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Revisiting Foundational Fictions in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Carlos Fuentes's "Sons of the Conquistador"

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Abstract

In William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* and Carlos Fuentes's short story "Sons of the Conquistador", personal and national destinies collide as the authors write their own critical versions of foundational fictions. The stories explore the relationships between brothers, and between fathers and sons against the background of the growth of two multiracial regions: the American South around the Civil War and Mexico at the beginning of Spanish colonization. Both works feature a type of founding father: Hernán Cortés, who conquered Mexico, and the self-made planter Thomas Sutpen. As in racial romances, the authors reflect on miscegenation and *mestizaje*, but choose to focus on two sets of half-brothers: a biracial elder son and a younger white heir, the son of a different mother. Faulkner's multiple narrative voices intertwine the taboo of incest with that of racial mixing, producing a multi-layered novel where the perspective of incestuous miscegenation causes the downfall of the Sutpens, but where incest also allows for an evocation of interracial love. Fuentes, who felt a kinship between his Mexico and Faulkner's South, chose to retain both the strong erotic tones and the dialogic form of *Absalom, Absalom!* in a simpler narrative structure. If Faulkner and Fuentes's depictions of racial mixing eventually diverge, they both revisit the history of their country to explore the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the possibility of living in a multiracial nation. Glissant's concept of creolization eventually provides an alternative reading to the pessimism that concludes both stories.

Sixty years and a border separate William Faulkner from Carlos Fuentes, yet I have chosen to compare two of their works: Fuentes's short story, "Sons of the Conquistador", collected in *The Orange Tree* (1993), and Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). "Sons of the Conquistador" is a series of alternated monologues, sometimes bordering on dialogue between two of Hernán Cortés's sons: the elder, Martín 2, that the famous conquistador had with La Malinche, a Nahuatl translator, and the youngest, Martín 1, born of a lawful marriage with a white Spanish lady. Fuentes focuses on the relationship between the multiracial heirs of a significant national figure to reflect on Mexican history and race relations, in a fashion similar to Faulkner's endeavour in the last chapters of *Absalom, Absalom!*, where the narrator concentrates on the planter Thomas Sutpen's sons Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen, whose mothers also belong to different races: Charles Bon is the son of Eulalia Bon, a part-Black¹ Haitian planter's daughter who looks white, and Henry is the son of Ellen Coldfield, a merchant's daughter from Jefferson. The stories share a focus on the process of inheriting familial and national legacies—Fuentes focussing on a historical figure and Faulkner on a fictive one—but they present formal differences as well, as Faulkner's (in)famous narrative intricacy is absent from Fuentes's short story.

Yet comparing those two authors is not far-fetched, as it is now well known that Faulkner has been acknowledged as a tremendous influence by many Latin American writers, most notably by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.² Carlos Fuentes recognized Faulkner's input on his work in the essay "The Novel as Tragedy" where he expresses his admiration for the American writer and develops a parallel between Mexico and Faulkner's Mississippi, in which prevails the same "image of defeat, separation, doubt: the image of tragedy" (23). It is indeed their common focus on their native lands and their histories that unites the authors. The United States and Mexico were both built on the dispossession of Indian land, a fact that Fuentes underlines in his essay and develops extensively in the collection *The Orange Tree*. In Fuentes and Faulkner's Souths, the land is central; it has a history that its inhabitants carry, a geography from which they spring and that shapes them: "the being is what is bequeathed, it is a legacy", writes Fuentes (Fuentes 1995, 14-15). With their focus on national history and on the land through the lens of interpersonal relationships, "Sons of the Conquistador" and *Absalom, Absalom!* are two truly American literary works or, as Edouard Glissant would call them, "novels of the Americas". Such works contain "the assumption of history as passion" (Glissant 1991, 81), "a tortured sense of time" (144) as well as "a tortured relationship between writing and orality" (147).³ The "tortured sense of time" is undeniable in the broken chronology of *Absalom, Absalom!*, where the past haunts the present and "abrupt[s]" (AA 175) out of linear history. Fuentes's chronology is more straightforward, but the choice to use the present tense and alternating monologues dramatizes the passing of time.⁴ History and family legacy are experienced as erotic passion in both novels. To these criteria, Barbara Ladd adds her personal reading of Glissant's concept of "transferred space" as meaning that "American 'space' and American 'time' bear the tracks and traces of other places and times, along with the tracks and traces of their violent despoiling" (44). This notion of "transferred space" is of particular

¹ The revelation of Charles's black ancestry is never made certain; as with most of the Sutpen story, it is merely an assumption. See Polk for alternative reasons for Bon's murder (3-4). In this article, I follow Shreve and Quentin's version where Charles Bon's mother is partly Black.

