Masses* and the Reed clubs were intently focused on recruiting and establishing the infrastructure of this literary formation, these blossoming independent magazines were actively creating the very aesthetic ideology of the formation, which, as a result of the decentralized network that the mushroom magazines had created, became very difficult to place within definable limits.

For the most part, these magazines could be grouped, based on the literature they published, under three general categories: leftist modernism, strict “proletarian,” and African American. First, the radical modernist magazines grew out of the tradition of previous avant-garde modernists magazines. Magazines such as *Pagany*, *Contact*, and *The Left* featured the work of modernist writers like Williams Carlos Williams, John Dos Passos, and Kenneth Burke, who were at the time turning to the left. These magazines contributed greatly to the aesthetics of this formation, infusing it with and introducing it to the modernist tradition. Second, there was also a real thrust for “proletarian” literature in a strict sense, namely working-class writers writing for a working-class audience, by the magazines that followed the lead of Jack Conroy’s *Anvil*. Conroy was the Midwest’s Mike Gold, a novelist, critic, and editor of an important magazine. However, Conroy was distrustful of Gold and the literary circle of New York and despised the European modernist tradition. He and Gold were constantly at odds with one another, each

attempting to promulgate their vision through their magazines and at the various conferences which they attended. The constant disputes between the two are clear manifestations of the contradictions and divisions within the formation's aesthetic ideology.¹¹ Third, there were also magazines devoted strictly to the literary works of African Americans. The two major magazines *The Saturday Evening Quill* (1930-32) and *Challenge* (1934-37), however, took on different formats, with the *Quill* deeply involved with modernism and the *Challenge* more in the tradition of the *Anvil*.

By 1935, the *New Masses* and the Reed Clubs had established a firm infrastructure for the proletarian literary formation, and the "mushroom mags" were creating a diverse yet consistently leftist aesthetics. However, as Denning points out, literary historians and critics suggest that by 1935 proletarian literature had died. How could a formation that seemed to be healthy and flourishing simply disappear? The best way to answer this seemingly bizarre phenomenon is simply to deny that the formation disappeared and argue that instead the formation adapted and changed in response to changing social circumstances. Denning claims that a "clear continuity exists between the radical avant-garde of the early depression and the cultural politics of the mushrooming Popular Front. ... far from being a brief and abortive episode in literary history, the literary formation that emerged under the slogan 'proletarian literature' continued to shape both writers and genres for generations to come" (224). Thus, the formation did not disintegrate or dissolve but adjusted to the changes motivated by the Popular Front and the WPA relief projects.

¹¹ From the Midwest, these magazines included Iowa's *Hub* (1934) and *Dubuque Dial*; Illinois's *New Quarterly* (1933), *Blast* (1933), and *Earth* (1930-32); Oklahoma's *Space* (1934-35); and Wisconsin's *Point* (1934). From the West Coast, these magazines included Beverly Hill's *The Magazine* (1934), Oregon's *The Outlander* (1933), Los Angeles's *Pollen* (1934), and Hollywood's *The New Tide* (1934).

As regards the cultural politics or infrastructure of the early formation, the Popular Front did actually promote and initiate the dissolution of the Reed clubs.¹² However, the Popular Front established in its place the League of American Writers, which was an organization that continued many of the organizing efforts of the earlier clubs. The LAW involved many of the Reed club members and continued to attract many young writers. Moreover, the Popular Front attempted to initiate the establishment of leftist literary institutions, such as “a left-wing book club, the Book Union, the experimental paperback book firm, Modern Age books; George Braziller’s Book Find Club; the attempt by Progress Publishing Company to create a prolabor pulp magazine; and a network of radical bookstores” (Denning 226).

While the work of the LAW was in many respects a continuation of the proletarian avant-garde, there was a significant difference as regards the avenues of work and publication. By 1935, many of the mushroom magazines that had helped create the formation’s aesthetic were no longer in print, but this by no means suggests that the aesthetics and the formation, had vanished: the writers simply had different opportunities for work. Whereas the avant-garde writers of the early Depression years were demanding relief, those very writers were now receiving the much-desired aid. As regards the WPA arts programs, many members of the proletarian avant-garde were able to carry “their proletarian aesthetics into the guidebooks and folklore collections of the Federal Writers Project” (Denning 227). Similarly, many of the writers who contributed to the early mushroom magazines were also finding relief in the newly developing cultural industries. Since these culture industries were expanding both in production and popular appeal,

¹² In large part, the Reed clubs dissolved after the Communist Party withdrew its support, turning towards the initiatives of the Popular Front movement.

they created large demand for cultural producers and workers, which provided many of the avant-garde writers with employment opportunities. Denning states, “many of the plebian writers who first published in the proletarian magazines ended up writing commercial short stories, radio scripts, and screenplays” (227). While the avant-garde writers and readers developed a relationship through various publications and Reed club meetings, these same writers now found relief in either the Federal Writers Project and/or the developing culture industries, which thereby provided them with new popular means and mediums for spreading their aesthetics to an expanding reading, listening, and viewing audience.

Moreover, this formation helped develop the careers Tillie Olsen and Richard Wright and provided them with a public forum for their work. Tillie Olsen was born in Omaha to Russian immigrant parents, who were part of the working-class of this region.¹³ Although she never finished high school, Olsen’s education continued outside the classroom, and at the age of eighteen, she joined the Young Communist League. After a brief stint within the Omaha chapter of this organization, Olsen moved to California, where she became an ardent activist and was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. Along with her activism, Olsen also published short stories in the current mushrooming proletarian magazines. Although it was not until much later that she finally published her masterpiece of the 1930s *Yonnondio*, the text was comprised from manuscripts and drafts written from that period. By providing Olsen with an avenue through which she could develop her writing and through which her writing was much

¹³ This biographical information is borrowed from that provided in Roberts, Nora Ruth. *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel LeSueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst*.

desired by a reading audience, the proletarian literature formation greatly influenced her writing career.

Although Richard Wright was not a second-generation immigrant, he was an African American from the Jim Crow South, who migrated to the northern city of Chicago.¹⁴ Shortly after arriving, he joined the local John Reed Club and became active in the Communist Party. During this time, he not only wrote but also read vociferously. Like Olsen, Wright published in the proletarian magazines, and even after the John Reed Clubs were shut down, Wright remained active in the Popular Front initiatives, especially in the newly formed League of American Writers. Although Wright was gravely disappointed about the dissolution of the Reed clubs, he continued to present lectures for the League of American Writers. Within this formation, Wright found a place in which he could develop his writing and intellectual abilities, and this formation also provided him with a means to publish and discuss his work. Thus, the network that the formation had established was immensely influential throughout Wright's career.

Although both Olsen and Wright were influenced by and took part in this formation, Faulkner's life and career does not display much of a connection with this formation, for he neither was involved in the Reed clubs nor published in proletarian magazines. This leaves the problem open as to whether we can connect Faulkner with and relate him to these writers? This is where, for my purposes, Denning's analysis falls short, for since he remains solely concentrated on this formation, specifically how it came to be a formation and sustained itself both in its incipient stages and after the influence of the Popular Front and WPA, he does not suggest or develop how authors, traditionally

¹⁴ This biographical information is taken and greatly condensed from Hazel Rowley's biography *Richard Wright: Life and Times*.

considered outside this formation, relate to those within the formation. This leaves unresolved how this formation should or could be viewed in relation to both the history of American Literature and to authors, like Faulkner, who are considered within the Modernist tradition.

Although Carey Nelson's work precedes that of Denning, he provides an avenue to approach this problematic. Writing in 1989, amidst much debate and controversy over the literary canon, Carey Nelson enters this discourse with his text *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*.

The title of the text announces Nelson's intentions: first, he wants recognize that specific poetic productions of 1910-1945 have been repressed from our contemporary memory and analyze the mechanisms of this repression, and second, he wants to recover these forgotten poems and poets and analyze how they relate to the modernist movement.

Through this project of recovery, Nelson hopes to:

resist the tendency toward decisive canonical judgments ... (but) to suggest the range of voices, styles, and discourses at work in the period, to point toward rather than wholly represent their writing practices, to provide possible entrances into their work, to raise interest in rather than settle the status of these poets, to identify poetry that may be able again to do useful cultural work in our own time.

(19)

Like Denning, Nelson attempts to recover and reanalyze "proletarian" texts, but he does so in a way that provides a means to reconnect them with what has traditionally been considered the distinct and separate Modernist movement. Following his lead and concentrating on these relations and connections, I will argue that important

relationships, which are worth examining, were prevalent among writers who have historically been separated from and not studied along with one another. I will specifically concentrate on the important institution of education and the cultural industry of film production, which were major loci of struggles during the 1930s and early 1940s which deeply concerned Olsen and Wright, writers considered “proletarian,” and also Faulkner, a writer who, as Lawrence Swartz claims, has been championed historically as unrelated to proletarian literature formation.¹⁵ In analyzing how these authors concentrate on and depict education and film, I hope to demonstrate that an analysis of how these writers relate to each other is significant and worthy of attention, which will thereby question the staunch division that has been historically constructed between proletarian writers and “non-proletarian” writers of the 1930s and early 1940s.

IV. Education

During the 1930s and early 1940s, education, like many institutions, became a central concern and a locus for conflict. Important struggles over education began in the 1920s, especially those over instruction and curriculum. With the work of John Dewey and the Progressive Education Association, the established educational system underwent many reform struggles.¹⁶ However, by the 1930s, a group of radical educators, who had begun “not only to examine the immediate causes of the depression but also to search out

¹⁵ In his text *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism*, Swartz examines how Faulkner's reputation was transformed from obscurity in the 1930s to superstar status in the 1940s and 50s. I will discuss his argument in more detail in the conclusion.

¹⁶ Progressive education, like proletarian literature, is difficult to define because it was constantly in motion, constantly being reworked and reformulated in various experiments in a vast number of diverse schools. However, progressive education experiments did share a similar philosophy in that the classroom was a child centered, open environment “in which students could work in groups, learn to cooperate with one another, and grapple with real problems in the context of classroom activities” (Parkerson and Parkerson 117).

the underlying flaws in the nation's social values," joined the turn towards the left, claiming that "educators had a legitimate right to direct the course of social change" and attempting "to galvanize teachers into becoming a new and incorruptible political force in American life" (Bowers x). These educators and educational theorist contributed to the proletarian magazines, like the *New Masses* and *The Partisan Review*, and also put out their own publication *The Social Frontier*, which provided them with not only a public forum but also an avenue to communicate their views. As C. A. Bowers notes, "The sponsors intended *The Social Frontier* to provide a rallying point for those educators who were receptive to the idea of using the school to bring about immediate social reforms" (97).

