Light in August was originally about white people: Lena Grove, Gail Hightower, and Byron Bunch were at the center of William Faulkner’s initial conception of the novel. The murder and near decapitation of Joanna Burden was to be the event that tied these three characters together. Joe Christmas became the central character of the novel when it became evident to Faulkner that another element, an embodied racial signifier, was necessary to get at the heart of Southern history. In Faulkner’s text, the brutal murder of a white woman, followed by the quick capture and lynching of a (reputed) black man, exemplifies and encapsulates the ideological and cultural crisis of black-white relations in the post-Reconstruction era, as inflected by gender, class, and the then recent history of slavery in the South. In her article, “Persons in Pieces,” Nell Sullivan asserts, “Christmas became so compelling that Faulkner kept adding episodes to his early life in the flashback[s]. The shift of dramatic emphasis from Lena, Byron, and Hightower to Joe Christmas reveals Faulkner’s recognition of the Negrophobe myth at the heart of the (white) Southern consciousness” (498). In writing Joe Christmas, Faulkner introduced a preoccupation he would continue to work out in such novels as Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses: miscegenation and its relation to history, to slavery, and to American genealogies. For Faulkner, miscegenation serves, as Krister Friday remarks, as a “metonym for the tragic aftermath of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction” (41). The fact of miscegenation—of mixed-race bodies that could evade or straddle the color line and in their very embodiment recall the intimate and violent history of institutional slavery—provided Faulkner with a viable, living metaphor for the gruesome history, tumultuous present, and uncertain future of black-white relations in the post-Emancipation South.

Many critics have analyzed miscegenation in Light in August in terms of Faulkner’s rendering of slavery and Southern history. This paper diverges from such standard readings to argue that miscegenation is not simply a metaphor for the messy, entangled racial history of the South; miscegenation is also the principal means by which Faulkner contemplates and represents the imperiled state of white masculinity in the post-Reconstruction era and the homoerotic desire and dread underpinning the white male obsession with black manhood. Generally sexualized, degraded, and debased, the black figures in Light in August are placed in close proximity to white characters and spaces in order to demonstrate that, in the postslavery South, black and white communities are
dependent on and, in some ways, mutually constitutive of each other. Joe Christmas, however, is not simply someone whose racially inscrutable body reveals uncertain but possibly mixed-race origins; he is Faulkner's definitive (albeit white) "nigger." Like many of the black characters in *Light in August*, Joe Christmas has little interiority and even less discernable motivation for doing what he does. Like the flat surface of a painting, he is a drawn figure. However, unlike the caricatured, illiterate black men who appear for mere seconds in the novel and abruptly leave, or the sexualized black females who are connected to Joe, or the mammy figures who raise other characters in the novel, Joe Christmas represents Faulkner's meditation on the civic equality of black men in the post-Reconstruction era and its effect on the psyche of whites. Christmas acts out his historical moment and anticipates, if not precipitates, crises in the established economic, gender, and racial systems of that historical moment. This paper principally aims to understand the way in which Faulkner's mixed-race figure in *Light in August* emblematizes the crisis of the post-Reconstruction racial order. I attend specifically to Faulkner's linking of racial ambiguity and homoeroticism in the figure of Joe Christmas, arguing that Faulkner uses the historical fact of miscegenation and the perceived failure of white masculinity to critique Southern culture and history and to offer ways of revamping and reconstituting whiteness in the modern—meaning postslavery—moment.

I.

As is the case with other early-twentieth-century American fictions, depictions of African Americans in *Light in August* provide William Faulkner with the means to critique fluctuations in racial, sexual, spatial, and other social arrangements in American culture and to ponder the effects of those fluctuations on white psychology. In their introduction to *Prehistories of the Future*, Barkan and Bush usefully describe the rac(ial)ist concept of "primitive irrationality" as "attractive to . . . [the] modern, alienated intellectual because it provided the means by which to represent the individual unconscious" (6). Marianna Torgovnick suggests that "primitives" were believed to be the "untamed selves [and] id forces—libidinal, irrational, violent, dangerous" of Europeans (8). The commodity nature and circulation of images of blackness in the early-twentieth century furnished American authors of that historical moment with a repertoire of images associated with "primitivity" through which to conjure and explore the condition of psychic fracture for the dislocated white subject under the pressure of modernity in an increasingly multiracial urbanized sphere.

