

## Re-Imagining Geography through Memory in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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### Abstract

Faulkner's sense of region has challenged and at the same time dismissed the claims that his oeuvre is only provincial and at best experimental in nature. In particular, this paper focuses on the US South as a model that has time and again evinced the past that is precarious and riddled with a whitened Americanness. I argue that Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* re-imagines the legacy of the South constantly shaped by the politics of race and the culture of Jim Crow – that is still haunted by the memories of the past.

**Keywords:** Jim Crow; Memory; Past; Race; The US South.

In creating Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner represents the voice of the South in its unfiltered and raw form – mixing violence and chaos to transgress the boundaries of race, gender and class. A closer study of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha demands a nuanced understanding of its geographical setting and how the author has utilized the model in his fiction. It also becomes significant to probe the fictional county as Faulkner has set all but five of his novels in Yoknapatawpha. A known fact that Yoknapatawpha is based on Lafayette County should be studied in the light of its actual geographical setting. Attempts to understand the relationship between Yoknapatawpha and its actual origin have been several. But what does Yoknapatawpha County signify? First time readers of Faulkner often mistake Yoknapatawpha for a real place in the South taking the fictional setting as a microcosm of the American South. Although it would not be wrong to argue that Yoknapatawpha does replicate the South but it is safer to assume Faulkner's County as a place within the South that purposefully blurs the boundaries between real and unreal. Still any assumption that Yoknapatawpha is actually Lafayette, thereby should only be considered after a thorough assessment of the region. In his article *Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: A Place in the American South*, Charles S. Aiken

offers an interesting take on this perplexity. By focusing on Yoknapatawpha in contrast to the Upland South and the Lowland South and rural and urban South, Aiken argues that Faulkner's fictional setting is a place within the South rather than a miniature of the South. The historical and economic background of the region offers an objective understanding by clearing any doubt regarding the setting of the fictional place. But does it really matter to understand Yoknapatawpha's geographical significance? Aiken's study is useful in interpreting the region's history along with its geographical significance, without which Faulkner's works cannot be fully understood: "Faulkner did not look inward and think of Yoknapatawpha County as a closed geographical model. Inhabitants of the fictional place reach toward other areas and operate within a broader spatial context" (348). Aiken's conclusion that Yoknapatawpha is not a closed geographical model and has a broader spatial context further allows room for argument regarding mobility and dislocation of the characters that appear in his works.

Faulkner's ninth novel *Absalom, Absalom!* published in 1936, provides an excellent example of how the author explores the relationship between place and people. Although at the outset the novel's overtone is unmistakably historical, there are attributes present in the story that point to the problem of slavery which itself is situated in the displacement of slaves. The narration of the novel is such that it becomes quite difficult to discern who is saying what to whom. There are layers of speculation about the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen that Faulkner presents through an abstruse narrative making the matters even more complicated. The novel begins with Quentin Compson sitting in Miss Rosa Coldfield's home one September afternoon, listening to her recalling some events that occurred forty-three years ago. Miss Rosa is the only person who has seen Thomas Sutpen in person and is alive to tell his story. Quentin who is unable to detach himself from the past of Sutpen later reinterprets the story with his Canadian roommate Shreve at Harvard.

Thomas Sutpen can be considered as the main character in the novel because it is about him that all other characters tell and retell their version of stories. But since the information regarding Sutpen is relayed by other characters often in first and second-hand form, sometimes even more than that, it becomes perplexing to confirm the authenticity of their versions. This style of the narrative complicates things and also shows the preoccupation of characters with Sutpen, thereby transforming him into a legend. Sutpen first realizes his social position when as a boy Pettibone's black butler tells him "never to come to the front door again but to go around to the back" (*Absalom* 188). This scene is significant due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the insult at the hands of a black person shatters

the worldview of Sutpen whose innocence until then was intact. Secondly, it prompts Sutpen to assess his own standing in Southern society and thirdly, this realization results in concocting of a design that would help him rise in the society. "I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family – incidentally of course, a wife" (*Absalom* 212). It is this design that provides momentum to the novel despite its flawed nature. Sutpen's rise and eventually his downfall is a direct result of adherence to the design.