Furthermore, one of the many effects of the Depression was that a large number of teachers were jobless. While the progressives were hard at work within the official school system, the unemployment rate of teachers rose, and as a result, these teachers began to develop unions, which eventually became affiliated with the CIO. The unionizing effort, however, had begun before the Depression years. As a response to earlier changes within the educational system, teachers began to organize and by 1916 established the first national teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor.¹⁷ Although this union was relatively small and faced many difficulties, after the Depression and the passing of the NIRA, a large number of unemployed teachers began to enlist in this national union and also many

¹⁷Commenting on the response to the modernization of the school system, the Parkersons state, "The dramatic success of the modern corporation demonstrated to reformers the great administrative possibilities for education. As schools restructured, state boards of education, school superintendents, and principals provided the various levels of management while teachers were forced to assume the role of hired employee with few proprietary rights. ... Teachers throughout the country responded to these changes through labor organization and protest that eventually led to the creation of the first national teachers union" (Parkerson and Parkerson 19).

notable, locally based teachers unions, such as Local 5, Unemployed Teachers Association, New York's Teachers' Union, and the Chicago Teacher Federation.¹⁸ As was the trend during the 1930s, many of the local and national teachers unions began to affiliate with the CIO and steadily continued to recruit new members. Robert Iverson claims that when the CIO:

launched its organizational drives, it found many supporters among teachers, particularly those advocates of mass action. Even at its peak, the A. F. T. had succeeded in unionizing only a minute portion of America's teachers, and the energy that the C. I. O. threw into its drives suggested greater organizational possibilities to beleaguered unionized teachers. (108)

Moreover, besides the push for unionization, many of these unemployed teachers were able to find work in the developing labor and night schools, which the American Communist Party was actively instituting. These alternative schools offered dissatisfied teachers the opportunity move beyond the scope of the official educational system. Most importantly, these alternative schools were not only centers for alternative educations but also opportunities for unemployed and like-minded teachers to find work and develop significant networks of support (Iversen 80-81).

From the progressive reforms to the teachers unions and the alternative labor and night schools, the institution of education was not only a major part of the 1930s discourse but also, like so many of institutions during this period, at a crisis point. Therefore, it is not surprising that Olsen, Wright, and Faulkner were thinking critically of and depicting this institution within their fictional texts. Olsen approaches this

¹⁸ The difficulties that the AFT first faced was both the active repudiation by the Boards of Education, which was backed by the legal and judicial apparatus, and also the resurgence of the National Education Association, an organization run by administrators not by teachers (Parkerson and Parkerson 187).

institution in terms of its class basis and meticulously dissolves the idealistic notion that a working-class education can provide a means of social mobility. However, Faulkner provides a depiction in which a Southern working-class education actually leads to social mobility, but he does so in a way that critiques the working-class curriculum and the institution's agenda of Americanization. Wright seems to continue from both Olsen's and Faulkner's critiques, but he ultimately reserves a space in which "education," one beyond the school walls, leads not to social mobility but to social change. In what follows, I will analyze and trace out these tendencies.

In Tillie Olsen's novel *Yonnondio*, a novel which documents the working-class struggles of the Holbrook family in the 1920s, formal education remains a central issue. In a sense, Olsen presents this institution dichotomously by depicting the tensions between working-class hopes and fantasies and the actual realities of a working-class education. She initially presents education in its most idealistic potentiality, namely as possessing the capacity to "save" the student so that he or she can transcend his or her class restraints and pressures. As the novel progresses, however, Olsen shows that this idealistic perspective is foundationless, a fantasy, a means for Jim and Anna, the Holbrook parents, to momentarily escape from their working-class struggles by projecting a better future for their children. I will focus on how education is initially presented, how this initial presentation begins to dissolve as the Holbrooks move from the Wyoming mining town, the South Dakota tenant farm, and finally to packing town.

As the novel opens in the mining town, the six year old Mazie, from whose consciousness much of the novel is narrated, asks her mother Anna an important question: "What's an edication?" (4). Without contemplating, Anna quickly responds,

“An edjication is what you kids are going to get. It means your hands stay white and you read books and work in an office” (4). In the very first pages, Anna defines education in terms of class. First, an education implies a cleanliness that is foreign to working-class life, especially in the mining town, hence the white hands. Second, the ability to “read books” implies a certain level of comfort and leisure, namely the possibility to distance one’s self from bodily and material pressures. Third, work in an office is markedly different from the physically exhausting and dangerous labor of the working class. This seemingly simple response reveals that Anna obviously perceives a relationship between education and the middle and upper classes and believes that this education is available to all who are willing to use it as a seeming rite of passage to these more privileged classes.

However, Anna is unable to critically analyze the class structure of the actual educational institution. In the *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams, although historicizing British formal education, elucidates three aspects that underpin any system of formal education: “a child must be taught, first, the accepted behavior and values of his society; second, the general knowledge and attitudes appropriate to an educated man, and third, a particular skill by which he will earn his living and contribute to the welfare of his society” (127). Williams also urges that education is not a fixed abstraction that has always remained the same, static system of teaching and learning but a historically changing construction that responds to specific social problems and is often differentiated in class terms. In this sense, the institution of education with its different types of schools, private and public, for the most part ensures the reproduction of the class system, offering not only different facilities but also different curricula to different classes. If William’s analysis of the implicit class system in formal educational systems holds true

for the American system, which I believe it does, then his insights irrevocably contradicts Anna's hopes.

This prompts an important question concerning the type of education that would have been available to the Holbrook children, which ultimately depended upon the geography and the predominant labor of the region. Anna first mentions education in the mining town, but the first school scene does not occur until after the family has migrated to the tenant farm of South Dakota. Mazie and her younger brother Will enter the school without having had any previous formal instruction and quickly become aware of this lack: "The playground squirming with kids was wonderful, but the teacher that waddled and held her head like a duck and her wheezing horror – 'Eight years old and can't read yet, you'll have to go in the first grade with your brother Will' – was shame" (48). Nevertheless, the curriculum, namely learning how to read, came easy, and the two children even displayed enthusiastic interest in the instruction of the higher grades:

The lessons came easy. ... Finding the two could suddenly read, the teacher put them both up one grade, but the primer already breathlessly raced through with only silly sentences as a reward, they spent most of their time secretly listening to the upper grades recite geography and history – far countries, strange peoples. (48-49)¹⁹

From this passage, it is clear that this countryside school emphasizes the important skill of reading and, as the child grew older, the necessary discipline to be able to memorize and recite what the teacher wanted to hear. Seeing that their children were able to read, Anna and Jim were quite pleased with their progress and believed that their idealistic

¹⁹ Interestingly, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Thomas Sutpen, as an working-class adolescent, also finds his schools narratives about "far countries, strange peoples" the most intriguing. However, Sutpen interest does not end at the classroom, as I will discuss shortly.

hopes were in the process of fulfillment: “‘See Jim,’ ... ‘See? They’re reading. They’ll be something, these kids’” (49).

However, when the family is forced to leave their tenant farm in order to find work, the Holbrooks’ idealism and hopes begin to unravel. As a tenant farming family, their position was always tenuous, and when the bank was ready to collect on its loans, the Holbrooks were unable to pay. The family was in a precarious position, which Jim’s impassionate statements display: “‘They’re taking all of it, every damn thing. The whole year slaved to nothing. I owe *them* after working like a team of mules for a year’” (54). In this economic position, the Holbrooks are at a dead end, desperate and without a source of income, and at this point, their economic pressures undercut their children’s educational opportunities. This is most evident in the events that follow Old Man Caldwell’s death. Old Man Caldwell, who was the region’s wealthy landowner, had taken an interest in the educational development of Mazie. Because of his college education, the Holbrooks viewed his interest with reverence and an implicit hope that he could somehow pass on the hallmarks of this privileged distinction. On his deathbed, Old Man Caldwell bestows a part of his library to Mazie: “Bess, see she gets some of the books. Those fairy tales, Wilde’s, and the Dickens and Blake, and that book of Greek myths. Someday she will read them” (54). While these books are constitutive of a middle- and upper-class education, the Holbrooks’ economic situation is so dire that Jim quickly turns them into capital (55). At this instance, the Holbrooks are forced to face the harsh economic realities of their situation, and for the reader, their hopes for education gradually seem to resemble a mere fantasy.

However, once the family moves to the packing town and the children are enrolled in the local school, the Holbrooks reinvest in their idealistic notions. As Anna is preparing Will and Mazie for school, she expresses this renewed hope and tries to impress its importance on her children: “When Anna made Will and Mazie ready for school that first morning, she stood them up against the wall and said fiercely, ‘You two got a chance to really learn something now; you’re goin to a good school, not a country one. I catch you not doin good and I’ll knock the livin daylights out of you, you hear?’” (70). Anna’s belief in education was so shaken by the thwarted possibility in the countryside that she now tries to ensure the actualization of her hopes through the threat of violence. However, this threat merely manifests the fragility of her dream, and Olsen is quick to expose this through the school scene that immediately follows.

Although Anna believes that the urban school is superior to that of the countryside, Olsen does not provide proof of this supposed superiority but simply details the differences between the urban school and that of the countryside. Whereas the countryside school emphasized reading and eventually history and geography, those “far places, strange people” are encountered in actuality in the packing town school, and the curriculum addresses this difference. As Mazie scans the room, she stops on the blackboard on which the day’s plan is written: “Na-tion-alities American Armenian Bohemian Chinese Croatian ... Irish French Italian Jewish Lith ... Mexican Negro Polish Portuguese” (71). This list of nationalities reflects the composition of the packing town’s labor force, which reveals that immigration and the plurality of ethnicities is a major social reality that this school confronts. If we understand that the school is preparing its students for, in all likelihood, the work of the packinghouses, then the curriculum must

account for this prominent aspect of the town. Without the ability to remain at a distance and disseminate enticing narratives about “far countries, strange people,” the school seemingly resorts to what Olsen portrays as a quasi-inventory list of nationalities, a list without explanation or context, what for Mazie is a simply a list of “funny words on the blackboard” (71).