At the historical moment of *Light in August* 's emergence, blackness was highly visible and widely commodified in the culture at large. As Grace Elizabeth Hale has argued, new modes of production within capitalism enabled racial stereotypes to become firmly entrenched in the popular imaginary. The

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1 See Eng for a thoughtful account of Sigmund Freud's theories linking notions of cultural primitivism and ideas about the white psyche.
railroad, photography, the cinema, and the advertising industry provided the means of disseminating quickly and nationally negative images of African Americans. Photographs of lynched black bodies that appeared in national newspapers and that circulated as postcards verified and provided a visual corollary for the belief that black Americans were less than human, unqualified for full citizenship, and unworthy of complete integration into the body politic. Minstrel performances helped to preserve derogatory characterizations of African Americans as dependent slaves even as they struggled to advance socially and politically beyond that former status. Furthermore, the plantation types depicted in minstrel shows helped to create enduring beliefs about black people that lasted well into the twentieth century. As Eric Lott elucidates, the minstrel show was “highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences” (6).

Blackface minstrelsy—including textual blackface—provided, moreover, a “space of fun and license” specifically to white artists (Lott 51). In his discussion of the important influence of African American dialect and African art on American modernist aesthetics in the early-twentieth century, Michael North argues that representations of blackness were used by the “moderns” to disrupt conventional aesthetic forms. He posits that “in painting and in literature, the step away from conventional verisimilitude into abstraction is accomplished by a figurative change of race” (61). Artists and writers who sought to distort, to experiment, to transform, and to invent wholly new ways of writing and painting did so by importing and infusing elements of racial blackness into their artistic creations. Because blackness was itself believed to be the very condition of fracture, radical uncertainty, and resultant chaos both within oneself and in one’s relation to the culture at large, textual blackface operated as a literary trope and practice that enabled meditations on and representations of the fragmented self in early-twentieth-century American culture. Representations of African Americans in white American-authored texts of this era have not tended overall to reflect African American people, their inner or cultural life; these representations have, instead, marked crucial moments in the development of white American culture and consciousness.²

II.

The mulatto—the putatively black but ultimately racially ambiguous figure—is one complicated and subtle manifestation of blackness. The performative quality of Joe Christmas’s blackness is evident not only in his iteration of certain behavioral norms of blackness but also in his susceptibility to the violence generally reserved for black people—i.e., lynching and castration. Christmas is, furthermore, a compelling case study

²Some prominent twentieth-century African American authors have made this point. See, for example, James Baldwin’s essays in The Price of the Ticket, especially “Many Thousands Gone” and “In Search of a Majority.” See also Morrison for a discussion of prominent twentieth-century novelists who use tropes of racial blackness to substantiate the development of white characters.
of how the status of a mixed-race person can be extended to represent African American people in the post-Reconstruction era in general. In *Faulkner’s Negro*, Thadious Davis argues that Faulkner “provide[s] details which link Joe to the black side of Jefferson life . . . . [Christmas] enters Joanna’s house like a nigger invading in the night, and he eats course food set for the nigger. . . . Even before he tells Joanna that he believes he is a Negro, he sees himself as the ‘nigger’ in her bed” (135-36). Davis contends ultimately that “Joe Christmas is both black and white” (135). Of course, what this means according to the one-drop rule is that Christmas is legally, if not completely culturally, black. To my mind, African Americans may be taken in general as a miscegenated group not only because of their mixed racial genealogies resulting from rampant interracial rape during and after slavery but also because of the inevitable cultural admixture resulting from African American presence in America since its founding. Race is not, nor has it ever been, completely corporeal. What determined white manhood in the nineteenth century was not simply white skin but access to the vote, access to the bodies of women, the right to defend one’s country in war, the right to hold arms or property, the right to acquire capital, and, especially, the right and ability to dominate black people. What determined blackness was susceptibility to violence, a so-called inability to fend off or control primal urges, and an ultimate negation of the aforementioned rights and privileges. In the post-Reconstruction era when black men were enfranchised—after hundreds of thousands had participated in the Civil War and helped to bring about the defeat of the South, after some had even gained the wealth and education to fare better than some of their white neighbors—racial blackness in the U.S. itself underwent a cultural miscegenation: it became infused with some of the rights and properties of white manhood.

