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Performing ‘the South’ in the Canadian Imaginary: Shreve McCannon, Marshall McLuhan, and the Southern Pastoral

In William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Miss Daingerfield responds to Shreve’s announcement that he is Canadian with absolute delight: “*I adore Canada*” Miss Daingerfield said. “*I think it’s marvelous.*”¹ In this particular scene, Shreve’s national identity is configured in negative relation to the South, as Spode accuses Shreve of “not [being] a gentleman” (148). Faulkner criticism on Shreve’s role in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) often reiterates this oppositional binary. Shreve is often figured as the “polar opposite of Quentin,” able to “treat the South and southern history...objectively, with detachment and irony.”² This paper seeks to examine the Canadian and the Southerner under representation - that is how the mythologizing of the Canadian and the Southerner in popular culture reveals the interdependent relation between the South and Canada. Contesting the antithetical binary, I argue that Shreve, “the child of blizzards and of cold,” and Quentin, “the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat” are intimately joined by a shared narrative and narrative process invested in the reconstruction of white masculinity that has emerged out of the crisis of modernity.³

While writing *Absalom*, Faulkner supported himself and his family by working as a screenwriter for various Hollywood studios and selling his stories to popular magazines. Examining Faulkner’s relationship with these forms of mass culture, Peter Lurie reminds us that Faulkner not only “hated the movies...[but] also despised the popular magazines, if not the short stories he frequently chose to submit to them.”⁴ “The idea of a pre-industrial, pastoral history, as well as the longing for its supposedly pure life

led by a white, nonimmigrant population, ”writes Lurie, “informed cultural thought of the period.”⁵ The commercial appeal of nostalgic depictions of the Old South is alluded to early on in *Absalom*, when Rosa Coldfield tells Quentin, “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. You will be married then I expect and perhaps your wife will want a new gown or a new chair for the house and you can write this and submit it to the magazines” (5). At the same time that Southern writers found a cultural marketplace for their stories, Canadian writers found that these same magazines and film studios were also eager to publish and reproduce their “local color” writings.

Canadian writers found not just greater opportunity, but preferential treatment, in the United States. The 1910 US census recorded 93 Canadian-born authors and a further 570 editors and reporters.⁶ Nick Mount argues that “Americans cherished a romantic notion that Canada’s unspoiled topography and more vigorous climate produced hardier, more dependable, more moral employees than those reared under relaxing southern skies...In the literary world, Canadians regularly found editorial positions on periodicals with an explicit focus on moral or physical well-being.”⁷ The myth of the “virile” Canadian was most predominately represented in fiction and film through the figure of the Canadian Mountie. He became a popular character for an audience lamenting the passing of Victorian manliness and traditional hierarchies in the face of modernity. The Mountie addressed threats to Victorian hierarchies and sought, in his fictional duties, to combat threats to Anglo-Saxon middle-class hegemony. In the 1930s, the subgenre of Mountie films originally known as Northerners thrived.⁸ The film titles highlighted

romantic notions of Canada as an unspoiled topography with its citizens possessing both moral and physical superiority through code words, such as “Northwest” or “Big Snows” or “Great Woods,” that tied Canadian culture and race to the natural landscape.⁹

Early Canadian cultural nationalism was grounded in the belief that Canada was a “northern kingdom” whose unique and distinctive character was derived from its northern location, its ferocious cold winters, and its heritage of “northern races.” In an 1869 speech entitled “We are the Northmen of the New World,” Robert Grant Haliburton asserts,

As long as the north wind blows, and the snow and sleet drive out over forest and fields, we may be a poor, but we must be a virtuous, a daring, and if we are worthy of ancestors, a dominant race... Let us, then, should we ever become a nation, never forget the land that we live in, and the race from which we have sprung... We are the Northmen of the New World.