Moreover, as the Holbrook’s economic position as a tenant farming family disrupted their anticipations for their children’s educations, the economic realities of the packing town have the same effect. Olsen’s narrator frames the education scene by first providing a bodily description of the packing town:

That stench is a reminder – a proclamation – *I rule here*. It speaks for the packing houses, heart of all that moves in these streets; gigantic heart – pumping over the artery of viaducts the men and women who are the streets’ lifeblood, nourishing the taverns and brothels and rheumy-eyed stores, bulging out the soiled and exhausted houses, and multiplying into these children playing so mirthlessly in the street yard where flower only lampposts. (68)

Ruling the entire packing town, this stench inevitably finds its way into the school.

Mazie describes this horrendous and pervasive smell as one that is seeping into the classroom, invading and conquering: “[the window] is greasy, like drippings was smeared all over, and stink comes in from the top, comes in and fills the room” (71).

This invokes an image that grotesquely contradicts the safety, security, and escape from working-class conditions that the Holbrooks hoped education would provide. Instead, the economic realities of the packing town overpower the educational institution. This is even more evident in Mazie’s description of her classmates: “Faces mad and tired and

scared and hungry and dead and their eyes like they want to eat you up” (71). The anger, exhaustion, fear, hunger, and despair, which this packing town has induced, deeply affect these children’s propensities as students, and for Mazie, who will soon become a part of this student body, this sight foreshadows a frightening future.

Instead of employing her narrator to describe the urban school scene, as she did in the countryside scene, Olsen characterizes the affront and fright that the school provokes through Mazie’s consciousness. As Mazie enters the classroom, undifferentiated words seem to assault her incessantly, which Olsen makes clear through a modernist technique: “MazieandWillHolbrookhavecomefromtheCountrywherethey-growthecornandwheatandallourmilkcomesfromsayhellotoMazieandWillchildren” (71). For Mazie, this is far different from the countryside school in which she was able to quickly adapt, make progress, and develop interests. Here, due to the different curriculum, student body, and awful and permeating stench, she is lost and must turn away. In this turn, Mazie retreats to dreams and fantasies in a futile attempt to escape this reality, which becomes her characteristic mode of existence throughout the novel.

However, Olsen does not end with this school scene but instead continues to dismantle even more thoroughly the Holbrooks’ idealistic hopes. Despite Anna’s “fierce” attempts to enforce the importance of education, life in this packing town had also affected Anna significantly. Later in the year, when Mazie brings home her failure report from school, Anna does not have the energy to follow through with her threats: “It would have struck her like a blow on the naked heart once, this failure report from school, but now she folded it carefully and put it into her pocket” (96). Nevertheless, Anna quickly retreats to what at one time she so passionately believed, but instead of

insisting on the values of education to Mazie, Anna pleads futilely to her infant daughter Bess, “Don’t you know learnin’s the only hope a body’s got in this world?” (96). For the audience, who has seen the urban school’s and student body’s conditions, this statement loses its significance: the statement is simply an assemblage of meaningless words, almost as if Olsen could once again have used the previous modernist technique. Furthermore, Olsen continues this process of dissociation in the packing town library scene. Whereas Anna sees the library as the sacred “Temple of Learning,” Olsen’s narrator reveals why her children do not share this same sentiment:

A squat dirty converted storefront (good enough for packingtown, they said) shelved with opiates and trash and marvels (from which most of the children are already turned in outraged self-respect, for is it not through books, the printed word, or so it seemed, that they had been judged poor learners, dumb dumb dumb? (155)

Although Anna takes out a library card for her children in hopes that they will use these books as “keys ... in that door to a better life on which opportunity would knock some day” (155), these cards remain unused. These books of “once upon a time and they lived very happy ever after fairy tales” are just as meaningless and absurd for the children as Anna’s educational hopes are for the reading audience (155). As Heidi Slettendahl claims in “Class-ifying Escape: Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio*,” “In Olsen’s text, books act as sites where the disjunctions between the story plots and the reality of the Holbrook children become unbearable” (266).

While Olsen begins her representation of education by alluding to it as the means of escape from the horrendous living conditions in the mining town, and although the

Holbrooks' hopes seem to be on the path towards fulfillment in the countryside, the realities of the packing town demonstrate that these hopes are simply foundationless. Although Olsen displays for the reading audience that the Holbrooks' idealistic expectations are a mere caricature of the family's social reality, the Holbrooks themselves do not arrive at any such self-understanding. Anna continues to believe that education is the key, and Mazie continues to escape to daydreams about her life on the farm. Olsen's narrator is the only one who speaks from a position of understanding. For example, the narrator speaks from a position privileged enough to summarize the general status of working class education: "Children – already stratified as dummies in school, condemned as unfit for the worlds of learning, art, imagination, invention" (149). However, despite the narrator's insights at certain points in the novel, this very position is unstable and, in a sense, incomplete. Similar to the characters, the narrator does not achieve a full understanding nor can (s)he construct a means of "escape" for the Holbrook family. Instead of concluding the novel, the narrator, forty years later, states, "Reader, it was not have ended here, but it is nearly forty years since this book had to be put aside, never to come to completion" (193). Thus, by the conclusion of the novel, Olsen has destroyed the idealistic notion of education and has even questioned the ability for a full understanding of social realities that could lead to change either on an individual or social level.

In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, education also remains a central to the text.²⁰ However, he provides a myriad of educational scenes that provide the reader with

²⁰ Throughout much of William Faulkner's fiction, characters struggle with understanding and becoming "educated" about the South's violent history, marginalization, defeat, social prescriptions and expectations, class structure, racial hierarchy, and gender system. However, I will look at *Absalom, Absalom!* because, of all his texts, this is most comprehensive and penetrating exploration in this direction.

a fuller spectrum of the class based institution. Throughout the novel, Quentin Compson, the young Harvard student from Jefferson, Mississippi struggles with understanding the Sutpen legacy. He both listens to narrators who focus on the Sutpen family history from differing perspectives and then later attempts to construct a more “truthful” narrative with his Canadian roommate Shreve McCannon. Throughout this process, much about both Southern and American history is exposed, but unlike Olsen’s narrator, Quentin and Shreve are able to complete their joint narrative.²¹ Moreover, Faulkner’s representation of education and learning does not remain at the elite Ivy League level; he takes the narrative to the newly founded, middle-class institution, the University of Mississippi. Finally, at an important point in Sutpen’s own narration, he portrays a school scene from the working-class education of the South. In this section, I will focus on his representation of working-class education and will attempt to show how Faulkner explores and critiques a powerful and controlling form of cultural production: the curriculum of the newly institutionalized “American” school system.

Whereas Olsen’s text focuses on the school’s historical narratives of “far places, strange people” and then brings these lands and peoples into direct contact with the Holbrook children, Faulkner does something similar with Sutpen. The school scene in which Sutpen initially learns about the “West Indies” displays how the institution of education attempts to displace as “far” and “strange” the South and America’s intimate, complicit association with imperialism and the postcolonial project of a new nation. At this point, the seemingly regional narrative of the Sutpen legacy suddenly points to an transnational connection, a connection that has been forgotten by the town members of Jefferson and which they must now confront. Thus, whereas Olsen presents Mazie and

²¹ I will develop an analysis of this creative process in the following chapter.

Will's fascination with their school's teaching of "far countries, strange people," Faulkner critically analyses why such narratives became an institutionalized component of the educational system's curriculum.

Before turning to the text, however, I will provide a brief analysis of the American institution of education from its roots in the colonial years to the years following the American Revolution. According to the educational historian Lawrence Cremin in *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607-1783*, the colonists initially attempted to transmit the British education to the American colonies (192). These colonists encountered many frustrations when trying to actualize this desire, for not only were other nations in the colonies but even England itself had markedly different policies for each colony. At best, the educational system in the colonies could be described as localized and regional, dependent upon the specific colony. However, after the American Revolution, education became a chief concern for the new nation, with a major effort to transform it from a regional into a national institution. Cremin expresses the view of the idealistic new "Americans":

"an expanding national domain meant not merely wealth and power but spaciousness, movement, and, above all, opportunity. ... The notion of empire carried with it an educational imperative – in effect, the obligation to extend civilization over a vast continent." (11)²²

As is common with most new nations, having recently won its freedom from the imperial country, there was also a strong desire to define what it meant to be an American and also how to promote and perpetuate this new "American-ness." The institution of education was an obvious means by which this growing patriotism could be spread

²² This quote is taken from Cremin's text *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876*.

uniformly. This sparked much debate and caused a proliferation of literature associated with educational theory.²³ The topics of discussion were various, stemming from arguments about the most effective ways of propagating American patriotism to arguments on how the educational system could guide the energy of the new nation so as to produce an accord between freedom and order. Commenting on the latter concern, educational historian Joel Spring states:

On the one hand, the rhetoric of the American Revolution stressed the idea of freedom, but on the other hand, ... many citizens of the new republic ... feared that uncontrolled freedom would lead to a decadent and chaotic society ... The balance of freedom and order was to be achieved through education ... [and] individuals could be allowed to be free if they were educated to be virtuous. In other words, freedom could be allowed if controls over behavior were internalized within the citizen. (33)

Thus, in the post-Revolutionary period, the institution of education was expected both to promote American nationalism and patriotism and to instill the appropriate form of discipline.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the spread of urbanization was increasing the expectations and pressures of the educational institutions. In the larger cities of the North, industrialization was growing, which attracted a large number of both rural families and foreign immigrants. These changes greatly affected the educational institutions in these cities in such a way that it steadily became class -based. For the increasing working and immigrant class, their education was “directed at the cultivation of proper ‘habits’ of industriousness and responsibility, ...essential skills of literacy,

²³ Notable contributors to this debate included Noah Webster, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson.

numerical calculation, and knowledge of history, geography, and other subjects ... It was preparation for life in ... a society increasingly characterized by ... the rule of the clock and efficiency” (Rury 62). Although the American South was agricultural, marked by its plantation system, large numbers of poor white families were migrating from the more rural, frontier societies to settle closer to the large plantations. In these increasingly populated areas, the schools were localized, depending on need, and taught basic skills, such as reading and arithmetic, and, of course, the necessary norms of discipline. Although the economic development in the North and South differed in meaningful ways, the schooling system in both regions was confounded with similar problems, namely a large influx in the population. Still attempting to foster a firm nationalism, the school system also became an important mechanism of social control for the working and immigrant class.

