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“The twilight-colored smell of honeysuckle:”

William Faulkner, the South, and Literature as a Site of Memory

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Abstract

This thesis examines the intersection of literature and historical memory, focusing on William Faulkner's literature and the construction of memory and identity in the 1920s-1930s American South. Understanding the basic objective of memory as using the past to consolidate a social consciousness rooted in a shared identity and future, I examine how literature contributes to and enriches this process. I argue that because memory is deeply embedded in the social frameworks of a population, and dependent on the population's cultural, political, and social identity, it is a fundamental component of understanding cultural identity. By interpreting literature through the lens of historical memory, I explore how fiction – specifically novels – construct and perpetuate a perception of the world that has real consequences on the way people act and think. Through my research, I concluded that William Faulkner does not just write about the South and its past, but constructs a discourse for understanding the past through the lens of the present; his novels, therefore, serve as a site of memory and provide insight to the cultural webs in which they were produced.

Introduction

When visiting Oxford, Mississippi, one of the main attractions is to visit Rowan Oak, the house William Faulkner purchased in 1930 and lived in with his family until his death in 1962.¹ Visitors can walk the expansive grounds surrounding the home as well as tour the inside, where they would notice that although Faulkner has not lived there in over fifty years, his presence is still palpable. Aside from the various museum exhibits and pictures featuring his life and his family scattered throughout the house, there is one room where Faulkner really comes alive. In his upstairs bedroom, visitors will find a recreated work space, complete with a typewriter, but more interesting than this display is the outline of his 1954 novel *A Fable* penciled on one of the walls. While this might seem like a relatively insignificant quirk of an author scrambling to get his ideas from his head into existence, it also speaks to something much more profound about Faulkner and his literature. When you visit Rowan Oak, you are not only visiting the home of a late author, but also confronting the line between fiction and reality which Faulkner straddled in his novels. You are not simply in Faulkner's home, but have also entered the vault of his imagination, where fiction and reality blur together as apparently as the novel exists on the bedroom wall. Rowan Oak is a historical site, but it is also a site heavy with the implications of Yoknapatawpha County – a microcosm of a world forced to become modern, yet inescapably tied to the past.

This thesis is about the historical implications of William Faulkner's novels. Specifically, I define my research project as examining the intersection of literature and historical memory, focusing on William Faulkner's literature and the construction of memory and identity in the

¹ "About Rowan Oak," *Rowan Oak: Home of William Faulkner*, <https://www.rowanoak.com/about/>

1920s-1930s American South. My research seeks to explore how people shape their world and how they create cultural webs of meaning that guide social behavior and action. Although my research methods are mainly informed by cultural history and literary theory, my primary tool of interpretation is historical memory studies. Understanding the basic objective of memory as using the past to consolidate a social consciousness rooted in a shared identity and future, I examine how literature contributes to and enriches this process. Because memory is deeply embedded in the social frameworks of a population, it is dependent on the population's cultural, political, and social identity, even as it helps shape it. By interpreting literature through the lens of historical memory, I explore how fiction – specifically novels – construct and perpetuate a perception of the world that has real consequences on the way people act and think.

In his 1950 Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech, Faulkner stated that “the poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.”² In this speech, Faulkner draws attention to the unique position of a writer to examine critically the human experience and convey it to the public to help them see, understand, and progress. However, more than simply reflecting reality, literature takes an active role in constructing a social reality — one that shapes readers’ lived experiences and influences how they understand their place in the world. I find the constructive quality of fiction most compelling in the case of literature written during times of transition and change. In her 2009 essay “Peril,” the late Toni Morrison explains, “Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel... only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening

² William Faulkner, “Banquet Speech.” Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech at the Nobel Banquet (Stockholm, Sweden, 1950).

the moral imagination.”³ Literature is not simply storytelling, but an important tool for populations struggling with trauma or – by extension – experiencing profound change. When a population undergoes trauma or a period of significant change, there is a sense of disorientation and an uncertainty in progress. Traumatic change brings about a shift in the relationship between a population and their world, and the people are forced to come to terms with how to move forward when they have lost familiarity with – or trust in – the world around them. Literature plays a significant role in grappling with change; it can be used to construct an identity and shared past for a group of people to help them move forward collectively and come to terms with a new state of existence.

My application of historical memory studies to literature is rooted in two questions: how do people find their footing during times of change? How does literature construct meaning for people in the aftermath of rapid change? Cultural trauma, “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric,” affects a group of people with some degree of cohesion, and must be understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse.⁴ Often, this is done by the group turning to its past, and using memory to make sense of their present situation. A group consciousness emerges not only from shared active in the present, but also through shared conceptions and sentiments of the group’s past. Therefore, when a community’s present experience has been disrupted by cultural change or trauma, memory becomes a fundamental tool in mending or reconstructing social consciousness and identity.

³ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), viii.

⁴ Ron Eyerman, “The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory,” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 304.

Drawing on Ron Eyerman's definition of memory, it "provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going."⁵

Memory depends upon the social frameworks within which it exists. Within these "the past becomes present through symbolic interactions, through narrative and discourse, with memory itself being a product of both."⁶ In this thesis, I argue that fiction is also embedded in the social and cultural framework in which it is produced, and thus it serves as an important site for these "symbolic interactions" of the past and present. Novels reveal the contours of the society in which they are written, and during times of rapid transformation, they communicate contemporary ideas of change and what it means for a society to undergo a transition which will have serious implication for its culture, society, economy, and politics.

Within this interpretive framework, I argue that Faulkner's literature produces a discourse for talking about the South in the early twentieth century and, consequently, seeks to define the conditions of existence for nostalgic southerners facing modernity. The early-twentieth century South is a compelling study in memory because of the region's obsession with its past, as most notably manifested in the Lost Cause. As Michael O'Brien explains in *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941*, "the South' has been a matter of social perception;" it is a site of intellectual and cultural discourse, where a tension exists between how the South was lived and how it was thought about.⁷ This dynamic between reality and perception lends itself well to the application of memory studies to the South, and guides this thesis in talking about the South not in terms of concrete social realities, but through the constructed perceptions of the region which sought to

⁵ Eyerman, "The Past in the Present," 305.

⁶ Eyerman, "The Past in the Present," 305.

⁷ Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), xiii.

consolidate a regional identity, such as the Lost Cause. As this thesis will explore, the Lost Cause is rooted in fostering a connection with the past – specifically by shaping a memory of the past to appeal to the present. Faulkner’s early novels are contemporaneous with the emergence of Lost Cause mythology and southerners’ attempts to respond and grapple with the cultural changes that impacted their lives but were out of their control.

The Lost Cause and Faulkner were both concerned with how to talk about the South’s past and transform it into something productive for the present, and the memories produced by Lost Cause ideology and Faulkner intersect because of their nostalgic character. Nostalgia mourns the loss of a (real or imagined) past, and is therefore a useful tool of analysis for the modern South as well as the characters of Faulkner’s novels, who grapple with – and embody – the tension between longing for the past and the necessity to move forward.⁸ This tension between nostalgia and modernity in Faulkner’s novels is central to understanding the novels through the lens of historical memory because it constructs a memory of the South that runs parallel to the Lost Cause and offers an alternative understanding of the South’s past and how to use it in the present. Instead of venerating the past, Faulkner’s novels demonstrate how the past can be a burden and obstruct a community’s progress, instead of helping them understand their lived experience and make sense of how to move forward.

By using historical memory studies as my primary interpretive framework, I grapple with questions that continue to be asked in the twenty-first century. Who wants whom to remember, what should be remembered, and why? It is important to explore what memories are designed to accomplish, and to analyze critically the social, cultural, and political consequences of crafting memory. My research looks at how aspects of our culture – for example, the books we read – can

⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xiii.

inherently shape our understanding of our world and the presence of the past in our present. This thesis draws connections between the way Faulkner's fiction is not only a useful source for historical interpretation of the South, but functions more abstractly by engaging with discourses of memory and the nuanced relationship between the past and the present. Faulkner does not just write about the South and its past, but constructs a discourse for understanding the past through the lens of the present; his novels, therefore, serve as a site of memory and provide insight to the cultural webs in which they were produced.

This thesis engages in a discourse about the ways in which a locality – or community, state, cultural group – exists simultaneously as a local social reality and within the framework of intellectual structures of the popular imagination. Studies of nostalgia and memory are useful because the construction and maintenance of collective memory have tangible effects on how people live and understand themselves and the world around them. It is a relevant theory for understanding the ways people create identity and engage with their environment; for example, “nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of [acceleration]... and historical upheavals,” and collective memory is commonly used to make sense of the present through a shared and usable past.⁹ Both nostalgia and memory are integral parts of community identity and lived experience, and therefore useful tools of analysis and inquiry.

Furthermore, this thesis is relevant to the present moment because of the way it engages with discourses of memory that draw on the same past as the Lost Cause, yet produce a different memory. Unfortunately, the mentality of the Lost Cause is alive and well in 2020, as most shockingly seen in moments like a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 that ended in deadly violence. Growing up in small-town Ohio, I was relatively distanced from such

⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.

sentiments, but this rally hit unexpectedly close to home for me as I prepared to move to Virginia that following spring. The rally demonstrates the lasting legacy of the South's fraught relationship with its past; white supremacists protested the removal of Confederate monuments throughout Charlottesville, and this "Unite the Right" rally was supported by leaders of dangerous movements, including David Duke, a former imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁰ Although this thesis focuses more on abstract notions of modernity and memory, and does not directly address the violent legacy of the American South, my research is relevant today because it explores how memory is culturally constructed, as well as presents an articulation of southern memory that was contemporary with the Lost Cause, yet offered an alternative understanding of the modern south's relationship with the past.

Faulkner Background

Because Faulkner drew upon his own personal and regional history to create a fictional world where his fellow Mississippians grappled with the weight of the past, and the burden it bore on the present, modern moment, he has much to offer in exploring literary constructions of the past. He was not an outsider to the region, but deeply embedded in its heritage and consciousness. With a complicated family lineage, Faulkner was a direct product of the nuances and complexities of the southern order, and his own personal investment in the history and fate of the South allowed him to portray the region in a raw, uncensored way that reveals an intimate understanding of the South and its culture.

¹⁰ Sheryl Stolberg and Brian Rosenthal, "Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence," *The New York Times* (New York, NY) August 12, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html>

William C. Falkner¹¹, the first Mississippi Falkner, traveled from Tennessee to a village outside of Oxford, Mississippi in 1842. A descendent of a North Carolina Appalachian family, Falkner went to Mississippi to study law under his uncle, John Wesley Thompson.¹² Falkner joined the Second Mississippi Volunteers to fight in the Mexican-American War for a brief stint in 1847 (he was injured and sent home only weeks after his arrival in Mexico), started a family after he returned, and had established himself as an attorney by 1860. He enjoyed “an extraordinary prosperity” throughout the 1850s, but was “not a member of the slaveholding aristocracy,” although he did own several adult slaves; since he was not a planter, it made more economic sense for him to invest his money elsewhere.¹³

This abstinence from participating in the “slaveocracy” of the antebellum South marked Falkner as “different;” here was a town businessman who managed to accumulate wealth “without the benefit of slaves and a plantation.”¹⁴ At the outbreak of the Civil War, Falkner helped organize a local company called the Magnolia Rifles, and came out of the war “neither vanquished nor impoverished.”¹⁵ His region had been severely ravaged by the war, but Falkner found himself uniquely well situated, as he had no large slaveholding prospects or great plantation to lose. In fact, Falkner emerged “as one of the several richest and most influential men in Tippah County” during Reconstruction.¹⁶ He speculated land and continued to search for

¹¹ According to Joel Williamson, the spelling of family names often varied in these times, with Falkner sometimes becoming Forkner or Faulkner. William Faulkner the author allegedly changed the spelling of his name from Falkner to Faulkner after accepting and adopting a printing error, or – and much more likely – he changed it in 1918 when he was hoping to join the English Royal Air Force.

¹² Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14-15.

¹³ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 39.

¹⁴ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 36.

¹⁵ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 45.

¹⁶ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 49.

ways to advance himself, but his ambition was cut short on November 5, 1889, when he was shot in the town square by his business partner with whom he had been feuding for several years.¹⁷

Note on Historiography

Three fields informed my thesis: southern historiography, memory theory, and literary criticism. One of the central components of my thesis was to synthesize these three distinctive fields and explore what intellectual pursuits and conclusions could result from their overlap. My thesis is fundamentally interdisciplinary, which is an advantage of the work because it demonstrates the range of pursuits within historical scholarship.

My work is unique in that it applies the literature of memory studies to Faulkner's fiction. It also introduces a discourse of Faulkner's role in constructing a memory of the South's past, and shaping how the modern South understood its relationship with the past. My thesis, that is, contributes to existing Faulkner historiography by situating him within the framework of historical memory studies. Memory theory is at the center of my thesis, which allows me to take a less conventional approach to studying Faulkner's literature through a historical lens. This distinguishes my work from scholarship that focuses on his relationship with southern history.

A range of writings influenced my thinking about the early twentieth century South and the ideology of the Lost Cause. These works include Gaines Foster's *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865 to 1913*, Michael O'Brien's *The Idea of the American South*, and *The South for New Southerners*, edited by Paul Escott and David Goldfield. These works helped me think about the South more conceptually and abstractly, as opposed to a concretely defined region. As John Shelton Reed explains in a chapter

¹⁷ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 56.

from *The South for New Southerners*, the question “where is the South” is surprisingly difficult to answer, which “tells us that the South is, to begin with, a concept – and a shared one. It’s an idea that people can talk about, think about, use to orient themselves and each other.”¹⁸

Similarly, O’Brien claims that “the South” has been a matter of social perception, and Foster explores the Lost Cause as an ideological construction intended to provide modern southerners with a sense of purpose and meaning.

In addition to southern historiography, I read literary criticism of Faulkner which focused on the way Faulkner’s novels engage with the past. Carl Rollyson’s *Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner*, although published in 1984, laid a productive groundwork for understanding how Faulkner not only talked about the past, but the way historical consciousness becomes a subject of his fiction. I also encountered various works that drew explicit connections between Faulkner’s fiction and the Lost Cause. These books, including John Matthews’s *The Sound and the Fury: Faulkner and the Lost Cause*, focus on how Faulkner’s fiction is representative of the reality in which it was produced.

My historical memory studies research focused on memory theory, specifically the construction and function of memory for communities undergoing times of change. Memory theory dominates my second and third chapters, and I drew on a wide range of theorists to construct a comprehensive view of the function of memory and the ways in which memory is created and used to meet the needs of a community. These theorists included Maurice Halbwachs, Peter Burke, Marc Bloch, and Wulf Kansteiner, who all postulate various – and overlapping – conceptions of memory that informed my application of memory studies to

¹⁸ John Shelton Reed, “The South: What Is It? Where Is It?” in *The South for New Southerners*, ed. Paul Escott and David Goldfield (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 18.

southern history and fiction. I also drew upon more specific studies of memory, including Svetlana Boym's discussion of nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia*, and the relationship between memory and modernity in Matt Matsuda's *The Memory of the Modern*. Within this interpretive framework of memory studies, I explore how and why the South turned to its past so intently during the early twentieth century, and how Faulkner is not just reflecting the social reality of the Lost Cause South, but *constructing* the conditions for lived experience and discursively creating a way to talk about southern memory and the South's relationship with the past that challenges the Lost Cause's view of the relationship.

The Plots

This thesis deals with two of Faulkner's novels: *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, published in 1936. I have chosen these two novels because in content or the narrative structure, both novels grapple with memory as a historical process as well as demonstrate the dynamic relationship between the past and the present. Quentin Compson, a central literary character in interpreting Faulkner through memory studies, also features prominently in both novels, and this overlap allows for the novels to be analyzed in tandem.

The Sound and the Fury focuses on the Compson family, whose history is tied to that of Yoknapatawpha County, but they lack "awareness of historical development [and] how intricately their actions fit into patterns begun in the past."¹⁹ The Compsons are deeply entrenched in the social and cultural codes that the Lost Cause venerated. It is precisely because

¹⁹ Carl Rollyson, *Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 228

of this that they are ill-equipped for modernity. They are stunted by their inability to let go of the past and abide by a new social order. The novel is divided into four chapters, with the first three focusing on the viewpoints of the Compson sons, and the final chapter taking a third person point of view to present a more detached view of the family.