An integral part of Sutpen's design is of course money, and so in order to fulfill his design, he goes to West Indies. "What I learned was that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as that man was clever and courageous" (*Absalom* 195). Once in West Indies, Sutpen begins working on a plantation, successfully overcomes a slave rebellion and is able to marry the daughter of the plantation owner as a result. The wife Eulalia gives birth to a son Charles, and apparently Sutpen comes close to achieving his design. However, upon learning that Eulalia has negro blood, Sutpen repudiates his wife and child and finally leaves for Jefferson with a band of slaves and a French architect to once again work on the design.

Sutpen's appearance in Jefferson is narrated by Rosa Coldfield to Quentin as she says, "that Sunday morning in June in 1833 when he first rode into town out of no discernible past and acquired his land no one knew how and built his house, his mansion, apparently out of nothing and married Ellen Coldfield and begot his two children" (*Absalom* 7). Rosa's words that Sutpen has no "discernible past" is not only problematic but tragic too. Since Sutpen has already undergone the trauma of displacement first as a child when he moved from the Appalachian Mountains to Tidewater Virginia and secondly when he came back from West Indies to Jefferson, it cannot be said that Sutpen is a man without a past rather it is his past that makes him problematic. Sutpen's insistence on recreating his design again in Mississippi is simply a result of his traumatic past.

Faulkner has depicted the character of Sutpen as someone who is able to repress and access certain portions of his memory without making any clear demarcation. Sutpen "didn't know why they moved, or didn't remember the reason if he ever knew it" (*Absalom* 181). In a similar way, "He didn't remember how he came to go to the school" (*Absalom* 194). On the other hand, Sutpen remembers his teacher mentioning West Indies, "I remembered what he had read to us and I went to the West Indies" (*Absalom* 196). Sutpen doesn't remember why they moved as a family from one place to another but he certainly "remembered how one time the gradual difference in comfort between the presence and absence of shoes and warm clothing occurred in one place" (*Absalom* 183). Does that mean Sut-

pen's memory is triggered by certain geographical differences? In other words does place have the power to evoke certain memories? This seems true at least in Sutpen's case. It is, therefore, essential to acknowledge the concept of place. John Agnew highlights three main dimensions of place: location, locale and sense of place. Place, therefore, can only be discerned when taking into consideration the material settings, social relations and individual experiences related to a particular location. While the construction of place is a complex process, it only becomes naturalized once individuals are able to relate to it, attach emotional feelings and create a sense of belongingness. The continuation of this relationship between an individual and place is of great significance in maintaining the identity of a subject. Any rupture in the continuity would therefore not only affect the otherwise stabilized identity but also impact the social relations.

By fulfilling his design, Sutpen wants to rise in the social hierarchy. But more than improving his social position, Sutpen wants to stabilize his identity—confirm that he would never be insulted again. Tuan argues that “sense of time affects sense of place . . . What can the past mean to us? People look back for various reasons, but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity” (186). Moreover, in acquiring a sense of self and identity, Sutpen needs a specificity in his endeavor as “to strengthen our sense of self the past needs to be rescued and made accessible” (Tuan 187). Sutpen through his design wants to access the past—a narrative of personal history by building Sutpen's Hundred that would allow him to hold a certain period of time as his own, because “objects anchor time” (Tuan 187). In this way there seems to be an interplay between memory and location i.e. place with Sutpen's Hundred being the site where this interaction communicates with the identity Sutpen has in mind.

Sutpen's design and ultimately his failure should be read in a larger context outside the personal history of the character. The fate of Sutpen is sealed once his realization takes hold of him. The traumatic affront prompts Sutpen to be a part of the same social structure that rebuked him for his poverty. Faulkner allows Sutpen to rise in social position by attempting to make him a part of Southern society that is plainly biased and preoccupied with a person's social footing. Sutpen thereby is already a part of the same social group that he retaliates against, at least imaginatively so, by temporarily forgetting his personal history. In *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs notes, “In reality, the continuous development of the collective memory is marked not, as is history, by clearly etched demarcations but only by irregular and uncertain boundaries” (82). Because of irregular and uncertain boundaries, it is easier to violate them without even knowing that a violation has occurred. It is so because “History can be



represented as the universal memory of the human species. But there is no universal memory. Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time . . . retaining only the group's chronological and spatial outline of them" (*The Collective Memory* 84). Once a part of the group, our very existence turns collective in nature, simplifying our memories within a collective framework.

