Breaking Out of the Ring: Blackness in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

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Abstract

This article assesses the ways in which William Faulkner's 1932 novel, *Light in August*, uses concepts of Blackness and race to reflect one facet of the African American experience in the U.S. South. I take my title from Joe Christmas' musing, that "I have never got outside of that circle, I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (*Light in August,* 252). Christmas, one of Faulkner's many racialised figures, cannot be either Black and/or white according to the societal need for categorisation—tellingly, Faulkner leaves the decision of Joe's race to the reader, if a decision ought to be made at all. Does Joe feel more at home as white, or Black? When attempting to escape from either race, Christmas' inherently- and enduringly-racialised body creates questions of rupture and social pressure which can only end in his death. Throughout *Light in August,* Joe tests the limits of race and sexuality, goading the townspeople to generate responses which primarily end in violence. Perhaps, if he cannot define his own race through "white thinking," he can provoke others to 'choose' his race for him *(Light in August,* 166). Faulkner exposes the fact that to break out of "the ring" of race is impossible. This argument acutely addresses racial issues and the polarisation of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, and the South as a whole.

Keywords: Blackness; Mississippi; liminality; racial binaries; US literature.

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William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932) utilises imagery of the "circle" and the "ring" to emphasise a claustrophobic trap of race as a construct within the boundaries of US identity and the African American experience. Faulkner's work tracks the narrative of Joe Christmas, who embodies potential ideas of Black Otherness within his deliberate racial ambiguity. Joe occupies a boundary point within Faulkner's imagined locus of Yoknapatawpha County, the setting of many of his works acting as a stand-in for Faulkner's Oxford, Lafayette County, MS.[1] I take my title from Faulkner's protagonist, who muses that "I have never got outside of that circle, I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" ([1932] 2005, 252). In the course of Faulkner's

[1] Though *Light in August* also focuses on Lena Grove's journey across Faulkner's South, I have elected to focus my argument on Joe Christmas as this work's protagonist.

work, Joe engages in a boundaried and perhaps interracial relationship with a White woman, Joanna Burden. He is lynched after murdering Joanna, though he is also persecuted for not conforming to the expectations of White society, something that is? inherent within his appearance and his actions throughout the novel.

My analysis contrasts linear geometry against Faulkner's image of "the ring" to discuss Joe's racial indeterminacy. Mapped onto the context of Faulkner's South within varied U.S. identities, Richard Dyer observes that "racial imagery is central to the organization of the modern world" (2017, 1). I utilize the framework of W.E.B. Du Bois's "color-line" to demonstrate ways in which Joe experiences the restrictive organisation of "that circle," and approaches the boundary line of racial demarcation (2003, 3). Ideas of geometric determination directly reflect Faulker's position as "seemingly obsessed with the shape and status of things no longer fixed in time, place, ideology, or memory" (Abdur-Rahman 2015, 44). Therefore, *Light in August* acutely examines constructions of race through Faulkner's engagement with creation via delineation and circularity, provocation, racial passing, and policing ideas of race created through language and expected behaviours.

Faulkner's work exposes hierarchy based on allegiance to an undefinable boundary, and the lengths to which White society will go to maintain racial imbalance within a permeable linear border between perceptions of race. *Light in August* portrays small-town violence resulting from fear of the unknown racial "Other," and the perceived threat of "non-Whiteness" against a privileged standard of whiteness encompassed within race as a construct.

1. Race as a Construct

In *The Souls of White Folk*, Du Bois declares that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (2003, 3). Fear of racial passing travelled in both directions along this "color-line," most prevalently witnessed in Joe Christmas's acts of slippage between two sides of racial segregation (Du Bois 2003, 3). However, Joe's death represents the consequences of "that frightful chasm at the color-line across which men pass at their peril," and *Light in August* reflects Faulkner's liminality between the vanguard of the Old South, and a New South teetering on the precipice of incendiary racial reckoning (Du Bois 2003, 72). A contaminant threat of suspected miscegenation suffuses Faulkner's examinations of racial passing, and mythifications surrounding race are at work in Faulkner's 1930s South—a region reflecting "the myth that both most consciously asserts whiteness and most devastatingly undermines it" (Dyer 2017, 36). For Joe, breaking out of "the ring" of race is an impossible boundary point. We do not necessarily *witness* the African American experience in the foreground of this work: Joe is a racially-indeterminate character whose identity is forced upon him via provocation and denial. *Light in August* is a work of sustained questioning, demonstrating the consequences of the