The novel opens on April 7, 1928, on Benjy's thirty-third birthday, and the first chapter is told from the mind of Benjy, the youngest Compson, who is developmentally disabled. Benjy is nonverbal, only "moaning" and "bellowing," and so the reader is immersed in Benjy's thoughts, which shift between present experience and past remembrances. The second chapter is told by Quentin, the oldest Compson, who is studying at Harvard University. The chapter takes place on June 2, 1910, the day Quentin commits suicide, and is also saturated with memories and flashbacks as Quentin obsesses over the past, which is a burden on him. The third chapter – set on April 6, 1928 – is from Jason's point of view. Jason is the most functional Compson in the age of modernity, but is greedy, bigoted, and generally unpleasant. The final chapter takes place on April 8, 1928, Easter morning, and is centered around the dynamic of those who remain at the Compson household – Benjy and Jason, their niece Quentin, and the Compsons' black servants – TP, Frony, Luster, and Dilsey. The only Compson voice missing is that of Candace (Caddy) Compson, the only daughter. However, her absence is at the center of the novel: each of her brothers is fixated on her and her fall from grace after getting pregnant out of wedlock and divorcing the man she married to cover her pregnancy.

Absalom, Absalom! is the story of Thomas Sutpen as told by an assortment of characters, and predominantly told in reflection. Sutpen arrived in Jefferson, Mississippi in 1830 with a "design in [his] mind... [and] to accomplish it [he] should acquire money, a house, a plantation,

slaves, a family – incidentally of course, a wife.”²⁰ Sutpen became a prominent planter in Jefferson, but his legacy is “tainted” by miscegenation, and his only surviving descendants are of mixed race. Sutpen’s story is the rise and fall of a southern planter, and it is compulsively retold by Rosa Coldfield, whose sister married Sutpen, and who later declined a marriage proposal after Sutpen was made a widower. Sutpen is the “long-dead object of [Rosa’s] impotent yet indomitable frustration,” and she tells the story of Sutpen to Quentin Compson the summer before he leaves for Harvard (1910).²¹ Quentin then discusses Sutpen with his father, because his grandfather Compson knew him “well enough to offer to lend him seed cotton for his start.”²² Thus, Sutpen’s story and legacy is reconstructed once again by the Compson men. Finally, Quentin also tells the story to his Harvard roommate, Shreve MacKenzie. A Canadian, Shreve is very removed from the dynamics of the American South, and finds Sutpen’s story entertaining, saying “Jesus, the South is fine isn’t it. It’s better than the theatre, isn’t it,” and tries to impose his own understanding of the story onto Quentin.²³

Ultimately destroyed by his own undoing, Thomas Sutpen continues to haunt the residents of Yoknapatawpha County, who frantically attempt to retell his story and make it into something productive and meaningful. *Absalom, Absalom!*, therefore, is more than just the story of Sutpen, but also about how his story gets reconstructed and manipulated by modern southerners seeking to make sense of their own reality. Sutpen’s legacy is the product of the process of memory, and the “product of a long historical process which relate past and present... through the human imagination (historical and artistic) which constantly turns over the facts to

²⁰ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936), 212

²¹ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 3.

²² Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 30.

²³ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 176.

see what significance they now possess, whenever that ‘now’ happens to be.”²⁴ The story of Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* becomes a symbol for the past, and the ways people reconstruct the past according to their present moment.

Limits of the Project

I recognize that this is not a comprehensive examination of Faulkner and memory studies, nor of southern history. Although I believe the interdisciplinary quality is to its benefit, this thesis – due to page and time constraints – can only scratch the surface of such intellectually and theoretically rich fields like memory studies, southern history, and Faulkner criticism. My intention for this thesis is to open the door to how these three fields intersect and overlap to produce a fuller and more nuanced understanding of how cultural products such as novels have tangible influence on the way a community understands itself and its place in the world.

By framing my thesis through historical memory studies, I do not get a chance to delve into some themes of Faulkner and southern history that have been explored at length by other scholars – themes such as gender, race, and class, each of which could be the focus of a thesis or dissertation on the historical implications of Faulkner’s literature. I chose to explore Faulkner’s novels through the **approach** of memory and the role of the past in the present to suggest the potential for the application of historical memory studies to various avenues of historical and literary scholarship, and explore how memory studies can both enrich serve as the interpretive framework for interdisciplinary studies.

²⁴ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 139.

Chapter Overview

This thesis will demonstrate how fiction contributes to historical memory, particularly during periods of change and trauma. In the first chapter, I establish a relationship between history and literary theory, exploring how the two disciplines mutually inform each other, thus making literature a valuable source for the historian. I examine the cultural function of literature, and the way literary works are a product of their culture and engage with the lived experience of contemporary populations, as well as reveal prevailing ways of contemporary thinking. The second chapter turns to memory theory, particularly the construction and use of collective memory by populations experiencing cultural change. I argue that as a historical source, literature can be used to critically examine the human experience and convey it to the public in a productive and meaningful way, particularly through the construction of collective memory and consciousness. Within this framework, I explore how Faulkner's novels can be viewed and studied as documents of historical memory because of the way they engage with the past and explore the complicated relationship between the past and the present. Specifically, I argue that *Absalom, Absalom!* is a case study in understanding memory as a process of discursive construction because of the way it demonstrates how the past is used and shaped by the present. The third and final chapter deals with the application of memory studies to the American South, specifically the Lost Cause. I examine the Lost Cause as project of collective memory, and argue that Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* presents an alternative memory and understanding of the relationship between the past and the present. The novel shows the past to be a burden that prevents progress, which undermines the way the Lost Cause venerated the past and saw it as a way to find meaning in the present.

Define Terms

A brief note on terms. For the purposes of this paper, I am defining “the South” as the former Confederacy – the states that underwent Reconstruction and are popularly characterized by their shared antebellum values and culture. I recognize that this is a wide swath of states, but in my research, I have consistently found the South to be defined as such. I follow John Reed’s identification of the South as a geographically and socially unified region whose institutions have contributed this sense of cohesion, “[playing] a part in sustaining the South as both idea and reality, tying the region together economically and socially and contributing to a sense of distinctiveness and solidarity.”²⁵ The South is a social system as well as an idea – a region that has been experienced and perceived in various (and sometimes conflicting) ways. The South is admittedly difficult to define, but this paper deals with “the South” as a geographically and culturally defined region.

I define modernity as the era dominated – and defined – by the culture of modernism and modernist thought, specifically the first half of the twentieth century. I follow Daniel Singal’s understanding of modernist thought as “an attempt to restore a sense of order to human experience under the often chaotic conditions of twentieth-century existence.”²⁶ It is a response to and the product of a rapidly changing world. I also borrow from Jo Labanyi’s definition of modernity as “attitudes toward the relation of present to past.”²⁷ According to Labanyi, modernity is a break with the past, and modernist thought understands the present as a detached period of time. This is particularly important to my analysis of memory and the relationship

²⁵ Reed, “The South: What Is It? *Where* Is It?,” 35.

²⁶ Daniel Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1987), 8.

²⁷ Jo Labanyi, “Memory and Modernity in Democratic Spain: The Difficulty of Coming to Terms with the Spanish Civil War,” *Poetics Today* 28, no. 1 (2007), 91-92.

between the past and the present, and how this informs both the Lost Cause and Faulkner's literature.

Finally, a reminder that Faulkner's fictional world is the town of Jefferson, Mississippi, located in Yoknapatawpha County. This geographic space parallels the town of Oxford, Mississippi, in Lafayette County.

Chapter 1: The Historical Appeal of Literature

In this chapter, I provide an overview of recent trends in fields of literature and history to study the past. I first examine how the Digital Yoknapatawpha project blurs the boundary between reality and the fiction of William Faulkner, then I turn to the overlapping theories of cultural history and literary studies to push this notion further. Through the exploration of concepts such as thick description, mimesis, and microhistory, I argue that literary theory and history converge in a way that positions literature as a valuable historical source. Specifically, fiction and novels have something to offer to the historical discipline because they are cultural products that provide insight to the conventions and meanings embedded in a culture; they serve as access points for exploring the past and how people understood themselves and the world around them. Throughout, I apply the major concepts to Faulkner's novels, and introduce how Faulkner's literature is valuable to historical scholarship because of the way it grapples with the relationship between the past and present, as well as engages with the cultural parameters of the time and place in which it was produced.

The digital humanities team at the University of Virginia – in collaboration with scholars from 34 colleges and universities – is currently engaged in a comprehensive digital mapping project of a single county in northern Mississippi. Based on two maps from 1936 and 1945, as well as various texts about the county and the people who lived there, this team of academics is determined to map out important locations, individuals, and events that this county bore witness to for over a hundred years, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. A sizable undertaking, the first phase of the project focuses on analyzing the production and relations of space as the county's inhabitants would have experienced it. In doing so, the first

phase aims to engage with major social issues – such as race – and how they play out across the space of, and within, a community. However, the project also prods more abstract issues such as the relationship between modern art and history, because the Digital Yoknapatawpha Project is not a map of a “real” place, but of Yoknapatawpha County, the fictional county created by William Faulkner and inhabited by the characters of his novels.²⁸

The objective of the Digital Yoknapatawpha Project is to create a comprehensive map of the world Faulkner constructed in his fourteen novels and fifty-four short stories, and is based on the maps Faulkner himself drew and included in the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936, and *The Portable Faulkner* in 1945. These maps are then supplemented by the texts of Faulkner’s novels and stories and interpretations of the works’ historical context.²⁹ Using QGIS software, the Digital Yoknapatawpha team has found that Faulkner was remarkably consistent in how he mapped out his county, and Johannes Burgers, a Professor of English and Digital Humanities at Ashoka University, stated that a main goal of the project is to be able to talk about how the particular relates to the general, and the production of modern art from American history. As of October 2019, the second phase of the project was underway, which turned to keywording as its primary point of reference, as opposed to physical location.³⁰

The very existence of the Digital Yoknapatawpha project prompts questions of the complicated relationship between history and literature – between historical and fictional worlds – and what, if any, overlap exists between the two. One answer is to view fictional worlds as

²⁸ “Digital Yoknapatawpha,” *Digital Humanities at University of Virginia*, 2020, <https://dh.virginia.edu/project/digital-yoknapatawpha>

²⁹ Johannes Burgers, “Like a Horse in a Duck Pond: Digital Humanities, GIS, and the Critical Geographies of William Faulkner,” (presentation, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, October 29, 2019).

³⁰ Burgers “Like a Horse in a Duck Pond.”

“imaginary alternates of the actual world,” and historical worlds as “cognitive models of the actual past.”³¹ Because history reconstructs the actual past by constructing models of the past, these models are technically possible worlds; similarly, fictional worlds are possible worlds because they are “ensembles of nonactualized possible particulars – persons, states, events, and so on.”³² Neither world is inhabited by actual people, but by their possible counterparts that have been either constructed (fictional) or reconstructed (historical). Furthermore, both fictional and historical worlds are necessarily incomplete, as both are the products of the human mind and thus subjected to the limitations of human knowledge. However, a key difference between the two worlds lies in the nature of their texts: fictional texts are performative and “liberated from truth valuation,” and historical texts are constative – they describe a world that preexisted the act of representation.³³

In the case of Digital Yoknapatawpha, the subject is clearly fictional, but because it is a description of a preexisting fictional world, the line between historical and fictional becomes blurred. The members of the Digital Yoknapatawpha Project are not creating Yoknapatawpha County themselves, but reconstructing a world that existed in the early and mid-twentieth century, albeit a preexisting fictional world that only existed within the realm of literary construction. A fictional world being studied and treated as if it is a historical world all but erases the disciplinary boundary between literature and history, and it seems as if the more you try to unravel Yoknapatawpha, the messier it gets. Of course, the intimate relationship between history

³¹ Lubomír Dolezel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 33.

³² Lubomír Dolezel, “Possible Worlds of Fiction and History,” *New Literary History* 29, no. 4 (1998): 787.

³³ Dolezel, *Possible Worlds*, 42.

and fiction is not a new point of inquiry when it comes to Faulkner, but one that still encourages research and questioning from various – if repeated – angles.

One of the qualities of Faulkner that makes him so compelling to study as an interdisciplinary figure is his own role in blurring the line between fiction and history in his works. After all, Faulkner himself drew the maps of Yoknapatawpha, and in the 1936 map, he included sites beyond the scope of *Absalom, Absalom!*, suggesting an interconnectedness between his novels that goes beyond the fiction and creates a geographic tie between the works. There is no denying the connection between Faulkner's novels and short stories, as many include recurring characters and of course call Yoknapatawpha home; however, the creation of a physical map seems to take this connection to a new level, one that transcends the fictional world of Faulkner and suggests that Yoknapatawpha is also a quasi-historical world. There is something tangible about Yoknapatawpha that is not true of other literary sites, such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the object of her "study in provincial life." Of course, this is not to say that Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is *real*, but that even if we can't rely on him for facts, perhaps we can look for "a more general historical realism that is, if not true *to* life, true *of* life."³⁴ Many Faulkner scholars take this approach; they acknowledge that there are distortions in his literature and that he is writing from a biased viewpoint, but determine to "put the history center stage and give Faulkner's fiction a supplemental role in helping interpret the action and its meaning, in other words to use the historical fiction to inform the history."³⁵

³⁴ Don Doyle, "Faulkner's History: Sources and Interpretation" in *Faulkner in Cultural Context: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1995*, ed. Donald Kartiganer and Ann Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 5.

³⁵ Doyle, "Faulkner's History: Sources and Interpretation," 5.

The notion of using Faulkner’s fiction to inform historical scholarship opens the door to a larger conversation about the relationship between history and literature, a conversation that goes beyond identifying the simultaneous existence of fictional and historical worlds. Instead, we should explore the complex mutual relationship between history and literature, and this chapter seeks to “elaborate a form of inquiry where history and literature are brought into mutually provocative contact – where historical understanding is challenged by critical (including literary) theories, and literary criticism is not only informed but insistently interrogated by historical questions.”³⁶ This mutual interrogation of the two disciplines is central to understanding the contributions Faulkner’s literature can make to historical scholarship, and how historians can find value in Faulkner’s “inter-related episodes in a vast chronicle of a world becoming modern,” which serve as a kind of microhistory of the American South in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁷

When History and Literature Converge

The discipline of history is not static, but is continually renegotiated and evolving. As this chapter will explore, the expansion of history in the twentieth century to incorporate more voices, perspectives, and interpretations of the past is particularly conducive to the use of fiction as a historical source because literature’s ability to communicate the experiences and viewpoints of a culture make it a valuable point of access to the past, and can therefore contribute to a more nuanced understanding of history. Events of the mid- to late twentieth century pushed historians

³⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *History, Literature, Critical Theory* (New York: Cornell University, 2013), 1.

³⁷ John Matthews, *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), viii.

to ask different questions and hunt down different sources, and to focus on how humans are constantly devising objects that affect how they perceive the world around them. Disillusioned by the First World War and its aftermath, historians began to question the notion of progress that had previously defined historical scholarship, and struggled to find any pattern or meaning in the past – qualities once so integral to the purpose of studying history.³⁸ These methodological changes lend themselves to the incorporation of literature within the historical discipline, particularly the prominence of cultural history.

Cultural history emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, and was rooted in anthropological methods and microhistory. Cultural historians, instead of approaching culture as an object of study, embraced an abstract, anthropologically guided definition of culture rooted in Clifford Geertz's "webs of meaning:" the purpose was to track systems of signs, recurrent cultural reflexes, and patterns in order to describe these webs. The project of cultural history is to gain access to past subjectivities and derive meaning from how people have acted within and through their specific cultural codes. Geertz, an anthropologist, is recognized for facilitating the advancement of cultural history within the wider field of historical scholarship, particularly because of his methodological model of "thick description." In his 1973 essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Geertz explains that the purpose of thick description is to restore as many layers of meaning as possible to the event or action in question. An ethnographic method, thick description seeks to decode "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in which [various actions] are produced, perceived, and interpreted and without which they would not... in fact exist."³⁹ Anthropologists – and historians – should use

³⁸ Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 24.

³⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 7.

thick description to interpret actions within socially established codes, and because a culture is “composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior,” this method allows the scholar to derive meaning from people’s actions within their contemporary culture.⁴⁰ In fact, key historians such as Robert Darnton and Quentin Skinner followed Geertz’s ideas, and his methods of interpretative anthropology influenced the field of intellectual history to shift “away from its origins in the history of philosophy and toward the analysis of a range of non-canonical sources and cultural practices.”⁴¹

Cultural historians also employ microhistory, a concept pioneered by Carlo Ginzburg, whose 1976 work *The Cheese and the Worms* broke through the assumption that “social [history] always meant plural,” and focused on the life of a single obscure individual, deriving historical significance from such a microscopic focus.⁴² Acting like a microscope trained on the past, microhistory has three defining traits: it concerns a non-famous person or group, it centers on a crisis, and is used to speak to a broader historical question (e.g. the relationship between classes. The purpose of microhistory is to hone in on historical incidents that can point us toward a society’s culture – its interlocking system of meanings – and is therefore particularly applicable to cultural history, with its anthropological turn. Together, the microscopic and anthropological methods employed within cultural history allow the historian to interpret and derive meaning from small, densely textured facts.⁴³ As Geertz explains, culture is not a power (to which things can be causally attributed), but a context, “something in which [social events, behaviors,

⁴⁰ Geertz, “Thick Description,” 11.

⁴¹ Martin Burke, “Geertz’s Influence on Intellectual Historians,” *Historically Speaking* 8, no. 4 (2007), 40.

⁴² Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 180.

⁴³ Maza, *Thinking About History*, 181.

institutions, or processes] can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described.”⁴⁴ The goal is to unpack the past on its own terms – to study within a culture – and construct a narrative that links the past with the present and invites critique of the present based on what we know about the past.

Literature is in a unique position within cultural history because of its position as both an example of microhistory and a cultural access point for those seeking a thick description of the past. This convergence of literature and cultural history is most effectively understood through the New Historicist school of literary theory. New Historicism was contemporary with cultural history, and Geertz himself was “lionized in the arena” by literary theorist Stephen Greenblatt (who explicitly cites Geertz in his New Historicist studies) thus establishing a direct intellectual connection between literary theory and cultural history.⁴⁵ New Historicism places great value on the cultural function of literature, and the way the literary works of a time period can reveal prevailing ways of contemporary thinking. Whereas previous literary critical theories viewed the historical context of a literary text as “background information” necessary for understanding and appreciating the separate world of art, New Historicism blurs the line between historical and literary materials, as well as the line between artistic works from their creators and audiences.

New Historicists recognize an active and mutual engagement between history and literature; instead of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, they focus on the historical and cultural conditions of its production. Within the framework of New Historicism, “literary and other types of texts are viewed as being implicated in a complex web of relationships with social and cultural institutions and practices, relationships that are *mutually*

⁴⁴ Geertz, “Thick Description,” 14.

⁴⁵ Burke, “Geertz’s Influence on Intellectual Historians,” 40.

determining.”⁴⁶ The critic must explore a literary text’s representations of the past within the context in which they were produced, as a component of the cultural web of meaning in which it exists. Because of this emphasis on literature as a cultural product, New Historicism is very compatible with the goals of cultural history; both methodologies acknowledge and engage with diverse discourses, redefine the boundaries of historical inquiry, and construct an understanding of the past that is centered around lived experience and the ways people constructed and behaved according to webs of meaning.

This convergence is also facilitated by history’s linguistic turn, which explores the textuality of history. The historians who initiated the linguistic turn in the late twentieth century, figures such as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, engaged with ideas from literary theory and argued that “far from seeing literature as the fictional opposite of a factual history, historians should acknowledge their intimate relationship as two forms of writing that create, rather than find, meaning.”⁴⁷ The linguistic turn, therefore, emphasizes the role of fiction within culture as constructive because of the way it produces meaning by directly engaging with its context.

However, when situating the role of literature within history, it is important to avoid two polar methods, which are confining and may diminish the benefits of mutual interrogation between the disciplines. The first method is contextual reductionism, “in which a literary text is a mirror image or at least symptom of some sociohistorical... structure,” and the text becomes a document of the times.⁴⁸ While there is value in viewing literary texts as reflecting the conditions of their time, it is important to not reduce the text to its environment, but also see the

⁴⁶ Tamsin Spargo, “Introduction: Past, Present, and Future Pasts” in *Reading the Past: Literature and History*, ed. Tamsin Spargo (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 10.

⁴⁷ Spargo, “Introduction,” 6.

⁴⁸ LaCapra, *History, Literature, and Critical Theory*, 13.

constructive elements of texts; literature is a product of its context, but it also takes an active role in its contemporary discourse, even helping to produce meaning within a culture and shape how people's behavior and lived experience. The second method is to see literary texts as transcending historical contexts.⁴⁹ By detaching the literature from its environment, it becomes a self-referential system, which ignores the structures and processes that guided the creation of the literature and its ability to exist in its time. Acknowledging the two polar methods of understanding the relationship between history and literature demonstrates how dynamic the connection is. It shows that there is a sliding scale of how to incorporate literature into history and vice versa; it demonstrates that there are multiple ways to approach and interpret this interdisciplinary dynamic, suggesting that there is much to be gained in doing so.

Viewing the Past Through the Present

Throughout the development of modern historical writing, the value of a multi-layered narrative is continually contested and renegotiated as historians debate the purpose of history and what the discipline should seek to accomplish. The professionalization of history in the nineteenth century, most notably marked by the works of Leopold von Ranke, emphasized a singularity to history, and renewed an emphasis on objectivity. Through a strict presentation of the facts, the historian could see patterns in the particulars, and detect an underlying unity and progress to human history (which, for Ranke, concerned racial unity of the Latin-Germanic peoples).⁵⁰ The professionalization of history in the early nineteenth century succeeded in constituting history as a scientific discipline by severing its association with rhetoric and *belles*

⁴⁹ LaCapra, *History, Literature, and Critical Theory*, 13.

⁵⁰ Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 56.

lettres, “a kind of writing that was more ‘creative’ or poetic,’ in which the imagination, intuition, passion, and, yes, even prejudice were permitted to take precedence over considerations of veracity, perspicuity, ‘plain’ speech, and common sense.”⁵¹ Essentially, professional historians distanced themselves from the field’s roots in literary form and function; they denied the “doubleness” or “duality” of history, which acknowledges historical research as “rooted in the real and framed by storytelling,” and thus an act of creation that is a hallmark of a fictional world.⁵² Historians of the nineteenth-century instead articulated the historical discipline as grounded in fact, and concerned with telling the past only as it really was. They understood history as an act of description, not construction, as they sought to uncover a historical truth through their singular approach.

The identification of history as a science cemented a distinction between fact and fiction that continues to fuel the argument that history and literature are radically opposed to one another, and “that any mixture of them must undermine the authority of the one and the value of the other.”⁵³ As history became increasingly seen as empiricist and scientific, fiction – and particularly literary fiction – became the “nefarious ‘other’ of history and the kinds of truths about the past in which it dealt.”⁵⁴ However, the singularity of history and its ability to communicate historical truth became continuously undermined as the historical field changed to meet present needs, and new methods of writing and practicing history allowed for more variability within the discipline. The disillusionment brought on by the First World War, for example, produced significant cultural and intellectual shockwaves; historians began to question

⁵¹ Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 8.

⁵² Maza, *Thinking About History*, 199.

⁵³ White, *The Practical Past*, 12.

⁵⁴ White, *The Practical Past*, 13.

the notion of progress that had previously defined historical scholarship, and struggled to find any pattern or meaning in the past – qualities once so integral to the purpose of studying history. Historians now struggled to find meaning in history, or interpret the past in any wider sense. The idea of the relativity of observer and fact emerged into the discipline during this period, and historians and philosophers began to understand the judgement and interpretation of the past to be guided by present concerns.

Turning attention to concerns of the present set a tone for the redefining and renegotiating the study of history that would continue through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Objectivity and “truth,” although still ultimately sought after by the historian, became significantly supplemented by the value of interpretation. The evolution and renegotiation of historical scholarship over the course of the twentieth century re-established the plurality of the discipline and reinforced the usefulness of literature to the historian’s craft. The value of literature to history can be most clearly seen in this changing purpose and subject of historical scholarship. Most notably, literature did not remain stagnant as history evolved, but was also undergoing significant changes and developments. For example, as history was becoming more “scientific” in the nineteenth century, literature, in general, and the novel, in particular, were becoming increasingly realist. This emerging modern literary realism adopted a “historicist” frame of mind, as its authors “sought (quite in contrast to their professional historian counterparts) to represent ‘the present *as* history.’”⁵⁵

As history shifted to interpreting the past in terms of the present, modernist literature’s principal object also became the relationship between the past and present. First generation modernist writers such as Conrad, Proust, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Kafka, and Stein

⁵⁵ White, *The Practical Past*, 13.

understood the past as a tool for dealing with the present, a method that would mirror the intellectual mood of twentieth-century historical scholarship, which saw interpretation of the past as dependent not on a grand idea of progress and objectivity, but the historian herself and her contemporary environment. For example, in her 2017 monograph *The Dawn Watch*, Maya Jasanoff looks at the age of globalization through the novels of Joseph Conrad. She argues that Conrad captured a mindset in his writings that is essential to understanding broader implications and notions of nineteenth and twentieth century globalization, and the tension between past and present that accompanied it; she states, for example, that “for Conrad writing fiction would often also be a translation of past experience,” a way to find present meaning in moments that had already passed.⁵⁶ Faulkner, whose writing career began in 1924, also follows in this tradition, as will be explored throughout the following chapters. His excursions into the past “are inextricably fused with his characters’ sense of the present,” which makes his literature such a compelling point of inquiry for historical research.⁵⁷ Through his novels, Faulkner seems to possess a profound understanding of the relationship between the past and present, and how the present is both informed by and informs our understandings of the past.

For example, Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* offers a way to use the past to talk about the present; it illuminates the conflicts of the 1930s South through the contemporary discourse of labor by setting the narrative against the background of anxieties about the legacy of antebellum labor practices. Thomas Sutpen’s design – his grand plan to achieve the lifestyle of a southern gentleman planter – speaks to the anxieties of the 1930s concerning both shifting labor and economic practices. Published in 1936, the novel emerged during a time of “tremendous

⁵⁶ Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 161.

⁵⁷ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 7.

upheaval of the American labor force and a national debate over the proper role of the federal government in negotiations between workers, private companies and corporations, and states,” a moment in American history that is reminiscent of the dramatic changes in labor that occurred in the mid-1800s.⁵⁸ *Absalom, Absalom!* is a product of this upheaval, and reflects the anxieties of southern society during the transition from dependency to free labor, specifically by drawing a connection between the past and present, since Sutpen’s story takes place during the nineteenth century but is told in 1909-1910.

The link between the past and the present can be further prodded by applying Hayden White’s definition of the “practical past,” which he differentiates from the “historical past.” According to White, the historical past is a “theoretically motivated construction, existing only in the books and articles published by professional historians;” it is a past without much practical utility, with “little or no value for understanding or explaining the present, and provides no guidelines for acting in the present or foreseeing the future.”⁵⁹ The historical past is the historians’ approach to the study of the past; it is constructed to have meaning for the historical narrative the scholar wishes to present and is therefore not of immediate use to the general public.

The practical past, on the other hand, refers to notions of the past which “all of us carry around with us in our daily lives and which we draw upon... for information, ideas, models, formulas, and strategies for solving all the practical problem” of our present situation.⁶⁰ A concept stemming from the late writings of the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, the

⁵⁸ Charles Hannon, *Faulkner and the Discourses of Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 79.

⁵⁹ White, *The Practical Past*, 9.

⁶⁰ White, *The Practical Past*, 9.

practical past is the past which people call upon without much self-consciousness to answer the question – as White states it – “What ought I (or we) do?”⁶¹ The practical past is a construction of the past that serves the present; it should address present circumstances and situations and be drawn upon as a basis for present judgments and decisions. It speaks to the ability of the past to inform and influence the present, which is the basis of historical memory studies, the focus of the next chapter. Whereas the historical past is given value by professional objectives, the practical past is assessed by the public and valued according to how well it serves the present needs of a community. It is the practical past which modern novelists were bringing to life in their work, as they used fiction to explore the conditions of their world.

Just as twentieth-century historians began to find meaning in the past that could guide their present existence, Faulkner’s literature communicates an awareness that the past is not gone or locked away, but exists in the present and can be used to confront present conditions. This shift in the focus of modernist literature reestablishes an alignment between history and literature that had been obscured by the professionalization of history; almost in tandem with each other, the two disciplines evolve in a way that places the present at the forefront of discussions of the past. Consequently, the two disciplines should not be seen as antagonistic to each other, but as “posing questions to one another,” a mutual interrogation that demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary inquiries to historical scholarship.⁶²

⁶¹ White, *The Practical Past*, 10.

⁶² LaCapra, *History, Literature Critical Theory*, 12.

Representing Reality

Furthermore, beyond this convergence of history and literature in seeking to understand the past through a presentist lens, literature also serves historical scholarship because of the way it represents reality. One way to understand the relationship between literature and reality, and the value of this relationship to historical research is through the concept of *mimesis*. Most often translated from the Greek as “imitation” and describing art as a “copy of the real,” the scope and significance of *mimesis* goes beyond this definition to suggest a more nuanced dynamic between art and the human experience.⁶³ Plato first introduced the term “*mimesis*” into literary theory in the *Republic*, and explained that art imitates something real, that it is an illusion to be distinguished from truth and nature. This concept has been at the forefront of the history of literary theory as scholars challenge, modify, or defend it; most importantly, however, the concept of *mimesis* opens up diverse logical possibilities concerning how people engage with art and how this engagement affects human behavior.

Therefore, *mimesis* is more than a theory of art and images – it has “connected ideas about artistic representation to more general claims about human social behavior, and to the ways in which we know and interact with others and with our environment.”⁶⁴ The concept has been complicated and developed to embrace a constructivist element – to be used to explore “broader questions of culture and society in their historical dimension.”⁶⁵ *Mimesis* is a tool for understanding how artistic representation does not simply imitate reality, but actively engages with – by synthesizing, deconstructing, reflecting, and interpreting – the lived experience of

⁶³ Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

⁶⁴ Potolsky, *Mimesis*, 2.

⁶⁵ William Calin, “The Evolution of Western Literature: Erich Auerbach,” in *Twentieth-Century Humanist Critics: From Spitzer to Frye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 44.

contemporary populations. For example, Erich Auerbach, one of the leading scholars of modern applications of mimesis, was committed to historical perspectivism in literary theory, which states that “each historical epoch and civilization has its own capacities for aesthetic creation.”⁶⁶ Within this framework, we can see how literature can be used to supplement historical studies because of the way it reflects temporally specific elements of a culture, becoming a “special site for accessing experience, especially affect or feeling.”⁶⁷

Historians, using the concept of mimesis, can interpret literature as a historical source, one that provides insight to the experience of life at a given time. This is especially useful for modernist literature, since, as previously discussed, modern authors had a distinctive relation to the past and modernity. Faulkner is of course included in this application; furthermore, the way his art already blurs the line between fiction and reality makes his novels particularly interesting to explore within this framework. As we know, Faulkner’s novels deal heavily with the past, but it is also important to emphasize the way Faulkner focuses on chronicling the lives and experiences of an interconnected set of people.

Through careful hermeneutic decipherment, mimesis allows a historian to access the lived experience literature conveys and produces – such as that of the residents of Yoknapatawpha. The concept establishes a connection between art and reality that makes literature an access point to understanding how people lived in and engaged with the world around them. Because of its focus on the actions of people and their engagement with their world, mimesis can once again inform the incorporation of literature into cultural history studies. Aristotle, following and building upon Plato’s theories of mimesis, understood art as appealing

⁶⁶ Calin, “The Evolution of Western Literature,” 45.

⁶⁷ LaCapra, *History, Literature Critical Theory*, 29.

to reason, to our sense of what is probable or necessary. Consequently, Aristotle believed art should be comprehensible across cultures and historical periods, but recent theorists have pushed this farther, “arguing that mimetic artworks appeal only to our conventional beliefs about reality.”⁶⁸ Art – including literature – does not necessarily span time and space, but are specific to the conventions of the time and place in which they are produced. This does not mean that art loses meaning outside it’s period, but speaks to the way art is intimately connected to the reality in which it is created and is therefore a compelling historical source.

