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“Playing It Out Like a Play”: Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden’s Erotic Masquerade in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*

AT THE FIGURATIVE CENTER OF WILLIAM FAULKNER’S *LIGHT IN AUGUST* IS the mysterious murder of the “spinster” (232) Joanna Burden, who is found with her throat slit inside of her burning home on the outskirts of Jefferson.¹ Though the townspeople had long ostracized and derided Joanna as a “Yankee, a lover of negroes,” they assemble within minutes, chorus-like, eager for the perpetrator of this “negro crime” (46, 287, 288) against a white woman to be punished.² Joe Christmas, an itinerant laborer who passes as a white man but is bitterly convinced that he is “part nigger” (254), is named as Joanna Burden’s murderer and a manhunt ensues that culminates in his being shot to death and castrated. These dramatic and gruesome details, narrated though they are in non-linear fashion, mark the denouement and epilogue of a three-act play that occurs within the novel, starring Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas as its principal actors. The narrator recounts three “phases” (260, 256, 268), or acts, in which Joe and Joanna assume multiple gendered and racialized roles, “playing it out like a play” (259). A marked attention to the performative and to social scripts and their oppressive demands pervades *Light in August*, warranting a sustained critical reading.

Through a complex web of flashbacks, the reader learns that Joe and Joanna had a three-year sexual liaison on her property. Their affair is a

¹For an extended reading of the novel as a mystery, see Wilhelm’s analysis of the relationship between visual spectacle and knowledge.

²As critics like Wittenberg and Snead have observed, the narrator, who speaks on behalf of the collective, espouses a heteronormative tone that is coded as male, which works to further emphasize the patriarchal imperatives undergirding this lethal drama. Snead also notes the narrator’s complicity in “turn[ing] arbitrary codes of dominance into ‘fact’” (85).

mobile site of pleasure and pain, attraction and revulsion, that (re)enacts and makes visible what Sharon Patricia Holland terms the “erotic life of racism,” which she defines as “the bridge between theories of race and theories of sexuality in all of their diverse complexity” (32). Joe and Joanna’s meetings are almost exclusively illicit nighttime trysts involving theatrical staging and choreographed movements in and around Joanna’s house, performances of the prohibition against miscegenation and its violation. The ambiguity of Joe’s and Joanna’s respective investments in the relationship raises a series of critical questions regarding the libidinal forces driving this couple’s fatal relationship. Joe’s revelation to Joanna of his belief that he has black blood fuels the erotic energy of their meetings. Their affair, however, is neither a simple violation of the law, nor the product of a set of biological facts, but rather the manifestation of a collective social fantasy, conjured within racialized and gendered structures of domination. Though Joe and Joanna engage in a private performance of gender play and policing that is predicated upon the prohibition against miscegenation and its violation, their erotic play is always already public insofar as its climax and outcome are predetermined and will be played out upon the public stage.

A provocative, perplexing character, Joe Christmas has endlessly fascinated critics. Though Joanna Burden regularly receives mention in discussions of the novel, she has received far less developed critical treatment. Moreover, readings of *Light in August* rarely set these two characters in an extended analysis, as the novel itself does with its staging of their three-act play. Situating the racialized aspects of Joe and Joanna’s affair as inextricable from the gender play and policing that unfolds between them during their extended performance of the taboo of miscegenation and its violation allows for examination of the novel’s engagement with the erotic life of racism. The first act of their play relates the exposition of their meeting in Joanna’s home on the periphery of town and introduces a conflict best described as what Judith Butler has termed “gender trouble”—a concept that Jay Watson develops in his compelling reading of the novel.³ In this first phase, Joe assaults Joanna,

³The notion of “gender trouble” arises when there is a discrepancy between dominant gender norms and their performance by individual subjects. As Butler notes, trouble often manifests in physical and rhetorical violence wielded against those who do not perform their gender correctly. Watson traces Jefferson’s “gender guard” and its policing of Joe Christmas’s hypermasculinity as, paradoxically, both hetero-normativized and

punishing her for having "the strength and fortitude of a man" (234) that threatens to emasculate him. Gender trouble takes on racialized dimensions in the second phase, after Joe reveals to Joanna his belief that he has black blood. This leads to a series of stylized sexual meetings, curated by Joanna, that (re)enact the prohibition against miscegenation and the violation of that prohibition. The symbol of the "bastard negro child" (266) moves the players into the final, climactic third act, in which Joanna urges Joe to conform to religious dogma, to attend a Negro college, and to train with a black lawyer in Memphis. The resulting confrontation leads to a fatal denouement for Joanna, and an epilogue wherein the vigilante Percy Grimm, himself described as being moved by "the Player," shoots and castrates Joe, warning, "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell" (462, 464).

Light in August stages Joe and Joanna's affair as a performance of the powerful taboos surrounding miscegenation and its violation, as Joe plays Joanna's "Negro" (260) lover, staying in a "tumble down negro cabin" while Joanna continues to live in her "old colonial plantation house" (36) for the duration of their relationship.⁴ In turn, the couple (re)enact various racialized fantasies, coupling under shrubs and in closets, significantly, at Joanna's prompting. To what extent are these roles deliberate and ironic, and to what extent unwitting? Though the novel suspends any precise reading of the players' intentions, Joe's inner musings reveal a critical distance from their erotic "play," while Joanna's actions and dialogue demonstrate an enduring alliance with masculinism and liberal humanism. The novel's attention to theatricality and its overdetermined effects signals a subversive treatment of historically contingent performances of social identity.

