Gates and Doors and Metaphors:
Materiality and (Dis)Embodied Sexuality in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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It may be, as T. S. Eliot wrote, that the property of a great work is its ability to communicate before it is understood. In his 1963 study *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, Cleanth Brooks reminds us of Eliot's definition and then goes on to say: "*Absalom, Absalom!* passes this test triumphantly. It has meant something very powerful and important to all sorts of people and who is to say that, under the circumstances, this something was not the thing to be said to that particular reader?" (295). This is not to say that the reader is everything and the text only a mirror for what the reader wants to see in it, but rather, that is Brooks's way (and mine) of acknowledging the difficulties in arriving at anything like a static or definitive analysis of the book. It is also a way of acknowledging that this book can speak to you long before you really understand what it is saying. Maybe, too, Brooks is confirming what I have come to believe about the book, which is that it communicates many things all at once, but as readers (and writers), we understand it differently at different times.

Writing about *Absalom, Absalom!*, like reading it, is a difficult task, which is not to say it is not worthwhile. But it helps, I think, to acknowledge that there are complexities here that confound even careful readers and seasoned writers. This is in part because *Absalom, Absalom!* is a book of loose ends, built around absent people with unknowable feelings and motives, in which ongoing conjecture masquerades as narrative reality. Elliptical and fragmentary, told by many voices in a confusing chronology, it leaves the careful reader with more questions than answers.

The starting point for this essay was the question "Why Quentin?" I was in good company for asking this; Quentin asks it himself, wondering why in the world he should have been "summoned" by Rosa

Coldfield to be the recipient of this story (6). Later, in conversation with his father, he twice demands, "Why tell me about it?" (7). Though Rosa and Mr. Compson offer explanations, Quentin disputes them both. But it's a good question: Why *did* Faulkner raise Quentin from his grave and send him back in time to the summer before his suicide in order to collect the pieces of the Sutpen story? The question seemed especially pertinent given that one of the main pre-texts of the novel was a short story, "Evangeline," that is plotted around the same main event (the murder of Charles Bon by Henry Sutpen in order to prevent Bon's marriage to Judith) and contains many of the same characters but is narrated by a reporter named Don. It bears mentioning, perhaps, that in "Evangeline" there is no possibility that Charles Bon is *either* black *or* the brother of Judith and Henry.

Quentin's involvement with the Sutpen story closely precedes his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*, a fact that has led many critics to raise questions: What is the connection? Why would Quentin be so devastated by the events of Sutpen's story that he is robbed of all hope and kills himself shortly after? Starting the process of thinking about this novel, I outlined the parallels between Quentin Compson and Thomas Sutpen: their "tragic innocence," their (self)destruction, and the demands of "the South" on both, or rather the demands made by their internalized interpretations of "the South," which compelled each to create and live within rigid codes or "designs" that ultimately, tragically, failed them. As an aside, I noted that for each man, his design or code was one in which women figured prominently, but as abstractions or passive objects, never as fully human subjects with stories and hopes and designs of their own. Shreve pretty much sums up the view taken of women by the male narrators of the text when he says, without the irony that is so often characteristic of his speech, "a woman . . . didn't need to want or hope or expect anything" (303).

Initially, I also accepted the interpretation of Sutpen's story as "the" story of "the" South and therefore imagined that Quentin was brought back in order to show us what it was about the South that was so de-