societal desire to label race as a certainty. Throughout *Light in August*, Joe's actions are frenetic and racially motivated, as he wishes to strike out against White questioning about his race. Crucially, Joe can pass for White, yet this act leaves him questioning his Black identity, if he were to possess one. My argument assesses Joe's exploration of his alleged heritage, denying and manipulating perceived sides of himself in interchangeable pathways. By deftly examining race as a paradoxically nebulous absolute, *Light in August* also sustains mythifications of racial inferiority. As Cornel West has further observed in response to Du Bois, "the problem of the twenty-first century *remains* the problem of the color line" (West 2001, xiv, emphasis mine). Standards of Whiteness are held as a baseline, maintained by White behaviour though "there had never been any enduring definition of a race, even the white race. Criteria continually shifted, including and excluding nationalities depending on conditions" (Yacovone 2022, 6–7).

Faulkner's depiction of violence and civic unrest in Jefferson fictionalises sustained, blinkered belief in mythification of racial inferiority primarily perpetuated by White society against Black bodies, thereby supporting the historical dominance of White supremacy by privileging Whiteness' power "to pass beneath critical inspection as an unremarkable, neutral standard against which other identities can be measured and known" (Watson 2011, 7). The threat of miscegenation disrupted the Black-White binary previously structuring the antebellum South, and characters like Joe Christmas become pressurised victims of the sustained racial thought oppressing Black bodies throughout the South.[2] Fissures form between rigid social lines when viewing race as a social construct: Joe's body trapped within "the ring" becomes a space within societal margins, "in between, liminal, in flux" (Davis 2011, 4).

When codifying mythification surrounding ideas of race, those who benefit are nearly always White versus the non-White Other. In terms of "the ring" and "the circle" surrounding Joe, geometric constructions reinforce racial limitations upon him, and upon the African American bodily experience in the South. Though this imagery may be contrasted against the definite boundary of a line, the circle creates a space within itself as well as having a definite edge. The circle is reinforced in turn by racial limitation, ensuring the presence of a limiting boundary point.

Reflecting the circularity of racial limitation, the insidious "one-drop rule" of racial classification has endured as a mechanism to enforce race as a social construct, delineating that "a single drop of 'black blood' makes a person black" (Davis 2000, 6). Constructions of race are well-established and controlled, though not based in discernible "fact" beyond ideas of skin colour and behaviour. Assessing the impact of early-twentieth-century racial analysis, Jeffery Stewart sees that "ideas of race might be mythic constructions

[2] Joe's individual indeterminate paternity and potential racial heritage are called into frequent question: see Worley and Birkhofer (2019).

of reality, but they were rooted in a race *practice* of discriminatory treatment" (1992, xxvi). As *Light in August* ironically makes clear, part of Joe's anguish comes from being seen as racially-indeterminate.

Audiences are left to read Faulkner's deliberate, mediated ambiguity. Joe is a fluid character—he fits into parameters of the myth of racial inferiority, but also does not conform to societal mores. This lack of judgement or ambivalence about Joe's race, however, has been informed by a modern-day viewpoint: for the citizens of Jefferson, Joe *needs* a race, and needs to fit into expectations of Blackness or Whiteness as "an ambiguously raced person in a state expecting racial certainty" (Davis 2011, 106). When Christmas refuses to conform and "act" either White or Black—in accordance with a racially-fixed viewpoint of expected behaviours, itself an anthropological mythification not based in fact—he angers society through his subversion. It is apparently imperative that he be categorised and treated according to the racial imbalance that constituted the rigid social and racial hierarchy of the South within the expectations of African American experience. Though baseless, racial difference was enforced by a series of rules and mythifications, and could be outlined and enforced through mechanisms of White supremacism. Mythifications of race itself were created for control, "biological fiction" that Faulkner identified and exposed, yet also endorsed (Stewart 1992, xxxii).