It is the position of black people in the aftermath of generational slavery that determines their abjectness and makes Joe Christmas a viable representation of post-Emancipation blackness in *Light in August*. My use of the word “abject” follows that of Julia Kristeva, who in *Powers of Horror* describes the abject as one who “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect, borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In other words, indeterminate ontology creates the position of the abject, the specter who haunts social order. Joe Christmas is abject first and foremost because his paternal lineage and, by extension, racial origins are unknown—as traceable genealogies were unknown by the overwhelming number of emancipated African Americans. Christmas cannot be located in the strict racial economy of white over black that was inaugurated in slavery and that continues under Jim Crow legislation. He, therefore, remains a shadowy, haunting presence in the town of Jefferson. Described as carrying with him “his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle” (33), Christmas is said to look like “a phantom, a spirit, strayed from its own world, and lost” (114). Furthermore, his white body is described as “slow and lascivious in a whispering gutter filth like a drowned corpse in a thick still black pool of more than water” (107). Despite his corporeal whiteness, Christmas’s
identity is associated with blackness, with filth, with fluidity. He is reputed to live “behind the veil,” the Du Boisian term for life within black communities or beneath the dividing line of race. The narrator describes, “None of them [the townspeople] knew then where Christmas lived and what he was actually doing behind the veil, the screen, of his negro’s job at the mill” (36). As has been noted almost to the point of consensus among contemporary literary critics, the difficulty and potency of the mixed-race person is her epistemic uncertainty, her ability to confound and render incoherent the signifying structures of race. Krister Friday suggests that “Joe’s indeterminate parentage allows him to pass as both white and black but to ‘be’ or have ‘been’ neither. Without the anchor of an origin, Joe’s past and present become open, unfinished possibilities rather than certainties, making Joe’s ‘presence’ in the novel assume a spectrality” (49). Friday’s observations are useful for understanding the threat of the mixed-race person to the racial schema in general. What I want to emphasize here, however, is the condition of blackness as abject itself, as indeterminate and in-between, once it is no longer contained in slavery, or once black people have been released from the fetters of a fixed definition and status as enslaved thing. My focus, then, is the similarity of the threat that Christmas’s white skin poses to white manhood—as it masks the so-called blackness of his “black blood” and thereby allows him white masculine privilege—and the threat that all black men posed to the racial order in the post-Reconstruction period after they had been given the vote and the legal position as head of their families.

The acquisition of citizenship rights challenged and redeemed the prior enslaved status of black manhood in the same way that Joe Christmas’s white skin challenges and redeems his own purported blackness. Enfranchisement masculinized black men because it established both their humanity and their U.S. citizenship; furthermore, black men’s legal right to marriage and to function as fathers granted them a recognizable position within the (implicitly patriarchal) symbolic order. Taken together, the status of black men in the post-Emancipation South made them akin to white men. Robyn Wiegman describes deftly, “the [black man’s] threat to masculine power arises not simply from a perceived racial difference, but from the potential for a masculine sameness” (90). Black men in the postbellum era were the same as white men, but with a difference—they were (un)desirable, uncanny, a threat. Put another way, emancipation converted African Americans from captive African slaves to U.S. citizens who spoke the same language, benefited from and believed in the principles that underwrite American democracy; like Joe Christmas’s racially indeterminable self, African Americans in the postbellum era delineated difference contained within, and undermined by, similarity.

The position of African Americans after slavery posed a threat not only to the established social schema but also to the very symbolic order that gave whiteness coherence. The end of slavery disrupted the oppositional relation between black slaves and white master-citizens. Following Saussure’s formula-

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1For more on the ways in which the failure to extend patriarchal recognition to black men has hampered their masculine development, see Harper and Ferguson.
tion about signifying structures of languages and applying them to Faulkner's literature, Doreen Fowler writes, "Identity and meaning come about only as a result of difference, only by exclusion" (9); in other words, all meaning derives from and depends on difference because the meaning of a sign is ascertained only by its difference from, or the exclusion of, other signs. The same holds for subjective development, wherein a subject begins to emerge at the precise moment that she ascertains her separateness, her distinction, from those upon whom her existence has depended. Extended to the logic of racial formation in the U.S., blackness may be understood as the chaotic, debased, and negated part of the racial dyad that defines and delimits whiteness, giving shape to its enabling boundaries.

The dialectic of race, the contingency of racial definitions, is emblematized in the figure of Joe Christmas. In a pivotal scene in the text, "[Christmas] stood with his hands on his hips, naked, thighdeep in the dusty weeds, while the car came over the hill and approached, the lights full upon him. He watched his body grow white out of the darkness like a Kodak print emerging from the liquid" (108). This scene exposes blackness as the frame and backdrop for the emergence of whiteness. Surrounded by the darkness of night, Joe's corporeal whiteness is contoured and given center-stage. This is imaged here despite the fact that in this very scene Joe is most concerned about his blackness, his nakedness, and its effect on the screaming white woman in the passing car. This scene reveals the epistemological uncertainty attending all racial differentiation, as race is shown to confound the visual technologies that have been put in the service of reifying it. Neither the bright light of the passing car nor the gaze of the imaginary camera exposes Christmas's reputed blackness. Instead, what racializes Christmas in this scene is his relation to the people in the car. Calling them "white bastards," he establishes his blackness relative to their whiteness (108).