An associate of the Canada First Movement, Haliburton’s speech equates the North with Anglo-Saxon virtues of “energy, strength, self-reliance, health, and purity.” Yet, while the South was equated with “decay and effeminacy,” the members of the Canada First Movement identified with southern plantocracy.¹⁰ The Toronto homes of George Denison, one of the founding members of the Canada First Movement, offered refuge for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War: as Carl Berger argues, Denison “adhered to the same values that legend and propaganda had attached to the plantation life and the Confederacy – the marital values and chivalric code of honour; the adulation of conservative, landed society; and the detestation of capitalistic business.”¹¹ Denison admired the Southern cavalier, and believed that the South was fighting the same fight as Canada – that is preserving its identity against the overwhelming pressure of Yankee expansionism. Thus, Shreve knows that West Virginia was not admitted to the Union

until 1863 not because he is a “Harvard man,” as Hortense Spillers argues, but because Canadians’ feared that Union would result in Canada’s ultimate annexation by the Yankees.

Southern ideology resonated with Canadian cultural producers, who in the early twentieth-century invested in nostalgic reproductions of the Old South. While writing *Absalom*, Faulkner worked for MGM studios, which was co-founded by Canadian producer Louis B. Mayer. From Saint Johns, New Brunswick, Mayer was able to form MGM studio through the profits he made distributing D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Griffith’s Hollywood career was notably supported and influenced by other Canadians, such as director Sidney Olcott and actress Mary Pickford.¹² Known as “America’s Sweetheart,” Pickford appeared in Griffith’s *Biograph* films from 1910 to 1914, and in 1919, she co-founded United Artists with Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and Douglas Fairbanks. However, if Mayer, Olcott, and Pickford were essential to Griffith’s representations of southern gentlemen and gentlewomen, Griffith was essential to representations of the “virile” Canadian. In *Hollywood’s Canada*, Pierre Berton argues that “[a]lmost every Canadian trapper, beginning with the un-named hero of D.W. Griffith’s 1908 one-reeler, *A Woman’s Way*, is shown in a full suit of fringed buckskin topped by a coonskin cap.” “This consume belongs to another place and another time,” writes Berton, “Yet Hollywood has crowded the north with platoons of men dressed up to look like Davey Crockett.”¹³ Berton’s description of the Canadian trapper dressed like the Tennessee folk hero is suggestive in thinking through the interdependent, rather than antithetical, relation between the Southerner and the Canadian in *Absalom*, as Faulkner

earlier represents Shreve's "virility" whilst wearing Quentin's pants in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Shreve and Quentin's reconstruction of the old South reveals the "queer intimacies" shared between these two children of popular regional mythologies, as the narrative process of reconstructing white masculinity joins the Canadian and Southerner in "some happy marriage of speaking and hearing" (253).¹⁴ Shreve offers a version of the story of Sutpen that foregrounds the value of "whiteness as property" that must be protected from the threat of miscegenation. Shreve's version culminates in explaining Henry's murder of Bon as a heroic response to Bon's threat of being "*the nigger that's going to sleep with [his] sister*" (286). Shreve's narrative orchestrates a "bleaching" of Quentin's very "mixed" worlds; together they become active performers in the histories they narrate as they "invent" scenes and "people who perhaps never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too"(243) Shreve is invested not only in demarcating blackness from whiteness, but also in distinguishing between various shades of whiteness. Shreve's exclamation that talking about the South is much better than watching *Ben Hur* is significant in its allusion to Canadian director Sidney Olcott who directed a version of *Ben Hur* in 1907, and whose films, such as "A Lad From Old Ireland," reconstructed whiteness for Irish-American audiences. In *Absalom*, Shreve similarly participates in reconstructing whiteness for his Southern audience through melodramatic renditions of the Old South.

Significantly, Shreve's "Aunt Rosa" slippages are not so innocent or naïve as some critics would like us to believe as they constantly remind Quentin of the fragile

constructedness of Shreve's version, and the ways in which Shreve's narrative, that has finally allowed Quentin to "finally read it, could finish it," is dependent upon Quentin fulfilling his role in their "marriage of speaking and listening." It is Quentin's historical and racial excess that enables Shreve to claim a historical and racial lack as Quentin surmises that "*maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us*" (210). Explaining why he is so interested in the South, Shreve says to Quentin, "I just want to understand it if I can and I don't know how to say it better. Because it's something my people haven't got.... We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves... and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget" (289). Shreve constructs the Canadian West as a "white" slate in which the absence of "freed slaves" – or even not so free slaves (Indian and Black) – leaves the western landscape unspoiled. Quentin and the narrator contribute to this mythico-historical narrative as Shreve is constantly read (and represented) in relation to the "code words" of Northerner films, particularly "Big Snow." Shreve's body goes through a metamorphosis in *Absalom* as his "naked torso pink-gleaming and baby-smooth, cherubic, almost hairless" body transforms a "huge and shapeless... disheveled bear" (147, 235). As Shreve links Quentin to a genealogy of Southern aristocracy, Quentin links Shreve to a genealogy of the Canadian trapper-cum-Mountie forging the Prairies into being.