² See Gilard.

³ Partly quoted by Barbara Ladd (44-46).

⁴ "caught in the swirl of time, the American novelist dramatizes it in order to deny it better or to reconstruct it" (Glissant 1991, 145).

interest here as it unites the two stories. Faulkner's American setting bears the mark of Haiti where Charles Bon was born, of Africa from which the Sutpen's slaves (Clytie's mother among them) have been taken, and Europe. This multinational and multiracial mix is then transferred to Fuentes's Mexico where Indian cultures meet colonial Spain—the "revisited" American South that he truly makes his own.

I- Two Rewritings of Foundational Fictions

The motif of the family is used in both stories to prompt a reflection that ranges from a study of affective bonds to the history of race relations. Such a device was very popular in the United States and Latin America and gave birth to a lasting literary trend that Doris Sommer calls "foundational fiction". In "Foundational Fictions: When History Was Romance in Latin America", Sommer analyses how "this natural and familial grounding along with its rhetoric of productive eroticism provides a model for apparently non-violent national consolidation during periods of internecine conflict" (111-112). More broadly, foundational fictions are "fictions [that] fused romance with nation-building through the depiction of erotic unions that constituted idealized projections of the coming together of a people otherwise divided by race, class, region, or party line" (Van Delden 59). Such fictions were unsurprisingly popular in the Americas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fuentes and Faulkner's stories are set during periods of particular national significance threatened by internecine conflicts: the Conquest of Mexico and the Civil War were times of intense reflection on the fate of the colony or nation, as well as times of racial mixing, a topic evoked through the story of interracial families. The paternal figures of the stories are depicted as founding fathers in troubled times. Cortés is the conquistador of the title; as for Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, if he is of a lesser national importance, he heroically stops a slave revolt in Haiti and builds a plantation out of nothing: as God created the world, he is pictured commanding "Be Sutpen's Hundred" (AA 9). His influence and legacy are such that he is imagined to be everyone's father when Quentin Compson—unrelated to the Sutpens—wonders if "maybe it took [...] Thomas Sutpen to make all of us" (AA 261).

In *The Romance of Race*, Jolie Sheffer studies a subgenre of foundational fictions, racial romances. She explains the reason behind the popular trope of the nation-as-family in America: "familial rhetoric circulated widely, not despite racial difference, but because of it. The language of familial ties—of sisters and brothers—served to justify American superiority to other nations, as well as to naturalize U.S. policies (slavery, Indian removal, imperial conquest) toward diverse peoples" (12). Such rhetoric was applied to Mexico, sometimes called the "Sister Republic" of the United States, where racial divides also ran deep. The colonial family allegory is echoed in "Sons of the Conquistador" where the Mexicans are called "the Crown's stepsons" (SC 83), thus highlighting their subjection to Spain. The portrayal of the nation as family was multifaceted: it was used to entrench racial and gender inequalities as well as to promote a more diverse nation, where Blacks, American Indians⁵ and whites would be true equals.

⁵ I use the word "American Indians" to refer to the Indigenous populations of South America when the tribe is not specified, because Fuentes uses "Indians" rather than "Natives" and "American Indians" is one of the terms

Fuentes and Faulkner's stories echo foundational fictions and racial romances but are not part of either of these earlier trends: the authors cast a critical gaze on idealized and overtly partisan national romances. *Absalom, Absalom!* as such is not strictly a foundational fiction but is heir to the popular tradition of racial romance as it portrays several interracial couples: Thomas Sutpen and his first wife, his son Charles Bon and his daughter Judith, and his two sons together. The union between Thomas Sutpen and Eulalia Bon is a racial romance with a twist, as the ensuing son seemingly causes the downfall of the Sutpen dynasty, of which only a biracial "idiot" (AA 214) survives. If the focus of *Absalom, Absalom!* is on interracial erotic unions, it does not depict idealized nation building, but rather national collapse, if the South can be called a nation. Fuentes's story, which questions the heritage left by Hernán Cortés, is both a rewriting of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and of a foundational fiction.