Although Faulkner reveals aspects of Joe Christmas's interiority through flashback material about his childhood, his internalized racism, his sexual development, and his relationship with Joanna Burden, the main focus of Faulkner's depiction of Joe Christmas is the awe and rage he inspires in white men. Not only does Christmas exemplify the status of black men in the post-Reconstruction era, he also exposes the imperiled state of white masculinity as wrought by the legal abolition of slavery. Faulkner's meditation on the state of white masculinity in the postbellum era is accomplished through his pairing of Joe Christmas and a doppelganger in the figure of Lucas Burch, who goes by the alias Joe Brown. When Byron Bunch describes the recent arrival of two strangers to Jefferson, who now occupy the "Negro" cabin on Joanna Burden's property, he informs Lena, "Two fellows named Joe live out that way somewhere. Joe Christmas and Joe Brown" (53). The two Joes are linked first and foremost by their shared first name, Joe, and further by their outsidersness, their liquor selling, their similar economic status, their cohabitation. It is Christmas's grandparents who attend the birth of Lena and Joe Brown's son, and Lena mistakenly thinks that Joe Christmas, and not Joe Brown, has fa-
thered her child (409). Though both men are taken for white, Christmas and Brown are described as having dark complexions. Brown’s name references his color, and he is described as “[t]all, young. Dark complected” (55). Christmas is described as having a “dark, insufferable” face (32). What ultimately enables Lena to distinguish between the two Joes upon hearing about them from Byron Bunch and to determine which has fathered her child is the white scar near Brown’s mouth. Brown’s white scar separates him from Christmas in that, despite his dark complexion, it designates and literalizes his racial whiteness. While Brown’s dark skin might gesture toward his own potential racial ambiguity, it functions more significantly as the “black” backdrop that surrounds and, thus, makes visible/emergent his whiteness. Because racial whiteness is generally unmarked and unremarked on, to become visible, determinable even, whiteness requires a marking, its own bodily inscription. In locating Joe Brown’s whiteness in a scar, Faulkner makes legible and literal the racial specificity of the white body. Regardless of Joe Brown’s abandonment of Lena, his refusal of patriarchal responsibility, his “negro’s job at the mill,” and his shacking up with Joe Christmas, Joe Brown has a more stable identity than Joe Christmas—a definitive (white) racial ontology—which determines his social desirability, justifies Lena’s continued pursuit of him, and keeps him present in the novel after Joe Christmas has been lynched.

III.

Though handsome and spirited, Joe Brown symbolizes all that has gone awry in Southern manhood. He is unmarried; he’s an alcoholic and a gambler. He resists both patriarchal and heterosexual imperatives. Instead of exemplifying the honor and chivalry of the old South, he exemplifies the decline and degeneracy of Southern manhood. David Minter explains that in the postbellum era Southern white men were “burdened . . . not only with indelible memories of a costly as well as humiliating defeat but also with the double burden of guilt—one born of having defended and one of having failed to defend an institution and practice that, in fact, could not be defended” (7). Brown’s abdication of his familial responsibilities, his low-class status, and the frequency with which he is manipulated, dominated, and beaten by other men reveal a masculinity assailed by all manner of defeat.

Nonetheless, it is the doubling and the interracial, homoerotic desire between Joe Brown and Joe Christmas that speaks most glaringly to the failure of white Southern manhood and to the challenges posed by post-Emancipation black manhood to white identity and authority in the South. To make this point cogently, I must first illuminate the ways in which Christmas’s racial indeterminacy is engendered and haunted by both same-sex desire and its polic-

"Much has been written about whiteness, its self-characterization as universal and “race-free”—specific only in terms of its cultural and racial dominance over all raced “others.” A crucial component of the character of whiteness is its reliance on serviceable raced “others” whose particularity enables its “race-less” emergence and prominence. For more on this, especially its manifestation in American literature, see Morrison."
ing in the town of Jefferson. In the same way that Brown and Christmas function as each other's doubles, Christmas functions in the novel as the double, the shadow, and the darker half of the white men in town. In *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge*, John T. Irwin explains:

> The ego's towering self-love and consequent over-estimation of its own worth lead to the guilty rejection of all instincts and desires that don't fit its idealized image of itself. The rejected instincts are cast out of the self, repressed internally only to return externally personified in the double, where they can be at once vicariously satisfied and punished. (33)

As I have discussed above, Joe Christmas embodies the black male threat to white masculinity even as he appears as the mirror image of white manhood. He is, thus, an incarnation of the unspoken desires and hidden dread white men had for black men who were no longer their legal property.