The relationship between art and reality is dynamic, as the mimetic effects of artwork are produced by a dialogue between the work and the expectations of its audience. Mimetic artworks appeal to convention, a customary and usually unspoken rule that – thought not strictly “realist” or “naturalist” – guides social life or artistic production. Constructed within the specific parameters of a community, convention becomes a kind of second nature within culture, and can thus be considered as the collective beliefs embedded within a culture’s web of meaning.

Faulkner’s novels are compelling case studies in mimesis and the value of literature to cultural history. As discussed, Faulkner is very much a product of the culture he’s addressing with his fiction; he is not only aware of, but deeply embedded in the conventions of early twentieth century south, and his fiction is intimately connected to the social and historical context in which it was produced and received. However, Faulkner’s novels are particularly interesting because they subvert the very conventions they reflect. In doing so, Faulkner demonstrates the fragility of these conventions, particularly as they become threatened by modernity during the first decades of the twentieth century.

⁶⁸ Potolsky, *Mimesis*, 4.

The fragility of convention is most clearly seen in his subversion of the family model, which was an integral component of southern culture. According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, the southern family unit was a microcosm of southern society itself, with its patriarchal structure and obsession with maintaining hierarchy and stability.⁶⁹ Southern family life reflected the southern social structure, and strict family values represented southerner's concern for social stability and respect for order. It should not be a surprise, then, that some of the most memorable characters in Faulkner's novels are generally focused on the times and trials of southern families, but what does it mean when Faulkner's fictional families are broken and in disarray? Instead of creating family units that are neatly within the southern framework of honor and respectability, Faulkner gives his readers dysfunctional families living in the early twentieth century and struggling to make sense of their position in a changing South. Faulkner's novels, therefore, operate within the bounds of cultural convention, but force the reader to confront the failings of these conventions as they are challenged by the onset of modernity.

For example, in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner engages in southern discourse concerning the viability of the South's values and conventions through the character of Caroline Compson, the family matriarch who cannot live up to the social role she is supposed to inhabit, whether because of incapability or by choice. The reader is made aware of Caroline's lack of maternal instinct in the first few pages of the novel through her interaction with her youngest son Benjy, who is developmentally disabled. When Benjy wants to go outside, Caroline wants to keep him inside but is eventually persuaded to let him go. Her brother – who lives with the Compsons for an extended time – tells her that she will “worry [herself] sick over him,”

⁶⁹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 115-117.

suggesting that Caroline's concern for her handicapped child weighs on her and she cannot help but focus her energy on his wellbeing.⁷⁰ At this first introduction, Caroline appears to be a martyr for the family – a mother who dedicates all of herself to her children. However, in the very next line, Caroline states, “It’s a judgment on me. I sometimes wonder,” to which her brother responds that she must stay strong in the face of the adversity that is having to mother a son like Benjy.⁷¹

This startling line reveals that Caroline is not a martyr for her family, but sees herself as a victim of her circumstances. Her concern does not lie in her children, but in herself and how people will perceive her as the mother of a disabled child. Caroline's inability to fulfill the role as an elite southern mother calls the very conventions in which she operates into question. In southern society, the father was the head of the household but played a “hands-off” role in child rearing, making maternal obligation all the more important to the growth of the family unit.⁷² Caroline's lack of maternal instinct and failure to put her family first represents the failure of convention for Faulkner. Caroline subverts the conventions of the culture in which she lives, and through her, Faulkner undermines the South's reverence for the family as a model of social order and values.

However, Caroline's role in *The Sound and the Fury* is a valuable case study for understanding the intersection of mimesis and cultural history. Mimesis is especially useful to cultural history because of the way it demonstrates the close connection between art and the cultural reality in which it was produced. Cultural historians interested in understanding a historical population's “webs of meaning” can apply the framework of mimesis to art produced

⁷⁰ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Random House, 1929), 5.

⁷¹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 5.

⁷² Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 134.

within the population, and then use this art to better understand the dynamics of a population's existence and behavior. The reality which a piece of art conveys and constructs can be studied by a historian as valuable insight to a culture and their conventional beliefs about reality.

Mimesis facilitates the incorporation of literature into cultural history because it provides the historian with a framework for decoding people's cultural webs of meaning; because "fidelity to convention, not fidelity to nature" is the source of mimesis, a mimetic interpretation of a culture's literature can provide valuable insight to cultural beliefs, behaviors, and social codes.⁷³ Faulkner's literature provides insight to convention, and should be interpreted within the framework of mimesis, but because Faulkner simultaneously challenges the very conventions he operates within, his novels become particularly valuable to understanding the lived experience of confronting change. Historians can use Faulkner's fiction to construct a comprehensive understanding of how southerners tried to make sense of their position during a time of transition, as their cultural conventions became threatened by a changing social order. Faulkner's literature serves as a cultural access point to the region's struggles, anxiety, and relationship with the past. His novels not only operate within and reflect the bounds of convention, but show how those conventions were being challenged and often found to be unsustainable in the face of modernity.

⁷³ Potolsky, *Mimesis*, 4.

Chapter 2: William Faulkner and Memory

In this chapter, I examine the application of historical memory studies to literature. I first provide an overview of memory theory and the central concepts of historical memory studies, focusing on the role of collective memory within a community to create a usable past that serves present needs. Using Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and discursive practice, I then turn to the discursive quality of literature and how literature shapes a way to talk about the conditions in which it was produced. After establishing a theoretical framework, I turn to William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!*; I explore how the narrative structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* mimics the multi-layered and selective process of constructing a collective memory, as well as the ways Faulkner engages with the tension between the past and the present in this novel, which is a hallmark of memory studies.

Memory is not the past as it was, but the past as people need or want it to be. When communities construct collective and social memories, they are not necessarily interested in the historical truth, but in what they consider to be true. In the most general of terms, memory is about negotiating a relationship to the past, and responds to the needs of a particular society at a particular time. As Joseph Bodnar explains, public memory is produced from a discussion about the very existence of a society, and "the very meaning of its past and present."⁷⁴ The process of constructing memory, and the actual memory product, are central to a larger discourse about how to interpret reality. Particularly when confronted with some sort of rupture, upheaval, or change, the past becomes a place of comfort and source of strength. However, this means that memories

⁷⁴ Joseph Bodnar, excerpt from *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 266.

are not fixed and objective, but malleable and carefully crafted to fit a subjective need. The development of collective memory is continuous and “marked not, as is history, by clearly etched demarcations but only by irregular and uncertain boundaries.”⁷⁵

Memory is different from history because it “retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive.”⁷⁶ Memory is dependent on individuals-as-group members to sustain it and give it meaning. But just like history, memory is subjective. Histories are mutable because interpretations of the past change over time, partly to address present interests and concerns, but also to fill in narrative gaps and come closer to a historical truth. Collective memory is also socially conditioned by the present, but instead of attempting to construct a more holistic picture of the past, collective memory renders the past necessarily imperfect and imprecise. But this does not devalue memory – and its various manifestations – as an object of historical inquiry. Rather, historians should be concerned with memory from two different points of view: memory as a historical source, and memory as a historical phenomenon. The goal of studying memory as a historical source is to be able to critique the reliability of remembering “on the lines of the traditional critique of historical documents;” in doing so, historians better understand the strengths and shortcomings of studying memory and can more effectively incorporate it into the broader discipline.⁷⁷ For example, this would include recognizing the biases that inform memory, and analyzing how the process of memory might manipulate the past to establish a certain interpretation that suits the present

⁷⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, excerpt from *The Collective Memory*, in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 144.

⁷⁶ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 143.

⁷⁷ Peter Burke, “History as Social Memory,” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 189.

moment. The second point of view, memory as a historical phenomenon, is to study the social history of remembering. The goal is to identify principles of selection and how they vary between places and groups, and how they change over time. It is important to understand how they are shaped and by whom, which lends insight to what the construction of memory was designed to confront or address, and allows historians to study the process of memory as a tool of identity and culture.

William Faulkner's novels reflect an acute understanding of the relationship between the past and the present, which is central to the construction of memory and its role in shaping a cultural identity. During his time as Writer in Residence at the University of Virginia, he stated, "To me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing as really was because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment."⁷⁸ This statement provides valuable insight to how Faulkner saw the past as overtaking the present; in line with the central tenets of memory studies, the past is an inescapable part of the present for Faulkner, and plays an active role in how his characters behave and understand themselves and the world around them. To Faulkner, time is a "fluid and malleable medium," and his novels are historical in the sense that "their concern is frequently with characters who are obsessed with a personal, family, or regional past."⁷⁹

The past weighs heavy in Faulkner's novels, particularly his 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!*. Much of the scholarship on this novel, and on Faulkner himself, centers on the simple claim that "William Faulkner was obsessed with history and with his place in history."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 3. Faulkner was writer in residence for the 1957-1958 academic year.

⁷⁹ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 1.

⁸⁰ Kevin Railey, *Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology, and the Production of William Faulkner* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), ix.

However, his novels are not a recounting of history, but a reconstruction of it. Through his literature, Faulkner presents a reinterpretation of the past that is not intended to resolve conflicting views of the past, but offer a new way of understanding it. The understanding of the past *Absalom, Absalom!* is one of creation: influenced by the sociohistorical forces that surrounded his life, Faulkner writes about the past not as it was, but as something that grips the present lives of his characters, looms over their experiences, and shapes their understanding of themselves and their world. The central question of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not *what* happened in the past, but what the characters *think* really happened and how this informs their experience and identity.⁸¹ As this chapter will demonstrate, this novel creates a discourse of how to talk about the past and its relationship to the present; it is a document of historical memory that captures the process of memory construction and frames memory as a historical phenomenon – a present construction that manipulates the past to meet the conditions of the present.

“Tell about the South:⁸²” Memory Theory and Literature as Discourse

Collective memories are based in a “society and its inventory of signs and symbols,” making them worth exploring to the cultural historian, who – as explored in the previous chapter – studies how people derive meaning within their culturally coded societies, and seeks to understand how people have constructed webs of meaning to engage with the world around them.⁸³ Memory is deeply embedded in the social frameworks of a population, and dependent on this population’s cultural, political, and social identity; the “new insight of memory studies is...

⁸¹ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 24.

⁸² Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 142.

⁸³ Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 302.

that it is at once situated within social frameworks... confronted with cultural institutions, and shaped by political circumstances.”⁸⁴ Remembering the past is a means by which a society can construct productive memories that help them understand the present and grapple with the future. These collective memories based on a “shared activity in the present and shared conceptions and sentiments of the group’s past” are important phenomenon to explore within the context of cultural history.⁸⁵ Because it is constructed within – and derived from – culturally specific social frameworks, memory is a fundamental component of understanding cultural identity, and therefore valuable to the discipline of cultural history. The most basic objective of memory, therefore, can be understood as the use of the past to consolidate a social consciousness rooted in a shared identity and future.⁸⁶

However, this purpose of memory to construct a useful relationship with the past raises questions of objectivity, thus closely linking memory and history in their shared struggle to understand how the past can explain the present and meet present needs. Memory is the basic form of our relationship to the past, “of our existence in time,” but the past is not simply objective knowledge to be retrieved by the present; rather, it is something to be interpreted and shaped to engage with present concerns.⁸⁷ Memory and history are intimately related because memory is the productive and active use of history to understand the present. Memory is the active working and refining of the past to construct something of meaning to the present society; it is “not a series of recalled mental images,” but the “accumulated past which acts on us and

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Olick, Introduction to *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

⁸⁵ Marc Bloch, “Mémoire collective, tradition et coutume: A propos d’un livre récent,” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152.

⁸⁶ Olick, Introduction, 3.

⁸⁷ Olick, Introduction, 6.

makes us act.”⁸⁸ Memory is not simply a passive faculty of storage and retrieval, but a present, active state in which people can negotiate their position within the historically-conditioned present.

To more fully comprehend the role of Faulkner’s literature played in the process of memory making in the twentieth-century south, it is also important to explore how literature operates as a site of memory. A site of memory anchors the present to the past in a time of acceleration, and is where the interpretations of the past-present relation occur; when literature serves as a site of memory, the collective memory being shaped often grapples with the theme of “the past in the present” – how the past shapes the present and is active in the present.⁸⁹

Furthermore, just as literature can be used within the discipline of cultural history to construct a more comprehensive understanding of the culture in question, literature is a valuable tool for memory studies because of the way it operates as a discursive practice. As a mode of discourse, literature does more than simply reflect reality – it has the power to help generate and shape it, and can therefore be understood as a site of memory because of its ability to construct and perpetuate a perception of the world that has real consequences on the way people act and think.

New Historicism once again enters the conversation, particularly through Michel Foucault, a French historian and philosopher whose theories had significant influence on the New Historicist literary critics that followed him. A brief exploration of Foucault’s theories of discourse and literature is necessary for understanding the role of literature in historical memory studies because of the way he understands modern uses of language as not pointing to the world,

⁸⁸ Matt Matsuda, *Memory of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

⁸⁹ Sandra Parmegiani, “Remembering War: Memory and History in Claudio Magris’s *Blameless*,” in *Transmissions of Memory: Echoes, Traumas, and Nostalgia in Post-World War II Italian Culture*, ed. Patrizia Sambuco (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018) 93, 104.

but conjuring it up; he is interested in the constructive quality of language and its ability to create and maintain a discourse (which in turn serves the process of remembering that is so integral to group identity and consciousness). Foucault identifies modern literature as a self-reflexive pattern of language, as opposed to the renaissance pattern of resemblance, and the classical pattern of representation. In this pattern of self-reflexivity, we see language occupy a creative and generative position; by occupying this space, language is no longer directly connected to what it signifies, and as literature, it becomes self-referential and therefore generative because it “has no other law than that of affirming... its own precipitous existence.”⁹⁰

This generative quality is most clearly seen in the discursive formation of literature, which is based on the unit of the *énoncé* – the statement – which, when strung together, ordered, and framed, form discourse. However, discourse is more complex than arranging sentences together in a coherent lineup. The same sentence might form different *énoncés* in different contexts, as modern language is not simply representative. The *énoncé* does not have an inherent tie to what it signifies, but can be constructed in various possible ways: it goes beyond representation and instead *generates* its signified or referent. Discursive formations, therefore, “exist as the *conditions of possibility* for the existence and repetition of particular sets of *énoncés*.”⁹¹ *Énoncés* are not connected to unities or frames, but form patterns that in turn produce a discourse (and go beyond representing reality).

Literature is the manifestation of language-as-generative, and as a discourse, it has its own limits, divisions, transformations, and modes of temporality; we can therefore analyze

⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), 300.

⁹¹ Simon During, *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing* (London: Routledge University Press, 1992), 95.

literature as a space of production and transformation, and the way it relates both to itself and to the world it exists within. In this way, we can now adopt a discursive practice of literature.

Foucault defines discursive practice as “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the same time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function.”⁹² A discursive practice of literature would therefore be concerned with the rules that conditioned its existence, and how it is both a product of these conditions and simultaneously producing the circumstances of their meaning.

The generative and discursive quality of literature is useful to its value as a historical source because it serves as a tool for exploring the way people understood and were relating to the world around them. Literature becomes a lens through which to view codes of culture because, as a stage in the historical development of language, it is rooted in the modern conception of knowledge and experience of order.⁹³ It must be noted that the literature Foucault deals with in his theories of discourse are typically tracts of medicine, science, and law – not fiction. However, he chooses to open *The Order of Things* with an analysis of a passage from Borges. The passage quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” that divides animals according to untraditional classifications, such as “fabulous,” “frenzied,” and “belonging to the Emperor.”⁹⁴ Foucault explains that “the uneasiness that makes us laugh” when we read this passage comes from the way it disrupts our traditional understanding of Chinese culture as “the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered,” instead presenting a system of thought that is “without

⁹² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books 1972), 117.

⁹³ José González, “Misunderstanding Foucault,” in *Appropriating Theory: Angel Rama’s Critical Work* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 168.