The inspiration Fuentes drew from Faulkner is especially visible in the choice to focus on the sons of the patriarch, rather than on Cortés or a heterosexual couple, which was the norm in foundational fictions. Indeed, in *Absalom, Absalom!* the final chapters mostly deal with the relationship between the two half-brothers, through the lens of Shreve and Quentin's tale. Those chapters herald "Sons of the Conquistador", which is a close up on the brothers: this original take on foundational fictions highlights the focus on the burden of heritage. The foundational romance has already taken place: Cortés had a son with La Malinche and Thomas Sutpen had one with Eulalia. The biracial elder son in each case has white siblings: Martín 2's brother is Martín 1, Judith and Henry Sutpen are born years after Charles. Faulkner chooses to pursue the romance among the Sutpen children themselves: Charles Bon, who is not publicly known as Sutpen's son, becomes friends with Henry and ultimately begins to court their sister Judith. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the racial romance is thus repeated and multiplied in the next generation. In the second generation, the main love interest is supposedly Judith Sutpen, who at different points of the story is the object of incestuous desire from her two brothers. Clytie, the daughter of Thomas Sutpen and one of his slaves, is part of another triad with her sister Judith and Rosa Coldfield, but she is never considered as a potential object of love or desire by her half-brothers. Her own feelings are likewise ignored.

The love triangle between the Sutpen siblings is intertwined with a second one when Charles's marriage to an unnamed octoroon woman from New Orleans is revealed. This second triangle fits into a popular trope of racial romance: to illustrate the dilemma often experienced by biracial people—rising up in the world by passing as white or remaining within their subjugated non-white community—they are often confronted with a choice between two love interests, a white man and a black man (the main protagonists of those stories are usually female). The white fathers, Sutpen and Cortés, are also mixed in a biracial love triangle, but their choices are the same: they choose the white woman. Charles's choice is never known: he is killed as he enters Sutpen's Hundred in order to join Judith to whom he wrote a love letter but, in the locket she gave him, he replaced her picture with that of his morganatic octoroon wife. Charles Bon therefore remains in between, caught in the tragic condition of the "mulatto" between two communities.⁶ If his racial status remains undetermined, he is acknowledged as a Sutpen in death, buried by Judith in the family plot.

currently favored by The National Museum of the American Indian. Martín 2 is referred to as being either Indian or *mestizo*.

⁶ On the figure of the "tragic mulatta" in Faulkner, see Roberts.

A similar triangle occurs in “Sons of the Conquistador”, where the brotherly bond between the two Martíns is threatened by a dear friend of Martín 1 named Alonso de Avila. The incestuous homoeroticism between the half-brothers of *Absalom, Absalom!* is displaced onto the relationship between Martín 1 and Alonso, fraught with vicarious desire. As the relationship between Charles and Henry Sutpen was mediated by Quentin and Shreve, the one between Martín 1 and Alonso is pictured through the brother’s eyes, who describes a textbook “triangular desire” relationship⁷ in which one desires an object because it is wanted by another: their lovers are “female vessel[s]” (AA 108) in the same way Mr Compson imagined Judith to be between her brothers. The two conquistadores “admir[ed] each other more than they admired the women they courted. They competed to conquer a beautiful lady only in order to imagine her in the arms of the other” (SC 72). The erotic aspect of their relationship is emphasized by Alonso’s feminization: “There was no one more seductive, of course, than Alonso de Ávila”, says the second brother, “only the whitest women were as white as Alonso de Ávila” (SC 71). When Alonso is executed at the end of the story, Martín 1 is stricken with grief: “Are you condemning me to live without you? Condemning me to live desiring you, regretting everything that wasn’t?” (SC 91) The paraphrasis “everything that wasn’t” is deliberately ambiguous as it refers both to their love and their joined attempted rebellion against Spain’s sovereignty. National destinies are thus entangled in family bonds and erotic desire.