At an important point in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner provides an account of a rural, frontier family migrating to a Virginia plantation in the 1820s, with an adolescent boy who attends the local school. After several chapters of both Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson attempting to explain and understand the Sutpen legacy, Thomas Sutpen finally tells his own story. Coming out of the frontier society of West Virginia, where “doggeries and taverns now become hamlets, hamlets now become villages, villages now towns and the country flattened out now with good roads and fields and niggers working in the fields while white men sat fine horses” (182), young Sutpen was learning the substantial differences between his previous frontier society and this new plantation society. He was gradually learning that in this new society skin color was a clear marker of either domination (white) or subordination (black) and also that there were divisions

between the whites, based not on physical prowess but on the relative amount of wealth and property: “He learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men not measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room” (183).

While the young Sutpen is able to mark these differences and by this marking, perceive how forced, unnatural, and arbitrary the rules of each society are, he is unable to transcend the plantation system in which he now finds himself. The older Sutpen, now telling his story, emphasizes how innocent he was during his journey from the frontier to the plantation society, but this innocence dissolved when a slave turned him away from the door of a plantation. Sutpen suddenly understands his place both in this society and in the eyes of the plantation owner: “he himself [Sutpen] seeing his own father and sisters and brothers as the owner, the rich man [must have been seeing them] ... as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them” (190). Moreover, he also realizes that the violence available to him as a poor white planter’s son, namely either killing the plantation owner or taking out his frustration by ritually beating slaves, would be a futile means to change his social position. Instead of immediate violence, Sutpen decides that he must become a plantation owner, and in order to do this, he knows that he needs wealth, slaves, and land: “So to combat them you have got to have what they have ...land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with” (192).

This is the point at which Sutpen’s formal education plays the crucial role in his plan to gain what he thinks he needs. In the late part of a winter, after his family has

stopped their journey and has settled down in West Virginia, the young Sutpen was enrolled in the country school. Although it is uncertain why Sutpen's father would allow Thomas to miss work by attending school, it is clear that the school itself tried to teach the basic skills that were needed for the maintenance of a plantation and to instill the appropriate and necessary form of discipline. Judging from what Sutpen claims and what recent historians have observed, the students were taught basic arithmetic: "I was equipping myself better for what I should later design to do than if I had learned all the addition and subtraction in that book" (195). Moreover, the students also learned the necessity of uncritically and pacifically listening to an authority figure (in this case the teacher, but later the plantation owner or plantation overseer). Sutpen claims that when the class would become unruly and on the verge of leaving, the teacher would begin reading from books for the mere purpose of settling the students: "I realize now that on most of these occasions he [the teacher] resorted to reading aloud only when he saw that the moment had come when his entire school was on the point of rising and leaving the room" (195). Even the most insubordinate student, Sutpen himself, who is described as being the school's anomaly (he is older than all the students yet far less "advanced" and even frightens and intimidates the teacher) is able to calm himself in order to listen to the teacher's readings. These reading sessions not only instill a certain form of discipline and social control but also, as Sutpen suggests, teach the students that everything has already been accomplished, which has the effect of implicitly promoting that these students should remain in their respective places within the social order. Sutpen states: "I learned little save that most of the deeds, good and bad both, incurring opprobrium or

plaudits or reward either, within the scope of man's abilities, had already been performed and were to be learned about only from books" (195).

However, one particular story sparks Sutpen's attention, and instead of ideologically "keeping him in his place," it becomes the impetus for his flight from the Virginia plantation. In one of those critical classroom moments, when the teacher is gradually losing control of his students, the teacher begins to read what seems to be a grand tale about an imperial power sending its venture capitalists into the West Indies, where they become incredibly wealthy: "That was how I learned of the West Indies. Not where they were ... What I learned was that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich" (195). Along with attempting to pacify the students, this story also presents imperialism as being completely other and disconnected from America's national history. The teacher presents this story uncritically, with no acknowledgement that "America" too was once considered part of the West Indies, that it too was a place where men "went in ships and became rich." There is no recognition of the similar origins between the West Indies and America, nor is there any acknowledgement of the current economic connection with the West Indies, specifically that large sums of money were produced through the triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas.²⁴ Instead, according to this story, America seems totally isolated and disconnected from this imperial enterprise. In fact, the story dehistoricizes the current conditions of America and makes them seem natural and inevitable. Nevertheless, for all that the story attempts, it does not keep Sutpen in his

²⁴ Both the teacher's and the students' lack of critical attention could be a result of the educational policy that prohibited both Native Americans and African Americans from attending schools at this time. If these two groups were allowed to attend schools, America's forgotten history and its current relationship with Europe, Africa, and the West Indies might not have been as easily suppressed.

place, who has lost his “innocence” about this social order. In an odd sense, he uses the story as if it were a manual, immediately sailing off to the West Indies in order to make his wealth.²⁵

When Sutpen returns from his Caribbean stint, having spent some time as a plantation overseer in the West Indies and having gained ownership of some slaves, the part of American history that the school story ignores comes back to literally haunt Jefferson’s town members. In his essay “Jim Bond’s America: Denaturalizing the Logic of Slavery in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” Sean Latham argues that Thomas Sutpen comes from a different tradition concerning slavery than the rest of America, especially the South. He claims that Sutpen is openly imperialistic in a European sense, whereas America in the nineteenth century increasingly viewed slavery (and the supposed difference between “whites” and “blacks”) as natural and ineluctable. While the town may attempt to view its current social system as inevitable, Sutpen recalls this more imperialist history, showing that the system is arbitrary and dependent upon a violent imposition.

In the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner provides a genealogy of the Compsons which illuminates how the family initially came to enjoy its aristocratic position in Jefferson. As the description of Jason Lycyrgus Compson reveals, he came into the area, wielding guns and taking land by intimidation, deception, and violence:

(he) rode up the Natchez Trace one day in 1811 with a pair of fine pistols and one meager saddlebag on a small lightwaisted but stronghocked mare, ... reached the

²⁵ I think that Sutpen’s response to this story, in the context of his coming to understand the structure and functioning of the slave society, is interesting when compared to Ab Snopes’ reaction in *Barn Burning*. When Ab understands his class position as a sharecropper in Faulkner’s 1930s short story *Barn Burning*, he uses his position to attack this planter class at its most vulnerable point by burning barns instead of attempting to become a part of the landholding planter class. Although this form of individual response can do nothing to change Ab’s position within the society, it does point towards both the ability for self-understanding that differs from Olsen and the plight of sharecroppers especially without union support.

Chickasaw Agency at Okatoba,... [and] within six months was the Agent's clerk and within twelve his partner, officially still the clerk though actually halfowner of what was now a considerable store stocked with the mare's winnings in races against the horses of Ikkemotubbe's young men ... and in the next year it was Ikkemotubbe who owned the little mare and Compson owned the square mile of land which someday would be almost in the center of the town of Jefferson. (407)

This description not only provides the origins of the Compson family but also elucidates the violent origins of both Jefferson and its aristocratic class. However, when Thomas Sutpen arrives in Jefferson thirty years later, the town members have already repressed and forgotten this history. No longer a frontier inhabited by Native Americans, Jefferson is now a well-established plantation society with a rigid class system and with the county name Yoknapatawpha as the only reminder of its original inhabitants. Once Sutpen enters the town and begins to construct his plantation, "The Sutpen Hundred," he forces the townspeople to confront their violent history. Rosa Coldfield, as a representative narrator for the town, describes the reaction in terms of digestion: "public opinion (was) in an acute state of indigestion" (35). However, once Sutpen attempts to marry one of the town's respectable ladies and thereby become an undeniable and inseparable part of the town, he is "vomited" out: that "public which at some moment during the five preceding years had swallowed him even though he never had quite ever lain quite on its stomach, had performed one of mankind's natural and violent and inexplicable volte faces and regurgitated him" (40). As is clear from the town members' reaction, they want to distance themselves from Sutpen, to deny him assimilation, because he represents a violent history which has been forgotten but not erased.

However, while Sutpen's ability to use his education, in a sense, as the stepping-stone for his life project, he is still stuck within this same arbitrary and violent system, which he had so aptly diagnosed as a young boy. Although he is different from Olsen's characters in respect to this understanding and ability to transcend certain individual class restrictions, the system is not affected at all. Despite the fact that the town members may initially attempt to "abject" him from civil society, they gradually accept him as the years pass by, and the general functioning of the slave society remains the same. However, in Richard Wright's texts, specifically *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*, he offers a more optimistic possibility for both education and the social change that can result from a self-understanding in relation to certain social structures. I will now turn my attention to these texts and focus on the scenes of education and the possibilities that arise from them.²⁶

In *Black Boy*, the narrator is Wright himself, constructing an autobiographical sketch of his life in the South and his migration to the Northern city of Chicago. In this sense, there is not much separation from the events and the characters within the narrative and the author himself, which marks a difference with *Yonnonadio* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In Olsen's text, the narrator is constructing a narrative about the Holbrooks, in which the characters do not come to an understanding of either their social position or the class structures of their society. However, in *Black Boy*, the young Richard resembles the young Thomas Sutpen in that he too is able at a very early age to perceive certain social structures of his society. One explanation for this is that both the young Richard and young Sutpen gain insight into these inherent structures through physical and violent

²⁶ Throughout *Black Boy*, Wright gives many portrayals of schools, from the segregated schools of the South to the Communist schools in Chicago, but since I have focused on primary educational institutions in the previous analyses of Olsen and Faulkner, I will do the same here.

encounters with them. Whereas the Holbrooks never encounter physically the people or the class which keep them impoverished and hungry, Richard is violently confronted with his “blackness” in a racist society, and Sutpen, as the outsider coming into the plantation society, clearly sees the violence of the planter class and the arbitrariness of the class system.²⁷ For Wright, violence seems to be the very foundation of this racist society, for it never leaves this text, regardless of the various geographic regions represented, and becomes more educational, in a sense, than the official curriculum of the segregated schools.