It is Haiti where Sutpen first attempts to fulfill his design. Later when he arrives in Yoknapatawpha, Sutpen works to fulfill the design once again. The distance Sutpen travels from the US to Haiti does not change his pure desire to acquire wealth through which he aims to rise in the society, not even after he is traveling back, failing at his design already. Sutpen's design mirrors the plantation narrative of the South when he attempts to reproduce the same hegemonic structure he has witnessed firsthand both in Virginia and Haiti. Sutpen's internalization of the Southern ideology is a definite part of his upbringing in a society that recognizes an individual through an unequal distribution of power and wealth, complicating the matters even further by emphasizing a person's color. It is only when Sutpen is insulted by the black servant at the door of the plantation owner that the realization is triggered, prompting him to put internalization into action via his design. The master-slave narrative if read within the context of Southern plantation demands a nuanced understanding of South's labor history. Richard Godden foregrounds the Southern labor history by linking the South and Haiti when he asserts, "In the South, Haiti is synonymous with revolution" (252).

Godden further notes that Faulkner clearly had enough knowledge of San Domingo to use the context in his novel. But then why Faulkner presents one of the key events in history in a false light? Godden argues "the recognition that slavery is an undeclared state of war, in which black revolution is a permanent risk, is Sutpen's. His behavior as a slaveholder in Mississippi is eccentric but plain: on a regular and ritualized basis he organizes and participates in single combat with his slaves. While clearly slave codes were designed to police the peculiar institution on the understanding that black conspiracy was a fact of planter life" (254). The distrust Faulkner depicts through Sutpen aims at utilizing the codes to dispel any doubts regarding slave uprising. As a result, Sutpen is able to import his slaves from Haiti to Yoknapatawpha, make them work and build Sutpen's Hundred. In doing so, he not only inflicts the trauma of displacement on the slaves but also constantly keeps them well within the boundaries of the master-slave relations. It is well within the argument that Sutpen's Hundred can be identified as a site where identities are established through spatial and power anomalies. Firstly, Sutpen because of his internalization of Southern ideology builds a place that would allow

him to be recognized as a powerful individual.

Secondly, the slaves who are uprooted from Haiti are always kept under control since they are expected to revolt. The childhood experience of Sutpen puts him in the same line of thought as Southern society – prompting him to act according to the Southern codes. This makes Sutpen approach the past to construct his identity within a social framework, making him a part of collective memory. At any point, it does not mean that Sutpen is without personal memories but that his personal and the South's collective memory intersect – forming a meaningful relationship. As Halbwachs points in *The Collective Memory*, “every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework” (140). Sutpen's Hundred provides this spatial framework necessary to stabilize the identity of its owner. Halbwachs further argues: “Now space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in the mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings” (140). Since Sutpen's mansion, Sutpen's Hundred is a powerful symbol that exudes great dominance through its physical structure, it immediately becomes part of the plantation narrative – upholding the master-slave pattern prevalent in the South. Focusing on Sutpen's Hundred as a construction of space through which the codes of labor are superimposed on slaves, space becomes a means to control the meaning of supremacy by not allowing the slaves to decode the struggle in maintaining their identities. In the words of Lefebvre, “the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (26).

The only way Faulkner allows Sutpen to attain redemption is by bestowing upon him a design – a Southern coda embedded in the intermarriage of race and place – notwithstanding any external influence or absorption of any reinforcement that could systematically render the narrative pattern of the South useless. When Sutpen first goes to Haiti in search of wealth, his consciousness is already shaped within the Southern discourse of class and race. Sutpen grounds his identity in a place that is racially fraught with a biased tendency toward the division of labor and property. Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* represents the South that is both troubled and conducive to destabilized identities of African Americans. What is apparent about the Southern situation is that time and again it requires a codification of myth and violence, place and memory within the past that stands upon the pillars of slavery. By creating a social spectrum through a reimagined geography riddled with prejudice and absolute racial difference, Faulkner attempts to depict a fragmented South tangled in its codes and principles. The physical space in *Absalom, Absalom!* as a

result, is shared between memories and place—soiled by the past that is undeniably fixated on whiteness.