Joe and Joanna have already been powerfully conditioned by the symbolic order, or dominant discourse, before they ever meet one another. The roles they enact during their affair fluctuate between the margins and the mainstream of social identity. Descriptions of Joanna Burden's transformations during their three-act play from a "manlike" (266), even sexless, person (235); to a nymphomaniac (259); and finally, to a religious zealot (282), are imbricated with the mobile accounts of Joe's status in the novel at large. Joe is an orphan called "nigger" by other

othered (150).

⁴See Davis's foundational reading of the novel on this point.

children (168); a white adoptee of the McEacherns (168); a black man in the North (226); a “foreign” itinerant laborer in the South (33); Joanna’s “Negro!” lover (259-60); a white man in Mottstown (349); and ultimately, Joanna’s “Negro” rapist and murderer (288).

Such identity flux complicates a purely liberatory reading of their affair. What transpires between Joe and Joanna may appear to be a sexual awakening for Joanna, or may seem to offer her an arena in which to express her repressed creativity, as critics such as Minrose C. Gwin have argued. In her brief address of Joanna’s character, Gwin writes that “Joanna Burden insists, above all, upon the *process* of her subjectivity, the narrative desire to invent and reinvent herself. It is the very multiplicity of her creativity, her insistence upon ‘playing it out like a play’ . . . which both frightens and excites Joe Christmas” (26). In a celebratory vein that is not unrelated to Gwin’s reading, John N. Duvall concludes that Joe’s connection with Joanna “grows into a deep and real love” (30), and that he only kills her out of self-defense. Gwin’s and Duvall’s assessments, however, are at odds with the narration’s characterization of Joe and Joanna as actors performing a “play,” which speaks to the artifice, not the authenticity, of their interactions and their patriarchal subtext. Diane Roberts’s feminist account of Joanna Burden’s character is the most extended and nuanced analysis to date. Roberts, like Watson, is attentive to “gender trouble” in Jefferson, and counts Joanna, along with other unmarried white women in Faulkner, as a “maladjusted, predatory, manless woman judged by her access to or denial of ‘normal’ sexual relations or the possibility of marriage, marginal to the favored definitions of the feminine in the South” (150). The foundational feminist work done on Faulkner in the 1990s finds complementary company in contemporary critical interventions in queer theory and critical race theory, and in gender and sexuality studies. Recent readings by critics such as Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman and Nathan Tipton importantly emphasize the homoeroticism of the novel and its links to violence, though neither engage Joe Christmas’s relationship with Joanna Burden in any detail, as I aim to do here with the goal of developing a fuller account of the novel’s engagement with the erotic life of racism.

Joe and Joanna’s play affords rich, albeit difficult material regarding what Saidiya V. Hartman calls “the thorny status of pleasure” (33) in the psychic life of American slavery and, by extension, its aftermath. The

libidinal energy driving Joe and Joanna's relationship and its possibilities for affording pleasure are a source of profound ambiguity, particularly in relation to racial and gender domination. The narration disallows a definitive reading of Joe's or Joanna's precise intentionality or volition, while subtly and simultaneously tracing how these players have inherited a cultural discourse defined by white supremacy and sexual repression. Eric J. Sundquist points out that *Light in August* "appeared approximately at the crest of a forty-year wave of Jim Crow laws that grew in part out of a threatened economy, in part out of increasingly vocal demands for black equality during and after World War I, and in greater part out of reawakened racist fears" (68). Such a milieu saturates the erotic play and identity policing that unfolds between Joe and Joanna, revealing, in dramatic fashion, the inextricability of race and class from gender and sexuality.

Mimicry or Masquerade?: The Problem of Intentionality

In her 1929 essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere makes reference to multiple case studies involving women who harbored a masculine identification and performed an excessively feminine display of gender in order to avoid reproach or rejection from men. For instance, she describes an accomplished "propagandist" who acted coyly and flirted with distinguished male audience members upon finishing her impressive lectures. Based on these studies, Riviere contends that "Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (176).⁵ Here, Riviere provocatively suggests that there is no difference between femininity and masquerade, or, in other words, there is no "true" or essential woman behind the mask. By extension, there is no true man behind the masculine mask, either. Feminine masquerade, Riviere posits, works to conceal the fact that a woman is as capable as a man of performing traditionally masculine roles related to public life. Feminist theorist Mary Ann Doane builds on Riviere's discussion, finding a site of resistance in the critical gap generated by acts of feminine masquerade, for "in flaunting femininity,

⁵Though I have not found evidence to corroborate Faulkner's familiarity with Riviere's work, this article engages it as a relevant and contemporary intertext with *Light in August*.

[the masquerade] holds it at a distance” (81). Elaborating upon theories of masquerade, feminist and critical race theorists adopted the term mimicry to refer to subversive performative acts. In *Female Impersonation*, Carole-Anne Tyler sums up the critical distinctions drawn between masquerade and mimicry:

Femininity is an unwitting masquerade, while mimicry is a witty redoubling of that doubling inherent to femininity. The female mimic—self-aware, self-conscious—apparently knows what she is up to. She is up to her neck in patriarchy, but her head is clear. . . . The female masquerader, equally bogged down in patriarchy—at her wit’s end, perhaps without knowing it—flaunts but apparently does not flout her femininity, and so remains mired in masculinism. (27-28)

Tyler troubles the assurance of intentionality with which feminists have endowed mimicry, as one’s intended message or meaning—be it ironic, or parodic—is not always decoded “correctly” by an other, or an audience.⁶ The unknowability of intentionality and the framework of masquerade as an unwitting, less radical performative gesture, and of mimicry as carrying a sense of self-reflexivity, opens up new avenues for complicating and engaging Joe and Joanna’s play; to what extent does either player “know what [he or] she is up to” in this deathbound drama? The explosive chemistry of their erotic performance invites exploration of Joanna’s role in terms of her white feminine masque, which she dons to disguise her masculine identification, and Joe’s role in terms of his self-reflexive racial mimicry as her “black” lover, which ironically rehearses the ultimate unknowability of his racial makeup.