⁹⁴ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv.

space,” and whose words and categories “lack all life in place.”⁹⁵ By writing about this passage from Borges, Foucault brings fiction into his discussion of order and the classificatory systems that comprise life. The inclusion of Borges suggests that literature – including fiction – can operate discursively because it reshuffles our sense of the categories of reality. It highlights the generative power of literature, and how fiction can speak to the “fundamental codes of a culture” by engaging with the categories and networks in which culture is rooted.⁹⁶

Foucault’s theories of discourse are a useful framework in which to situate the value of literature to historical memory studies because they facilitate an understanding of literature as not just producing or addressing a condition of existence, but defining the limits of how to talk about the reality it generates. This function of discourse facilitates the incorporation of literature into history because it allows historians to see literature as defining the reality in which it exists. The intersection of literature-as-discourse and history can be most profoundly felt in the field of historical memory studies; memory-making itself possesses a generative quality, as it is a construction of the past to fit a certain agenda for the present.

Social memory, for example, creates a discourse of the past for a socially organized group of people: it is the construction of a way to understand, talk about, and use the past, thus operating discursively. The next chapter will examine the Lost Cause as an example of social memory that dominated southern thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Characterized by an obsession with the past, the Lost Cause constructed a specific memory of the South’s past to justify the region’s modern existence. As previously discussed, Peter Burke defines social memory as the (conscious or unconscious) selection, interpretation, and distortion

⁹⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii, xix.

⁹⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xx.

of the past to fit a certain narrative. Memories are socially conditioned and therefore, according to Burke, our access to the past is limited by our culture and social context. Wulf Kansteiner builds upon this notion of memory as constructed through and by present concerns by discussing how “the collective” constructs a remembrance of the past rooted in shared communication about the meaning of the past and how this meaning manifest in the communal life of the collective and fits their contemporary interests.⁹⁷ “Relevant” remembering shapes reality because people often intentionally remember an event or occurrence to help explain the present. Essentially, the memory of the past is a constructed discourse that defines how the present understands itself as conditioned by the past.

Historical memory studies, therefore, analyze the discursive function of these memories and how the discourses of memory have been historically conditioned and produced. The historian’s task is to ask “who wants whom to remember what, and why,” and consider what version of the past is recorded and preserved; the historian must determine not only how these memories came to dominate the discourse, but how they define reality and the meaning of that reality.⁹⁸ Within this context, Foucault’s notion of modern language’s generative quality allows literature to assume an interesting position within historical memory studies. Memory as discursive production – at least within the context of the modern episteme – can be done through an analysis of the literature produced during the time of memory-making. For example, Faulkner’s novels become tools for understanding the relationship between the past and the present within the context of the Lost Cause’s memory project. They reveal the ways the past can shape the present, and how memory informs identity and notions of progress.

⁹⁷ Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory,” 301.

⁹⁸ Burke, “History as Social Memory,” 191.

Using Foucault's framework of modern literature not simply representing the world, but generating a reality and defining the conditions of its existence and the limits of how to talk about it, we can understand literature written during times of memory-making as taking an active role in its production. The literature is not just writing *about* something, but defining the limits of how to talk about it, thus adopting a generative role in a community's struggle to define and understand the past as filtered through the present. By using literature as a discursive site of memory, therefore, historians can learn how people in particular times understood their past and present, and gain insight to how people defined their reality and lived experience. Turning back to Faulkner within this framework, we can understand how Faulkner's literature produces a discourse for talking about southern memory in the early twentieth century and, consequently, seeks to define the conditions of existence for nostalgic southerners facing modernity.

Contemporary with the Lost Cause, his novels grapple with the tension between the past and the present, and how nostalgia might pose a challenge to southerners' ability to enter modernity. By situating Faulkner's novels as a site of memory for the early twentieth-century South, we can explore their discursive function and the way they generate their own reality to inhabit and perpetuate; in exploring how memory and nostalgia define present experience, Faulkner does not just write about the South and its past, but constructs a discourse for understanding the past through the lens of the present.

"The resonant strings of remembering."⁹⁹ Application of Concepts to Absalom, Absalom!

Absalom, Absalom! reveals memory to be a process of discursive construction that actively engages the past to better understand the present moment. The narrative of Thomas

⁹⁹ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 172.

Sutpen is constructed not through Sutpen's own words, but the retelling and shaping of his story by various narrators, all who carry their own investment in how the story is told and how it can influence the lives of those who hear it. *Absalom, Absalom!* is not Sutpen's story, and even though Sutpen is at the center of the novel, Sutpen is "entirely a creature of narrative who springs to life... out of the oral machinations of the narrators."¹⁰⁰ The frame narration of *Absalom, Absalom!* is key to understanding the novel as a document of historical memory because this structure shows how the past gets used and continuously reshaped by the present. Faulkner presents memory as a historical phenomenon within the novel because the focus is not so much on what actually happened, but how people interpret what happened – a retelling that is tailored to fit their personal understanding of the world around them.

Throughout the novel, the story of Sutpen is continually renegotiated and reshaped by the narrators as they retell the story to each other as well as to themselves. Additionally, it is told in fragments that are not necessarily in chronological order. The fragmentation and inconclusiveness of the narration of Sutpen's story is an act of memory construction because it is not a recounting of what happened, but an active dialogue with the past, and the reader is also forced to participate in this process of historical inquiry and judgement; the narrative structure of the novel pushes the reader to interact personally with the experience of the past being put forth in present conversation and discourse.¹⁰¹ Sutpen's story is not presented to the reader as a fixed narrative, but the reader also has to work to put it together alongside the narrators, and because of this, Faulkner "demonstrates the difficulty of separating *what* we know about history from

¹⁰⁰ Ted Atkinson, *Faulkner and the Great Depression: Aesthetics, Ideology, and Cultural Politics* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 171.

¹⁰¹ Jay Watson, Introduction to *Faulkner and History* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), xiii.

how we know it.”¹⁰² The reader cannot take what the narrators say as fact, but must acknowledge how and why the narrators are telling it the way they are; the novel draws attention to the process of revision and construction that is a part of memory, making it an important source for understanding memory as a historical phenomenon with which the characters engage and actively shape. As Carl Rollyson explains:

The remarkable coherence of the Sutpen story is the product of a long historical process which relates past and present, not through an agreement on all of the facts which are the ephemeral surface of a particular moment in time, but through the human imagination (historical and artistic) which constantly turns over the facts to see what significance they now possess, whatever that ‘now’ happens to be.¹⁰³

The form of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not only true to the process of historical interpretation, but the process of memory construction; it is a document of historical memory because of the insight it provides to how and why memory is shaped, as well as the ways in which the past is present in and informs the present.

The continual reshaping of Sutpen’s story is apparent within the opening pages of the novel, when Rosa Coldfield first invites Quentin Compson to her home to tell him about Thomas Sutpen – “the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration.”¹⁰⁴ Rosa had a complicated and intimate relationship with Sutpen – after his arrival in Jefferson, Sutpen married Rosa’s sister Ellen, and then married Rosa after Ellen died – and Rosa views Sutpen as a man “without pity or honor,” and considers her family “cursed to be instruments not only for that man’s destruction but for her own.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, it is clear from the very start that Rosa was a

¹⁰² Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 143.

¹⁰³ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 139.

¹⁰⁴ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 3.

¹⁰⁵ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 13, 14.

witness not only to Sutpen's rise and fall, but to the destruction he caused to himself and others, and is still haunted by Sutpen forty-three years after his death, when she begins telling her story to Quentin in the summer of 1909. Clearly, Rosa is an unreliable narrator, yet she is the one closest to the source, and thus to the "truth." Her personal investment immediately signals to the reader that Rosa is telling Sutpen's story not to preserve history, but "because she wants it told" on her terms, from her present moment.¹⁰⁶

Rosa's reshaping of Sutpen's story is first evident in Quentin's internal monologue during his first meeting with Rosa; Quentin attempts to process what Rosa is telling him, but is continually interrupted by Rosa adjusting the narrative or adding to it in order for the story to match her own design. Quentin thus first understands Sutpen as such:

*'It seems that this demon – his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation – (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which – (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shelf and comfort of his old age, only – (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died) – and died.'*¹⁰⁷

Quentin's first introduction to the story is already subjected to revisions and modifications so that it is told on Rosa's terms, which of course are not strictly truthful terms. This in turn affects Quentin's understanding of the story, and over the course of the novel he adds to it himself, from his own position as someone who had "grown up with [these kinds of stories]" and whose "very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 5.

¹⁰⁷ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 5. (Italicized in the text)

¹⁰⁸ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 7.

The audience of Quentin's narration is his Harvard roommate, Shreve, who – being Canadian – is about as far removed from the cultural trauma of Mississippi as one can be within Faulkner's literary world. Despite this distance, Shreve also participates in narrating Sutpen's story, viewing the South's past not as something fixed, but something to be constructed and continually reshaped. This is made particularly clear when Shreve interrupts Quentin's narration and says, "let me play awhile now," then continues to manufacture the story.¹⁰⁹ Even though Quentin insists that "You cant understand it. You would have to be born there," Shreve's cooption of Sutpen's story draws attention to how the past is not fixed and accessible to a select set of people, but changes as it extends geographically and temporally, reaching into the present and being shaped by individuals (and groups) who do not necessarily have a direct claim to it but nevertheless have the power to retell it.¹¹⁰

Memory is a historical phenomenon because the shape it takes depends on who is telling it. Shreve is telling Sutpen's story based on what he knows about the South, as a foreigner in 1909-1910; because of his distance, he sees the problems and traumas of the South and its past as trivial, saying: "Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theatre isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur isn't it. No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn't it."¹¹¹ Shreve sees the past as something to reconstruct, engaging in the process of memory by shaping the past to fit his own present, which is that of understanding the South as something foreign and distant – something that sounds and feels like fiction. His interpretation reveals that "the human conflicts of the past are still part of the present and probably part of the future."¹¹² Even without a

¹⁰⁹ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 224.

¹¹⁰ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 289.

¹¹¹ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 176.

¹¹² Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 97.

personal investment like Rosa, Shreve is able to easily draw the past into the present and shape it in a way he sees fit, and a way that will potentially guide his future behavior and worldview. Furthermore, Shreve's narration leads up to and includes the climax of the novel, Chapter 8, in which Quentin and Shreve attempt to reconstruct Sutpen's story from their respective understandings of Sutpen and his position within southern history and memory. Chapter 8 "is the outgrowth of all previous interpretations of the Sutpen story," but also Quentin and Shreve's own creation, "which could not have occurred at any other time than their present moment."¹¹³

This chapter especially demonstrates how *Absalom, Absalom!* is a document of historical memory because it explores how people take the past, reshape it, and claim it as theirs. Through Quentin and Shreve particularly, we see memory as a historical phenomenon, and can begin to understand the process of memory construction within a present context. Through "the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed anywhere at all," Faulkner draws attention to the process of memory as an act of creation, not of truthful reflection.¹¹⁴

In addition to highlighting the dynamics of memory construction itself, Faulkner's literature is also valuable to broader historical studies because of the way it confronts the tension between nostalgia and modernity. As explained, memory is culturally and temporally specific, with each time period's memory being a historical entity; modern memory, therefore, is specific to the conditions of modernity, and the literature Faulkner produced in the first decades of the twentieth century was also conditioned by the social changes wrought by the modern era. However, Faulkner's novels rarely look forward, but to the past (and famously so), which does

¹¹³ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 51.

¹¹⁴ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 243.

not quite fit with the understanding of modernity as “a commitment to breaking with the past, to acting out an originary moment upon which to build a new society.”¹¹⁵ In general, the modern era is characterized by an awareness of time as linear and moving toward the future, which seems to directly conflict with Faulkner’s characters’ obsession with the past and feeling of stagnancy in the face of a rapidly changing world. However, it is this tension between progress and nostalgia that makes Faulkner’s novels so compelling within the framework of historical memory studies. This tension, specifically as it is dealt with in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is central to understanding Faulkner’s literature as constructing a discourse of memory for the modern south.

Most explorations of modernity – including my own– begin with Charles Baudelaire, who wrote in 1863 that “modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.”¹¹⁶ David Harvey builds upon this claim, explaining that “the only secure thing about modernity is its insecurity, its penchant, even, for ‘totalizing chaos.’”¹¹⁷ Because of the emphasis modernism places on change and the transitoriness of things, it cannot have respect for either its own past or the past of any pre-modern social order. There is a lack of historical continuity, and an emphasis on temporality and the changing ways in which people experienced time and space – but especially time. Modernity depends on a rupture with the past to create something new in the present. It follows, then, that the construction of a modern identity depended on releasing one’s present self from the grip of the past.

The constant renegotiation of the past, as demonstrated by Rosa’s modifications and Shreve’s participation in the narration of Sutpen’s story with Quentin, is an act of memory, but

¹¹⁵ Matsuda, *Memory of the Modern*, 43.

¹¹⁶ David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989), 10.

¹¹⁷ Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 11.

also a product of modernity. The frame narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* is an active discourse concerning the relationship between past and present, as each narrator wishes to view the past within the context of their own present, as well as use that reconstructed past to affirm and explain the present. This interaction of the past and present, as mediated by the narrators, may seem unmodern because of the emphasis on continuity, but Sutpen's story constantly changes and, at the end of the day, is still inconclusive, thus "the novel constantly invokes the ephemerality of the very story it tells."¹¹⁸ Although the past haunts the narrators, their inability – or unwillingness – to pin down a historical truth suggests a fleeting quality to the past, which aligns with Baudelaire's definition of modernity as the transient and fleeting.

Furthermore, *Absalom, Absalom!* is part of a larger discourse of modern memory because Faulkner suggests an unsustainability to this grip the past holds on the present, particularly by using Quentin as a site of confrontation between nostalgia and modernity. Quentin's intense relationship with the past is the ultimate cause of his demise, suggesting – like Sutpen's demise – that his lifestyle, which was rooted in a "mental paralysis keeping him fixated on the past," is not sustainable with the conditions of modernity in which he now lives.¹¹⁹ For Quentin, Sutpen's story becomes a symbol for the past itself, something that continues to confront and haunt Quentin, particularly after Rosa's death leaves him the "heir to her narrative" and prompts his narration of the story to Shreve one night at Harvard.¹²⁰ Even in their cold, "tomblike" dorm room, "which seems to symbolize the deadness of the past, and hence its irretrievability," Quentin embarks on his narration of Sutpen; despite the (modern) break with the past the

¹¹⁸ Brooks Hefner, "The Paper Old and Faded and Falling to Pieces': *Absalom, Absalom!* and the Pulping of History," in *Faulkner and History*, ed. Jay Watson (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 188.

¹¹⁹ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 89.

¹²⁰ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 57.

environment seems to convey, Quentin is determined to construct a memory of the south, and produce a discourse of how to talk about the south's past, even though much of it relies on conjecture between him and Shreve.¹²¹

Quentin embodies nostalgia and the inability to let go of the past, which makes him an unmodern character living in a modern world, and thus unable to survive. As he listens to Rosa's narration, "he was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts," signaling how Quentin is consumed by the past and the fate of the southerners who came before him.¹²² In fact, he barely needs to listen to Rosa's story because it is something he already knows, "since he had been born in and still breathed the same air in which the church bells had rung on that Sunday morning in 1833 [the day of Sutpen's arrival]."¹²³ Quentin is a product of the past; despite being a young adult in 1910, when the United States is on the cusp of modernity, Quentin cannot escape the images and ghosts of the Old South, which continually reaches out to him and maintains a grip on his present. Quentin understands himself not as his own entity, but an extension and keeper of the Old South – the society and culture Sutpen inhabited. We know from his appearance in the 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury* that Quentin is absorbed by the past, which prohibits his ability to enter modernity and progress forward.¹²⁴ *Absalom, Absalom!* provides even more context for Quentin's fate by showing how he is burdened with Sutpen's story as well as an active participant in constructing a memory of Sutpen. As Rosa tells him (within the bounds of Quentin's narration, which again may or may not be "accurate"): "But you were not listening, because you knew it all already, had learned, absorbed it already without the

¹²¹ Rollyson, *Uses of the Past*, 64.

¹²² Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 7.

¹²³ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 23.

¹²⁴ See Chapter 3 for a deeper discussion of Quentin Compson's relationship with southern memory.

medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it.”¹²⁵ The past is an unshakeable part of Quentin, and he is not able to break with it, as is necessary to the experience of modernity. Quentin’s nostalgia is his downfall, as we witness in the final pages of his chapter in the *Sound and the Fury*, and in this novel, we again see Quentin embodying the tension between nostalgia and modernity.