Faulkner's Haiti is a reimagined geographical location where Sutpen goes in search of wealth that would help him acquire a social position in Southern society but more than serving as a mere geographical setting where people go to become rich, Haiti also highlights the transatlantic problem of slavery. The very depiction of Haiti in the novel supports this predicament as Sutpen's design depends on this "spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself . . . a theatre of violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty . . ." (*Absalom* 202). For Sutpen, Haiti becomes a tool through which he could attain his design, and so acting accordingly he takes his share of negroes and returns to Mississippi to create a dynasty. The creation of Sutpen's Hundred has its own significance in the novel—one that surpasses every other object or being. Since Sutpen's Hundred assumes more than a geographical complexity, it exemplifies the link between place, memory and identity. Not only the substance of the plantation narrative strongly carries the element of a bygone era, it also recapitulates the Old South in its nascent themes such as class, race and violence. This recreation of the past is specifically embedded in a physical form—to support its appearance by presenting it as an unchallenged avenue of power. If indeed our memory unfolds within a spatial context and, in turn, assumes a meaningful resonance, then it can be argued that Sutpen's Hundred becomes a site of memory where Sutpen's own identity is contested because of certain memories that are evoked. Sutpen's design is the only way through which he could ensure his position and identity in society but this design is challenged once Charles Bon, his repudiated first son from Haiti appears at the door. Simply put Sutpen's design becomes a way "to repeat periodically that traumatic affront but in a different role. Henceforth, he will no longer receive the affront, he will deliver it" (Irwin 50). The spatiality that is constructed through Sutpen's Hundred is in tune with the societal codes of the South. Faulkner in verifying the past has allowed Sutpen to build Sutpen's Hundred because of a particular childhood experience—memory that Sutpen is unable to forget. It is only through memory that Faulkner attempts to stabilize the meaning of Sutpen's Hundred, which otherwise in the absence of a past would have been a mere building.

The legend of Sutpen is primarily based on the memories of other people. Rosa Coldfield is the only person at the beginning of the novel who is alive and retells the tale of Sutpen to Quentin. The reason Rosa chooses Quentin to divulge details about Sutpen is purely transactional. Rosa hopes that Quentin might share a detail or two about herself and Sutpen.

After Sutpen's second wife Ellen died, Sutpen proposes to Rosa who is Ellen's sister. Sutpen's only condition is that if Rosa gives birth to a male child they will marry otherwise the marriage will be called off. This insult is the prime reason, Rosa is unable to cast aside Sutpen's memory even after forty-three years, and to some extent hopes to find a sense of closure by disclosing information to Quentin. Invested in a regional past, Quentin's memories are a result of a trauma he has not even experienced firsthand but somehow has come to believe that it has changed his life "since he was born and bred in the deep South" (*Absalom* 4). Leigh Anne Duck argues that "certain pasts can overwhelm individual subjects and that collectivities can become so invested in a given interpretation of historic events that they provide little opportunity or support for persons who need to work through their traumatic relationships to these events" (98). Growing up in Jefferson, Quentin has heard stories about Sutpen from his father who himself has heard about Sutpen from his father i.e. Quentin's grandfather. This passage of information about Sutpen from one generation to another is made possible through memories. Even at Harvard, Quentin is unable to detach himself from the legend of Sutpen, as along with his roommate Shreve, he continues to reconstitute the tale of Sutpen.

Quentin's obsession with Sutpen's past can be understood because of his vested interest in the South. Coming from the South, he has imbibed a great portion of Southern history together with its regional artifacts, and that is what does not allow Quentin to separate his identity from the burden of his memories even when he leaves for Harvard. Our sense of meaning regarding the place we inhabit is shaped within a collective framework, which itself has an essence of selective images from the past – coordinating and expressing a kind of echo that now depends on mutual basis within the group. The give and take relationship allows a group to derive particular meanings out of the past – retaining the identity that has been shaped during the retrieval. This entire coexistence of meaning and rationality occurs within a spatial context. Quentin, as a result, is not just a Southerner but product of the South since his sense of retrieval of past has occurred within a collective framework. The change in geographical location, when Quentin leaves for Harvard from Jefferson, therefore, does not affect him. Although he is now in the North, Quentin still fixates his entire being in deriving meaning from the legend of Sutpen along with his roommate Shreve. The seemingly social expectation that a Southerner would behave differently in the North is quickly changed to a geographical stimulation through Quentin's obsession with Sutpen. Quentin is able to transgress the physical boundaries between Mississippi and Massachusetts since his sense of the past has been nourished within the collective framework of the South.