2. Creating Race through Provocation

The idea of creating race through provocation threads throughout *Light in August*. Joe begins testing the limits of race and sexuality, using forms of provocation to generate responses primarily ending in violence. Perhaps he can provoke others to apparently "choose" his race for him through biases of "white blood and the white thinking and being," using imagery of "the ring" as space for provocative reckoning (Faulkner 2005, 166; 252).

Joe is exploited, outcast, and eventually murdered—a liminal figure in a society based around rigidity and stratification. Ringed entirely by perceptions of race and ethnicity, Joe is trapped by his indeterminate racial heritage. However, as Faulkner indirectly asks, why does this matter? Faulkner's use of language is deliberately vague: Joe is a "sand-colored man" with "parchmentcoloured" skin (2003, 88). However, "race is not, nor has it ever been, completely corporeal," as Abdur-Rahman delineates, and it is primarily upheld by the rigid stratification of White Jeffersonians (2011, 139). Joe chafes against the invisible imposed restrictions of "the ring" passing between Black and White communities. In these environs, George Lipsitz posits that "race is produced by space, that it takes places for racism to take place" (2011, 5). In terms of the spatial "ring" of racial conformity contained within the overtly-racist environs of the narrow South, the juxtaposed circularity of racial delineation begins from the very moment of Joe's birth to his death. As witnessed in the town's mob mentality against Joe's racial indeterminacy

once it is "discovered," Dyer observes that "whiteness has been enormously, often terrifyingly effective in unifying coalitions of disparate groups of people" (2017, 19). Furthermore, this mob coalition "creates a category of maybe, sometimes whites, people who may be let in to whiteness" versus more incendiary perceptions of specific Blackness and racial passing (Dyer 2017, 19).

Although perhaps Faulkner's lines of segregation are permeable, Joe primarily feels constricted by "that circle," "the ring" of racial liminality encountering the linearity of race as a "color-line." Race may be a constructed mythification of perceived value, yet lines of colour were usually inscribed by appearance as a factor, and Joe's apparent subversion lies in the idea that he "don't look like" racially-based expectations (Faulkner 2005, 161). In terms of the circularity of constrictive racial constructions around Joe, however, Dyer considers "aspects of whiteness – where it begins and ends, notions of degrees of whiteness," which can inform a reading of Joe within the idea of the circle lacking a beginning or end (2017, 19). There are obviously no discrete boundaries between races, and the idea of race itself is a form of control, yet Faulkner's presentation of Joe throws questions of race into sharp relief. Joe can be Black and/or White in private, but the external input of the townspeople will always force him into a choice, as he tries to force them too with provocation. Hiding from scrutiny initially, Joe works "behind the veil, the screen, of his negro's job at the mill" and lives "in a tumble down negro cabin" (Faulkner 2005, 25).[3] When he is driven to extremes by racially-motivated confusion, Joe murders Joanna Burden after their sexual relationship, when he feels constricted by ideas of race and "belonging" as consequences of his provocation.

Joe fits into the parameters of a myth of racial inferiority due to his sustained racial ambiguity, and the fictionalised 'fact' that he will never be able to discover the truth of his own racial construction. In 1957, Faulkner explained his assessment of Joe: "I think that was his tragedy—he didn't know what he was, and so he was nothing … which to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in—not to know what he is and to know that he will never know"(Gwynn and Blotner 1959, 72).

Though Joe "will never know" "what he was," there is no corroborating "truth" to race that can be solved, only degrees of relation and subjugation to constructed mythification (Gwynn and Blotner 1959, 72). Considering lines of racial mythification as providing points of difference to "the circle," racial delineations of Whiteness ought to be held to account, no longer "an unremarkable, neutral standard" but another racial marker of African American experience (Watson 2011, 7). Race is a construct, not held within skin colour, or any other physical or non-physical factor. However, Jefferson provides a microcosm of racist White Southern society, out of which Joe cannot effectively evict himself.

[3] Here Faulkner echoes Du Bois's imagery of the "veil" in relation to race: see *The Souls of Black Folk* (2003).