Nevertheless, there is no firm line to draw between masquerade and mimicry, as an irreducible slippage exists between the hyperfemininity (or hypermasculinity) of masquerade and the ironic intentionality aligned with mimicry. The erotics of human sexuality complicate the matter, for each performer requires an other to bear witness to and recognize the performance. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, “The erotic

⁶Tyler critiques, for instance, Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of parody in the context of postmodern cultural productions, questioning whether one’s ironic intentions may necessarily be recognized or accepted by one’s audience. Relevant to any discussion of mimicry is Homi Bhabha’s examination of its subversive potential in “Of Mimicry and Man.” Joe Christmas’s awareness of the oppressors’ rhetorical violence against subjugated others leads him to identify at times with the dominant discourse of white supremacy, even as he often subverts this power structure by changing racial roles, often at his own discretion, as in his participation in Joanna’s scripts.

experience is one that most poignantly reveals to human beings their ambiguous condition" (416). Moreover, as Holland has pointed out, these gendered performances cannot be disentangled from their imbricatedness with race and racism. In emphasizing this fundamental ambiguity by way of Joe and Joanna's racialized drama, *Light in August* demonstrates how subjectivity is constituted from without, and must be repeatedly performed in order to appear "natural." Butler, drawing upon Beauvoir, insists that the body "is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation" ("Performative Acts" 902). Joe and Joanna's play is a dramatic performance of identity flux and racial and gender domination that exhibits the overdetermined realm of the erotic life of racism.

The First Act: "it was like I was the woman and she was the man"

Gender nonconformity, and the anxiety and "trouble" it arouses, characterizes the first phase, or act, of Joe and Joanna's affair. After several days on the road, a hungry Joe Christmas enters Joanna Burden's old colonial house through an open window, where his first glimpse of her is softened by candlelight (231). Signs of Joanna's masculine, autonomous lifestyle, however, soon impinge upon Joe's initial impression of her. This effect generates Joanna's

dual personality: the one the woman at first sight of whom in the lifted candle . . . opened . . . a horizon of physical security and adultery if not pleasure; the other the mantrained muscles and the mantrained habit of thinking born of heritage and environment with which he had to fight up to the final instant. (234-35)

Joe immediately associates Joanna's image with "pleasure," but his attraction is complicated by his subsequent repulsion upon encountering signifiers of "the other" Joanna, her female masculinity. In regard to female masculinity, Judith Halberstam notes that masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (2). For Joe, Joanna exudes a disturbing "dual personality," as he sees her both as a desirable white woman and as a formidable white man with whom he has "to fight up to the final instant" (234, 235). This scene has sparse dialogue, thereby compounding the effect of each actor "reading" the other by way of the cues learned through social conditioning.

This expository opening to their play emphasizes Joe's simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward Joanna's female masculinity. Shortly after their first meeting, Joe approaches the house again, peering "through a downstairs window," where he sees Joanna "writing at a desk" (233). The problematic pleasure that is traditionally accorded to male voyeurism is disrupted, however, when he spies Joanna engaged in the act of writing. This compounds the signifiers that call attention to Joanna's "manlike" (266) persona: her self-sufficient lifestyle, her financial independence, her austere manner of dress, and her impressive knowledge base, which is described as that "of a combined priest and banker and trained nurse" (258). She is the master of the house, a role typically aligned with the sovereign subject with claims to the nation-state. This stylized *tableau vivant* depicts the fact that Joe cannot help but look at Joanna, but he recoils from what he sees, punishing her female masculinity with sexual violence shortly thereafter. He enters her room at night and assaults her, exclaiming, "I'll show you! I'll show the bitch!" Underscoring the movement or blocking of this violent social script, Joe "blew out the lamp, thinking, 'Now she'll run.'" Joanna, however, defies his preemptive beliefs, lying still so that "beneath his hands the body might have been the body of a dead woman not yet stiffened" (236). It as though Joe has killed her with his brutal lesson. This overdetermined scene of sexual force does not seem to leave room for pleasure, but speaks instead to the social conditioning that compels subjects to regulate each other's gender performances, reminding us that "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 903).

Afterwards, Joe assures himself, "At least I have made a woman of her at last" (236), suggesting that Joanna's display of female masculinity—"the bitch!"—merits both discipline and direction. Nevertheless, the incompleteness of Joe's attempt to make Joanna into a woman haunts him, so that he also thinks, "*Under her clothes she cant even be made so that it could have happened*" (235). Joe's thwarted attempt to *make* Joanna into a woman by force only intensifies his feelings of anxiety towards her masculine behavior and "manlike yielding" (234), which leads to his disavowal of this sex act having even happened. The effect of the first act's irreconcilable gender trouble leads Joe to think, "it was like I was the woman and she was the man" (235). The narration makes clear that this is not an acceptable state of affairs for Joe Christmas. The

staging of sexual violence is predicated upon their mutual gender and sexual ambiguity, initiating a pattern of violence that recurs throughout their death struggle to sculpt one another's social identity, here, at the level of gender and sexuality. In the second and third acts of their play, race, class, and religion become overt forces in their struggle for recognition, waiting to be named as such, but always already imbricated with the erotic life of racism.