Before entering the school system, however, Richard had already experienced violence and learned that it would be a constitutive part of his life. Unlike the Holbrooks, Richard’s nuclear family did not remain together, for his father had left, leaving his brother and him in the sole care his unemployed wife. Desperately in need of money and food, Richard’s mother took a job as a cook, and Richard, at age six, was forced to take on family responsibilities, specifically the grocery shopping. In his first shopping expedition, Richard was jumped and robbed by a gang of local boys. However, when he returned home, his mother did not show compassion but instead an obstinacy that he must try again and this time fight back: “I’m going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself” ... “Take this money, this note, and this stick ... If those boys bother you, then fight.’ ...Don’t you come into this house until you’ve gotten those groceries” (17). At the young age of six, Richard was forced to go through this quasi rite of passage

²⁷ I would argue that Olsen is attempting to illuminate, through the Holbrooks’ opacity, the need for organizations such as unions and the CIO and movements such as the Popular Front, for there is even a point in the text in which the narrator apologizes to a worker who individually revolted against the packing industry: “Jim Tracy, sorry as hell we weren’t stronger and could not get to you in time and show you that kind of revolt was no good ... you had to bide your time, and take it, till the day millions of fists clamped in yours, and you could wipe out the whole thing, the whole goddam thing, and a human could be a human for the first time on earth” (92).

through which he would learn the importance of self-reliance and the necessity to defend himself at all cost:

They [the gang of boys] closed in. In blind fear, I [Richard] let the stick fly, feeling it crack against a boy's skull. I swung again, lamming another skull, then another. Realizing that they would retaliate if I let up for but a second, I fought to lay them low, to knock them cold, to kill them so that they could not strike back at me. (18)

Moreover, as he was learning the importance of violence, he also was learning outside the school the basic skills of reading and arithmetic that catalyzed his general curiosity about his environment. Nevertheless, this curiosity ultimately introduced him to the construction of race and the violence sustaining this construction. Still at the age of six, Richard began to meet students coming home from school, those children whose parents could afford the "necessary clothes to make" their children "presentable" (24), and took interest in what they were learning, namely reading skills and arithmetic. From this, Richard became enthralled with his environment to such an extent that, as he describes, "There grew in me a consuming curiosity about what was happening around me" (22). Through his relentless curiosity, Richard first learned about racial violence and the harshly imposed distinction between white and black in this racist society.

Describing his experience of race before hearing the news of racial violence, he states, "Though I had long known that there were people called 'white' people, it had never meant anything to me emotionally. I had seen white men and women upon the streets a thousand times, but they had never looked particularly 'white.' To me they were merely people like other people" (23). However, when Richard hears the story of the "seemingly

causeless beating of the 'black' boy by the 'white' man" (24), race becomes an emotional force in his life. This strange phenomenon of race mixed with violence persisted in Richard's thought, and when he began to projectively construct what he would do if he were this "black" boy, Richard resorts to his early lessons of violence: "There was, of course, a vague uneasiness about it all, but I would be able to handle that when I came to it. It would be simple. If anybody tried to kill me, then I would kill them first" (49).

However, Wright visits the consequences of such thought in his short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children*, specifically "Big Boy Leaves Home." The short story begins with a group of "black" boys, who have skipped school and are enjoying the summer day. The opening scene seems serene and pastoral, as if there are no dangers or concerns on the horizon. Nevertheless, when they decide to go swimming in a creek that is on the property of "ol man Harvey," who "don erllow no niggers t swim in this hole" the setting changes (25). As the kids come to a sign that reads "NO TRESPASSIN," the once distant or even nonexistent danger is suddenly imminent. This danger presents itself immediately after the boys disrobe to go swimming. Coming out of the water naked, the boys catch site of a white woman on the other embankment. In this awkward position, the boys scramble for their clothes, which scares the woman, who, terrified, then calls out to her boyfriend, ol man Harvery's son Jim. As the boys are running away, they here the crack of rifle fire and see that their friend Buck had "stopped at the edge of the embankment, his head jerked backward, his body arched stiffly to one side; he toppled headlong, sending up a shower of bright spray to the sunlight" (31). As the boys stop in shock and dread, they see Jim approaching with his rifle aimed. A scuffle ensues in

which Big Boy comes away with the rifle, and as Jim tries to regain it, he shoots him, just as the young Richard had vowed to do.

The story does not end with this scene, for now that Big Boy has killed a white man he must leave the town before retributive action is taken.²⁸ Luckily for Big Boy, his family has found a means for him to flee to Chicago, but in order to do so, he must hide in the woods over night. While in the woods, his friend Bobo, the only other survivor in the earlier scuffle, is suppose to meet him; however, the white lynch mob finds him beforehand. The lynching takes place so close to Big Boy that he is forced into a hiding place where he must unavoidably watch his friend's lynching. He watches while Bobo is tarred and burned alive: "he saw them [the mob] tilt the barrel. ... A scream quivered. He knew the tar was on Bobo ... [and] saw a tar-drenched body glistening and turning... He saw a writhing white mass cradled in yellow flame, and heard screams, one on top of the other, each shriller and shorter than the last" (57). After seeing this, Big Boy is left "numb, empty, as though all blood had been drawn from him" (57), and so too is the audience. Through this short story, Wright is reworking this attitude which he had as a young child and shows that this faith in self-reliance and self-defense is futile within this racist society that sanctions and promotes this form of mass, ritual killing.

Just as Big Boy learns a very important lesson about his society through racial violence outside of the school, Wright constantly shows throughout *Black Boy* that the most important education actually occurs beyond the school walls. Through his portrayals of the segregated educational institution, he concentrates on its alienating effects. In the first school scene of the text, Wright provides a representation that persists through all his discussions of the various schools he attended. He presents the school as a

²⁸ The family of course realizes that a claim of self-defense would have no influence in this society.

alienating institution that is simultaneously frightening and paralyzing: “I was frightened speechless and the other children had to identify me, tell the teacher my name and address. I sat listening to pupils recite, knowing and understanding what was being said and done, but utterly incapable of opening my mouth when called upon” (24). This representation contrasts starkly with the earlier portrait of the engaged and curious Richard, who cannot close his mouth outside of the educational institution. Wright provides a similar scene a few years later, after he and his family had moved to West Helena. In this new school, Richard is called to the blackboard to write his name, but he is once again caught in a state of paralysis and trepidation. Although he knows how to read and write, he feels distanced from these skills, and becomes, as he states, “the laughingstock of the classroom” (74).

In fact, through the progression of Wright’s narrative, the school becomes an institution that Richard continuously tries to escape. Although Richard, at the age of six, couldn’t wait to enter the school system, as a result of his experiences within it, he cannot wait to leave. As he becomes increasingly more accustomed to the functioning of the school, he even develops techniques through which he can avoid it:

At the beginning of the school term I read my civics and English and geography volumes through and only referred to them in class. I solved all my mathematical problems far in advance; then, during school hours, when I was not called on to recite, I read tattered, second-hand copies of *Flynn’s Detective Weekly* or the *Argosy All-Story Magazine*, or dreamed, weaving fantasies about cities I had never seen and about people I had never met. (133)

Although Richard is just as curious and enthralled with his world as he was when he was six, Wright presents the school as inadequate to meet his questions. Part of this has to do with what these segregated schools discuss or, for that matter, not discuss. Even though the schools were segregated, neither segregation politics nor racial issues are discussed. He states explicitly, “Nothing about the problems of Negroes was ever taught in the classrooms at school” (164). Although these issues of race were central in this racist society, the segregated educational institution was not self-reflective and, as Wright presents it, did not provide a chance for its students to confront these problems critically.²⁹ Instead, the segregated schools seem to implicitly promote through its reticence the philosophy of “remaining in your place.”

In contrast, however, Wright portrays an informal education outside of the official school that is rife with possibilities for self-understanding in relation to social realities. In fact, in the autobiographical short story “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch,” Wright labels this distinct education his “Jim Crow education” (7). Through this short story, Wright provides scenes in which, as a young boy, he begins to learn about “his place” within his society. In the first episode, after he was hurt in a fight with white children, he learns from his mother what she feels are “gems of Jim Crow wisdom” (2). Far from showing compassion or sympathy, she whips Richard for forgetting an important aspect of the Jim Crow south, namely that he must remain in his disadvantaged position and “never, never, under any circumstances ... fight *white* folks again” (2). Richard receives similar instruction from his family after he had experienced racial discrimination and intimidation while working at an optical company in Jackson,

²⁹ This portrayal of and complaint with the segregated school system is remarkably similar to Ralph Ellison’s portrayal in *Invisible Man*.

Mississippi. Even though the white workers at the factory had virtually forced Richard to quit through racial intimidation, his family blamed the whole situation on him: they called him “a fool” and warned that he “must never again attempt to exceed his boundaries” because when “you are working for white folks ... you got to ‘stay in your place’” (7).

Nevertheless, despite the family’s admonitions that Wright presents in that short story, in *Black Boy*, Richard does not simply remain passively in “his place” but continues to think about what it means to “have a place” and incessantly self-educates himself. Although the segregated schools are not self-reflective and do not present Richard with his much desired analysis of this racist society, he remains optimistic about the benefits of self-education. Once Richard has finished his formal schooling, he continuously searches for odd jobs. The most interesting aspect about this search is not the type of labor he found but what Richard was doing during moments of rest. Whether he is reading novels, newspapers, or magazines in moments before work and during work breaks or he is finding ways to secretly check books out of the public library, Richard is constantly trying to educate himself so as to understand better his social position.³⁰ This is quite unlike the portrait that Olsen presents in that Richard’s social position, while consistently present and restraining, does not actually inhibit his possibilities for fruitful self-education. Instead, his social situation catalyzes his interest in the possibilities of education and understanding his society. Moreover, unlike Faulkner’s representation of Sutpen, Richard’s continual self-educational initiatives lead to possibilities of challenging

³⁰ Richard has to find ways to sneak books out of the library because at the time African Americans were not allowed to officially and legally check books out on their own.

the social hierarchies of this racist society. Whereas Sutpen merely hopes to reap the fruits of an unbalanced and exploitative society, Richard hopes to change it.³¹

This hope is most explicit in Wright's portrayal of a pastor and his starving African American community in the short story "Fire and Cloud." In this story, Reverend Taylor faces a crisis in that his congregation is starving and the only real chance of receiving aid from the mayor is by organizing a mass march. Although Reverend Taylor's congregation is urgent to march and they have the support from local Communist leaders, who have promised that the starving poor whites will also join in the march, he still faces the problem of "exceeding his boundaries" and "stepping out of his place" as a black man. Much like Richard, Reverend Taylor also faces intimidation from the white mayor and chief of police, and when he actually refuses their wishes, he experiences actual racial violence when a group of white men kidnap and whip him nearly to death:

The whip brought more fire and he could not stand it any longer; his heart seemed about to burst. He screamed, stretched his nees out and twisted his arms till he lay sideway, half on his stomach. The whip came into his stomach, *whick!* He turned over; it came on his back again, *whick!* He stopped struggling and hung limply, his weight suspended on arms he could not feel. (200)

Despite these attempts at keeping the Reverend in his place, these experiences bolstered his belief and resolve that this racist and hierarchical society must be challenged on a unified front: he clearly understands his and thereby his people's social position, and he

³¹ While Faulkner presents Sutpen as eventually becoming a complicit member of his slave society, his presentation of Quentin is remarkably different. In fact, Quentin's desire to understand Southern and by association American history resembles Richard's quest of self-understanding. I will focus on him and what he is able to construct with his roommate Shreve in the following section.

puts his faith in a united people's movement. As he and his congregation walk to City Hall, the poor and starving whites join them. This united mass movement of "black and white marching" gave the Reverend faith that "whatever would or could happen could not hurt this many-limbed, many-legged, many-handed crowd" (219). This optimism turns into actual change, for as the march reaches City Hall, the Mayor concedes to the demands of the people and promises to provide them with their much-needed food. The Reverend's self-realization and self-understanding catalyzes this social change, and the story concludes with a very optimistic quote from Reverend Taylor: "*Freedom belongs to the strong*" (220).