Joe's racial barriers are extended into adulthood, including sexual transgressions with Bobbie the waitress and prostitute, a series of nameless women, and Joanna. In terms of renewed provocation, Joe has a mindset of himself against others; his enemies are conglomerates of either Black or White bodies. He does not consider nuance in others, and pits himself against them to enforce provocation or violence. Instead, Joe wishes to live outside of the constrictions of the human race, though he will never be permitted to do so, and his actions are inherently informed by a longing to straddle the boundary of Du Bois's "color-line" through racial liminality and lack of categorisation, or else end the indeterminacy of his existence. Perception of the "color-line" worked in both directions, yet moving from behaviours of Blackness to Whiteness was historically viewed as more pernicious and insidious.

Faulkner delays and anticipates racial revelation, as the impact of Joe's race is held within its total ambiguity. Joe will eventually hide in the wilderness of the backwoods in a quest to evict himself from this reflective tension of social judgement, and the constriction of "the ring." When he returns to humanity, however, Joe is killed for his transgressions—not necessarily for murdering Joanna, but for passing as White.

The action of lashing out against categorisation of race is not new: Joe taunts Black and White cultures to react to him through increasingly-outlandish behaviour, including in the Northas perhaps he is used to the rigid racial non-acceptance of the South. Joe also taunts Jefferson by coupling with Joanna, transgressing the town's inflexible racial boundaries and codes. Joe's relationship with Joanna is provocative, yet it cannot be sustained—Joanna degrades Joe, forcing him to play a part of a racially-loaded stereotype, causing him to seek provocation in return and potentially further defining his race. It is Joanna who introduces racial angles into her relationship with Joe: she cries "Negro! Negro! Negro!," forcing him into a fetishised role for her own gratification (Faulkner 2005, 192). Though Joe may confess that he could be partially-Black to the women he sleeps with, it is still on his own terms, and he does not appreciate being reified.

Joe forces others to define him through racial provocation, as the Faulknerian representation of a wider whole in which the reader is similarly kept unaware of Joe's race. This argument is not to define Joe's race, however, or to ignore the idea of race altogether. Joe exists in a space of definitions, using provocation to gain a sense of identity. By potentially possessing some element of ephemeral Blackness, Joe is one of those who possess, in Christina Sharpe's viewpoint, "already weaponized Black bodies (the weapon is blackness)" (2016, 16). If "Blackness" can be a weapon, Joe turns it back upon his White audience and wider society. These critical opinions represent an ongoing conversation concerning race and racial difference, with foils of Whiteness adding to wider societal labelling. Du Bois's "problem of the color-line" permeates, as Joe slips between lines of racial segregation: echoing Du Bois, Theresa Towner observes the irony of "Christmas, who murders and is murdered because of the American color line, yet who never knows

where he stands in relation to it" (Du Bois 2003, 3; Towner 2000, 21). Joe incites views of White primacy, provoking violence in racial classification, and creating perceived inferiority through his racial liminality. Predicated upon questions of possession and dispossession as a concept, the South offers promise for White Southerners only. The impact of Joe's race is held within its total ambiguity: the suggestion of uncertainty reflects the need to limit Joe within "the ring" of racial categorisation.

3. Boundaried Belonging

Joe goads his audience into generating responses through violence, trying to avoid being tethered to social expectations and testing the limits of race and sexuality. Through these racialised interactions, Joe experiences a feeling of coming into being, and a sense of belonging in exclusion.

Ostensibly slipping between Black and White boundaries, Joe is at ease in neither world. Echoing Joe's instability, Mark Jerng posits that racial passing

> assumes that race is a stable referent to which the individual can relate and that the individual is an already integrated entity. It assumes and reproduces both race *and* the individual as static givens. (2008, 70)

Therefore, when Joe cannot be categorised as racially-determinate, he reneges against stable referents present in society for order and control. Echoing ideas of subversive racial liminality, Joe is beaten by two men who discuss his racial passing while doing so:

> [I]s he really a n—? He dont look like one
> That's what he told Bobbie one night. But I guess she still dont know any more about what he is than he does. These country bastards are liable to be anything
> We'll find out. We'll see if his blood is black.
> (Faulkner 2005, 161)

This incident becomes a point at which Joe's burgeoning sexuality is conflated with his race. Joe may be a "son of a bitch," but he may also be a son of the non-White Other. Joe is dangerous in his liminality, "liable to be anything" and exposing fear of the foreign because "he dont look" as Whiteness expects. If "these country bastards are liable to be anything," then Joe has secondary liminality in being more foreign to Jefferson. He may be from out of town, a "country bastard," "more than just a foreigner" who introduces rural Otherness (Faulkner 2005, 161; 144). This encounter adds another facet to ideas of foreignness within US identity, not necessarily related to race yet still present in ideas of Otherness versus belonging.