Joanna's "manlike" response to Joe's display of sexual force baffles Joe and serves primarily to shore up her masculine persona in his eyes. His frustrated attempt to "[make] a woman of [Joanna]" is exacerbated by his acknowledgment after the rape that she is still the proverbial man of the house. The play stages his return to the house the next night, where Joe finds the front door locked, but the back door unlocked, and it was "as though some enemy upon whom he had wreaked his utmost of violence and contumely stood, unscathed and unscarred, and contemplated him with a musing and insufferable contempt" (237). The front and back entrances signify erotic power dynamics, so that to enter the front door would be to assert his mastery and sexual prowess, while being made to use the back door, once reserved for slaves and now for servants, invokes a marginality that Joe associates with his sense of his own blackness. This racialized dimension comingles with Joe's impression that he was the woman and Joanna was the man; Joe casts Joanna as his "enemy" who mocks his greatest efforts to feminize and dominate her with sexual violence; she remains, instead, the white (male) master of the house.

This scene initiates the racialized dimension of their affair: upon entering the back door, Joe smashes the plates of food—"Woman's muck"—that Joanna has prepared for him against the wall, as he interprets them as being "*Set out for the nigger*" (238). As Holland emphasizes, racism accumulates across quotidian, rather than spectacular, acts. Joanna's leaving the back door unlocked for Joe transmits meaning to him based on his life experiences and cultural knowledge. His relegation to the back door, symbolic to Joe of Joanna's masculine indomitability and whiteness, renders her feminine gesture of preparing food for him loathsome and a mockery of his own precarious manhood. Joanna may have intended this offering of food as a "womanly" gesture, a sign of her female masquerade, but Joe interprets it as an act of ridicule. The first phase's exposition establishes that their

gender play and policing will unfold across a scarred racial terrain that is already socially conditioned prior to their meeting one another.

The Second Act: “playing it out like a play”

Joe’s subsequent revelation to Joanna that he believes he is “part nigger” (254) is uttered, importantly, in the former slave quarters of her property, where he lives for the duration of their affair. His statement crystallizes the racialized threat of rhetorical and physical violence that pervades their three-act play from its inception. As Thadious M. Davis argues, “Even before he tells Joanna that he believes he is a Negro, Joe apparently sees himself as the ‘nigger’ in her bed” (136). The impossibility of assessing the reality of this “part” of his racial makeup dictates, all the same, that Joe must play a part, be it black or white, throughout his fraught experience. Joe’s self-reflexiveness in the text at large aligns this part, or role-playing, with racial mimicry.⁷ Joe’s admission of his purported racial difference follows upon what he interprets as Joanna’s womanly gesture of “surrender” when she visits him. Her female masculinity, however, is still apparent as she tells him in a voice “pitched almost like the voice of a man” (241) of her Calvinist forefathers and their investment in racial uplift. This voice, aligned with liberal humanism, will resurface in the third act of the play, as will the unwelcome presence of Joanna’s female masculinity. Ensnared as these characters are in the Jim Crow South, Joe’s revelation takes on a radically erotic charge that takes its cues from the preexisting script of anti-miscegenation discourse, and “in this way the second phase began” (256).

In contrast to Joanna’s characterization in the first phase as corpse-like, the second phase is characterized by descriptions of Joanna’s overt sexual courting of Joe; her body softens as she gains weight (264), and she is associated in the text with blood and fluid—substances that both

⁷After his “white” upbringing in the McEachern household, Christmas moves to the North, where his conscious attempt to become “black” is described during the course of his living with a black woman described as an “ebony carving” (225). Lying awake at night, Christmas works “to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being” (226). His concentrated effort at this time to be “black” ironically contests the notion of an essentialized individual. Furthermore, the narration describes a distinct orchestration of meaning on Christmas’s part when he recalls how “he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white” (225).

attract and repel Joe.⁸ As Butler explains, "to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, . . . to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" ("Performative Acts" 902). Such insights speak to Joanna's efforts to make a female body for herself—the very female body that Joe has disavowed: "*Under her clothes she cant even be made*" (235). Reading Joanna's behavior in the second act as a feminine masquerade highlights the process of her having to become a woman, as defined by time and place. Michele Montrelay explains in regard to masquerade that "the woman uses her own body as a disguise" (Doane 82). Joanna's sex play exposes "the most literal kind of performative expression of gender, a volitional dramatization in the service, say, of seduction" (Martin 102).

The second act of their play rehearses prohibitions against miscegenation and their violation, as Joanna pens erotic notes on a daily basis for Joe that detail his nightly role in their sexual rendezvous. She hides her scripts in the hollow of a fence post (259), signaling the illicit nature of their affair. Joe and Joanna's sexual escapades dramatize the racialized taboos scaffolding their performance:

he would have to seek her about the dark house until he found her, hidden, in closets, in empty rooms, waiting, panting, her eyes in the dark glowing like the eyes of cats. Now and then she appointed trysts beneath certain shrubs about the grounds, where he would find her naked, or with her clothing half torn to ribbons upon her, in the wild throes of nymphomania . . . with her wild hair, each strand of which would seem to come alive like octopus tentacles, and her wild hands and her breathing: "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (259-60)

Here, Joanna's Medusa-like depiction appoints her sexuality a hyperbolized, nearly supernatural and dangerous quality that recurs gruesomely in the text when she is nearly decapitated, while the description of her shredding of her own clothes recalls Doane's discussion of masquerade as excessive: "in flaunting femininity, [the masquerade] holds it at a distance" (81).⁹ Joanna's feminine masquerade

⁸See Urgo.