Joe Christmas's power as a racially inscrutable figure is not simply that he resists and negotiates the identity politics that govern race and race relations in the post-Reconstruction South but also that he calls into question endogamous heterosexuality as the reigning social and sexual paradigm in early-twentieth-century American culture. Christmas's ability to engender a racial pass, or to escape definitive racial inscription, carries the distinct possibility of transgressing all sexual boundaries, first and foremost, because it allows him access to the bodies of white women. The product of a reputed black man's criminal engagement with white womanhood, Joe Christmas, in his sexual relationships with Bobbie, other white prostitutes, and Joanna Burden, violates the brutally enforced restrictions on black male sexuality. The product of a reputed black man's criminal engagement with white womanhood, Joe Christmas, in his sexual relationships with Bobbie, other white prostitutes, and Joanna Burden, violates the brutally enforced restrictions on black male sexuality. The predominant belief in black men's predilection for desiring across racial lines was itself essential to developing theories of homosexuality, as both interracial sexuality and homosexuality were believed to be characterized by an inappropriate choice of sexual object. Heteronormative qualification at the turn of the twentieth century did not require simple heterosexuality but endogamy as well; as customary and judicial prohibitions on interracial and same-sex coupling made clear, the proper sexual object choice under the regime of compulsive heterosexuality was a person of the opposite sex and the same racial group.

As did black men's status generally in the postbellum period, Joe Christmas dislodges both normative racial and sexual categories, transgressing their historically enforced boundaries. As Christmas's blackness is unhinged from legible racial demarcation and, further, as his sexual exchanges are patently nonreproductive, Joe Christmas is a figure who evades, if not defies, all manner of social and sexual regulation. In his analysis of Christmas's sexuality, Jay Watson notes that "Joe's identity is so radically uncertain, making it difficult if not impossible to ascertain and fix what is sexually permissible and sexually illicit where he is concerned" (161). Christmas is an unbound and unmanageable sexual agent/signifier whose racial ambiguity itself obfuscates (hetero)sexual

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5 To explore this point further, see Ginsburg.
6 For a groundbreaking, in-depth discussion of this point, see Somerville.
identity and precludes for him any claim to heteronormative qualification. According to Watson, Christmas's unbound racial and sexual identity both engenders and reflects a hypermasculinity that "amounts to simultaneously [an] overdoing and underdoing of masculinity, one that spells gender trouble because its excesses... threaten the 'law and order' of Southern manhood itself" (161). It is important to note that Watson's definition of hypermasculinity extends beyond the predictable paradigm of a brutish and overly dominant maleness to convey, instead, a masculinity that is both excessive and (historically, internally) fractured. Although Watson's discussion of Joe Christmas does not explicitly link hypermasculinity to embodied black manhood in general, I want to emphasize precisely that connection here. Post-Emancipation black masculinity was both empowered and besieged. It, furthermore, had the ability to confound the racial schema and render conventional, racially inflected, masculine hierarchies unintelligible. Watson's characterization of Christmas as "something more like conventionally defined masculinity and its other" speaks finally to Christmas's status both as racially indeterminable figure and enfranchised black man.

The doubling of Joe Christmas and Joe Brown, with its insinuation of homoerotic desire, makes clear not only the extent to which black male identity has been freed from some of its traditional markers but also the extent to which white masculinity has depended on these exact markers of black male inferiority to secure its own ascendancy and legitimacy. When Brown reports to the sheriff that Christmas has murdered Joanna Burden, he is described by Bunch as speaking "louder and louder and faster and faster, like he was trying to hide Joe Brown behind what he was telling on Christmas" (96). In other words, the Joes' identities are so imbricated that Joe Brown's narration of Joe Christmas risks his own self-erasure. Moreover, Brown's disclosure of Christmas's putative black racial ancestry "outs" Christmas not only as a black man passing for white but also, as a result of his erotic entanglements with white women and men, as a sexual deviant. Speaking of Christmas's and Brown's relation to one another, Byron Bunch postulates:

I reckon the only thing folks ever wondered about was why Christmas ever took up with Brown. Maybe it was because like not only finds like; it cant escape from being found by its like. Even when it's just like in one thing, because even them two with the same like was different. (87)

In his description of their (uncanny) relationship, of Christmas's "taking up" with Brown, Bunch intimates that a sexual relation undergirds the two Joes' attachment.

Rooted in narcissism, a felt desire for the self with a difference, the double—by which I mean both the reflected image and/or the shadow—engenders and exposes homoerotic desire. Siobhan Somerville suggests that a common sexual fantasy that accompanied racial thinking in the post-Reconstruction era was that "black was to white as masculine was to feminine" (35). In other
words, race supplies the difference—imagined in terms of gender—that masks and marks same-sex eroticism while exposing and emphasizing the alleged perversity of interracial desire. Somerville posits further:

In turn-of-the-[twentieth]-century culture, where Jim Crow culture erected a structure of taboos against any kind of (non-work-related) interracial relationship, racial difference visually marked [sexual] alliances . . . . In effect, the institution of racial segregation and its cultural fiction of “black” and “white” produced a framework in which . . . interracial romances became legible as “perversion.” (35)