Although Wright concludes *Black Boy* with less hope that a similar mass movement could occur nationally, due to deep-seated race and class divisions, he still retains an optimism about his role as a writer. From the curious six year old to the mature writer, Richard had experienced the racism of the Jim Crow South and had hoped to challenge the position of African Americans on a united front with the Communist party in Chicago. Despite his hope that life in Chicago and membership in the Communist Party would dissolve racial divisions, these distinctions remained prevalent. During a May Day parade, white Communists attempted to physically exclude Richard from their marching ranks:

Hands lifted me bodily from the sidewalk; I felt myself being pitched headlong through the air. ... Slowly I rose and stood. Perry and his assistant [the white Communist] were glaring at me. ... I could not quite believe what had happened, even though my hands were smarting and bleeding. I had suffered a public assault by two white Communists with black Communist looking on. (381)

Although this scene contrasts with the unity pervading “Fire and Cloud,” Wright still preserves the optimism of that story, except that, in this case, he places his faith in the affective power of his writing and the acceptance of his reading audience. He writes, “I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human” (384). Thus, using the lessons learned from his experiences with race, Richard hopes to challenge America’s ubiquitous racial structures through the relationships that he creates with his readers, and thereby Wright displays an optimism that certain educational initiatives can gradually lead to social changes.

V. Film: Spectating and Constructing

While education was a locus of much debate and struggle during the 1930s, the film industry was also important during this period due, in large part, to its mass popularity. As I stated above, many writers, who were in need of money during the post-depression years, went to Hollywood to find work, and many unemployed workers found jobs as the rank and file of the film industry. One reason that so many jobs were opening in Hollywood was the mass appeal of and demand for these movies. As Richard Maltby states, “During the 1930s ... on average Americans went to the movies once every two weeks” (114). Although the industry had a slight setback and sales dropped immediately following the depression, the industry responded in such a way that it was once again possible for the once employed moviegoers of the 1920s to continue to frequent the many movie theatres that had been built during the film industry boom of the late 1920s. Just

as education was a major concern for Olsen, Wright, and Faulkner, the film industry, as a powerful institution of cultural production, deeply concerned each writer. In the analysis that follows, I will examine how each author focuses on a particular aspect of this industry: Olsen is concerned with cinematic control over the audience, Wright with spectatorship, and Faulkner with the popular appeal of historical films and the possible construction of a counternarrative.

In *Yonnondio*, Olsen explores the power that the film industry has over its young, working-class patrons. As in her presentation of the institution of education, the actual characters do not have a space in which they can critically analyze their position in relation to the cinematic productions. Instead, the young children are thrown into a situation that is beyond their comprehension, and in effect, they become passive and uncritical moviegoers. Nevertheless, Olsen's narrator does not simply pass this over without comment. Since this is one of the first times that the narrator's parenthetical comments are italicized, it seems to suggest some form of anger and indignation, which is borne out by the narrator's imagery. The narrator describes film as "the conjurer magic of a shining screen in darkness" and the cinematic experience as "*the conjurer [that] is working spells*" (155). This conjurer, however, is not working with a playful or innocent form of magic but one that deeply transforms. According to the narrator, this magic works "*Subtly into waking and dreaming, into imagination and everyday doings and play, shaping, altering them* [the children]" (156). This "shaping" and "altering" even extends outwardly so that the children's outward expression is simply a simulation of what they see on screen. The narrator sees this happening with young Will, who is aping the style of an on-screen actor: "*Will eyes are narrowed now, his mouth drawn up at the*

corner, his walk – when he remembers – loose; for the rest of his life he will grin crooked: Bill Hart” (156). While the Holbrooks had placed their hopes in the educational institution, Olsen suggests that the film industry has become the most influential and forming aspect in these children’s lives.

The influence of the film industry is most obvious in the scene in which Mazie and Ginella are playing with one another. Every interaction and aspect of their play is informed and depends upon the scenes, actors, and actresses of the movies. Their play is scripted directly from the movies that Ginella has seen: “Twelve-year-old Ginella’s text: the movies, selected... *Sheik of Araby. Broken Blossoms. Slave of Love. She Stopped at Nothing. The Fast Life. The Easiest Way*” (158). Even the dump on which they play is subject to the specific setting of the movie they are acting out that day: “On the dump there is Ginella’s tent, Ginella’s mansion, Ginella’s roadhouse, Ginella’s pagan island, Ginella’s palace, whatever Ginella wills it to be that day” (157). On this particular occasion, the children are within the scenes of a Hollywood romance:

Luxuriously on her rug, pretend silk slinking and slithering on her body,
turbanned, puffing her long pretend cigarette: Say vamp me, vamp me. I’m
Nazimova. Take me to the roadhouse, I want to make whoopee. Hotcha. Never
never never. O my gigolo, my gigolo. A moment of ecstasy, a lifetime of regret.
... her arms tight around Mazie, passionately: Whisper to me: Jeannine my queen
of lilac time. Jeanine, I dream of lilac time. Whisper it. Kiss me. Forever,
forever never to part, my pagan love. (158)

Olsen suggests that this scene is not unique but characteristic of the children’s interactions, namely that aping the Hollywood films is the very basis and foundation of

their interactions and moments of play. This scene is simply a manifestation of what the narrator has already claimed: the spells of the film industry have worked subtly into the children's "*waking and dreaming, into imagination and everyday doings and play*" (157).

For Olsen, the film industry, as the conjurer of magic spells, is highly influential in the working-class packing town. Far from just a simple and innocent form of recreation, Olsen presents the film industry as a powerful institution that possesses the real possibility of altering and manipulating its moviegoers. According to Olsen, however, this institution works in such subtle and "magical" ways that the moviegoer may not even be aware of its spells. However, through the narrator, Olsen comments on this controlling aspect, rendering it explicit for her reading audience. She refuses to accept that the film industry is simply a form of recreational and mindless entertainment, an industry that provides working-class moviegoers a brief respite from their harsh working-class conditions. Instead, Olsen focuses on how this institution can actively manipulate the moviegoer's consciousness and actions. The influence of the cinema does not cease with the conclusion of the movie or when the lights come on: this influence extends far beyond and can produce lasting effects. Thus, Olsen offers her reading audience a critique and analysis of the film industry as a warning to remain constantly critical and suspicious of the spells, which this powerful industry can and does cast.

However, in *Native Son*, Wright presents a scene in which the films cannot fully cast its spell over the African American moviegoers. Although the two films that are shown, *The Gay Woman* and *Trader Horn*, work to reinforce certain class, racial, and other social myths and fantasies, Bigger Thomas and his friend Jack act as, what

Jacqueline Stewart terms, reconstructive spectators. In her provocative essay “Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity,” Jacqueline Stewart explains how her formulation of reconstructive spectatorship relies upon the works of Carby and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., works which “demonstrate that black efforts to refute racist dominant discourses were designed not only to change the black image in the white mind but also to reformulate the race’s image of itself” (661). However, while these two critics remain within the domain of literary production, Stewart is interested in how African Americans “continued the reconstructive process in their activities as audiences” (661). Since many of the cinemas, like the schools, were segregated, Stewart states, “During this period, black viewing can be read as a reconstructive process, whereby black viewers could reconstitute themselves as viewing subjects in the face of a racially exclusionary cinematic institution and social order” (661). However, Stewart insists that the social dimensions of the cinematic viewing experience greatly influences the viewing subject’s possible response:

We must image that the potential pleasures offered by the cinema extend far beyond the viewer’s capacity to identify with (or resist) particular characters or ideologies or her or his ability (or refusal) to lose her- or himself within the diegesis on screen. In addition, there is a range of possible responses, including those aspects of spectatorship that are shaped by the viewer’s experience of inhabiting and interacting with others within the space of the theater. (661)

Using these insights, I will focus on how Wright, while taking into account the “spells” that the film industry can cast, presents a film viewing scene in which two African Americans actively and cooperatively reconstruct their spectating experience.

Before analyzing the actual cinematic experience, it is important to examine the events before Bigger and Jack decided to go to the cinema. Before Bigger and Jack decide to go to the Regal Theater, a group of their friends have just rehearsed their plan to rob Blum's Delicatessen. After the group splits up, Bigger and Jack find the theater appealing because they believe that it is a public space that could provide them with a momentary escape: Bigger believed that the movies "could drain off his energies," namely his nervous energies concerning the impending robbery (33). However, the film viewing experience does not simply provide Bigger and Jack with a space to lose themselves and forget about their present social concerns and pressures. Whereas Olsen shows how the "conjurer" can cast such strong and influential spells that the distinction between inside and outside the cinematic experience is blurred, Wright portrays a reverse phenomenon whereby the viewer cannot forget his position outside the theatre in order to allow the spell to take effect inside the theater.

This is foreshadowed even before Bigger and Jack are inside the cinema. While Jack is buying their tickets, Bigger sees the poster advertisements for the two featured films, *The Gay Woman* and *Trader Horn*. While the poster for *The Gay Woman* displayed "images of white men and white women lolling on beaches, swimming, and dancing in night clubs," the poster of *Trader Horn* showed "black men and black women dancing against a wild barbaric jungle" (32). Since Jack must actually verbalize that he is ready to go in, Wright suggests that Bigger is fully engrossed with the incongruous collages: on the one hand, the whites are portrayed as completely lost in leisure activities, something that Bigger has never experienced; on the other hand, the blacks are seemingly portrayed as tribal primitives, also something beyond Bigger's experiences. Thus, even

before Bigger and Jack enter the theatre, Wright is already suggesting an immediate resistance to these films.