II- The Erotics of Family

Absalom, Absalom! mixes the taboo of miscegenation with that of incest. Incest was often used as a concept to criticize miscegenation, especially by eugenicists in the nineteenth century (Sheffer 15). Miscegenation is purposely the reason why Henry Sutpen kills his half-brother, who was about to combine the sin of incest with that of racial mixing by marrying his white half-sister Judith. The plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* seems to depict such unwanted genetic effects of racial mixing: Jim Bond, Charles’s Bon grandson, is described as a congenial “idiot”, a “hulking slack-mouthed saddle-colored boy” (AA 214). Yet, the conflation of opposite ways to extend one’s family (endogamy and exogamy) was used with various ideological ends in mind: in his thorough chapter “Incest and Miscegenation”, Werner Sollors shows that the two motifs are to be found in abolitionist and pro-slavery literature alike. As explained by Sheffer, the purpose of racial romances that did value racial mixing was usually “to underscore the familiarity of racial difference” (3) as well as “the failure to recognize existing interracial family ties” (16). In Faulkner and Fuentes, the white father is guilty of not respecting the rule of primogeniture by preferring his white son: “I am the firstborn but not the heir. I should be Martín the First but I’m merely Martín the Second”, the *mestizo* Martín complains (SC 51). Similarly, Charles Bon, the eldest, is not the Sutpen heir; when Henry tells him that he, Charles, is the oldest, Bon answers: “No. He has never acknowledged me. [...] You are the brother and the son” (AA 349). Henry is Judith’s brother, not Charles’s: the lack of paternal recognition, a staple of racial romance, paves the way for incest in Faulkner’s novel. Simone Vauthier highlights the responsibility of the father that does not “transmit with his surname what Jacques Lacan calls the-Name-of-the-Father, i.e. the universal Law that prohibits incest” (qtd. in Sollors 317). In Shreve’s version of the story, Charles’s pursuing of his half-sister is truly a desire for

⁷ As defined by René Girard.

paternal recognition. He would be ready to renounce Judith Sutpen if her father sent a lock of his hair or a paring of a nail, which, for Bon, would be an acknowledgment of his origin, and is also what lovers send to their beloved.⁸ He is pictured promising to renounce Judith (“Yes. I will renounce her; I will renounce love and all”) to take his father’s “love” and “acknowledgement in secret” (AA 327). In “Sons of the Conquistador”, the relationship between the two Martíns is free of incestuous overtones because their common ancestry is well known. Nevertheless, incest is not absent from the story as Fuentes chooses to displace it onto the relationship between Alonso and Martín 1 where Alonso is both a brother and a father figure: their relationship echoes the bond between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, the older brother he admires. At some point, Alonso whispers in his friend’s ear, “I love you like a brother” (SC 74), but he is the one who tries to convince Martín 1 to pursue his father’s work towards the independence of Mexico; Martín 1 calls him “mi compadre” (Fuentes 2001, 144), but the mention of the father is lost in the English translation (“my dear friend” SC 89).

The possibility of incest introduced by Quentin and Shreve means the union between Judith and Charles must be prevented to avoid reproduction. Paradoxically, if this union should not be consummated, the relationship between the two lovers is strengthened by their familial bond as love between siblings is perceived as natural. Following racial romances, I argue that interracial incest in *Absalom, Absalom!* is not only a condemnation of miscegenation but also a way to evoke a greater taboo: interracial love. Judith and Charles are rumoured to be engaged but their relationship is only known through hearsay, Charles’s letter to Judith and the imaginative interpretations of the narrators. Ironically, it is the Southern Compsons and Rosa Coldfield, all racially prejudiced, that dwell on the possibility of real love between Charles and Judith: the explanation for forgoing racial prejudice is simple, as they ignore that Bon may have black blood. Only Quentin knows, but his incestuous love for his sister Caddie that drives him to suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* may have overcome his ingrained unease towards miscegenation. He disagrees with Shreve’s version in which Judith is nothing but a way for Charles to force his father to recognize him as his son: “But it’s not love” (AA 322). Quentin’s belief in true romantic love between the siblings is comforted by Bon’s letter to Judith, which betrays intimacy if not love. There is no address nor signature, which implies Judith will recognize Bon’s writing from previous letters; the tone is allusive, and Charles insists on the plural pronoun, “*We have waited long enough. You will notice how I do not insult you either by saying I have waited long enough*” (AA 131). The concluding sentence is a convoluted expression of belief in their common future: “*I now believe that you and I are, strangely enough, included among those who are doomed to live*” (AA 132). The importance of the letter for Judith is visible in her desire to preserve it after her death. She hands the letter to Mrs Compson after Charles’s murder hoping that the letter can be “something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday (AA 127). According to her logic (which echoes Bon’s), their love did exist *because* it is now dead. Despite numerous attempts to silence the possibility of true love between Judith and Charles, the peculiar love letter is a powerful testimony of this attachment since it emanates directly from the protagonists, unlike the many speculations from the storytellers.

