

Chivalry and the Cultural Narration of Human Sacrifice in

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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*A theatre for violence and injustice and
bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of
human greed and cruelty, for the
despairing fury of all pariah-interdict and
all the doomed—*

William Faulkner—*Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)

The quote at the beginning of this paper is taken from *Absalom, Absalom!*, written by William Faulkner in 1936, during the era when the nostalgic representation of the Old South hailed the plantation for white Southerners to recall with pride. In that same year, the film *Gone with the Wind* was awarded Hollywood's Oscar for Best Picture of the Year. Both the novel and the film call attention to the romantic images of innocence and the gothic nightmare. But while the film offered an unrealistic, indeed, romantic version of the plantation, where the enslaved are represented as loyal to their masters and most grateful for their servitude, *Absalom, Absalom!* represents the plantation as the site of violence, injustice, and greed.

Yet, of all that has been said and has been written about Faulkner's works, little of it has acknowledged his devastatingly honest revelations about the violent history of racial oppression in the U.S. represented in his novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner wrote the novel in an atmosphere of intense hatred and fear expressed in the legalization of segregation and in the lynching of the African; yet, white male critics continue to consider him a regional writer whose subject surrounds the quaint antics of a bygone era of white Southerners.¹ As Frantz Fanon states, decolonization "is always a violent phenomenon" (*Wretched* 35). Knowledge about cultural, political, and racial identity acquired in the continuing process of Euro-American conquest is not only privileged knowledge but also made to appear the only knowledge worth knowing human existence. *Absalom, Absalom!*'s particular engagement in decolonization process involves the demystification of that knowledge formulated by the ideological interests of Euro-American literary tradition. In this discussion of *Absalom, Absalom!*, I want to argue that the novel's unsettling revelations regarding the literary omissions inherent in the cultural narrative of Southern chivalry (the cavalier and plantation legends), uncover the sacrificial mechanisms that help establish and maintain racial difference in the U.S. In particular, Faulkner's critique of the literary motifs of the romantic and the gothic suggest that they are one and the same mechanisms for legitimizing and justifying the expulsion of plantation reality. Consequently, I contend that behind the façade of the romantic dream is the ideology of white supremacy (innocence). The violence associated with this ideology is concealed within the aberration of the gothic nightmare. Both the romantic dream of innocence and the gothic nightmare, Faulkner shows, are used as a stratagem in which to attribute cultural

violence to the victims of slavery, exploitation, and miscegenation. Thus, by locating the creation of the cultural narrative of chivalry (innocence) at the plantation, Faulkner moves against the grain of U.S. literary tradition to expose its narrative omissions of white violence (sacrifice) as the practice that permits the continuing physical marginalization and murder of the Africana people.

Absalom, Absalom! also establishes that far from being happy and content with slavery or legalized segregation, the Africana has resisted the plantation images of Sambo and Mammy that stand as figurative sacrifices that relegate the Africana (in the actual) to a status less than human. This resistance (as represented by the character Charles Bon) marks the “disruptive forces” in the ideology of innocence, as Faulkner reveals, at the same time, points to the acts of violence sanctioned by the cultural narrative of innocence. Behind those glimpses of the nightmarish gothic apparitions, those “disruptive forces” that begin to creep into the reality of the Southern landscape in the 1920’s and 1930’s, represent real figures of the Africana responding to his or her lived experience in the U.S. For readers of the plantation novel in 1936, *Absalom, Absalom!* makes no attempt to provide a comfort zone in the abstract or in the “idyllic sanctuary” of the Old South since the Old South of the imagination and its reality, Faulkner shows, bares the legacy of the violence of white supremacy. Thus, in the U.S., it is not surprising that *Absalom, Absalom!*, is generally described as “too difficult” for college students, particularly white students to read and to comprehend. I would equate this difficulty to that experienced by white critics whose avoidance of the subject of slavery in discussions of Faulkner’s work replicates that glimpse of the nightmare much omitted in the cultural narrative of innocence.