⁹Wittenberg cites Ilse Duso Lind's speculation that Faulkner may have based Joanna's depiction upon his "reading about premenopausal sexual hyperesthesia in a book by a Dr. Louis Berman" (118); see Lind 95-96. I privilege a performative, rather than a biological, reading of Joanna's hyperactive sex drive, though this second phase can

generates a productive gap that calls our attention to the repressive demands of gender and racial performativity, even as it opens a critical space to allow that Joanna derives sexual pleasure from her erotic performance of miscegenation's violation. Though Joanna offers her body freely to Joe each night, she requires that he search the dark house, so that "he felt like a thief, a robber, even while he mounted to the bedroom where she waited" (234). In this way, Joanna interpellates Joe as a "Negro!" (260) by incorporating the initiating violence he exercises over her in the first phase into her now ostensibly feminine role as insatiable nocturnal nymph in the second. She reenacts, with seeming pleasure, the pervasive Southern cultural script of a white woman being raped by a black man. This is clearly problematic, and the novel, it seems, calls for our attention to this very narrative. To what degree is Joanna a sexual agent in scripting these racialized scenarios, "waiting, panting" with anticipation to play her part, and to what degree a mere actor reciting taboo lines and performing illicit gestures that long predate her meeting Joe? The text seems to point to the latter, while still allowing for the free-floating force of desire to pursue an (impossible) fulfillment by the other.

The racialized dynamics of Joe and Joanna's sexual affair and its descriptions in the passage above warrant comparison to one of Riviere's 1929 case studies of masquerade:

it was a step towards propitiating the avenger to endeavour to offer herself to him sexually. This phantasy . . . had been very common in her childhood and youth, which had been spent in the Southern States of America; if a Negro came to attack her, she planned to defend herself by making him kiss her and make love to her (ultimately so that she could then deliver him over to justice). (175)

Riviere's patient's racialized fantasy, which culminates in the African American male's arrest and punishment, resonates with the lethal subtext of Joanna's feminine masquerade's racially charged cues. The law, in short, will defend Joanna against Joe's repeated entrances "by stealth to despoil her virginity each time anew" (234). Of course, by the end of Joe and Joanna's affair, this scenario rings true, as Joe undergoes a punishment equal to the euphemistic "justice" Riviere's patient conjures for her "attack[er]." Seemingly forgetting their longtime

surely be read as a combination of the two.

perception of Joanna Burden as a "Yankee, a lover of negroes" (46), the town rallies to avenge her as a violated white woman whom they imagine "had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward" (288). Here, the erotic life of racism is spelled out on the page. But what is Joanna's role in all of this? Does she stage their affair knowing that she will be exonerated and that Joe, in the end, will be punished? Does this account for her proposed double suicide pact in the third act? Whether Joanna's aims to seek pleasure from and/or to punish Joe are conscious or unconscious, their effects are material and irrevocable. As such, Joanna's masquerade "remains mired in masculinism" (Tyler 28), ultimately ensuring her legibility as a white woman in the eyes of the town, and perhaps in her own estimation, even as it guarantees that Joe will be lynched as a black rapist and murderer.¹⁰

Joanna's interpellation of Joe during sex as "Negro!" operates ironically and theatrically, however, when read in the context of the complete passage in which this exclamation appears: "Sometimes the notes would tell him not to come until a certain hour, to that house which no white person save himself had entered in years" (259). The provocative pairing of a description of Joe as a "white man" in the same passage in which Joanna hails him as "Negro!" (260) calls attention to their affair as a performance of roles that preexist their occupation of them. In Joanna's case, she was tasked by her father to carry the burden of the so-called "curse of the black race" (253); her "wild," nymphomaniacal sex with Joe channels this discourse into the erotic life of racism. This extended passage stages an impossible desire for a racialized exorcism that would rid her of her father's mandate inasmuch as her crying out "Negro!" is a racialized climax. Her generic cry transcends Joe Christmas as her individual "black" lover and invokes the racialization and pathologizing of sexuality in the dominant discourse.

¹⁰For an extended account of the stereotype of the African American male as a rapist of white women and its role in the literature of the '20s and '30s, see Leiter, who analyzes the Southern tendency to see "blackness" anywhere—a tendency that is then conflated with the sexually rapacious figure of the "black beast" that fuses in the town's perception of Joe Christmas following Joanna's death. Leiter, drawing upon Joel Williamson's research into what he terms the "radical racism" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, asserts that "lynching and riots were common means of cowering African American communities throughout the South, and white demagogues invoked white female sanctity as a call to white unity and political support" (3). This discourse readily returns in the novel to provide a narrative to explain Joanna's death.