According to Quentin and Shreve, Henry’s opposition to Charles marrying his sister is not based on the obstacle posed by incest. After purposely learning their family ties, Henry declares: “But kings have done it! Even dukes! There was that Lorraine duke named John

⁸ Philip Weinstein remarks that “these are the materials of a narrative of unrequited love” (146).

something that married his sister. The Pope excommunicated him but it didn't hurt! It didn't hurt! They were still husband and wife. They were still alive. They still loved!" (AA 342). The numerous exclamative sentences and repetitions reflect his struggle, but he eventually accepts this union. Imagining this surrender to incest, the narrating characters must then blame miscegenation for Henry's crime, the killing of his beloved brother and friend. Miscegenation then appears to be the unbreakable taboo with which Henry cannot reconcile. This struggle to accept incest, one of the few cultural taboos said to be universal (Lévi-Strauss 14), highlights the absurdity of the racial prejudice that spells the end of Charles Bon.

This "overt [...] acceptance of the deed of incest" (Sollors 314) was recurrent in interracial literature and not specific to Faulkner's novel. Faulkner however distances himself from nineteenth-century foundational fictions by masterfully intertwining the perspectives on the Sutpen story (told at turns by Rosa Coldfield, Mr Compson, his son Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon), which multiplies interpretative possibilities. All the different romantic combinations between the three siblings are evoked, down to the trope of the interracial couple made of the tragic mulatta and the white heir when Clytie and Henry die together, not unlike tragic lovers, after she set fire to the Sutpen house. For Shreve and Mr Compson, Judith is either a tool to get to Charles's father or merely "the woman vessel" (AA 108), a "girlname" (AA 119) in the love story between the two brothers. In *Doubling and Incest*, John Irwin describes Bon's intended marriage to Judith "as a vicarious consummation of the love between Bon and Henry" (77-78). In Shreve's imaginative reconstruction of Charles kissing Judith for the first time, he does it as a brother would, without passion (AA 330). Shreve, as a young, likely inexperienced bachelor, is unable to imagine a loving, heterosexual relationship; his version of the love story between Charles and Judith is bland and stereotypical: after their first kiss, Charles is pictured dismissing Judith with these words: "Go. I wish to be alone to think about love" (AA 333). On the contrary, Shreve imagines a complex and passionate relation between the two brothers that is loaded with the same homoerotic ambiguity as in his own relationship with his roommate Quentin. Beyond Shreve's possible homosexual feelings, his dismissal of the couple Charles-Judith is a dismissal of miscegenation, the implicit potential of any interracial heterosexual relationship.

Werner Sollors rightly points out that, in *Absalom, Absalom!* "Faulkner weighs the force of incest and miscegenation, both separately and in tandem." (330) and that "*Absalom, Absalom!* 'talks back' to the thematic traditions of interracial literature [and] calls attention to its narrative conventions by juxtaposing them against each other" (334-335). The multiple possibilities make drawing a definitive interpretation impossible. In his own rewriting of foundational fictions, Fuentes separates miscegenation from incest, yet follows Faulkner's choice to focus on the relationship between the brothers.

III- Sterility and Creolization

The emphasis in both stories on the homosocial and the homoerotic is antithetic to the very purpose of foundational fictions which is to "to establish conjugal and productive unions which represent national unification" (Sommer 130). In Fuentes and Faulkner's stories, interracial unions fail to be productive in the second generation. The marriage between Judith and Charles does not take place; Martín 2 dies childless, and it is likely the "idiot" Jim Bond