When Eric J. Sundquist begins to identify Faulkner's use of the gothic in relationship to the racial tension between whites and the Africana, his discussion confines the narrative construction of the "nightmare" to the historical figure of Lincoln and the devastation of the Civil War, thereby limiting Faulkner's concept of Gothicism to a specific location and time. Consequently, most readers would consider this ideology *extreme* and linked to the U.S.'s past. Thus, in *Faulkner: The House Divided*, Sundquist argues that Faulkner's employment of the gothic is an outcome of his (Faulkner's) "at once" (98) embrace and attack of the "nostalgic dream" of chivalry, romanticism in which the cultural construction of the happy enslaved provides the ideological core for the construction of innocence on behalf of white Southerners, slaveholders in particular. Secondly, Sundquist argues that the Gothicism in *Absalom, Absalom!* does not represent the benign dream in which "all coons look alike" but rather represents "the nightmare in which black and white begin all too hauntingly to look alike" (99). I would suggest that Faulkner demonstrates how Gothicism represents an ideology gone wrong. Consequently, Gothicism is the nightmarish hue of Romanticism because, as Faulkner exposes in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the nightmare represents the horrors of historical violence involving conquest and human sacrifice. Whites in the U.S. recognize not their innocence but their fundamental connection to violence in this nightmare!

Absalom, Absalom!'s contribution to the process of demystification focuses on the narrative omissions in the cultural production of literary texts and the practice of literary sacrifice. That is, these omissions simultaneously represent the repression of white violence and the location of the victims of this violence while "innocence,"

espoused in the romanticism of chivalry, remains integral aspect of the culture's ideology. Thus, together, the expulsion of cultural violence and the marginalized Africana people are represented in the aberration that is the gothic nightmare.

From my perspective as an Africana womanist, I recognize that J. Hillis Miller's discussion of *Absalom, Absalom!* in his article entitled "Ideology and Topography in *Absalom, Absalom!*" is fraught with avoidance of those issues surrounding the Euro-American concept of "innocence." Miller suggests that for Faulkner, "ideology is not something abstract and dreamlike, the impalpable confusion of linguistic with material reality" (273). However, he goes on to add that the "confusion is embodied" in the ideology is reflected in the novel itself and is "marked on the bodies of the human beings who are mystified by the ideology" (273). But Miller refuses to name this ideology other than to say it is a "Southern" ideology. Miller, then, is unable to move beyond the word "ideology." It is an "odd word," he writes, one that calls for the authority of the "OED" to define" (253) and a further abstraction of the term. Miller's use of "us" and "reader" further confounds the confusion surrounding ideology in the U.S. He suggests that perhaps the "novel (*Absalom, Absalom!*) may give knowledge about ideology that might help liberate us from it" (269). This representation of ideology, he writes, will force the reader in "a new position where a decision about it may be made, must be made" (269). Failure to name this ideology or to discuss how it marks the bodies of the Africana too, represents a critique at odds with Faulkner's theme of narrative violence in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

To use Miller's words, the ideology of innocence is just such a confusion of "linguistic and material reality" embodied in the psyches of whites as well as the

Africana in this country. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner's focus on its effects on the white psyche renders for his white readership a painful exploration of omitted knowledge about white violence. Rather than further the cooperation and blind acceptance with the status quo, the novel threatens a disruption of hierarchical order, one reader at a time. As an Africana theorist of cultural narratives, my critique of *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses on Faulkner's contributions to uncovering the ideology of innocence because, like Faulkner, it focuses on what is omitted in the narrative account of slavery Quentin Compson (the novel's protagonist) receives from his elders. The history of racial differentiation, of the denial of human rights, and of the murder of Africana people, all omitted knowledge left out of the accounts of slavery, is represented in the corpse of Charles Bon, who, in life and in death presented a unrelenting challenge to the Southern legends of chivalry. The narratives of Rosa Coldfield, Jason Compson (Quentin's father), and Quentin draw circles around a violence that generates the very foundation of white identity and white culture in the U.S. We are speaking of a cultural narrative, to use Marimba Ani's words, that "represents its members as advanced on an evolutionary spectrum" (*Yurugu* 121). Yet, limiting this essay to a discussion of Rosa Coldfield's narrative, I want to suggest that the narrative has at its core this sacrificial omission of white violence; as a result, its romantic and gothic motifs not only reflect the cultural narrative of chivalry but also reproduce the narrative masking of violence that permits a "supremacist concept and allows only for a monolithic reality" (121). Faulkner insists that the ideology of white supremacy and the reality it generates are sustained by narrative omissions of the U.S.'s own catastrophic indulgence in the practice of sacrifice.