¹²⁵ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 172.

Chapter 3: The Lost Cause and William Faulkner's Production of an Alternative Memory

In this chapter, I examine the memory project of Lost Cause and how it shaped southern thought and identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I first provide an overview of the Lost Cause and how it operated as a collective memory for the South, defining its values and outlining the narrative it produced through its interpretation of the past. I then introduce Faulkner's engagement with Lost Cause memory, and how, although contemporary with the Lost Cause and drawing on the same past, his novels construct an alternative memory for the modern South. While acknowledging the ever-presence of the past in southern imagination, Faulkner's novels also suggest that the past is a burden and can be an obstacle to – not a tool of – a modern identity. I then turn to a few examples of how Faulkner challenges the memory of the Lost Cause in his novels, and presents an alternative way for thinking about the past and the role of the past in the present. First, I briefly explore how the character of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* undermines the way the Lost Cause memory worships Confederate veterans and the social order of the Old South. Then, I turn to *The Sound and the Fury* and the way the Compson family is held back from entering modernity because of their damaging relationship with the past. Specifically, I look at the character of Quentin Compson, who is obsessed with the past and the ideals the Lost Cause embodies; however, the past is a burden for Quentin, and he ultimately commits suicide because of his inability to live up to the values celebrated and maintained by Lost Cause memory.

Southern Memory and the Lost Cause

One of the more recognizable instances of collective memory in modern American history is the narrative of the Lost Cause in the southern states, and the perpetual

memorialization of a defeated culture. Americans are certainly familiar with the remnants of the Lost Cause, including (but by no means limited to) the monuments of Confederate generals in various southern cities and chapters of the Daughters of the Confederacy. These types of institutions and physical manifestations of the Lost Cause represent the attempts made by southerners to interpret the Civil War and the South's defeat, and therefore were intended to construct a public memory of the Confederate tradition that would help contemporary southerners consolidate their identity. For a society facing rapid change and disorder, the rituals and rhetoric of the Lost Cause provided an appealing memory of white southerners' defeated past and "served to ease their adjustment to the New South and to provide social unity during the crucial period of transition."¹²⁶

The Lost Cause "created a sense of order and community out of the chaos, uncertainty, and despair of defeat," and the ceremony and rituals were designed to redeem the honor of white southern men and justify their new place in a vastly different world.¹²⁷ Following the defeat of the Confederacy, white southerners needed to create a unified front to combat the changes facing their region – most notably the freedom and enfranchisement of African Americans. Memory "provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going," thus making it an especially useful point of inquiry when studying the cultural history of a community undergoing a social transition or experiencing a crisis of identity – or both.¹²⁸ The southern United States in the early twentieth century is an example of memory-making occurring during a moment of uncertainty and change to consolidate

¹²⁶ Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8.

¹²⁷ Stuart Towns, *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2012), x.

¹²⁸ Eyerman, "The Past in the Present," 305.

identity, and demonstrates the way social groups turn to the past to find meaning in the present, and a way to move forward into the future. Within the Lost Cause, a rhetorical narrative was established by southern orators that explained the South's past, present, and future in a way that affirmed how white southerners wanted to see their world. The Confederacy had failed, but a public memory of the Old South, the Confederacy, Reconstruction, and the New South persisted, and it "formed the foundation of white southerners' perception of the world and how they should respond to that world."¹²⁹

The interpretation of memory reveals not only the way people perceive themselves within and in relation to the world, but how and why they manipulate their past to do so. Peter Burke places great emphasis on understanding the process of selection memory communities employ when turning to their past to explain their present. He uses the term "social memory" to refer to this process of selection and interpretation, and explains that, as a cultural historian, he finds it helpful to "approach the question of the uses of social memory by asking why some cultures seem to be more concerned with recalling their past than others."¹³⁰ Within the memory community, who wants whom to remember what, and why? Building upon the study of the memory itself, it is equally important to explore how and why the memory was constructed, and what the memory community sought to accomplish in doing so. For white southerners in the years after the Civil War, the experience of daily life was the "[experience] of devastation, defeat, poverty, death, a changed social order, a new environment of increased industrialization and commercialization, and a drastic change in the patterns of life."¹³¹ The Lost Cause provided them with a way to escape their present environment of defeat and remember their glorious past

¹²⁹ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, xii.

¹³⁰ Burke, "History as Social Memory," 190.

¹³¹ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 14.

– the days of victory and honor – on their own terms. This remembrance included hundreds of events, institutions, and organizations created from April 1865 through the late twentieth century, and was led by groups such as the Ladies’ Memorial Associations, the Southern Historical Society, the United Confederate Veterans (1889), the United Daughters of the Confederacy (1894), and the United Sons of the Confederacy (1896), as well as various military unit, state, and local reunions. The rituals and rhetoric of these groups created a continuity with the traditions and history of the Old South, and strengthened white southern solidarity against “outsiders” such as northern carpetbaggers and African Americans living in the South.¹³²

Under the ideology of the Lost Cause, white southerners reinvented the past and their vision of how they wanted to remember it. However, the memories and ideology of the Lost Cause did more than provide a sense of escapism for white southerners. The rituals, rhetoric, and ceremonies of civilians and Confederate legacy organizations confirmed an interpretation of the past that simultaneously celebrated a specific understanding of southerners’ heritage and guided southerners into the future. This act of memory – looking to the past to inform the present and shape the future – is manifested in the erection of Confederate monuments, for example. Confederate monuments “[reminded] white southerners that even though they lost the war, they were heroes in a heroic cause,” and were intended to be a guide for the future by ensuring that southerners never forgot their past.¹³³ The monuments represented how the past had become a part of southern identity, as the mythology of the Lost Cause continued to create, enhance, and affirm the solidarity of the southern white community into the twentieth century, and provide them with a sense of continuity in the face of “overwhelming change.”¹³⁴ The monuments are

¹³² Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 15.

¹³³ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 38.

¹³⁴ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 116.

physical reminders of the past, a past that has been remembered a certain way to fit the needs of southerners searching for meaning in the postwar world.

The glorification and justification of the South persisted into the twentieth century, particularly through the United Daughters of the Confederacy's efforts in the 1920s and 1930s to make sure that "the southern story and only the southern story [would] be told in the public school textbooks across the region."¹³⁵ The Lost Cause, though a project of memory, was also codified as true history for white southerners, and was thus just as much an act of forgetting as remembering. The Lost Cause in educational settings, as well as in mass media projects such as the films *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Song of the South* (1946), told a version of the South's past that perpetuated the myth of the contented slave and confirmed white supremacy, and "served as fundamental assumptions and assertions" for segregation and other forms of systematic discrimination.¹³⁶

The projects of southern history selectively preserved and interpreted the past, contributing to the creation and maintenance of the Lost Cause's collective memory. The simultaneous remembering and forgetting in order to produce a usable past is an act of collective memory because "in the collective memory, the conditions of the present give rise to somewhat imperfection notions of the past... [and] does not preserve the past precisely; it is constantly reconstructing and reformulating in light of the present."¹³⁷ Within the framework of memory studies, the past loses its objectivity because it is subjected to interpretive strategies in order to serve the present population doing the remembering. Because memory is recalled and used to meet present needs, memory "is not merely a theme to search out... nor a convenient trope to

¹³⁵ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 118.

¹³⁶ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 118.

¹³⁷ Bloch, "Mémoire collective, tradition, et coutume," 152.

impose generically,” but a historical entity in itself.¹³⁸ Memory is an appropriated and politicized object that brings diverse subjects under the same category of analysis and interpretation; it demands more than a rereading of history, requiring an epistemic framework that highlights how constructions of memory reflect a population’s changing relationship with the past.¹³⁹ Because “[memory] has meant different things to people and cultures at different times and has been instrumentalized in the service of diverse cultural practices,” there is a multiplicity to it; memory is not transhistorical, but historically and culturally specific.¹⁴⁰

Designed to help southerners make sense of their new world, the Lost Cause justified the present and gave southerners a way to move into the future without sacrificing their values and way of life. The myth of the Lost Cause was a bulwark against modernization and modernity, celebrating a “glorious, organic civilization destroyed by an avaricious ‘industrial society’ determined to wipe out its cultural foes.”¹⁴¹ It represented an attitude towards the past, but also was a manifestation of memory that played an active role in how southerners engaged with their present and the changes that came with twentieth-century modernity. As David Blight explains in his 2003 monograph *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, at the turn of the century, the Lost Cause served two purposes – reconciliation and southern partisanship.¹⁴² Through the establishment of organizations, erection of monuments, and promoting a self-serving interpretation of the past, the Lost Cause at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century was rooted in three core elements: the effort to rewrite

¹³⁸ Matsuda, *Memory of the Modern*, 4.

¹³⁹ Matsuda, *Memory of the Modern*, 6.

¹⁴⁰ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁴¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 257.

¹⁴² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 258.

and control the history of the Civil War and its aftermath, its use of white supremacy “as both means and ends,” and gendered nature of memory construction.¹⁴³

In terms of controlling the narrative, the Lost Cause placed the responsibility for secession and the Civil War on the North, venerating the South as merely “[protecting] its natural rights” against the power of the federal government.¹⁴⁴ As Jefferson Davis explained in the aftermath, slavery was not the cause of the conflict, but an incident; furthermore, he defended the institution of slavery itself, a defense which carried through the racialized language of the Lost Cause even into the twentieth century. The quest to write a “southern history” hinged on taking control of the nation’s memory of the mid- to late nineteenth century; although the “history they had lived ruined them, the history they would help write might redeem them,” and the rituals and rhetoric of the Lost Cause served to justify the South’s defeat and guide an understanding of their present.¹⁴⁵ Southerners also took control of the historical narrative by framing Reconstruction as a victory, thus allowing the rhetoric of the Lost Cause to take a triumphant turn, and not only be about defeat. The Lost Cause found a victory narrative in the end of Reconstruction, as they had redeemed their states and successfully rid themselves of Republican and black political control.¹⁴⁶

By the 1880s, therefore, as the South witnessed a surge in the unveiling of Confederate monuments, the Lost Cause had shifted from a rhetoric of redeeming defeat to a narrative of triumph. For most white southerners, the Lost Cause had adopted a “language of vindication and renewal” and was no longer a narrative of loss, but a “narrative of order, revival, and

¹⁴³ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 259.

¹⁴⁴ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 259.

¹⁴⁵ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 262.

¹⁴⁶ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 264.

triumph.”¹⁴⁷ Equipped with a distinctly southern interpretation of history rooted in a memory of triumph and superiority, the Lost Cause entered the twentieth century prepared to confront modernity and the changes that would accompany it. The Lost Cause was a “tonic against fear of social change, a preventative ideological medicine” against a new modern reality, and its traditions offered southerners protection against the racial, political, and industrial disorder of modernity.¹⁴⁸

This bulwark against modernity was not only characterized by an intense relationship with the past and rigorously executed project of memory, but also by the perpetuation of a traditional understanding of race and gender. The Lost Cause’s language of victory did not only promote the triumph of white southerners, but “included the demeaning of black people as helpless, sentimental children and the crushing of their adult rights to political and civil liberty under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.”¹⁴⁹ A sense of racial mastery dominated Lost Cause memory, as southerners became increasingly confident in their narrative of victory. The triumph of Reconstruction that the Lost Cause remembered was rooted in the notion that black equality had been defeated, and a renewed commitment to white supremacy accompanied the pursuit of a distinctly southern history. Looking back with fondness on the antebellum South, advocates of the Lost Cause perpetuated the sentimental image of the faithful slave, and the natural order of a master-slave relationship.¹⁵⁰ In the fight to control the historical interpretation of the Civil War and the postwar world, some Lost Cause advocates “fashioned Confederate memory into a revival crusade and the Old South into a lost racial utopia,” encouraging a vision

¹⁴⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 266.

¹⁴⁸ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 266.

¹⁴⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 272.

¹⁵⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 274.

of a victimized South that had fought to defend a racially stratified civilization rooted in white supremacy.¹⁵¹ Denying slavery as the cause of the war, Lost Cause rhetoric nostalgically remembered the paternal relationships forged between master and slave, thus enforcing a similar racial hierarchy for modern times. The memory project drew its staying power from the ideology of white supremacy and the image of the faithful slave, and found new energy in the increasingly segregated modern society.

Furthermore, at the forefront of such racially motivated reminiscences were white southern women who, through the structures of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, defended an exceptional southern history as “cultural guardians of their tribe, defenders of a sacred past against Yankee-imposed ignorance and the forces of modernism.”¹⁵² White southern women were behind the establishment of Confederate Memorial Day across the South, and served as the organizational force behind reunions and ceremonial events. Doing so allowed women to “live up to expectations of their virtue” and support the men who had defended the South.¹⁵³ However, the events themselves were executed by men, and women’s involvement stopped with organization, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles and the gendered, patriarchal dynamics of Lost Cause tradition. The United Daughters of the Confederacy also led the charge for the erection of Confederate monuments, thus playing a central role in the (physical) perpetuation of the Lost Cause and the memory of the South it embodied. With 412 chapters and 17,000 members in twenty states and territories by 1900, the United Daughters of the Confederacy guarded the Confederate past and saw the memory project of the Lost Cause to be a righteous effort in guarding the south from the disorder and instability of modernity. However,

¹⁵¹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 279.

¹⁵² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 278.

¹⁵³ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 22.

the efforts of white southern women also helped to perpetuate traditional gender beliefs and solidified the notion of southern womanhood as a domestic practice that served the needs of white southern men.

For southerners, the past is “alive and vivid,” and it “intrudes upon our lives, infiltrates the present, and attempts to shape, influence, and persuade the future.”¹⁵⁴ The Lost Cause, with its rituals, rhetoric, and institutions, is the primary memory project behind this desire to establish continuity with the past and to use the past to shape a modern identity. The public discourse of the past as embodied by the Lost Cause “played a vital role in shaping southern attitudes and values.”¹⁵⁵ Designed to help southerners make sense of their new world, the Lost Cause justified the present and gave southerners a way to move into the future without sacrificing their values and way of life. The myth of the Lost Cause was a bulwark against modernization and modernity; it represented an attitude towards the past, but also was a manifestation of memory that played an active role in how southerners engaged with their present and the changes that came with twentieth-century modernity.

William Faulkner and the Production of an Alternative Memory

Although contemporary with the Lost Cause, Faulkner novels construct a memory that, while drawing upon the same past, looks different than the veneration of the Old South so commonly associated with Lost Cause mythology. One of the main ways in which Faulkner presents an alternative memory of the South’s past is through this simultaneous experience of nostalgia and modernity in his literature. Faulkner’s literature is very much a product of

¹⁵⁴ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 145.

¹⁵⁵ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 35.

nostalgia, but also one of modernity, and this weaving together of modernity and nostalgia constructs a memory of the south that runs parallel to the Lost Cause and offers an alternative understanding of the South's past and how to use it in the present. There is no doubt an obsession with the past in Faulkner's novels, but this obsession is put in dialogue with elements of modernity, and one of the primary tensions his characters face is how to grapple with the past while confronting a changing, modern world. Whereas the Lost Cause's investment in the past tries to ward off modernity, Faulkner forces his characters to confront it, thus creating a discourse of how to understand and use the past in a way that is productive for the present moment. This is what makes Faulkner's novels so compelling as documents of historical memory: by weaving nostalgia – an obsession with the past – and modernity – a rejection of the past – together, they construct a discourse of memory to build a modern identity.