will do the same.⁹ On a factual level, the bonds between brothers, embodiments of multiracial cultures attempting to come to terms with themselves, appear to be doomed by paternal mistakes and failures. Henry kills Bon, reportedly to stop the threat of miscegenation, and he dies years later with his half-sister Clytie as their house burns down. Hernán Cortés subjugated the native populations and failed to establish Mexico as an independent nation. His white son attempts to follow in his footsteps but is imprisoned with his brother for a failed coup and both are eventually exiled to Spain. In exile, Martín 2 dreams of being back in Mexico in his mother's arms. The stories end with the biracial descendants that do not become founding fathers in their turn: the bellows of Jim Bond in the night and Martín 2's final musings mark the end of their short-lived multiracial families. Both works are cases of failed foundational fictions, what Thomas Genova calls "frustrated nation-building" (76) in his study on Villaverde's racial romance *Cecilia Valdés*.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the derogatory depiction of Jim Bond (Charles's grandson) as a "creature which bellowed" (AA 375) seems to deny what Barbara Ladd calls the "regenerative possibilities of créolisation" (45) in her article on Faulkner and Glissant. Jim Bond, whose surname bears the history of the enslavement of non-white people, is described as mentally-impaired in an undeniably racist portrait. He is the son of Charles Valéry Bon, himself the son of Charles Bon and his octoroon wife. The young Charles Valéry was educated at Sutpen's Hundred by Judith and Clytie after his father's death; he eventually rebelled and married an illiterate Black woman, which is equated to a rejection of his white ancestry. Jim, "the hulking slack-mouthed saddle-colored boy" (AA 214) is said to be "the scion, the last of his race" (AA 376), yet according to Shreve his type will in time "conquer the western hemisphere" (AA 378) and Bond's surname signals towards the familial and social bonds he will possibly forge.¹⁰ However, Shreve's prophecy sounds more like a curse spelling the end of the white race than an endorsement of interracial unions. In Fuentes's short story, Martín 2 is humiliated at the end; mocked for being the son of La Malinche, he is stripped naked, tied to a donkey and paraded through the streets before being thrown in jail. Yet, it is in the dirty streets of Mexico City that he meets the female equivalent of Jim Bond in a "misshapen" American Indian woman who tells him that they belong to the same people: "You're my brother. You're the fucking son of *la chingada*" (SC 89). The vulgarity, the insulting term designating La Malinche and the insistence on the filth of Mexico do not diminish the endorsement of a diverse Mexican people: Martín 2 is depicted as the brother of the Mexican nation to be because he is of Indian descent. Similarly, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Valérie Loichot blames "the expelling of the Caribbean as origin" on "the evacuation of the Haitian mother's body", as "Eulalia Bon's body remains mute" (119). The emphasis on Martín 2's mother, rather than on his disgraced father, echoes what is said about Jim Bond in Faulkner, that he would not care being Charles Valéry Bon's son because Jim "had inherited what he was from his mother and only what he could never have been from his father" (AA 215), which is a beautifully-crafted sentence summing up the tragic fate of biracial people in the segregated South. The words "mulatto" or "mixed-race" are never used to describe Jim Bond or his ancestors. When the Justice Jim Hamblett realises that Charles Valéry Bon has black blood, his horror is due to his inability to put Charles Valéry in a racial category:

⁹ In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner evokes the forced sterilization often practiced on mentally disabled people.

¹⁰ I thank Frédérique Spill for pointing this out.

“I say, a white man, a white—” [...] he looking at the prisoner now but saying “white” again even while his voice died away as if the order to stop the voice had been shocked into short circuit, and every face in the room turned toward the prisoner as Hamblett cried, “What are you? Who and where did you come from?” (AA 203)

When Hamblett fails to categorise Bon’s son, he attempts to know his origin because he is unable to fathom that an interracial man may have been raised in a Southern planter’s house. The unwillingness to acknowledge interracial people is characteristic of the discourse of miscegenation, which “places all ‘nonwhite’ groups in the category of blackness”, as stated by Emron Esplin (271). This denial of interracial unions in the United States contrasts with the acknowledgment of racial mixing or *mestizaje* in Mexico: in Fuentes’s story, Martín 2 is said to be a *mestizo*. Following a similar line of argument, Doris Sommer asserts that “the term *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, is grossly violated in English translation as miscegenation. The process is embraced in Hispanic America as a sign of national unity and progress” (125). Sommer’s analysis is rather optimistic, yet racial mixing is indeed pictured in a more positive light in Fuentes’s story than in Faulkner’s, where Shreve’s racist disdain for Bond is the last version of the story that we hear; it seems that unresolved racial tensions prevent to even dream of a unified, multiracial nation in the early twentieth century. In “Sons of the Conquistador”, the white Martín knows he needs his *mestizo* brother, even though he calls him “the least seductive of men”: “You, Martín Cortés, the *mestizo*, the son of the shadows. Without you, I could do nothing in this land”, to which his brother adds: “We are the new country” (SC 83), “we” referring to the sons of Hernán Cortés, white and *mestizo*. Martín 2 realises that, despite his humiliation after the failed coup, he will prevail over Mexico, as Jim Bond will over the West: “subjugated as I am: I am the majority” (SC 98), says Martín. This embrace of his mixed origins is linked with the defining role of the mother in Fuentes’s short story: Martín 2 loves and admires his mother, whereas, in Faulkner, Eulalia Bon’s part is limited to a revengeful figure invented by Shreve, while Jim’s and Clytie’s Black mothers are not even named.