Faulkner's diligent effort toward the demystification of these legends of heroes and chivalry is reflected in the way Quentin recognizes, on the one hand, his inheritance of privilege, and on the other hand, the way he is forced to recognize his inheritance of sacrificial mechanisms that result in violence and in death. The reader is asked to consider what Quentin is encouraged by Rosa Coldfield to "remember [. . .] and write about" in her telling of Southern history (*Absalom* 5). In other words, what is it that Quentin, along with "so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen" in "the literary profession (5) will pass along to the next generations of whites in this country. The historian Howard Zinn writes, "there is not a country in world history in which racism has been more important, for so long a time, as the United States" (*A People's History* 23). Long before the first enslaved Africans were transported to the United States of America, on the continent of Africa, Africans enriched the world with the great kingdoms of Ancient Egypt, Zimbabwe, Ashanti, Timbuktu, Mali, to name a few. However, motivated by self-interest of profit and of greed, Europeans invaded the continent en masse, developing, in the process, a hate-filled meta-narrative of Western Civilization that denounced Africans as inferiority beings and proclaimed white superiority. In turn, reduced to less than human status (28), enslaved Africans represented the labor force of a "capitalistic agriculture" (28).

In the heyday of Southern aristocracy, 1820 to 1860, during which "the development and growth of the great South" (*The Mind* 10) depended upon the labor force of African people, "the plantation," Cash writes, "tended to find its center in itself: to be an independent social unit, a self-contained and largely self-sufficient little world of its own" (32) where the planter became slaveholder and "limited only

by his capacity for conjuring up the unbelievable” (45). It was during this period when attention was brought to bare on the continued enslavement of the Africana in the U.S. by Europeans and by the budding Northern industrial complex that, as Cash notes, the novels of Walter Scott became for the South the “inspiration for such extravaganzas as the *opera bouffe* title of “the chivalry” (65). The planter turned cavalier becomes the subject of plantation legend. According to William R. Taylor, these legends established and maintained “a set of popular beliefs about the Southern planter, the plantation family and was assumed to be the aristocratic social system which existed in the South” (*Cavalier* 146). In other words, the narration around the planter and the plantation system has to be purged of guilt and responsibility for the enslavement and exploitation of the Africana. It is not surprising, then, that in the throes of a gothic revival after the Civil War, the hierarchy of racial difference remained in place throughout the U.S., and only the most visible sign of the ideology of white supremacy, the plantation, was dissolved and replaced with the dissemination of the ideology of innocence, evidenced in the legalized segregation of the Africana people.

In cultural literary production, therefore, Southern writers began to portray the Old South and the plantation as an “an idyllic sanctuary” (151). It is there in this figurative image of the plantation that controlling literary motifs of the romantic and the gothic nightmare displaces the cultural violence of slavery. The ideology of innocence is re-invented and re-written to point to an origin of innocence, that is, the plantation itself. Excised is the history of slavery and with it, any trace of the African civilizations

and cultures. In short, the literary practice is a sacrifice of the humanity of the African people.

The history of slavery becomes that “other,” that nightmare, excised, silenced, and supplanted with the nostalgic, “idyllic” image of the Old South. It is this “idyllic” image Rosa Coldfield wants Quentin to remember, for it becomes and must remain the history of the South, as it is rendered in the plantation legends of an old and very innocent landscape purged of violence. Faulkner, on the other hand, reveals that romantic and gothic motifs are the sacrificial mechanisms that legitimized an ideology of innocence before the Civil War and afterward helped to re-establish racial dominance by concealing the collective violence and displacing it onto the victims of enslavement. These sacrificial mechanisms differentiate human beings in a hierarchy of racial order. Ultimately, as Faulkner shows, Quentin is to remember the history of racial differentiation in the U.S., and in the process, he is to engage in the cultural production of the ideology of white innocence for a new generation of citizens.