Because interactions across racial borders were so rigorously prohibited and policed in the postslavery South, any interracial contact outside of black labor and service to whites was believed to be criminally sexual. When the sheriff hears about Brown’s abandonment of Lena, he claims to have no interest in the “wives [Brown] left in Alabama, or anywhere else” (321). The sheriff insists that his concern is only with “the husband he seems to have had since he come to Jefferson” (321). In designating Christmas Joe Brown’s husband, the sheriff acknowledges the eroticism informing the Joes’ liaison. Byron Bunch describes Brown and Christmas as “set[ting] up together” in the “old nigger cabin in the back” (79). When Christmas moves Brown into his cabin with him, he hopes both to stave off Joanna’s desires for him and to make her jealous. The “nigger cabin” is the former home of slaves that will become ultimately the birthplace of Joe Brown’s illegitimate child. Throughout Light in August, the “nigger cabin” is the liminal, transitional space where unaccepted sexual urges—extramarital, interracial, homoerotic, violent—are explored and where character transformations are wrought.

The homoeroticism framing the Joes’ liaison signifies the vulnerability of white masculinity to penetration by black men in the social, economic, and political realms. Although the intimation of a sexual relationship between Joe Christmas and Joe Brown indicates a potential for equality in an interracial alliance between white and black men, it is depicted by Faulkner as carrying with it the threat of white racial subordination. Christmas is clearly the dominant of the two Joes—Christmas is described as the “master” and Brown as his “disciple” (45). Brown imitates Christmas’s mannerisms and participates in his business. One evening after beating Brown, Christmas undresses, goes outside, and when he returns, goes naked to his cot. Christmas’s beating of Joe Brown coupled with his nakedness implies that the nature of Christmas’s and Brown’s alliance is not only homoerotic and interracial; it is also sadomasochistic because both Joes willingly participate in a relationship of practiced physical domination and submission.

I want to add two things: first, sexual criminality encompasses all outlaw sexual practices, including interracial sex, rape, incest, and homosexuality. Second, I do mean to posit a rigid distinction between black service to and sexual engagement with white people. As we know from black women’s plight as domestic workers in much of the twentieth century, black labor in white homes and white establishments often included sexual service to white employers.
Brown is able to assert dominance over Christmas only by accusing him of having black blood, of passing for white. In the period after slavery, there was growing anxiety within the white community around the fixity of racial categories. Rather than allow former slaves full citizenship rights, Southern whites established a system of cultural superiority and racial segregation. The rise of Jim Crow, antimiscegenation laws, and the institution of legal segregation not only mandated who could participate in government and to what extent but also divided public and private spaces along racial lines. African American bodies were literally forbidden contact with white bodies. This anxiety around interracial contact must be understood first and foremost as anxiety around an integrated body politic and the refusal of postbellum America to grant to former slaves full membership in U.S. society. The 1896 ruling in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* authorized white townspeople to determine the racial category of others and to publicize it to maintain segregation. Rumor and innuendo were essential to this project, and, thus, the accusation of “black blood” was sufficient evidence for one to be taken for, and convicted of being, African-descended.

Brown's disclosure to the sheriff that Christmas had once confessed to having black ancestry sets in motion the events that lead to Christmas's ultimate demise. In other words, by accusing Christmas of being black and of raping and murdering Joanna Burden, Brown, in effect, causes Christmas to be lynched. Not only does Brown's revelation of Christmas's blackness become the means by which he gains an advantage over Christmas, it also becomes the means by which he disavows his prior subordination, particularly in his erotic relation, to Christmas.

Joe Brown is not the first character in *Light in August* to allege Christmas's black racial ancestry in order to conceal sexual transgressions and to effect his social removal. In what is often seen as the inaugural moment of Christmas's sexual development, a five-year-old Christmas hides in the closet of the dietitian who works in the orphanage in which he lives. While swallowing toothpaste and hiding amidst her garments, he witnesses a sexual exchange between the dietitian and a white male intern. The sexual exchange falls beyond the requisites of proper sexuality in two regards: it is extramarital and it is violent. The intern disregards the dietitian's repeated cries, "No! No! ... No, Charley! Please!" and aggressively continues his sexual advances (121). Readers are not given the specific details of the sexual violation that ensues, as the scene shifts into a narrative of Christmas's sensory—oral and aural—perceptions while witnessing it. Christmas's ingestion and eventual regurgitation of the toothpaste dramatizes and mirrors the dietitian's experience of sexual assault by the intern:

> [Christmas] saw by feel alone now the ruined, once cylindrical tube. By taste and not seeing he contemplated the cool invisible worm as it coiled onto his finger and smeared sharp, automatonlike and sweet, into his mouth. ... He seemed to be turned