Despite the more positive depiction of *mestizaje* in Fuentes’s story, the concept continues to baffle the narrators of “Sons of the Conquistador” until the end: “I don’t understand how a nation is born” (SC 100) concludes the biracial brother as the fate of Mexico remains uncertain. He voices the hesitation and lack of certitude prevailing in both stories: Martín 2 cannot assert that the Jim Bonds will find their way out of the plantation or that the Mexican Indians will stand equal to their white brothers. Both stories end on the image of an agonizing, “suffering land” (SC 100), scarred by fraternal conflicts.

What remains, then, of the idealism of foundational fictions in Faulkner and Fuentes’s versions? Despite their disillusion, they chose to “revisit” the history of their countries through the story of a family. *Absalom, Absalom!*’s foundational failure should not let us forget the fact that Quentin and Shreve try desperately to make an interracial foundational fiction of the tragic story of a family while there is no proof that Charles Bon had black blood or that he was truly Thomas Sutpen’s son. Ultimately, Quentin and Shreve, the two Martíns, and Faulkner and Fuentes choose to tell stories of brotherhood, to entertain the dream of interracial fraternity, if only for a moment.

IV- The “meeting of word and flesh”

Significantly, Fuentes chose to retain and strengthen the erotic dimension of foundational fictions despite the absence of lovers as such. Like Faulkner, he turned the “productive eroticism” (Sommer 111), that is aimed at reproduction in foundational fictions, into productive, erotic storytelling. Carlos Fuentes admired William Faulkner for turning “erotic passion into a meeting place: a meeting of word and flesh” (Fuentes 1995, 30). In both stories, the erotic is where the two brothers’ voices meet, where national and familial destinies collide. Linguistic cooperation is rooted in desire: the French translator of Fuentes’s fiction, Céline Zins, says that “for Fuentes, language possesses a primal, telluric strength, linked with desire, an eminently erotic function”¹¹ (Fuentes 2001, 15, my translation). This erotic nature of language can be traced back to Mexican history and the Mexican couple formed by Cortés and the translator La Malinche. Fuentes’s writing is characterized by a certain straightforwardness that sets him apart from Faulkner’s intricacy, yet both authors “negotiate weddings in words” (Matthews 584) between their characters and their speech.

In Fuentes, the juxtaposed monologues reflect the father’s duality but also the cohabitation of two languages, Castilian and Nahuatl, the native tongue of La Malinche. The two languages and the two voices are sometimes opposed: when the brothers disagree with one another, they end the dialogue and consciously switch from the second to the third person: “I’m leaving you, Brother. Once again, I relegate you to the third person, not even the second in which, without you deserving it, I’ve been addressing you until now” (SC 65). On the contrary, the choice of the personal pronoun “we” signals brotherly harmony that climaxes when the brothers contemplate their country together:

The land. Yesterday I brought him (my brother the mestizo brought me) to the highest point on Chapultepec, and there I showed him (he showed me) the beauty of this Valley of Mexico.

It was morning, and the cool air announced a hot day. We both knew that the dawn would smell of roses pearly with dew and ripe fruit, open to pour the secret juices of the papaya, the cherimoya, and the guanabana. [...] The lakes dry up and evaporate, but they still mirror the trees newly born next to them, laurels, *pirús*, and weeping willows. The century plants reclaim their ancestral dominance over the dust. And the bluish mountains, the volcanoes crowned with white whirlwinds, the hillsides covered with thick forests, the liquid air, the breath of the sun like an oven, the punctual afternoon shower: all that, we two brothers contemplated one morning (SC 78-79).