Quentin and Shreve are intimately intertwined as their regional identities are dependent upon each other's participation in their respective narratives. Shreve reminds Quentin that as long as there is "one nigger Sutpen left" the two of them will be joined. Shreve needs Quentin to "tell about the South," but he needs Quentin to tell a particular

tale about the South that reiterates the ideals and hierarchies of the southern pastoral that are foundational, in fact constitutive, to the myth of the virile Canadian; thus, he asks Quentin “Why do you hate the South?” (303). Quentin’s series of negations to Shreve’s question can be read as Quentin’s resistance to providing the narrative Shreve needs; however, Faulkner makes it clear that the “queer intimacies” that join the Canadian and the Southerner together continue despite Quentin’s resistance and eventual suicide.

In *Absalom*’s closing genealogy, Shreve’s is the last entry, with the story of Sutpen finding its home in Edmonton, Alberta. While Quentin refuses to accept Shreve’s mediating role in the reconstruction of the south’s past, southern writer and critic Allen Tate gladly accepts Canadian literary critic Marshall McLuhan’s help in the 1940s. Hailing from Edmonton, Alberta – Shreve’s hometown-, McLuhan would write in a letter, “That’s where, I too, take my stand. The view is horrible, but the garden is there.”¹⁵ In this present moment, the interdependent (and dialogic) relationship between Canada and the South is all so evident every time Malcolm X’s summation on US regionalism – “the Mississippi can be found anywhere in the United States south of the Canadian border” – is quoted in new southern studies.¹⁶ So, it is with objective, detachment and of course irony, that I *must* ask you to “tell me just one more thing. Why do you hate the South?” (303).

Notes

¹ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 148. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² Ben Raitlin, “What Else Could a Southern Gentleman Do? Quentin Compson, Rhett Butler, and Miscegenation,” *Southern Literary Journal* 35.2 (Spring 2004): 46.

³ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 276. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Peter Lurie, *Visions Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2004), 1.

⁵ Lurie, 111.

⁶ Between the 1880s and 1890s, over a million Canadians left Canada for the US. Boston became Canada's third largest city after Toronto and Montreal.

⁷ Nick Mount, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005), 36. Bliss Carmen edited the religious weekly *Independent*, E.W. Thomson edited the juvenile *Youth Companion*, and Edwin Sandys edited the sporting magazine *Outing* (36).

⁸ Mountie films were almost identical to the American Western genre; traditional western actors played the role of the heroic Mountie furthermore blurring the distinctions between the two genres. Between 1934 and 1936, Western actor Ken Maynard, for example made 10 Mountie films and 8 traditional Westerns.

⁹ Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of our National Image* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 19.

¹⁰ Haliburton's father, Thomas Chandler Haliburton's, support for the southern planter is evident in his intertextual engagement with southern writing, such as John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 novel *Swallow Bar*, in his international best-selling *The Clockmaker* series.

¹¹ Carl Berger, *Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 15-16.

¹² For a history of Canadians in Hollywood during the Golden Age, see Charles Foster, *Once Upon a Time in Paradise: Canadians in the Golden Age of Hollywood* (Toronto: Dunduran Group, 2004), 9-12.

¹³ Berton 77.

¹⁴ This paper attempts to engage with the queer readings of Shreve and McLuhan provided by Noel Polk and Norman Jones during MLA (2005).

¹⁵ McLuhan, Marshall. *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 184.

¹⁶ The Malcolm X quotation has become a pithy statement of southern regionalism writ large that seems to be constantly repeated. See, Houston Baker, *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 10. Houston Baker and Dana Nelson, "Preface: Violence, the Body, and 'the South'" in *American Literature* 73.2 (June 2001), 231, and more recently, Jon Smith, "The Rhetoric of Uneven Modernization: Hybrid Cultures in 'the South'" in *American Literature* 78.4 (December 2006), 707.