> **Before the sheriff knows about Christmas, Brown is the main suspect in the killing of Joanna Burden. Brown discloses Christmas's putative black racial origins to divert suspicion from himself—"That's right," he says. ... 'Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free" (97). To gain the social advantage over Christmas, Brown also announces his whiteness, thereby securing it and summoning the authority conferred by it.**
in upon himself, watching himself sweating, watching himself smear another worm of paste into his mouth which his stomach did not want. Sure enough, it refused to go down.... He didn't have to wait long. At once the paste which he had already swallowed lifted inside him, trying to get back out into the air where it was cool. It was no longer sweet. (121-22)

While much critical attention has been paid to the association of the toothpaste with the “pinkwomansmelling” dietitian and, therefore, with femininity, I want to underscore its masculine features here. Described as a worm that coils and that issues forth from a cylindrical tube, the toothpaste operates as a phallic replacement. Christmas’s initiatory sexual experience, then, simulates nauseating fellatio as he internalizes the victimized sexual position of the dietitian. When the dietitian, ravaged and “surrounded now by wild and dishevelled hair,” peers into the closet and discovers Christmas, “limp, looking with slack-jawed and glassy idiocy,” she projects onto him the image of her assailant, presumably now “limp” with the satisfaction of an accomplished sexual act. This is evidenced foremost in the racial epithet she calls Christmas in that a “nigger bastard!” hiding in her closet insinuates the black male rapist (122). Later, the traumatized dietitian fixates more on Christmas than on the intern who has actually assaulted her. “She lay most of the night now tense, teeth and hands clenched, panting with fury and terror.... The young doctor was now, even less than the child. ... She could not have said which she hated most” (123). The dietitian displaces her outrage and terror onto Christmas. As his identity is radically unstable, both racially and sexually ambiguous, he alternately inhabits the position of violated (white) womanhood and of (now racialized) violating manhood. Foreshadowing Joe Brown’s method of effecting Christmas’s removal from the town of Jefferson, the dietitian relieves the shame and horror of the intern’s sexual assault by alleging Christmas’s black ancestry to secure his expulsion from the orphanage.

IV.

Under assault in the late-nineteenth century, white masculinity asserted itself through physicality—through resemblance to and finally dominance over—black manhood. In severing the penis from the black male body and taking it into their literal possession, white men who participated in lynching rituals appropriated the symbolic and sexual power they themselves had previously ascribed to black masculinity. In Manliness and Civilization, Gail Bederman explains that white manhood was constructed in the late-nineteenth century as both civilized and linked to the “savagery” and ‘primitivism’ of dark-skinned races, whose masculinity [white men] claimed to share” (22). White men in Light in August are said to have more physical prowess and to be better suited for “negro jobs”—those that require maximum physical exertion—than black men (44). The revelation of Christmas’s reputed blackness, which generally occurs after he has engaged in sexual activity with white women—Bobbie, the numerous prostitutes and oth-
er white women Christmas takes to bed between the ages of 20 and 33, as well as Joanna Burden—is followed by a savage beating by the white men nearby. In the end, Joe Christmas is lynched in a communal spectacle.

In the climactic lynching scene, Joe Brown’s desire for Joe Christmas, as well as its disavowal, is extended to the other white men in Jefferson. L lynching’s mechanized violence enacts and covers up the awe and the lust that black manhood engenders in some white men. After the ejaculatory gesture of firing a round of shots into Christmas’s body, Percy Grimm stoops over and castrates him:

“Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell,” [Grimm] said. But the man on the floor [Christmas] had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. . . . [H]is face, body, all seemed to collapse, to fall upon itself, and from out of the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. (464-65)

As Trudier Harris has so usefully summarized, lynching functions as a “communal rape” of black manhood (23). By castrating him, Grimm inscribes onto Christmas’s body the phallic lack of the feminine and, under the regime of slavery, of the black masculine. The shadow around Christmas’s mouth is the specter of homosexuality and race. The black blood that rushes from his body like a released breath, or new life, signifies that murder and mutilation have finally situated Christmas firmly within a proper—that is, victimized and subordinate—black racial identity. Lynching’s bloody rituals function to abate the threat of black masculine similarity/parity with white men in the post-Reconstruction era by feminizing the black male body and by simultaneously reracializing it. As Robyn Wiegman argues, lynching enacts a gruesome, racially motivated, homoerotic encounter:

In the image of white men embracing—with hate, fear, and a chilling form of empowered delight—the same penis they were so overdeterminedly driven to destroy, one encounters a sadistic enactment of the homoerotic at the very moment of its most extreme disavowal. . . . [T]he lynching scenario and its obsession with the sexual dismemberment of black men to mark the limit of the homosexual/heterosexual—that point at which the oppositional relation reveals its inherent and mutual dependence—and the heterosexuality of the black male “rapist” is transformed into a violently homoerotic exchange. (99)