Accordingly, the liberal humanist discourse that Joanna inherits from her forefathers and conveys to Joe in a voice in which “There was nothing soft, feminine, mournful” (249) is passed down from the same patriarchal order that pressures Joanna to masquerade as a woman. Aware at some level of the inevitable and impending violence that is the necessary outcome of miscegenation’s violation, Joe thinks, “I better move. I better get away from here” (260), signaling the danger of this role. And yet, he stays. The presentation of him staying on, ostensibly in spite of himself, is suggestive of the inevitability of the spectacular and often erotic violence of lynching that follows the discovery of interracial sex or intimacy, whether real or imagined.

Amplifying this inevitability, Joanna delivers her lines in the mode of scripted melodrama. Joe, in turn, “watch[es] her pass through every avatar of a woman in love” (259). With its reference to avatars, the language here distances Joanna from a woman who is actually in love, rendering her instead as a player performing the act of love—a performance that Joe *watches*. The text delineates these markers, explaining how Joanna

surprised and took him unawares with fits of jealous rage. She could have had no such experience at all, and there was neither reason for the scene nor any possible protagonist: he knew that she knew that. It was as if she had invented the whole thing deliberately, for the purpose of playing it out like a play. (259)

Although there is no cause for such invented displays of jealousy, Joe and Joanna continue to participate in these scenes. One possibility for their doing so lies in the magnetic appeal of stable gender performances. By going through the motions of a forbidden love affair, Joe and Joanna move closer to identifiable, albeit illicit and even precarious, roles that their circumstances—Joe’s racial indeterminacy and Joanna’s spinsterhood—have denied them in the past. Joanna’s “fits of jealous rage,” which she performs “with such fury, with such convincingness and such conviction,” constitute a seemingly normative display of passion and intimacy (259). The narration’s likening of the affair to a play, nonetheless, productively reveals that their affair conforms to a preexisting script, couched in the language of the dominant discourse that remains uncannily familiar as each predicts the other’s next move or line. Their mutual participation suggests that social performances, even restrictive ones, can allay a subject’s anxiety by consolidating his or

her legibility in the eyes of others. In other words, Joanna's role as a sexualized woman and Joe's as her "Negro" lover holds mutual appeal.

In spite of Joe's socially deviant status as a drifter and Joanna's as a spinster, the unconscious pressure of the Old South's hegemonic discourse pushes them closer to the center of white heteronormative expectations during the course of their performance. This is not, however, a seamless or progressive process, as is clear from the text's repeated depiction of Joe, who "began to see himself as from a distance, like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass." From this same distance, he watches Joanna, as though he were "watching the two creatures that struggled in the one body like two moongleamed shapes struggling drowning in alternate throes upon the surface of a black thick pool" (260). Though this pool can be read as a menstrual-like substance aligned with the female body (Bleikasten 290), it also metaphorizes Joanna's struggle with the erotic life of racism, heard in her cry, "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (260). Joe watches himself stand in for what Joanna and her forefathers call the "burden" of blackness, which ironically recalls his own suffocating sensation upon walking through Freedman Town, the black quarter of Jefferson, which is characterized as a descent into a "black hollow" (115). The narration pathologizes blackness with its references to the "black abyss" (261, 331), "black thick pool" (260), and "black tide" (339); blackness figures as an undefined but threatening force that engulfs Joe as he approaches a ritualized death by lynching.

In related fashion, the "two creatures" engaged in a death struggle are Joanna's feminine and masculine identifications, persistent since Joe's first dimly-lit sighting of Joanna in her kitchen. The narration reinforces this bifurcated impression even in its physical description of Joanna's retaining the "face of a spinster: prominently boned, long, a little thin, almost manlike: in contrast to it her plump body was more richly and softly animal than ever" (266). The traditional division of the masculine mind as rational and the feminine body as animal or "natural" produces a bewildering effect in the text as Joanna's female masquerade struggles to remain legible by day, even as her "manlike" face exudes an uncanny, enduring presence by night. This proves a haunting image when, by the end of their performance, Joanna's "manlike" head is nearly decapitated from her "plump body," calling attention to her masquerade's ultimate failure to quell her gender trouble. Significantly, the novel characterizes this as a "surface" "struggl[e]" (260)—with blackness, gender, and

sexuality—built upon and sustained by cultural mythologies with fatal effects.

The Third Act: “justify or expiate”

The play traces the trajectory of Joanna’s feminine masquerade from her nocturnal, overtly sexual displays in the second phase to her conscious desire to display to Joe, her “Negro” lover, an ostensibly indisputable sign of her womanhood in the third act: pregnancy. The taboo subtext of their play is clear as “She began to talk about a child, as though instinct had warned her that now was the time when she must either justify or expiate” (263). Nevertheless, in spite of Joe’s earlier observation during the second, hypersexual phase of Joanna’s “rotten richness ready to flow into putrefaction at a touch, like something growing in a swamp” (262), when Joanna finally announces that she is “with child” (266), Joe rejects her attempt to secure her womanhood by way of pregnancy: to make real their prolonged performance, with what Martin critically terms the “fixed ground or maternal swamp of women-identification” (101). Such oxymoronic language is fitting, given alternating descriptions of Joanna as a cold, solid man, and a fluid, soft woman (262). Striking Joanna “with his fist,” as he might a man, Joe insists, “You haven’t got any baby. . . . You never had one. There is not anything the matter with you except being old. You just got old and it happened to you and now you are not any good anymore” (277). Joe exposes the failure of Joanna’s feminine masquerade by affirming that she is “not any good anymore,” presumably either for sex or for pregnancy. Deborah Clarke suggests that Joanna’s “imagined pregnancy may reflect a desire to solidify her gender, much as she uses it to demand that Joe solidify his race” (98). Though the text retains a degree of ambiguity regarding whether Joanna’s pregnancy is legitimate or, as Clarke assumes, “imagined,” Joe’s violent denial of Joanna’s ability to procreate reveals his underlying suspicion that Joanna is still, somehow, not quite a woman, in spite of her prolonged masquerade, and he, by extension, is not actually her black lover.