Even during provocation, however, Joe runs from female sexuality In adolescence, Joe linguistically elides the Black female body as "womanshenegro," fearful of its power in discrete elements (Faulkner 2005, 115). He experiences disgust at being both Black and/or White—during his time in a moral wilderness, he tests the limits of female entanglements depending on whether or not he had the money to pay:

> beneath the dark and equivocal and symbolical archways of midnight he bedded with the women and paid them when he had the money, and when he did not have it he bedded anyway and then told them he was a negro. For a while it worked; that was while he was still in the south. (165)

Again, Joe has created a racialised space for himself through acts of provocation: "symbolical archways" merge together in linearity and circularity through geometric combinations sheltering Joe "beneath" their negative spaces.

Faulkner describes Joe's flight as a street that "ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi" (Faulkner 2005, 165). During these ironically linear *and* circular wanderings, however, Joe is unprepared for any female response that does not fit into his expected parameters. It is this scenario of acceptance which makes Joe violent and sick:

> because one night it did not work. He rose from the bed and told the woman he was a negro. "You are?" she said. "I thought maybe you were another wop or something." (165–66)

Once more, Joe may also fit into connotations of foreignness rather than racial difference. To be confronted with the idea of being "another wop or something" provokes Joe to violence, beating the woman to the point of near-death. Joe may wish to be White or Black, but he seemingly cannot tolerate the alternative of being indeterminate, and appears to actively resist race through provocation in this episode. Following this dismissal, Joe

> was sick after that. He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with black skin. … Sometimes he would remember how he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; *now he fought the negro who called him white*. (166; emphasis mine)

Joe now becomes metaphorically caged within "the ring" as an arena for violence and competition, reinforcing his racialised confinement via provocation within the taunt "to beat them or be beaten" (166). Joe feigns indifference at his racial ambiguity yet anticipates and provokes these responses from others.

Joe's reactionary provocation is borne from a sense of injustice, and a tendency towards violence as a form of recognition. When he is forced into a racial category, however, his reaction is sometimes performative. Joe's anger is directed at the rigid basis of society forcing his hand, making him 'choose' between Black and White. Joe may feel trapped within expectations, however, I argue that he is primarily trapped within the constrictive circle of the myth of racial inferiority itself.

Joe attempts to create racial identity through provocation of others but runs from the consequences, attempting to physically break out of "the ring" that he also perversely longs to define him. However, the ring traps him within its circular return. After the racialised beating above, Joe "entered the street which was to run for fifteen years … from that night the thousand streets ran as one street, with imperceptible corners and changes

of scene" (164–65). Herein the potential of "the thousand streets" collapses into a constrictive linear singularity of "one street" (164–65). Although Faulkner abstains from exhorting his audience to pass judgement, Joe has—or a time—clearly decided to live nomadically among Black people as a Black man: "he lived with negroes, shunning white people" (166). During his wandering flight he tries to breathe imperceptible elements of Blackness as if they can provide answers to his conceptions of race or provide him with a sense of belonging within these networks of relationships. In this act, Joe tries to somehow negate any influence of blood as an apparent marker by breathing

> deliberately, feeling, even watching, his *white* chest, arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the *dark* odour, the *dark* and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the *white* blood and the *white* thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odour he was trying to make his own would *whiten* and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial. (166; emphasis mine)

Contraposing perceptions of Whiteness against darkness, Faulkner clearly presents the struggle of Joe's "white chest," "white blood" and "white thinking" as he attempts to somehow deny one race over the other in an exercise in futility. Torturing himself with "outrage and spiritual denial," Joe attempts to write himself out of existence, "trying to expel from himself" that which might apparently make him White. Joe's companions are a nebulous group of indeterminate bodies, creating a focus on the bodily extended through repeated imagery of "white blood," and "the dark odour" surrounding Joe in its invisibility (166). The myth of race itself is predicated on boundary-points which cannot be seen, akin to "the dark odour, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes" pervading Joe's senses, permeating body and mind (166). Joe also carries an awareness of the extent of his life, and the fragility of it. When he is on the run for murder, he experiences the feeling of

> entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it … he has travelled further than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle. "And yet I have been further in these seven days than in all the thirty years." he thinks. "But I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo." (252)

The inescapable trap of "that circle" or "the ring" restricts Joe, despite his restlessness depicted that "he was ready to travel one mile or a thousand, wherever the streets of the imperceptible corners should choose to run again" (174). For the most part, Joe can ignore social barriers and traverse mythicised terrain between Black and White, as well as North and South. Joe is reneging against the circle's ideological trap designed to limit him through the narrow lens of racial classification, exposing his fear of finite racial restriction. Deliberately set apart from society, he acts out of self-preservation and concern.

However, he cannot remain untouched by society as an external force when it proceeds with exerting its will onto him, eventually eradicating him for his racial uncertainty and non-conformity.

In an insight into interiority, Joe feels the cage of life around himself: "his own flesh as well as all space was still a cage" (118). Joe can run to progressive Northern cities, yet he cannot escape the reactive pull of the South trapped within the violent imagery of the "cage." In Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha specifically, Joe can oscillate between Black and White ends of town but cannot outrun his actions.

Joe becomes enveloped within opposing conceptions and constructions of race: he occupies a boundary between Black and White, finding himself entrenched in the mindset of either space. It is when he is held in a liminal attenuation of purpose before murdering Joanna, however, that Joe "found himself" (84). Joe had been a phantom in the white streets, but experiences coming into being whilst in the Black area of Freedman Town "surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible negroes. They seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring, talking, laughing, in a language not his" (84).

Du Bois observes that it is possible "to draw in nearly every Southern community a physical color-line on the map, on the one side of which whites dwell and on the other Negroes" (2003, 119). Yoknapatawpha County is no different, and now that Joe has physically crossed Du Bois's "color-line" into Freedman Town he is trapped within a suffocation of Black bodies akin to the constrictive imagery of the "circle" or "the ring" (2003, 3). Ideas of racial passing are couched within surrounding "invisible" Black voices, seemingly insidious in their lack of visibility and the connotation that they could 'pass' amongst the townspeople (Faulkner 2005, 84). Joe does not claim the language of those in Freedman Town, adding an element of Othering—they communicate in a way "not his" (84). Instead, he runs furiously back into the security of the White town: "the air now was the cold hard air of white people," more sterile than in Freedman Town (84). Joe feels a reactionary sense of peace at his geographical superiority when "he became cool. The negro smell, the negro voices, were behind and below him now" (84). Placing mediated distance between himself and Freedman Town, Joe balefully views it as "the other street, the one which had almost betrayed him" (85). Tellingly, it is this street in which Joe had "almost" belonged, and in which he "found himself" in a metaphysical sense (84).

Joe runs from the consequences of Joanna's murder down a dark road, and becomes trapped between external forces when he is lit by a beam of headlights causing him to "grow white" (79). After Joe takes solace in darkness "he watched his body *grow white* out of the darkness like a kodak print emerging from the liquid" (79; emphasis mine). Ruminating on "all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be," Joe's life has been a series of decisions between Black and White, both conscious and subconscious (196). Joe's apparent threat lies in his anonymous, disguised skin and the

provocative power to "grow white" (79). However, if Joe is delineated as White, it holds an external mirror up to White behaviour in turn. Faulkner may allude to the colour of Joe's skin in narrative description, but his race is invisibly unfathomable.

Mythifications surrounding race work to limit Joe, and the townspeople subscribe to the theory of racial inferiority through words and actions. Joe becomes created by external perspectives, as well from a sense of his own interiority in an in-between state, conscious of somehow belonging to both worlds and to neither. Repeatedly, he is called a "n—" to limit him with language. Jerng (2008) posits that "Christmas is not so much a character as he is the product of collective fantasy": Joe is fetishised by the community, a "collective fantasy" of subversive racial passing delineated as one who "wont never know" the truth of his heritage and identity, except for that which is imagined and forced upon him by others (81; see Faulkner 2005, 285).