Faulkner does not fully align himself with Lost Cause memory, but gives a raw portrayal of the faults of the southern order and its unsustainability in the face of modernity. Drawing on the same shared past and operating in the same historical moment, Faulkner provides historians with an alternative memory to the Lost Cause and other romanticized notions of southern history. Of course, Faulkner was not the only southern novelist writing about the South's relationship with his past; novelists such as Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, writing at the turn of the century, wrote novels that “revived a mythological South,” and by the mid-1920s, the antebellum South continued to be a popular setting for fiction, “which helped to perpetuate the ‘moonlight-and-magnolias’ image of the region.”¹⁵⁶ A romantic image of the South in literature persisted into the twentieth century, but Faulkner removes himself from this literary turn by not

¹⁵⁶ Karen Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Raleigh: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 114, 126.

perpetuating an idyllic image of the South, but confronting the region's ills through his literature. In doing so, Faulkner aligned himself more with the Southern Literary Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s which "offered a new and even critical perspective on the region by native southerners, and... represented a departure from the romance of the Lost Cause."¹⁵⁷

The discourse of memory generated by Faulkner's literature complicates the idealized memories of the past embodied by the Lost Cause, and the collective memory of the South that is found in his literature shapes a unique relationship with the past on which to build a modern identity. Granted, the memory that Faulkner presents is still rooted in a racial hierarchy, and is very much a white narrative. In this sense, it is easy to place Faulkner's literature within the larger memory of the Lost Cause. However, Faulkner engages with the past differently than the Lost Cause, and seems to think that the Lost Cause's obsession with the past is not in fact beneficial to the creation of a truly modern South. As John Egerton explains, "far from exhibiting a desire to be free from the burden of history, the South seemed instead to cling obsessively to its past."¹⁵⁸ Faulkner, on the other hand, *does* seem to acknowledge the burden of history, and the characters in his novels who cling to the past are often ill-fated. The memory of the Lost Cause is one of glory and honor, but the memory Faulkner produces does not see the past as something to be venerated, but as an inescapable burden. His novels depict a damaging relationship with the past, and the characters are weighed down by the burden of the past to the point of immobilization and inability to move forward. Faulkner acknowledges the centrality of the past to southern identity, but his literature seems to suggest that a dependency on the past will do more harm than good, and that it cannot truly protect southerners from the impending modern

¹⁵⁷ Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 126.

¹⁵⁸ Egerton CITE

era. The Lost Cause sought to use memory as a bulwark against modernity, but the alternative memory Faulkner produces serves more as an obstacle than a defense.

“He wasn’t even a gentleman.”¹⁵⁹ *Thomas Sutpen and the Challenge to Lost Cause Memory*

For example, through the character of Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner engages in the shared past as fostered by advocates of the Lost Cause, but constructs a discourse of this past that shapes a different memory than these two ideologies cultivated. Although Lost Cause mythology constructs and depends upon an idealized memory of the antebellum lifestyle, Sutpen’s easy co-optation of it suggests that the culture to which modern southerners so desperately clung could be easily mimicked and exploited, and therefore was not something on which to construct a memory designed for anchoring the present. *Absalom, Absalom!*, published the same year as *Gone With the Wind*, paints a very different picture of the South’s planter class than Margaret Mitchell’s romantic narrative of Scarlett O’Hara and the survival of the antebellum culture. *Absalom, Absalom!* is not a story of survival, but the demise of Thomas Sutpen, a man from West Virginia who arrives in Yoknapatawpha County in 1833 determined to establish himself as a member of the plantation class, only to destroy his own ideal southern life and the lives of those he implicated within it.

The fact that Sutpen is an outsider is central to understanding this novel as discursively generating a memory of the South’s past that is entrenched in Lost Cause mythology, yet runs parallel to it, as well. Sutpen “had hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it,” a place with the land “divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine

¹⁵⁹ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 9.

horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them.”¹⁶⁰ Whereas the Lost Cause venerated the class of men to which Sutpen belongs and is seemingly intended to represent, for Faulkner, Sutpen is not a hero to be memorialized, but reveals the fragility of the cultural system to which he belonged; this novel, therefore, constructs an alternative memory of the past which the Lost Cause celebrates. Sutpen is an imposter within the southern order, and his arrival and calculated ascent into the planter class calls into question the Lost Cause’s reverence for a way of life that could so easily be mimicked and co-opted.

Like the mythology of the Lost Cause, Faulkner recognizes the deep attachment the modern South has with its past (he is undoubtedly implicated in this relationship as well), but he also pushes back against the overwhelming presence of the past in the present and creates a discourse of the past that complicates the idealization and romanticization typically associated with popular southern memory. Sutpen manipulated the southern social order to put himself at the top; he “came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before... seeking some place to hide himself, and Yoknapatawpha County supplied him with it,” as well as the “guarantee of reputable men” and “respectability, the shield of a virtuous woman, to make his position impregnable.”¹⁶¹ Sutpen’s ability to extract what he needs from a foreign land speaks to the ease with which the southern order – which the Lost Cause celebrates – could be exploited. By having Sutpen so easily infiltrate the southern planters, Faulkner suggests a fragility to the social order – a fragility the Lost Cause either willfully ignores or cannot see through their worship of a past way of life.

¹⁶⁰ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 179-180.

¹⁶¹ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 9.

Through Sutpen, Faulkner fosters a discourse of memory that does not romanticize the past, but questions whether it is worth salvaging with the intensity propagated by the Lost Cause. *Absalom, Absalom!* therefore posits an alternative discourse to the Lost Cause that, while embedded in the same shared past, attempts to shape a different collective memory based upon this past. The purpose of constructing an alternative memory in *Absalom, Absalom!* is to suggest that the past which the Lost Cause holds so dear, and upon which it bases the South's modern identity, is in fact unstable and easily mocked. The political purpose of the Lost Cause – to give southerners a usable past that justifies their modern experience – is undermined by Faulkner presenting a corrupt southern gentleman (Sutpen), and showing the process of memory as depending more on conjecture than reality. Sutpen's ability to infiltrate the southern order, despite his humble upbringing and history of miscegenation, highlights the fragility of the order in which the Lost Cause is rooted, thus challenging the credibility of the Lost Cause's memory project and its ability to truly offer a usable past to southerners. Furthermore, *Absalom, Absalom!* not only calls the glorified past of the Lost Cause into question, but also demonstrates how memory is constructed through manipulation and selective interpretation, and thus not necessarily rooted in something "real." With this novel, Faulkner intervenes in the memory project of the Lost Cause and offers an alternative, more nuanced, understanding of the past and its role in the modern South.

"Father said a man is the sum of his misfortunes."¹⁶² Quentin and the Burden of the Past

The Lost Cause, with its backward gaze and deep roots in an invented Confederate tradition that justified segregation and the maintenance of conservative social values, defined the

¹⁶² Faulkner, *Sound and the Fury*, 104.

South's relationship with the past during the first half of the twentieth century. The Lost Cause provided an anchor for the South during a time of social disorder, but it did so by turning to the past and constructing a collective memory that could address present needs and concerns... but without truly preparing the region for passage into the future of modernity. Therefore, the Lost Cause is both a means and result of collective memory, as "collective memories originate from shared communications about the meaning of the past that are anchored in the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective."¹⁶³ The Compson family, of the 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury*, at first glance appears to be the kind of people who would benefit most from the mythology of the Lost Cause. They are an established Yoknapatawpha family; as Faulkner explains in the appendix he added to the 1946 reprint of *The Sound and the Fury*, Jason Lycurgus Compson came to northern Mississippi in 1811 and settled what would be the Compson mile, around which the town of Jefferson would be settled, and his descendants include a Mississippi governor, a Civil War veteran, and ultimately the Compson family of the novel.¹⁶⁴ However, when *The Sound and the Fury* opens in April 1928, the world is changing around them, but the Compsons are stagnant, if not in irreversible decline.

The Lost Cause's obsession with the past, and determination to shape the past into a usable ideology for confronting change, would be appealing to a family with such a lineage, but as this chapter will explore, none of the Compsons are positioned to enter modernity gracefully, if at all, and Faulkner uses the family to construct a discourse of memory that does not venerate the past, but draws attention to the way the past can be a burden. *The Sound and the Fury* chronicles the "progressive implosion of the patrician Compsons," with the family's ultimate

¹⁶³ Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory," 302.

¹⁶⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 328.

downfall being their inability to let go of the past and accept the changes being wrought by modernity.¹⁶⁵ Quentin Compson, the oldest of the children, “loved death above all” and committed suicide in Cambridge, Massachusetts in June 1910; Candace (Caddy) Compson was “doomed and knew it, accepted the doom without either seeking or fleeing it;” Jason Compson was “the first sane Compson” in generations, but was a childless bachelor; and Benjy Compson was committed to the State Asylum in Jackson in 1933.¹⁶⁶ The Compson line ends with Caddy’s daughter, “fatherless nine months before her birth... and already doomed to be unwed from the instant the dividing egg determined its sex,” who snuck out of her home at age seventeen and “vanished.”¹⁶⁷

The Compsons do not benefit from the Lost Cause mythology in which they are embedded, but represent the inability of the Lost Cause to provide southerners with a productive memory that can be used to move forward, instead choosing to look perpetually backward. Through the Compson family, Faulkner suggests that the way of life perpetuated by the Lost Cause is ultimately unsustainable; with *The Sound and the Fury*, he constructs an alternative memory than the Lost Cause, one that is more prepared for the onset of modernity, yet still acknowledges the grip of the past on southerners’ present experience. The discourse produced in the novel is one that highlights this tension between nostalgia and modernity because, although Faulkner does not venerate the past, he is also uncertain of the modern future. The Compson family is a case study in memory; it explores the relationship between the past and the present, and offers a way of talking about the South’s past that counters the collective memory of the

¹⁶⁵ Natalie Ring, “Massachusetts and Mississippi: Faulkner, History, and the Problem of the South,” in *Faulkner and History*, ed. Jay Watson (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 220.

¹⁶⁶ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 331, 332, 338

¹⁶⁷ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 341.

Lost Cause. Faulkner shows that the past is unescapable and plays an active role in shaping present experience, but unlike the Lost Cause, sees the past as a potential burden and thus creates a discourse of memory that accounts for this tension and is therefore more productive than the backward gaze of the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause, as a process and product of collective memory, created a past on which to construct the future, but ultimately kept the South firmly entrenched in the past without making productive steps towards the future. In doing so, Lost Cause mythology was a manifestation of nostalgia, which is defined as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. [It] is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it’s also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”¹⁶⁸ Nostalgia is not necessarily about one’s actual past, but the idea of the past. It is most commonly associated with “the uprooted of society, those who had ‘no place even in the present,” which makes it applicable to the condition of memory in the twentieth-century American south.¹⁶⁹ As discussed, southerners at this time inhabited an unsettled present characterized by movement and change, which made them vulnerable to memory construction in order to make sense of their place in the world. Nostalgia mourns a loss of a past (either real or imagined), and is thus a useful tool of analysis for the modern South because the culture of the Lost Cause actively engaged in nostalgic memory. The traditions of the Lost Cause did not emerge out of nowhere, but “built upon the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offered a comforting collective script” for the consolidation of identity in the face of unwanted change.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii.

¹⁶⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 46.

¹⁷⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 42.

The Lost Cause actively brings the past into the present, shaping it into a usable ideology for southerners who harbored intense anxieties about the changes and challenges thrust upon them by the prospect of modernity. However, Faulkner pushes back against this productive quality of the Lost Cause's use of the past, particularly through Quentin Compson, the character who embodies the Lost Cause most profoundly in *The Sound and the Fury*. As discussed in Chapter 2, Quentin is consumed by the past, and his obsession with maintaining a sense of order in his world is derived from the ideologies of the Lost Cause, and the societal order the Lost Cause values. Historian Ricky Floyd Dobbs explains that "Quentin internalizes the Lost Cause mindset and struggled to isolate himself from the wider world which moved and changed with time."¹⁷¹ Confronted with a modern world, Quentin continues to be consumed by the past – specifically the values of the Old South that the Lost Cause venerates but which Faulkner suggests are no longer sustainable. Quentin's embodiment of the Lost Cause is undermined by his suicide on June 2, 1910, and this life-ending event is what makes him such a compelling source of memory construction within Faulkner's novels.

Faulkner uses Quentin to construct a discourse about the south's relationship with the past that runs parallel to the Lost Cause. It is an alternate memory because it presents the past as something that does more harm than good when it weighs on a person and prevents them from moving forward. Unable to impose a moral order on the chaotic world around him, he decides to take his own life, an action that suggests an ultimate unsustainability to those Lost Cause values which Quentin held so dear. For Quentin, the south's history is not a source of power and cannot be shaped into a usable ideology; instead, it is a burden that cannot be conquered, and Quentin's

¹⁷¹ Ricky Floyd Dobbs, "Case Study in Neurosis: Quentin Compson and the Lost Cause," *Papers on Language and Literature* 33, no. 4 (1997), 369.

obsession with the it, so akin to that of the Lost Cause, is the ultimate cause of his demise.

Although Quentin only dominates one chapter in *The Sound and the Fury*, his character serves to redefine the relationship between the past and present, as it was experienced in the early twentieth-century South and sustained by the mythology of the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause manifests in – and fails – Quentin in two ways: it is his inability to let go of the past that consumes him, and he is persistently weighed down by the pressure of living up to the Lost Cause ideal. The inescapable past is immediately introduced at the beginning of Quentin’s chapter. Quentin awakens in his Harvard dorm room and hears his watch ticking, and with the sound “[he] was in time again.”¹⁷² This scene sets up Quentin’s perpetual battle against time; from the moment he receives the watch from his father, he “spends the rest of his life hoping to trick time into giving his past back to him,” ultimately deciding to “defy time” by taking his own life rather than “letting time gradually steal it.”¹⁷³

The watch reminds Quentin that time continues to march on, despite Quentin’s efforts to control it – efforts which symbolize the Lost Cause’s nostalgic orientation, its determination to conquer time by controlling the narrative of the past and using it to understand the present. When Quentin’s father gave him the watch – which was his grandfather’s – he told Quentin, “I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire... I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it.”¹⁷⁴ The watch also reminds Quentin of his inability to conquer time; even when he breaks the glass of the watch and removes the hands from its face, “the watch ticked on,” almost

¹⁷² Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 76.

¹⁷³ John Matthews, *The Sound and the Fury: Faulkner and the Lost Cause* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991), 53.

¹⁷⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 76.

mocking Quentin for thinking that he could stop time, when in fact “clocks slay time... [and] time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels.”¹⁷⁵ Even if Quentin cannot see it happening, time continues to pass, and throughout his chapter, Quentin continues to battle with “the destructive nature of time,” until he makes his final attempt to transcend time by jumping in the Charles River with two six-pound flat-irons in his pockets.¹⁷⁶

In addition to Quentin’s battle with the passage of time, Quentin also grapples with the way the past profoundly shapes his present experience. Just as Quentin cannot truly transcend time, he cannot escape the grip the past holds on him, and he carries this burden of the past to his final day as chronicled in the novel’s second chapter. The “past [shoots] through Quentin’s present,” which is one of the most fundamental elements of the process of memory.¹⁷⁷ Just as the South, “searching for identity... grasped backward, romanticized a defeated lifestyle, rallying around confederate tradition as provider of stability and moral example,” Quentin worships the past as a realm of moral righteousness and tragic defeat, letting it consume him and provide him with a (ultimately illusory) moral order.¹⁷⁸

Quentin’s obsession with the past is most evident through the narrative structure of the chapter. As the reader moves through the chapter, there are several scenes in which Quentin’s mind “instantaneously translates the present into reenactments of the past” – shifts which are easy to miss if the reader is not paying close attention, and thus speak to Quentin’s disorientation in time, and the way he cannot fully distinguish between past and present because of the grip his past holds on his present moment.¹⁷⁹ As Quentin walks along the river, he is thinking of his sister,

¹⁷⁵ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 80, 85.

¹⁷⁶ Matthews, *Faulkner and the Lost Cause*, 52.

¹⁷⁷ Matthews, *Faulkner and the Lost Cause*, 55.

¹⁷⁸ Dobbs, “Case Study in Neurosis,” 380.

¹⁷⁹ Matthews, *Faulkner and the Lost Cause*, 55.