The gaps that Joe perceives in their play give way to the volatile scenes that characterize the third phase of their affair. Though in a new incarnation, these scenes are scripted, all the same, in the social discourse of the Old South. When Joe rejects the notion of them forming a family, Joanna responds, “A full measure. Even to a bastard negro

child. I would like to see father's and Calvin's faces. This will be a good time for you to run, if that's what you want to do.' But it was as though she were not listening to her own voice, did not intend for the words to have any actual meaning" (266). The gap signaled here between Joanna and her melodramatic lines depicts her as a mouthpiece of the Other, or a puppet of a preexisting discourse—in this case, that of liberal humanism. That she "did not intend for the words to have any actual meaning" cautions the reader against interpreting these proclamations as authentic or expressive. As Butler observes, "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" ("Performative Acts" 906). Though Joanna can assume her place as the rightful heir of her Calvinist forefathers' legacy, Joe Christmas and his "negro child" are both branded as bastards who, as Hortense J. Spillers observes in her reading of the literary trope of the bastard son, have no claims to legitimacy, inheritance, or national belonging. Just as Joanna recites the discourse of the Other by proposing that Joe will leave her with an illegitimate "black" child, similarly, Joe presumes that Joanna will demand he marry her. He thinks, "'Here it comes. She will say it now: marry. But I can at least get out of the house first.' But she did not" (265). The cultural unconscious conditions Joe to assume that Joanna, in her feminized incarnation, will pressure him to marry her. The novel, however, preserves the underlying irony that the two cannot legally marry if they continue to play their parts as white woman and black man.

Once Joanna begins to pray ritualistically during the third phase, she expresses a masochistic, fanatical impulse to display her womanhood not only by pregnancy, but also by way of relinquishing her financial and legal power to Joe, which further demonstrates the delimiting impact of heteronormative gender norms in Depression-era Mississippi. Joanna tacitly offers to disavow her masculine identification in order to be a mother to Joe's child and his "secretary" (268). That such roles are practically unthinkable under the law and outside of Joanna's property further instantiates the idea of the erotic life of racism as an effect of a collective fantasy. In turn, their affair disintegrates in the third act under the pressure of many social forces: the failure of liberal humanism, the pressure of religious fundamentalism, and, finally, through irrevocable physical violence. Joanna's hailing of Joe as "Negro!" during sex in the second phase returns in the third act by way of her dual attempts to

fashion him a “black” identity: she offers both to send Joe to law school at a black college, tuition-free, “on [her] account” (277), and to save his soul from damnation with her prayers. Thus, the hidden authority barely veiled by Joanna’s feminine masquerade returns to the fore—whether she consciously intends for it to or not—in the form of her liberal humanist and religious aims to control Joe’s behavior and destiny under the guise of racial uplift.

Joanna’s sustained textual alignment with female masculinity, or “the other” Joanna, signals the fissures in her feminine masquerade, which continue to prove anxiety-producing to Joe up until her death. When Joanna, bespectacled and dressed like “a careless man” (275), suggests that Joe announce his black blood publicly, Joe strikes her. As Doane observes of the image of the woman in glasses, “There is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking” (83). From her “bleeding mouth,” which affirms the sense of the lethal stakes of their performance of miscegenation, Joanna concludes, “Maybe it would be better if we were both dead” (278). Joanna’s conclusion articulates the murderous, suicidal subtext of racial and gender domination that courses beneath their entire affair, presenting her with no other option than their deaths. Even as her statement implicitly acknowledges the marginal social role Joanna is pushing Joe to assume, her assessment also addresses the crushing effects of assuming heteronormative gender performances on subjects whose desires fall outside of such norms. Joe firmly rejects Joanna’s offers, first of education, then of salvation. For, as Doreen Fowler maintains, “Joanna orders him to acknowledge his kinship with a despised people, in Joe’s own words, to ‘tell niggers that I am a nigger too’” (157). Though Joe has played the part of her Negro lover in their erotic theater, he violently spurns the assumption of a black identity in the public sphere, in both the liberal humanist and religious manifestations that Joanna proposes, as either would ensure him a secondary, subjugated position in the hegemonic regime of the Jim Crow South.

In spite of the fact that Joanna cannot or does not consistently perform her feminine masquerade during their three-year affair and that Joe refuses to publicly perform his role as a “Negro,” their roles demand a resolution of sorts as their performance nears the end of the third act. Though Joe plays an active part in “feminizing” Joanna, in large part through physical and verbal abuse, he soundly rejects the possibilities

she presents him of family, career, and religion, concluding to himself, "No. If I give in now, I will deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be" (265). Joe's notion of "choosing" his way of life and "making" himself position him as a defiant subject aligned with mimicry, one who forcefully rejects his role as exoticized other once "the novelty of the second phase" (258) of their sexual courtship has worn off. Joe's refusal to accede to Joanna's demands, shaped of a paternal liberal humanism and religious dogma, leads to the climax of their performance and to the revelation of Joanna's enduring masculine identification, which persists in spite of her best efforts to display herself as a woman. When Joe categorically refuses to pray with her, Joanna reminds him, "I dont ask it. Remember that. Kneel with me" (282), before unfurling her shawl, in a moment of symbolic unmasking, to reveal a revolver. Joanna's reminder that she does not ask him to kneel marks her allegiance to the discourse of the Other, against which Joe has rebelled for nearly all of his life. This culminating gesture aligns Joanna's feminine masquerade with underlying patriarchal norms and Joe's rejection of her proposals with his self-reflexive, defiant acts of mimicry.