Joe's own viewpoints on race and racial inferiority are biased and racist, like in his surrounding society. On the surface, Joe uses the African American experience as a means to an end by trying to emulate patterns and households yet never fully committing to living as a Black man permanently. Frequently perturbed by appearances, smells and behaviours, Joe exhibits racial biases and conforms in part to the overarching behaviour of the White society in which he lives and operates. The myth of race endorses both ideological and physical segregation; in reality, mythification surrounding Du Bois's "colorline" was more permeable than it may have been perceived or upheld to be (2003, 3). Black characters see Joe as White, and White people also believe Joe is White, until he is not. He enters an African American church and the congregation flee, seeing a White man trespassing in their Black space. The churchgoers are fearful, as "then they saw that the man was white," and "they saw that his face was not black" (Faulkner 2005, 239). Joe is defined through negated opposition: here he is firmly "not black." In this way, Joe cannot be White and cannot be Black within the rigid binaries *Light in August* may enforce—his violence and anger stem from either being one or the other, or being neither. He will claim kinship when it benefits him, slipping between margins; he is not excluded from society until a racial definition is brought forth, when "that circle" defines him once more within its more rigid certainties.

During his time of social excommunication, Joe is forever in "the circle" and cannot rest. He becomes tired of running, tired of the expectations of either race, tired of inciting provocation to define him. He wishes to give up, and is "ready to say Here I am *Yes I would say Here I am I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs*" (Faulkner 2005, 250). For Joe, breaking out of "the ring" will always be an impossible act. Mythifications of race and racial boundaries have limited him: he is trapped within the endless circularity of his own actions, and the caging boundaries imposed by others—a "ring" which he creates, and that also doubly-reinforces the constrictive caging circle of racial perception. The myth of race itself is predicated on the outcast

of the Other and the threat of Black Otherness; either one is within "the circle" of social acceptance in this case, or one is without.

4. Joe's Death and the Racial Order

When Joe has been in a sexually transgressive and increasingly dangerous relationship with Joanna in the shadows of her dark house, it becomes another form of racial provocation, ironic in its secrecy. Beyond his control now, Joe's identity comes into being through the focalisation of the townspeople, and threats of violence and retribution spiral into his murder. *If* Joe is defined as Black, it is speculated by the townspeople that he raped and murdered Joanna once her body has been discovered in "an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro" (Faulkner 2005, 212). The apparent monolithic threat of "Negro" becomes metonymic for White perceptions of racial threat.

After the discovery of Joanna's body and the subsequent outraged delineation of Joe as threatening "Negro," there is an uproar (212). The townspeople have now decided Joe's race, and the ways in which he fits into their expected narrative of Black violence. If Joe were to be Black, he is a sexually-crazed murderer. If he were to be White then he is one of their own, which cannot be permitted. Joe's racial liminality works in the townspeople's favor, avoiding reflecting their own (White) capacity for equal violence. Their solution is to lynch Joe, fitting him neatly into the parameters of consequences for Black violence, or existence. Joe's death is indicative of generalised anger against miscegenation, racial passing, and expected behaviours as a controlled denomination of society, when viewed entirely through the generated lens of the myth of racial inferiority framing boundary points of African American identity.

Joe is discovered "passing" in a White area after murdering Joanna, in an affront to societal expectations and parameters. He is caught "in broad daylight," adding insult to injury for the white populace by going "into a white barbershop like a white man, and because he looked like a white man they never suspected him" (259). Continuing on from his need for recognition through provocation, Joe walks the streets "like he owned the town" until he is recognised (259). Anger is directed toward him once the townspeople hear of his actions, after he has emerged from his fugitive week in the wilderness and re-entered White society. Perhaps he could have been permitted to enter Black society, kept "invisible," "bodiless," at a remove (82). A mob-mentality belief in the myth of racial inferiority creates consternation, as Joe is not behaving as a Black man 'ought' to behave; Joe is caught, but has not had the apparent decency to subscribe to White people's expected behaviours. Tellingly, "he never acted like either a n— or a white man [...] that was what made the folks so mad" (259–60). By acting sanguine, he angers the townspeople to the point where "it was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a n— too" (260). In this scenario the town conflates the despicable act of murder with race, in that Joe is equally as damnable for both.