Caddy, who was pregnant out of wedlock and so quickly arranged to be married to another man. His thoughts shift back and forth between his present existence in Cambridge and his past life in Mississippi:

I walked [my shadow] into the shadow of the quai. Then I went east. *Harvard my Harvard boy Harvard harvard* That pimple-faced infant she met at the field-meet with colored ribbons. Skulking along the fence trying to whistle her out like a puppy. Because they couldn't cajole him into the diningroom Mother believed she had some sort of spell he was going to cast on her when he got her alone. Yet any blackguard *He was lying beside the box under the window bellowing* that could drive up in a limousine with a flower in his buttonhole. *Harvard. Quentin this is Herbert. My Harvard boy. Herbert will be a big brother has already promised Jason*¹⁸⁰

In this single passage, Quentin has moved from his present in Cambridge along the quai, to his mother praising his Harvard destiny, to Caddy's lover Dalton Ames and the loss of her virginity, to the introduction of Herbert Head as Caddy's fiancée. This passage is also significant because Caddy's sexuality and "ruin" is one of the memories that haunts Quentin most. As will be further explored in the following pages, Quentin is obsessed with gendered notions of purity and morality, which Caddy defies by having sex and getting pregnant out of wedlock. As the primary male figure in her life, he mourns that he could not save or protect her, and this past loss and failure proves to be unescapable for Quentin.

Quentin cannot fully separate between the past and present, which is a bastardization of what the Lost Cause sought to accomplish and therefore challenges the mythology's determination to manipulate the past to serve their present. Although a worship of the past grounds him – as is the intention of Lost Cause mythology – this reverence is constantly undermined by the failures of the past that continue to haunt his present. Quentin challenges the

¹⁸⁰ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 92-93.

sustainability of the Lost Cause by demonstrating how the past can be a burden instead of a tool for progress. One of the reasons the past weighs on him so intensely is because it is a reminder that Quentin could not uphold the values of the Lost Cause. Quentin wants to create a sense of order in his world, particularly by adhering to the social codes surrounding family expectations and gender relations that the Lost Cause emphasizes. However, Quentin's inability to live up to his family's legacy, and failure to protect female virtue and embody a masculine ideal, represent a failure of the Lost Cause to provide a true sense of stability for the modern southerner.

From his father, Quentin inherits "a renewed version of the Old South, the romanticized image of the Confederacy envisioned by the Lost Cause movement."¹⁸¹ This inheritance manifests itself in two ways: family expectations and gender relations. Quentin inhabits a world that places great value on the centrality of family to the social order. In southern culture – the one derived from antebellum values and preserved by the Lost Cause – patriarchs "provided standards of accomplishment, status, and character" to be met or exceeded by the next generation.¹⁸² There is an expectation for children, especially sons, to continue to uphold and bring honor to the family name, and Quentin acutely feels the weight of it. However, the family honor Quentin is supposed to sustain is already tainted and flawed, since his great-grandfather, the governor, was "the last Compson who would not fail at everything he touched save longevity or suicide."¹⁸³ But Quentin continues to pursue an honor he can never salvage, which represents a hollowness to the Lost Cause's search for meaning in the south's past.

¹⁸¹ Kumiko Kobayashi, "Only the Flat Irons': Counter-Monuments in *The Sound and the Fury*," *The Journal of the American Literature Society of Japan* no. 12 (2014), 10.

¹⁸² Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 119.

¹⁸³ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 329.

The central failure which Quentin cannot shake is that he knows he does not want to be at Harvard anymore, but he cannot leave because his family had sold off part of their land to send him there – the land that would have belonged to his younger brother, Benjy. In one of his flashbacks, Quentin thinks: “*On what on your school money the money they sold the pasture for so you could go to Harvard dont you see you’ve got to finish now if you dont finish he’ll have nothing.*”¹⁸⁴ If he doesn’t follow through on his Harvard education, his family will have given up Benjy’s inheritance for nothing, and this is something that haunts Quentin during his final hours. Furthermore, he cannot leave Harvard because his father told him, “for you to go to Harvard has been your mothers dream since you were born and no compson has ever disappointed a lady.”¹⁸⁵ This scene, when Quentin thinks of his obligation to his family – and, as a man, to his mother – comes in the last few pages of the chapter, right at the end of his downward spiral: a multi-page monologue where Quentin moves from the past to the present without pausing, and where Faulkner has dropped most of the punctuation to make the reader feel the sense of dread and lack of control that Quentin feels in the face of his expectations as a Compson man. In a society in which family ties are so intense, Quentin’s failure to live up to his Harvard expectations is too much to bear, and ultimately drives him to commit suicide.¹⁸⁶

Quentin also fails to uphold the gender relations of the Lost Cause, as demonstrated by his relationship with his sister, Caddy, and the way he obsesses over his inability to save her from ruin. The two central problems of post-war southern gender relations – as maintained by the Lost Cause – were a fear of male inadequacy and anxiety over female virtue, both of which

¹⁸⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 124. (Italicized in the text).

¹⁸⁵ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 178.

¹⁸⁶ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 13.

Quentin falls victim to and cannot resolve.¹⁸⁷ Within this social code, “the male child was under special obligation to prove early virility,” and demonstrate masculinity from an early age.¹⁸⁸ Conversely, female honor centered around restraint and abstinence, and women symbolized southern virtue within Lost Cause mythology, as demonstrated by the active role played by the Daughters of the Confederacy in perpetuating Lost Cause memory.

Sexuality is a key obsession for Quentin, who is concerned with both his lack of experience, and his sister’s defiance of social codes, which were central to the conservative traditions being constructed and upheld by the Lost Cause. Recalling a conversation with his father when in his Harvard dorm room, Quentin thinks: “In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it. Because it means less to women, Father said. He said it was men invented virginity not women.”¹⁸⁹ Quentin knows that he is expected to be sexually active, but he is not, rather it is his sister who loses her virginity first, and wonders “Why couldn’t it have been me and not her who is unvirgin,” which would better suit the way he understood how things were supposed to be.¹⁹⁰ As explained previously, Caddy’s sexuality is an obsession of Quentin’s, and one of the central memories that haunts his present.

Quentin is not only unable to live up to his own masculine ideal, but he cannot even protect his sister’s purity, and this past is a burden on him. Quentin so desperately wants to uphold the standard of gender relations that his relationship with Caddy takes on an incestual quality, which would allow Quentin to embody the masculine ideal through both his own sexuality and his control over Caddy’s. When he learns that Caddy has lost her virginity, he

¹⁸⁷ Dobbs, “Case Study in Neurosis,” 369.

¹⁸⁸ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 154.

¹⁸⁹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 78.

¹⁹⁰ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 78.

obsesses over the ideal of him and Caddy being together, and it just being the two of them, where Quentin would have complete control over the values he holds so dearly:

If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. *I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames*¹⁹¹

For Quentin, this incest with Caddy represents an opportunity for Quentin to be in control. He can be a man who embodies the Lost Cause's ideal of manhood as a "noble defense of home and family."¹⁹² Incest with Caddy allows Quentin control over both his own sexuality, and he can defend Caddy's honor against men like Dalton Ames, who can no longer ruin Caddy and corrupt her womanhood. Of course, this incestual fantasy does not mean that Quentin was sexually attracted to Caddy, but speaks to his obsession with being a man and his desperation to have control by upholding the responsibilities of southern manhood. Quentin "loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously" and thought that he could protect both himself and her from ruin.¹⁹³

A literary symbol of the paternalism of the Lost Cause, Quentin is a "social agent whose language and behavior stem from his particular identification with [these] particular historical forces [of the Lost Cause mythology]," and the chapter's "movement towards Quentin's death mirrors the movement toward the demise of paternalism as an active social force."¹⁹⁴ Quentin is weighed down by the pressure to live up to the ideals of the Lost Cause, which don't give him the stability they were intended to provide, but simply cause more turmoil and chaos in

¹⁹¹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 79.

¹⁹² Rebecca Montgomery, "Women in the New South," in *The New South*, ed. James Humphreys (Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2018), 118.

¹⁹³ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 331.

¹⁹⁴ Railey, *Natural Aristocracy*, 59.

Quentin's life. Whereas the Lost Cause looks backward to find meaning in the present, Quentin represents what happens when you let the past seep too much into your present experience without using it to guide you forward. The Lost Cause holds great meaning for Quentin, but instead of benefiting from a worship of the past, Quentin is burdened by it, and, unable to shake his past and his failure to uphold the social order of the Lost Cause, he is prevented from becoming modern. For Faulkner, Quentin's fate is the fate of the Lost Cause – it is an unsustainable ideology that does not equip southerners for modernity, but makes the past an unshakeable burden.

Epilogue

In early November 2017, I entered Yoknapatawpha County for the first time. Travelling from Centre College in Kentucky to Oxford, Mississippi for the weekend, I had embarked on what can most accurately be called a Faulkner pilgrimage, as it is the tradition for Dr. Mark Lucas to take his senior seminar students to the hometown of the man at the center of the class, William Faulkner. While in Oxford, we toured Faulkner's Rowan Oak, visited the town square, and walked around the college town, all the while trying to map the town of Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha County onto what we saw in front of us. Dr. Lucas pointed out important sites from Faulkner's life – such as his childhood home – but also the sites that existed both in Lafayette County and Yoknapatawpha County.

One morning, we drove into the town square, where we passed the Courthouse, built in 1872, and the Confederate monument out front, erected in 1907.¹⁹⁵ However, this square does not just exist within the history of Oxford, but the history of Yoknapatawpha County as well, most notably in the last chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*, when Luster (one of the Compsons' black servants) takes Benjy around the square in a different direction than normal. This causes Benjy to panic because the street is not passing by him in the order he is used to. He only calms down when his brother Jason takes the reins and turns the carriage back the other way, restoring order to Benjy's world:

They approached the square, where the Confederate soldier gazed with empty eyes beneath his marble hand in wind and weather. Luster hit Queenie again and swung her to the left at the monument. For an instant Ben sat in an utter hiatus. Then he bellowed... There was more than astonishment in it, it was horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless; just sound... With a backhanded blow [Jason] hurled Luster aside and caught the reins... and swung her about to the right of the monument... Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed.... His eyes were empty and blue and serene again as

¹⁹⁵ Kobayashi, "Only the Flat Irons," 4.

cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right... each in its ordered place.¹⁹⁶

This is the final scene in the novel – Faulkner closes *The Sound and the Fury* with an attempt to disrupt order, only to have the familiar route restored.

Driving past the same monument Jason steers the carriage around at the end of the novel speaks to the complicated and nuanced relationship between Faulkner’s literature and the reality he inhabited. For example, Benjy’s panic in the above scene is representative of the anxiety of change that plagues the American South in the 1920s and 1930s, as southerners struggle to come to terms with the profound cultural changes challenging their way of life. Jason returning the carriage to the familiar route might suggest that Faulkner believes the only thing for the South to do is to further entrench itself in what is familiar. However, this interpretation is complicated by the contextual details of the scene; most importantly, Benjy being developmentally disabled suggests that his preference for the familiar is not in line with Lost Cause preservation and veneration of the past, but simply a manifestation of his inability to mature, which can then be interpreted as commentary on the ability of the South to develop and grow when faced with the opportunity for change.

My trip to Oxford surprised me with how blurry the line between fiction and reality is, particularly when it comes to Faulkner’s literature and the way his fiction and his reality interact and inform each other. Here, we see that reality informs the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha, as demonstrated by the dual existence of the town square and statue in Oxford and Jefferson, and that Faulkner’s fiction can help inform an understanding of the historical reality of Oxford and its southern experience of change and modernity by engaging with the ideologies of the Lost

¹⁹⁶ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 320-321.

Cause. Over the weekend, we also came across a large house with columns, which we were told was the inspiration for the Compson house, and that the family who lived here influenced the characterization of the Compson family. Or, if I ever found myself in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I could see a plaque memorializing the death of Quentin Compson that was installed on the Anderson Memorial Bridge in 1965, the 55th anniversary of the character's death by suicide from this bridge.¹⁹⁷

During my time in Oxford, I began to truly see the complex relationship between fiction and reality begin to take form, and how Faulkner's literature, although fictional, grapples with historical circumstances. In this thesis, I have explored how, as a historical source, literature can be used to critically examine the human experience and convey it to the public in a productive and meaningful way, particularly through the construction of collective memory and consciousness.

Of course, this thesis does not – and could not – cover every possible route of inquiry for interpreting Faulkner's literature through the lens of historical memory. With this project, I simply hoped to open a dialogue about the usefulness of fiction to the study of history and collective memory. I was primarily interested in the ways literature speaks to, and produces a way of making sense of, the human experience. Using historical memory studies as my interpretive framework, Faulkner is a compelling case study because of the memory his literature constructs while existing within the context – and challenges the memory project – of the Lost Cause. To analyze this role of Faulkner's novels in the South's collective memory, I focused on the way *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* speak to the process of memory and

¹⁹⁷ Juan Siliezar, "In Search of Quentin Compson," *The Harvard Gazette*, Harvard University, June 27, 2019. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/06/faulkner-fans-visit-harvard-plaque-honoring-quentin-compson/>

highlight the dynamic between the past and the present which is central to memory studies. Specifically, as my third chapter demonstrates, I explore how Faulkner's literature, although contemporary with the Lost Cause, produces an alternative memory for the modern south, and a different way for modern southerners to think about their relationship with the past.

However, there are several other routes I could have taken with my research, and I would like to end this project by presenting a few of them. One potential route of inquiry for this thesis would have been to study, within the "memory versus modernity" tension, to focus not so much on the nostalgia and role of the past in Faulkner's novels, but how he confronted modernity. I imagine this new project including similar abstract themes as my thesis (for example, notions of time and progress), but would also be more conducive to exploring more tangible themes that dominate Faulkner's literature, such as race, gender, and class. As mentioned in the third chapter, Quentin is obsessed with his sister Caddy's morality and purity in *The Sound and the Fury*, which is a sign of his desperation to uphold the principles of the Old South. But this is also a point of entry for analyzing this novel as commenting on the modern changes to gender roles and expectations that Caddy embodies, but Quentin cannot keep up with, making him a case of arrested "modern" development.

Furthermore, *Absalom, Absalom!* can be used to analyze modern race dynamics, and the legacy of antebellum race relations that continues to the early (and mid-) twentieth century. The miscegenation of Sutpen and the survival of his children by his Haitian wife, but not his white children, would be a compelling source for someone studying the legacies of race in the modern American South. For example, his first son is named Charles Bon, which conceals the patronym "Sutpen," and also translates from French to mean "good," or "goods," indicating that Sutpen is more of an owner, not a father, and Charles is more of a "good" or piece of property than a

son.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, Jim Bond, the last surviving Sutpen, suggests imagery of a shackle or binding agreement, and his name “contains the idea of constraint,” or can even be seen as a derivative of Jim Crow.¹⁹⁹ He represents the “blurring of a color line that Sutpen sought to maintain in theory, if not in practice, as a means of preserving his power.”²⁰⁰ Jim Bond, as the sole natural inheritor of Sutpen’s legacy, haunts Jefferson’s social order because he represents the undermining of the ideology of racial purity on which the order depends upon for structural integrity.²⁰¹

Faulkner’s novels speak to the lived experience of modern southerners, and the interpretive framework of memory studies demonstrates his literature as historically meaningful to the construction of memory and identity. His literature provides a way to access the past, and construct a more comprehensive understanding of how the people understood themselves and their place in their world. Novels such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* can serve as valuable historical sources, as they are cultural products that reveal conventional behaviors and actions, giving a historian access to the “webs of meaning” of the culture in question. Regarding the modern south, Faulkner’s novels provide insight to the way people understood the changes they faced, and how people thought about their past and the presence of the past in their current lived experience.

As Faulkner’s famous line from *Requiem For a Nun* reads, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”²⁰² His novels provide readers with a nuanced understanding of the relationship

¹⁹⁸ Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South’s Long Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁹⁹ Godden, *Fictions of Labor*, 70.

²⁰⁰ Atkinson, *Faulkner and the Great Depression*, 169.

²⁰¹ Atkinson, *Faulkner and the Great Depression*, 169.

²⁰² Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), 88.

between the past and present, and serve as a site of memory, discursively creating a way to think about and talk about the past and its grip on the present. Reading Faulkner's novels through the interpretive framework of historical memory studies opens up an interesting conversation about the way a person's past – personal or cultural – continues to shape the way she understands her present identity and position in the world. Furthermore, Faulkner's novels demonstrate the discursive function of literature, and how fiction is not just simply influenced by reality, but takes an active role in shaping reality and how people perceive their lived experience. The cultural products we encounter in our daily lives – books, movies, poetry, music – can have tangible consequences on our lives, behaviors, and perception of ourselves. The way Faulkner produces a parallel memory to the Lost Cause demonstrates the impact novels have on shaping people's understanding of their lives and the sources of their convention.

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