Though Joanna's death, provocatively, is not actually narrated in the text, occurring, as it were, with the curtain closed, the reader, like the townspeople, is coaxed into presuming that Joe Christmas kills her, rather than risk incurring either literal or symbolic death at her hands.¹¹ Roberts asserts that over the course of Joanna and Joe's affair, "The fictions of the spinster and the black rapist collide, destroying two people struggling to break free of the boundaries of race, gender, class, and sexuality, yet who finally reduce each other to the roles of white woman and black man" (172). Though the extent to which Joe and Joanna are "struggling to break free" is unknowable, they are certainly reduced to their respective roles by each other and by the community at large. Consequently, even after Joe refuses to play his "Negro" part in public, the fact that Joanna is made a white woman in death by way of the collective's recognition of her as such finally forecloses her masculine oscillations in life, while also ensuring that the spectacle of Joe's punishment as a black rapist and murderer will be played out on the public stage.

¹¹See Wilhelm and Lurie 69.

Epilogue: “I have never got outside that circle”

During the days after Joanna’s death, Joe dwells on the literal and figurative outskirts of society. While on the run, he survives for a time in nature, where he experiences starvation, isolation, and hallucinations. The sense of peace Joe experiences in the time he spends apart from the social order contrasts with the repressive, exclusive influence the system of language has wielded over him his entire life, and which pervades the subtext and finally the dialogue of his three-year play with Joanna. As Joe functions in this liminal, interstitial mode, he loses track of time and space—he is unable to tell if he is awake or sleeping, if he is running or lying down. This newfound reality exceeds, but exists alongside, the dominant order, as figured by the deputies in pursuit of Joe, resulting in an epiphany that is a radical enunciation of Joe’s perception of his position in the symbolic order: “I have never got outside that circle” (339). The “circle” to which Joe Christmas alludes may be read as the symbolic order, or the discourse of the Other, which circumscribes reality. In this circular notion of the system of language, chains of meaning circle back upon themselves, as in Lacan’s depiction of signifying chains as “rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings” (153). These interlocking chains constitute Joe’s previously concentric role, wherein the Other, or the dominant discourse, overshadowed most of his life experiences. While Joe is never outside of language and the cultural code that entraps him, his acknowledgment of his cultural and psychic enslavement by way of this epiphany produces a sense of ex-centricity that he embraces toward the end of his life. His play with Joanna is not unlike Reverend Hightower’s drama with the town wherein “the entire affair had been a lot of people performing a play and that now and at last they had all played out the parts which had been allotted them” (73).

As his last days unfold, Joe is more successful than Joanna at effecting a subversion of social performances, pointing again toward his alignment with mimicry. Even as he moves steadily towards his own bloody, preordained death on the public stage, Joe demonstrates the arbitrary nature of racialized performances when, prior to his arrest, “He went into a white barbershop like a white man, and because he looked like a white man they never suspected him” (349). Because of his demonstrated ability to pass in both white and black communities (225), Joe’s mimicry of whiteness exposes how the society of the novel maintains its norms,

for the most part, through rhetorical violence that is punctuated by acts of brutal physical violence. Thus, Joe brazenly "walked the streets in broad daylight, like he owned the town" (350), mocking the ability of the Southern discourse to name him as an inferior subject. His fluid movements in and out of Mottstown's white spaces call attention to the arbitrariness of racial distinctions and heighten the tragic irony of his being hunted for committing a "negro crime" (288). In this sense, Donald M. Kartiganer maintains that Joe Christmas presents "a challenge *on behalf of not-knowing against knowing*, on behalf of the indefinable Other against that which claims the power to define" (305). Joe's final performance as a white man casts an ironic light on his three-year engagement as a "Negro!" on the stage afforded by Joanna's property's remote locale. Joe forges an alternative, ex-centric discourse by way of his recognition and rejection of the restrictive circle of Southern discourse. The significance of this hard-won insight is depicted by his final, singular look in death, described as "itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant" (465).

Joe's and Joanna's similarly brutal deaths foreground what is at stake in performing one's social identity correctly. Like Joe's indeterminate racial makeup and his experience of feeling like a "woman" (235) upon having had sex with Joanna, Joanna's "dual personality" (234), or female masculinity, both unsettles and highlights the performative and potentially punishing quality of heteronormative social relations. Joanna Burden remains never wholly nor only masculine or feminine, just as Joe Christmas wrestles with gender indeterminacy and can never be said to be either "black" or "white." The erotic representation of their respective gender and racial ambiguity in the play within the novel, which is likewise inflected by class and religion, speaks to the incompleteness of all social performances, even as the relentless demands of these social performances work ceaselessly to render speaking subjects as passive and complicit with the dominant fiction. *Light in August* achieves its nuanced engagement with the erotic life of racism by layering a three-act play within its narrative structure. Joe and Joanna's erotic masquerade demonstrates the ways in which we are each caught up in the matrix of social performances, always seeking the recognition of the other, in ways both painful and pleasurable.

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