Once the two are in the Regal Theatre, Bigger and Jack's cooperative cinematic experience begins. It is important for an analysis of their shared viewing experience to point out that the Regal Theater was an actual theatre that was located in a predominantly African American portion of Chicago.³² Since the patrons of this theatre were African Americans, Bigger and Jack's viewing behavior and reactions are not as restricted as they would have been if whites were present in the audience. Of the two films, *The Gay Woman* was shown first, and throughout the film, Bigger and Jack are constantly discussing the events on the screen, not just passively digesting them. As the scenes of white, upper-class leisure and luxury progress, Bigger and Jack, although excluded from these activities and this lifestyle in their actual lives, are inserting themselves into these cinematic scenes. However, unlike the children in Olsen's text, who seem to lose themselves in the films, Bigger and Jack's projections remain grounded to the social realities of the racist society in which they live. When Bigger tells Jack his wishes of going to one of the white, elite nightclubs shown on screen, Jack responds immediately, "Man, if them folks saw you they'd run. ... They'd think a gorilla broke loose from the zoo and put on a tuxedo" (33). This joke results in uproarious laughter, something that, along with their vocal discussions, would not have been tolerated in a "mainstream" theatre with a mixed audience. Nevertheless, in the freedom of this viewing space,

³² Developing the importance of the type of public space, Stewart states, "During the era of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation in the U. S., the public dimension [of the viewing] took particular forms for black viewers: they might be segregated in balconies of "mainstream" theaters; they might attend "midnight rambles" or other separate shows in theaters serving black clienteles at different times; or they might be seated among all-black audiences in their own neighborhood, second-run theaters" (661). Given the particular public arena in which the film was viewed, the black spectator's viewing experience would vary. Since Bigger and Jack are in the Regal Theatre which served all black audiences, they were considerably freer in this viewing space.

Bigger and Jack are able to collectively rework the film's scenes in such a way that the always implicit racial codes of the seemingly "raceless" film present themselves. Despite the lack of explicit racial coding within the film, Bigger and Jack invoke what remains hidden and, in so doing, are not simply approaching the film as passive, absorbed viewers.³³

However, as the second film *Trader Horn* begins, which Stewart labels a "colonialist fantasy," Bigger and Jack's response is quite different (658). Whereas both Bigger and Jack were actively reworking the previous film *The Gay Woman*, the cooperative social dimension of their viewing experience recedes with *Trader Horn*. As the film unfolds, Bigger and Jack remain silent, seeing "pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances" and hearing "drums beating," and are not actively reworking the film's scenes through a shared discourse (35). However, this does not suggest that, with this film, they are in the same position as Olsen's packing town children. Instead, they are unable to relate to the naked black bodies on screen and therefore are highly resistant to these images. Although there is no dialogue to analyze that would bear this out, Wright's focus on Bigger's consciousness clearly evinces this. As soon as Bigger sees this African scene, his thoughts revert back to those of the previous movie: "gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking,

³³ Although I am not primarily focusing on gender, it is important to recognize that Wright also focuses on the intersection of gender and race through Bigger and Jack's black male spectatorship. Within the freedom of this space, the two African Americans jointly fantasize about transcending the seemingly impregnable social taboo of sleeping with a white woman. Stewart comments on this: "As moviegoers in a black urban neighborhood theater, however, Bigger and Jack are not only able to express their attraction to the white scarlet but they also feel empowered to make broad, lewd comments about the sexual proclivities of white women: 'them rich white women'll go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up'" (657). Thus, within the freedom of this space, the two adolescents derive pleasure and feelings of power from male fantasies that are socially prohibited.

drinking, and dancing” (36). While Bigger is still privately reworking the scenes of *The Gay Woman*, imaging himself within those scenes, he simultaneously is refusing to watch and accept the scenes in *Trader Horn*. In his continuous reworking, Bigger fantasizes about the possibilities of finding work in this white world and begins to regret the impending robbery. These mixed feelings of opportunity and regret that stem from Bigger’s unstable and unsettling social position conflict with the depiction of the black bodies on screen, who comfortable in their environment. Seeing this, Bigger is even more regretful, nervous, and fearful than when he first entered the theater: “He [Bigger] frowned in the darkened movie, hearing the roll of tom-toms and the screams of black men and women dancing free and wild, men and women who were adjusted to their soil and at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria” (36). While Bigger had hoped to be completely absorbed in the cinematic experience so as to lose himself and drain his nervous energy, he ultimately exits the cinema even more anxious and more aware of himself and his situation. Thus, Olsen’s conjurer is unable to fully cast its spell, for Bigger (and Jack) are never the passive spectator but are always reconstructing the film text in ways that make them conscious of their blackness in a racist society.

Similarly, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner initially concentrates on spectatorship but ultimately focuses on the construction of a counter-narrative that critically engages and critiques the homogenizing effects of popular mass-produced films that attempted in the early twentieth century to heal the cleft between the North and the South after the Civil War. In his essay “‘Some Trashy Myths of Reality’s Escape’: Romance, History, and Film Viewing in *Absalom, Absalom!*” Peter Lurie investigates both how the tendency to romanticize the “Old South” came to characterize the film industry and also how

Faulkner, writing *Absalom, Absalom!* while working in Hollywood in the 1930s, was highly aware and critical of this tendency. Although Lurie mentions various popular historical films that have common representations of Southern history, such as the adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), *The Fighting Coward* (1929), *Hallelujah!* (1929), and *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), he concentrates on D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which introduced many new cinematic techniques and involved a sustained love affair between a Northern woman and a Southern man. This film presents not only a symbolic unification between the North and the South but also a romanticized, biased representation of Southern and American history. It treats the Civil War as a necessary evil that America had to suffer in order for the new nation to prosper, and instead of focusing on the division or violence that preceded and followed from the war, this film approached it idealistically, as if the Civil War was instead a great source of unification and a minor dispute between some of history's most valiant and honorable men. By approaching the Civil War in this way, *The Birth of a Nation* neglects the history of racial violence, oppression, and exploitation that prompted the war and even goes as far as to glorify the current violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan, who were depicted as the supposed saviors and upholders of a gentlemanly code of honor, and also to depict African Americans as being blissfully happy in their pre- and post-war social position.

Interestingly enough, Lurie also finds evidence that Griffith's film and many like it were popular not only in the South but also in the North. For both regions of the United States, this historical film and many like it responded to social phenomena that were threatening the current social structures. These "threats" included most specifically

the increasing immigrant population and the organization of the working-class, with particular attention to the “threat” of communism. By offering an alternative response to these “problems”, the historical films became immensely popular:

During a period of national reconciliation, when Northern and Southern audiences alike were eager to find reasons to forget the Civil War, nostalgic depictions of life in the Old South were readily accepted as an alternative to the ravages of both contemporary and historical truth. (569-71)

Very similar to the plantation school’s narrative, these films attempt to displace a violent history and to provide resolutions to threatening current situations through idealized and mythologized cinematic representations, while simultaneously creating “a singular, consensus narrative for the entire country” (571) that fostered both patriotism and a faith in national unity.

Furthermore, Lurie also concentrates on how film viewing and the cinematic tendency to romanticize Southern history appear in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In his analysis, Rosa espouses this romantic sentimentality towards the South. On the other hand, Quentin partakes in the newly arising, American phenomenon of film viewing, “watching” her narrative unfold, as if he were in a movie theater. For Lurie, however, even after Quentin has “left” Rosa’s theater and begins to develop his own “film” with his roommate Shreve, he still retains much of the residual romanticization that he has learned from Rosa’s narration and the culture that helped produce it. Employing the theory of film suturing, as developed by film theorists Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan, whereby the viewing audience is sutured into the cinematic present, Lurie argues that Shreve and Quentin’s shared narration imaginatively sutures them into the Sutpen

legacy, allowing them to “forget” their present circumstances and also their connection to the “real” past:

In depicting Shreve and Quentin in the thrall of a narrative that subsumes and contains them, as the film frame does its viewer through the effect of suture, and by showing the romantic shading of their narration, Faulkner points to a manner of conceiving history similar to that encouraged by early film. Quentin and Shreve participate in a construction of narrative and a reproduction of a romantic myth, processes which find a structural and ideological paradigm in the cinema.

(586)

This analysis leads Lurie to read the conclusion of Quentin and Shreve’s narrative, specifically through the reactions of each, as producing markedly different effects. For Shreve, the encounter with this historical past is comforting because his “viewing” of this romanticized history produces a suture that indeed holds, but for Quentin, the suture of this narrative falls apart, prohibiting him from “leaving the movie theater” reconciled with this historical past. Lurie suggests that Quentin, unlike Shreve, displays the inefficacy of romanticizing history and that through him, Faulkner “pointedly critiques the effects of that ideology and its [cinematic] reproduction.”

Although I agree that Faulkner is using Quentin in order to critique the process by which these historical films are attempting to understand and promulgate Southern history and that Quentin and Shreve are producing a “film” through their shared narrative, I read their “movie” not as a romanticization of the historical past but as a counter-narrative that pointedly elucidates what has been forgotten or purposely overlooked by such films as *The Birth of a Nation* and such narrative strategies as Rosa’s

and Mr. Compson's. In my reading, there is a progression in narrative approaches, at least as regards the exploration of the connection between the historical past and Charles Bon's murder. This progression begins with Rosa's romanticization and demonization, extends through Mr. Compson's exoticization and fatalism, and ends with Shreve and Quentin's more thoroughly pointed examination.

As Lurie so aptly demonstrates, both Rosa's expectations and narrative evince a romantic sentimentality, from her assumption that as a Southern gentleman, Quentin should "escort her to Sutpen's Hundred and ... carry a pistol to defend her" (564) to her thousands of laudatory Civil War poems and her gothic, fairytale-like narrative style. When she begins to investigate the murder of Charles Bon, the same attitudes pervade her interpretation. Instead of discussing the circumstances of the murder, namely why her nephew Henry would kill his best friend, Rosa is more concerned with how Charles Bon's death thwarts her romantic desire: due to his death, she will not be able to satisfy this desire vicariously through her niece Judith. She ignores the violent aspect of this murder and, in her typical demonizing fashion, immediately scapegoats Sutpen for damning both the Sutpens and the Coldfields because of his "devil's fate" (107). She focuses most thoroughly on the supposed affront that she suffers at the literal "hands" of Sutpen's "brute," his mulatto daughter Clytie: *"I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh"* (111). Through her meticulous attention and build up for this scene, Rosa hopes to reveal the irony of a "black" woman authoritatively commanding a "respectable" white lady, but this also calls attention to the

displaced events of the murder. It is as if this supposed affront not only distracted Rosa at that time but also distracts her narrative's exploration: Bon's dead body slowly recedes, almost as if it is forgotten.