This passage is ascribed to the “The two Martíns”, the only occurrence in the story when they speak together. Faced with the land they both love, the brothers progressively become indistinguishable, the third person interchangeable with the first (“I showed him (he showed me)”), until they both think as one (“we both knew”). The landscape they contemplate and describe in Spanish is specifically Mexican, with its native plants (cherimoya, guanabana, *pirús*), recalling Glissant’s statement that “creolisation creates a new land before us” (2011, 18). The newly born trees, that symbolize the Mexican nation to be, grow despite the trials they

¹¹ “La langue a pour Fuentes une force primordiale, tellurique, liée au désir, une fonction éminemment érotique” (Zins 15).

face (“the lakes dry up”). Immersed in the harmony of Mexican nature, Martín 1 at last embraces his *mestizo* brother: they are one and they are two (“we two brothers”). The epiphany is encouraged by the voice of the land to which the brothers listen: “Listen to what the land says” (SC 79). That voice is a chorus of Castilian and Nahuatl that “end up blending together” (SC 80), a mix of “voices fus[ing] to sing together in the fleeting passage of life” (*ibid*). As the two brothers cooperate, the two languages, that of the conquered and that of the conqueror, unite and herald the formation of Mexican Spanish. This linguistic union is an illustration of creolization: to differentiate it from mere *métissage* (cross-breeding), Glissant quotes the example of creole languages, the synthesis of at least two linguistic areas that “results in a new kind of expression” (2011, 13).

Absalom, Absalom! proposes a similar reflection on language as the combined product of several voices. However, as it is not rooted in the land and not supported by a common love for their country, the linguistic union that occurs is much more fragile. Language is described as “a meagre and fragile thread [...] by which the little surface corners and edges of men’s secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then” (AA 251). If the harmony in the Mexican landscape was also said to be “fleeting”, the brothers remain hopeful, asserting that “the singing ends without ending” (SC 81). In Faulkner’s novel, the evanescent moment of linguistic unity occurs during the “marriage of speaking and hearing” (AA 316) between Shreve and Quentin, when they discuss the matter of love between the three Sutpen siblings. The aborted union between Judith and Charles is enacted between the two friends at the level of the narrative: the metaphor of marriage signals a degree of narrative intimacy unmatched elsewhere in Faulkner. Shreve and Quentin’s voices intertwine to the extent that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish who is talking:

It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal (AA 303)

Despite their different geographical origins (Quentin is from Mississippi, Shreve from Canada), their voices merge into one. However, if Quentin and Shreve identify with the Sutpen brothers (“four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry” AA 334), the linguistic union is limited to the white intradiegetic narrating characters. The two sets of brotherlike friends, Shreve and Quentin, and Charles and Henry, fail to unite around a shared vision of the land.

Yet, if the story does not end with a multiracial family inhabiting a creole country, it does not mean that creolization does not occur. Loichot speaks of “a shared geography of blood” (123) in Faulkner’s novel, which I believe is a version of creolization. Sutpen’s Hundred, like the story of *Absalom*, starts as blank slate, a white “virgin land” (AA 301). As the different narrating voices “visit” it, it becomes what Martín 2 calls “a written land” (SC 100); Faulkner’s South, like Fuentes’s Mexico, is shown to be a creolized region at the crossing of different cultures. The land was stolen to a drunken Indian and it is where creole characters from New Orleans and Haiti meet African slaves and white planters of European descent. This bubbling creolization, however, is short-lived. Jacques Pothier speaks of “creolized gothic” in *Absalom, Absalom!*, defined by “a weakening of the common set of perceptions and inter-relations, of

received sets of oppositions” (13); he argues that “the Gothic character of this novel is largely due to the haunting presence of a Latin Caribbean otherness, Spanish or French” (8). Faulkner’s version of creolization is dark and unsettling; it does not feature Glissant’s optimism or even Fuentes’s tentative hope. The creole presence of Jim Bond haunts the plantation as if to curse the segregated South, but also to remind us that he, like the South, are the products of “a meeting of word and flesh”, to quote Fuentes again. Faulkner’s South is a haunted land, but also a revisited space, fertilized by a collaborative story that turned it into a creolized country—embodied at the end by the sole figure of Jim Bond. In “Sons of the Conquistador”, Jim Bond is given a voice in Martín 2, the voice of a land that suffered, but lives on. Martín’s last words express the ultimate creolization, the union of the multiracial son with the land: “My skin is a field. My wrinkles and my veins are plowed fields, accidents of the land. My bones are rocks. The lines on my palm are skin, field, and paper. Written land, suffering land as sensitive as a skin, inflammable as a codex” (SC 100).

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