Grimm’s final statement to Christmas bespeaks the challenge that Christmas represents to white manhood in the areas of sexual prowess and civic access, as symbolized in the figure of the white woman’s body. Like McEachern’s sexually charged and sadistic ritual beatings of Christmas as a child, Grimm’s actions not only feminize Joe Christmas—concretizing what was believed in the early-twentieth century to be a queer subjectivity—but also confirm and constrain his racial blackness. In other words, castration transfigures Christmas’s hyper-

*John Duvall elucidates the homoeroticism and the homosexual panic that subvert Joe Christmas’s murder and dismemberment. He writes, “A clear portrait of homosexual panic emerges . . . in Grimm’s killing and castration of Joe Christmas. . . . But a homoerotic subtext is also at play in this moment” (62).
masculinity into the docile, emasculated, asexuality of the eunuch—or of the black male slave. As lynching is the brutal enactment of homoeroticism and its panicked repudiation, lynching is also a strategy for the containment of racial difference in the post-Reconstruction era. The lynching of Joe Christmas functions, then, both as an expression and disavowal of same-sex desire and as a violent rejection of an egalitarian, racially integrated social sphere.

Emblematic of the crisis of race hatred in America at the turn of the century, lynching exemplified the problematic and interlocking constructions of racial, gender, and sexual identity in U.S. culture, as Winthrop Jordan, Angela Davis, Trudier Harris, and Judith Stephens have all argued. Most African Americans understood lynching to be an act of racial terrorism aimed at preventing their social, economic, and political advancement. It had more to do with the effect of black cultural encroachment on white manhood, and by extension on white community, than black male ravishing of white womanhood. Judith Stephens assesses, “For nearly a century, lynching was a highly visible and concrete expression of institutionalized white supremacy and symbol of the existing power relations between the black and white ‘races’ in the United States” (655). While I share Stephen’s estimation that lynching was a highly visible manifestation of white supremacy, I do not believe that it reflected “existing power relations” as much as desperately sought-after ones. In other words, we might best understand white racial violence as a will to whiteness. The routinized, ritualized violence of the lynching act and the widespread white communal participation in it reveal a profound need on the part of whites (during Reconstruction and throughout much of the twentieth century) for some evidence that the racial order of slavery still governed black and white relations despite the legal abolition of slavery. Lynching, then, reflects a profound insecurity around the stability and supremacy of whiteness in the post-Reconstruction era. Percy Grimm functions in Light in August as the white phallic authority that attempts to rejuvenate and restore white racial hegemony. Lynching functions in the absence of slavery’s racial organization and operational logic to fix racial categories in the post-Emancipation period and to annihilate the threat that African American male enfranchisement posed to the desired (racist) social order.

Throughout Light in August narratives about slavery are depicted in the fragmented memories of key characters—namely Joanna Burden and Gail Hightower. Discernable in those narrated flashbacks is nostalgia for the ease and heroism of an earlier time, particularly around the figure of the white patriarch. Although neither the characters nor the novel itself displays an overt longing for the reinstallment of institutional slavery, slavery does represent a neat social order in its rigid hierarchy of the races. All manner of miscegenation and diversity could be contained in slavery because the messiness of human contact—in the form of interracial sexual unions, mutually affectionate...
and dependent relations, violent confrontation—that inevitably erupted and to some extent undergirded the relations between blacks and whites on the plantation did not disturb the fixed, naturalized order of things that race-based slavery forcefully proscribed, policed, and preserved. It was only in its aftermath that the heinous practices and traumatic legacies of American slavery had to be confronted.

*Light in August* ends with a wish for the reconstructed white family: the redeemed, maternal white woman, the weathered but hardworking and upstanding white man, and the “manchild,” upon whom the future of the white race depends. In those decades following the formal abolition of slavery, beliefs about the deviant and excessive sexuality of black people led to the myth of the black male rapist and to Jim Crow legislation and to lynching as the punishment for black men who supposedly raped white women. Sanctions against interracial marriage, as well as prohibitions on homosexuality, supported the ascendancy of whiteness and the unimpeded formation and multiplication of white families at the precise moment of the nation’s reunification after the Civil War, westward expansion, the enfranchisement of former slaves, and the increased immigration of nonwhite peoples into the U.S. As did compulsory heterosexuality generally in the late-nineteenth century, the intact straight white family with which *Light in August* concludes is offered as a buffer to white masculinity and a safeguard against the increased presence of nonwhite peoples in the national polis who demanded—and now qualified for—civic equality.

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