Although Mr. Compson's narrative probes deeper into the murder of Charles Bon, he himself acknowledges that it falls short. Mr. Compson admits initially that he is most interested in Bon because he believes that Bon is completely (culturally) Other and different: "He [Bon] is the curious one to me. He came into that isolated puritan country household ... a man a little older than his actual years and enclosed and surrounded by a sort of Scythian glitter" (74). The exotic pervades Compson's narrative, creating a helpful dichotomy, at least for him, between the exotic, experienced Bon and Henry, "the provincial, the clown almost, given to instinctive and violent action rather than to thinking, ratiocination" (76). Compson expands upon the interactions between these two seemingly polar opposites, and his final explanation for the murder revolves around the yokel Henry's inability to accept both the public marriage ceremony between Bon and the octoroon mistress and also Bon's refusal to renounce the marriage. While this account points indirectly towards Henry's anxiety about miscegenation, the murder remains within the Sutpen family, unable to penetrate to the deeper structures of this society. The narrative is superficial because Mr. Compson treats the murder as merely an old tale of simple violence that must remain ineluctably inexplicable:

We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now

incomprehensible affection. ... we see dimly people ... performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable. (80)

Compson's retreat into a fatalistic surrender leaves the violent murder unexplained and suggests to both Quentin and the reader that such violent motives are highly personal and singular, like the chance meeting between the learned, exotic journeyer and the provincial yokel, and that a thorough explanation is not only unfruitful but impossible. Ultimately Compson suggests that one would do best to accept these singular instances of violence and fatalistically in their inevitability and inexplicability.

Nevertheless, Quentin neither simply romanticizes the South's history of violence nor adopts a hopeless fatalism; instead, he more thoroughly explores the murder, producing a counter-narrative that foregrounds the South's history of violent exclusion. Two very important factors contribute to Quentin's ability to cut across these two, almost hegemonic, modes of approaching Southern (and American) history: his close attention to and identification with Henry's part in the Sutpen story and the inclusion of Shreve, an outsider, in the creative process. First, from the initial introduction of Henry, he and Quentin are in a position of passive "viewer" and student: Quentin listening to his father, who is effectively teaching Quentin a certain fatalism; and Henry watching his father fight his slaves, offering Henry a lesson in imperialistic ideology. With increasing curiosity, the Jefferson townsmen stole to the Sutpen Hundred at night in order to see the fighting matches that Sutpen would arrange between his "wild" slaves. On one of these occasions, Sutpen specifically arranged for his son Henry to attend.³⁴ After a few of the slaves fight each other, Sutpen himself steps into the ring. Far from the naturalized view

³⁴ The reader is aware of this through Ellen's acknowledgment of this plan: "I understand your bringing Henry here to see this, wanting Henry to see" (21).

of white supremacy and domination that the town believed emanated from blood and race, Sutpen attempts to teach his son the basic tenets of an imperialistic ideology, showing that domination and insubordination are relative positions that must be decided violently by will and power. In this fight scene, Sutpen displays the prototypical imperial “drama,” the white man violently imposing an order on the colonial subject. However, this “play” does not produce the desired effects for which Sutpen was hoping, because at the conclusion of the fight, Henry is screaming and vomiting. This vomiting scene could be interpreted in a variety of ways, but I read it as an instance of resistance, a refusal to “stomach” what his father is attempting to teach him. The vomiting manifests not only revulsion but also a recognition that this type of order was and is still necessary in order for the current racial system to remain. At this point, Henry seems as if he will attempt to evade or resist this prevalent system of violent domination, and this scene foreshadows the defiance and repudiation he will later show his father. Similarly, Quentin defies the fatalistic stance and surrender that his father is trying to promote. At various points of Mr. Compson’s narrative, Quentin simply refuses to listen: “meanwhile Mr. Compson’s voice speaking on while Quentin heard it without listening” (102); but, more importantly, Quentin also refuses to relinquish the narrative. Although Quentin does not vomit when he “views” the aforementioned fighting scene through Rosa’s narration, he uses what the fighting scene elucidates when he later constructs his narrative with Shreve.

Secondly, Shreve’s involvement in the narration is a crucial aspect of the narrative that he and Quentin jointly create. By killing Bon, Henry demonstrates that he cannot fully resist the grip of this violent racial system, but Quentin, with the help of Shreve, explores the murder deeply, which produces a sustaining and resistant counter-

narrative for the reading (viewing) audience. It is important to note what Deborah Cohn argues about the relationship between Shreve and Quentin in her article “The Case of Fabricated Facts: Historical Reconstruction in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Vargas Llosa’s *Historia de Mayta*.” As an outsider, Shreve neither knows nor respects the “rules” of speaking and listening that Quentin follows throughout his relationship with Rosa and his father. The narrating process is now open and the limits or rules are no longer closed, which allows for greater flexibility and a more sustained, shared, and penetrating narrative. What was once a regional account between insiders of Jefferson, takes on once again a transnational dimension. The Canadian Shreve enters the narration, irrevocably offering different insights than what Quentin would have discovered alone. Whereas the regional narrative seemed to have importance only within the South, Shreve’s contributions and interest opens the narrative and its consequences to a broader audience. This addition of an “outside” dimension is invaluable for the construction of their narration and marks their narrative as markedly different from Rosa’s and Mr. Compson’s.

When Shreve and Quentin begin to investigate the murder more closely, they focus on Henry’s fear of incest. For the purposes of their narrative, however, this fear does not fully explain the reasons for the murder because it is too singular and particular, keeping the explanation only within the confines of the Sutpen family. Incest is not enough of a motive for murder, as Henry shows in his defiant response to Sutpen’s demand that he mustn’t allow Bon to marry Judith, “*Yes. I have decided. Brother or not, I have decided. I will. I will* (allow Bon to marry Judith)” (283). However, immediately after this, Quentin and Shreve probe deeper and have Sutpen reveal the only realistic

motive for the murder, the fear of miscegenation, "*He must not marry her, Henry. His mother's father told me that her mother was a Spanish woman. I believed him; it was not until after he was born that I found out that his mother was part negro*" (283). With Henry now believing that Bon is marked as "black," he feels that it is impossible to allow Bon, now "*the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister*" (286), to enter into his family legitimately. Henry resorts to the violence that his father attempted to teach him, cruelly safeguarding the hierarchy of domination that supposedly preserves the "purity" of white blood by violently excluding the "black". Unlike the anxiety over incest, Shreve and Quentin have elucidated a basic premise that characterizes a pervasive fear throughout Southern and American history, namely this fear of miscegenation and the challenge to racial and social hierarchies that it exemplifies. By intensively focusing on the murder, Shreve and Quentin unromantically produce a narrative that runs counter to both Rosa's and Mr. Compson's, evoking the violent aspects that such mass-produced films as *The Birth of a Nation* attempt to romanticize and repress. Although, as Lurie argues, Quentin is more affected by this narrative than Shreve because "he cannot 'come away' from his contact with a historical past that marks him, as a Southerner, as complicit with its violent events" (588), this detracts from neither his openness in allowing an "outsider" to enter into the creative remembrance nor his uncompromising exploration into this murder, whereby he refuses to resort to seemingly hegemonic modes of uncritically representing and understanding the South. As a result, the shared counter-narrative forces the reader to confront a social system based upon violent exclusion.

VI. Conclusion

In Lawrence Swartz's work, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism*, he analyses how Faulkner rose to literary prominence and the historical and political circumstances that catalyzed this rise. The thrust of Swartz's argument is that Faulkner "was not a 'great' writer just because he wrote fiction of high quality..., [but] that in the context of the postwar era, and the emergent cultural cold war, there was a need to find an important American nationalist writer" (3). For my study, this is an important and helpful argument because it helps to explain why Faulkner has not been studied in conjunction with "proletarian" writers. While during the 1930s and early 1940s Faulkner was judged negatively by socially conscious critics of the 1930s as being "hard to read, often macabre, and too involved with style," there was a shift after the war in Faulkner criticism (Swartz 3). Led by the work of Malcolm Cowley and Robert Penn Warren, this shift called for a revaluation of Faulkner's work, and after the war, Faulkner was lauded as "an important novelist, a literary genius, and a serious moralist" (Swartz 3). As Swartz claims, this revaluation coincided with "United States political and economic hegemony at the end of the war," and "like Jackson Pollock and the abstract expressionists, Faulkner became universalized as an emblem of the freedom of the individual under capitalism ... [and] was seen to exemplify the same values that Western intellectuals saw in capitalism which made it morally superior to communism" (4). During this shift from obscurity to prominence, Faulkner was championed as a writer of undeniable genius and utterly different from the socially conscious and political-minded "proletarian" writers of the 1930s and early 1940s, a legacy that I believe has inhibited analyses of how the two relate.

While Swartz's analysis provides firm grounds for why Faulkner's relationship to the proletarian literature formation has historically been purposely distanced, ignored or simply unnoticed, this thesis has attempted to resituate Faulkner into his historical times and to argue that the events of this period greatly affected his writing. Since many of these same events catalyzed the formation of "proletarian literature," I have argued that Faulkner and these writers were responding to similar social phenomena in remarkably similar ways. For this thesis, I have concentrated on how these writers approach and represent two important and highly contested institutions during this period, namely education and film. Although my analysis has focused on issues of class and race, I do not mean to suggest that these writers are not also thinking critically of these institutions in terms of gender. Due to time and space, I chose not to pursue the important intersection of gender. Although many discussions of proletarian literature often focuses primarily on class and race, recent scholarship has begun to reread many of these works in terms of gender and corporeality, which has stemmed largely from the groundbreaking work of Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1992) and Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (1993). A recent collection of critical essays, *The Novel and the American Left*, has just recently been published in 2004 that focuses on these issues. Specifically, an essay in this collection, Joseph Entin's "Monstrous Modernism: Disfigured Bodies and Literary Experimentalism in *Yonnondio* and *Christ in Concrete*," analyzes Olsen's text simultaneously in relation to both Modernism and gender and corporeality. I have mentioned this to suggest possible ways of rethinking these writers and these institutions in terms of gender and corporeality that I

feel would be a highly productive and fertile endeavor. Nevertheless, I hope to have proven that proletarian literature and Faulkner should not be viewed as such an “odd” pairing and to have demonstrated that analyses of the relations between Faulkner and proletarian writers can produce new and penetrating understandings.

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