The townspeople are finally satisfied when Joe acts according to their expectations. He is recognised and beaten, taking the attack with a degree of stoicism: "the n— acting like a n— for the first time and taking it, not saying anything: just bleeding sullen and quiet" (260). In this attack, Joe has become tangible in apparent Blackness. The crowd then crow exultantly over "Christmas! That white n— that did that killing up at Jefferson last week!" (255). As M. Nell Sullivan observes, "in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha narratives, all definitions are relative to the term 'n—'" (1996, 503). The degrading use of this word throughout the text is a cipher for race relations and delineation. Each telling and retelling of Joe's actions creates further boundaries and delineations of racial identity. The common voice of the *polis* has the irony of limning Joe as a paradoxical "white n—," collectively creating his racial identity (Faulkner 2005, 255).

At the close his life, Joe turns to dynamics between Black and White. Evading capture again at the courthouse and in Jefferson, he is contorted between apparent "black blood" and "white blood" providing stark difference within himself (333). As he runs throughout Jefferson, his actions are imagined by Faulkner's character Gavin Stevens. Stevens imagines that Joe's

> blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his body save itself. Because the *black blood* drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the *white blood* drove him out of there, as it was the *black blood* which snatched up the pistol and the *white blood* which would not let him fire it. (333; emphasis mine)

After this conjecture, Stevens posits that "the white blood deserted him for the moment. Just a second, a flicker, allowing the black to rise in its final moment" (333). Stevens privileges the nobility of Joe's alleged "white blood" which "would not let him fire" the pistol when he is found and cornered, whereas the "black blood" is attributed to violence and exists in a "black jungle" drawing connotations of animalisation by alluding to such a setting and perceived savagery (333). Joe has apparently "defied the black blood for the last time, as he had been defying it for thirty years" (334). Here, Joe has been created again via perspectives of others, though he still retains the agency of creating race through provocation himself.

Joe's death is predicated on belief in the myth of racial inferiority, and a power vacuum left by the end of enslavement as a hierarchy for White male dominance in the US South. His murderer, Percy Grimm, is frenzied in performative protection, and castrates Joe while executing him. The practice of castration before lynching has a long history in the South. Mattias Smångs delineates that,

> framed as a defense of the virtue and purity of white womanhood from black defilement and pollution, the castration of an African American man and the display of his emasculated body signaled to white lynch mobs and audiences their communal racial superiority and triumph. (2017, 57)

By removing Joe's provocative physical embodiment of sexuality, Grimm neutralises his "threat"—though by doing so he releases the "pent black blood" of Joe's racialised body instead (Faulkner 2005, 345).

Joe's death becomes so renowned that he is known across the state line in Tennessee: a furniture dealer in *Light in August*'s final chapter knows Jefferson, casually, as "where they lynched that n—" (369). Joe is linguistically defined as a "n—" in death, by strangers who can only understand another rote lynching, and another day in Faulkner's Deep South. For the final time, Joe is boundaried within perceptions of Whiteness and Blackness, and constructions of racial limitation.

5. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I argue that Faulkner's Joe Christmas is simultaneously caught within "the ring" and cast outside of it. He is trapped within "that circle" of racial demarcation, reinforced by the demanded linearity of being Black and/or White whilst being neither or both. However, to search for an answer to Joe's race limits him to our own purposes of racial categorisation. As Du Bois observed, in terms of racially-loaded demarcation "the white man, as well as the Negro, is bound and barred by the color-line" (2003, 131). The threat of queried miscegenation clouds Faulkner's examinations of race, racial passing, and the perceived threat to White society leading to a rise in the myth of racial inferiority and the historical dominance of White supremacy. Joe is brutally murdered, yet the townspeople will only gossip and retroactively label him as Black, creating him through linguistic boundaries. The myth of racial inferiority is constructed and maintained for the benefit and categorisation of the White townspeople, representative of wider societal hierarchical benefit.

My argument discusses the permeable border between Black and White ideas of race. Faulkner's fictionalised microcosm of Southern history exposes negotiations of ironic invisibility and hypervisibility, in the idea that Joe is either Black, White, neither, or both. Racial mediations are created within the act of racial passing itself, as well as through provocation. Therefore, Joe can never break out of "the ring" of the boundaries of U.S. identities for African Americans within race and racial expectations.

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