It is noteworthy to point that this particular notion is not simply nostalgia or longing for an identifiable environment but a way an individual has come to realize and locate the past because of a specific spatial context. In Quentin's case also, the relationship between place and individual continues to solidify itself through successive images of the past intimate to Quentin's memory. These images are of course related to Sutpen who in turn is located within the framework by Quentin. Rosa's intention and her understanding in disclosing the information about Sutpen is in tune with this notion since she already knows that Quentin possesses a certain share of knowledge about Sutpen as she says, "so maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it" (*Absalom* 5). Rosa's insistence that Quentin should write about Sutpen is nothing but an accumulation of memories that are relevant to a group of people. In a way, Rosa wants to commemorate—crystallize the tale of Sutpen as she understands her own position within the group. Paul Connerton argues that "Groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localised and memories are localised by a kind of mapping. We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group" (37). For Rosa, Sutpen's Hundred becomes a mental space to situate her memories. It would not be, as a result, wrong to say that Rosa's memories have localised within Sutpen's Hundred. If Quentin has grown up listening about Sutpen from his father then Rosa had a direct confrontation with Sutpen, but in both cases, the site where the memories are actualized is Sutpen's Hundred. It is not possible to deduce with utmost certainty who is more involved with the tale of Sutpen since both Rosa and Quentin are unable to let go of the past. However, each in their own way contributes to the legend of Sutpen—making the already difficult subject of Sutpen even more indiscernible. But what haunts Rosa and Quentin is not merely the memories that revolve around Sutpen but an instability caused by a vortex of emotions as they try to reinterpret the past. It is problematic to arrive, as a result, at truth.

Faulkner in creating *Absalom, Absalom!* has kept the plantation narrative of the Old South intact. It is only through the design of Sutpen that the creation of Sutpen's Hundred becomes possible. The issue of slavery which is apposite to anything Southern is at the core of this design—bringing into focus the master-slave relationship. Sutpen utilizes the strand of the plantation narrative to construct the whiteness through which he propagates subordination. From the very beginning, Sutpen attempts to neutralize his slaves by various tactics. If Sutpen works along with his slaves, he also wrestles with them, leaving no room for an uprising. This whiteness is solely constructed within a spatial context. By excluding the slaves from any kind of geographical superiority, Sutpen establishes powerful bound-



aries of segregation that are based on the color of a body. "It seems that on certain occasions, perhaps at the end of the evening, the spectacle, as a grand finale or perhaps as a matter of sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of supremacy, domination, he would enter the ring with one of the negroes himself" (*Absalom* 21). Sutpen's actions demand a closer scrutiny since as the master of slaves, he does not have to put a display of authority time and again. To further probe this behavior of Sutpen as a master, the role of Haiti should be studied in the light of its historical setting. Haiti serves a dual purpose in the novel: firstly, for the planter class in the South, it becomes a reminder of the uprising against the white authority. Secondly, for slaves and abolitionists, Haiti is no less than a constant source of inspiration in their ongoing struggle for freedom (Atkinson 166-67). Sutpen is aware of the significance Haiti has for slaves, and, as a result, strives to maintain his dominance through violence. This systematic channelization of violence helps Sutpen in building his plantation and keep the band of wild negroes in control.

Faulkner carefully builds the momentum of the story around Sutpen without allowing him to appear directly. Yet the forceful intervention of memories in the novel becomes a kind of phenomena that should be considered before approaching the novel in its entirety. The trauma, clash of identities and a significant portion of the novel are situated around or within Sutpen's Hundred. If Sutpen's Hundred means a sense of closure for Rosa, then for Quentin it is a place where his memories are either evoked or formed. The onset of Quentin's memories is deeply embedded in the spatial context. Sutpen's Hundred extends this context by acting as a site where Quentin is able to derive meaning out of his memories. Our sense of memory is directly related to our sense of past. The lived spaces by providing us a framework enhance this sense—actualizing what was merely a tantalizing resemblance until now into a homogeneous experience that is fixated around a place. From General Compson to Quentin and from Rosa to Sutpen himself, the field of memory only seems to expand—ushering each one of them to a new horizon upon which the past laments their very existence.

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