Beginning with her own body as a presentation of Southern womanhood and her location in proximity to the plantation, Rosa immediately tackles the present dilemma of recreating the Old South’s image of innocence. Thus, when the young Quentin Compson arrives at Rosa Coldfield’s house, the young man is intended to come away with an understanding of what caused the end of the Old South and what course of action, that is, what specific literary skills would be required to effect the restoration of chivalric innocence. For the purposes of instructing Quentin, Rosa must begin her narrative in the hue of the gothic nightmare. Thus, it is 1909, and the elderly Coldfield has surrounded herself with the relics of what she perceives are symbols of the Old

South's innocence. However, in this mausoleum, Faulkner has placed Rosa in her father's office seated in his too tall chair. The wisteria vine "blooming" on "a wooden trellis" (*Absalom* 03) surrounding her home are intended to represent what is peculiar to South, yet Faulkner's placement of these vines at Col. Thomas Sutpen's plantation as well suggest Rosa's connection with not only the institution of slavery but also with its paternalistic order as well. To solidify her connection to the reality of the plantation system, Faulkner has Rosa seated in a "hot airless room with binds all closed and fastened" (3), dressed in the "eternal black [. . .] she had worn for forty-three years" (3). Rosa's subsequent recollection of the slaveholder Thomas Sutpen's first arrival in Jefferson, Mississippi some eighty years earlier, sets the stage for her to imprint in Quentin's and the reader's mind an aberration of gothic horror that sweep through the old south and brought down its fall. Her designated scapegoat in retrospect, Sutpen becomes responsible for "all the evils aboard in the community," and subsequently, "he alone...must assume the consequences for these ills" (*Violence* 77). In turn, Rosa's narrative not only determines Sutpen's guilt but points to his crime!

Sutpen, according to Rosa, was not an aristocratic of the old south; he was not a "gentleman," but something that "came out of nowhere" (*Absalom* 5), a "fiend blackguard and devil" (10), with "faint sulphur-reek still in his hair clothes and beard" (4). In creating her gothic villain, Rosa implicates Sutpen in a betrayal of the ideology of white innocence itself. She charges that upon his arrival in Jefferson, Sutpen delivered to the South enslaved peoples from Haiti. Rosa's narrative omits an explanation about why she considers Sutpen's enslaved "wild niggers" (4), whom she further characterizes as "beast half tamed to walk upright like men" (4). However, as

Mr. Compson (Quentin's father) notes, there was a difference between "'Sutpen's negroes'" (67), the "'wild blood which he [Sutpen] had brought into the country and tried to mix, blend, with the tame which was already there'" (67), were different and foreign. Both Rosa and Mr. Compson imply that the differentiation of the Haitian enslaved pointed a "disruptive force" in that these enslaved recalled a familiar desire for freedom and expressed an agency not acknowledged in the representations of the soothing plantation enslaved who were made invisible within the Sambo and Mammy images rendered in popular plantation novels. Consequently, the enslaved Haitians symbolized a potential threat of violence directed toward the community because, as Rosa notes, they posed the possibility of "contamination." To suggest a "contagion" of what Rene Girard terms "impure" violence as opposed to that violence (white violence) deemed necessary for the restoration of harmony and social order is to apprehend the "awful nightmare of the Santo Domingo massacres" (Taylor 301).² It is not surprising when Rosa recalls how, on U.S. soil, after the bloody uprising of the enslaved led by Nat Turner in 1831 people began "'to frighten each other with tales of negro uprisings'" (*Absalom* 130). The Haitian enslaved efface the "difference between impure violence and purifying violence" (*Violence* 49), and to obliterate difference is, as Girard explains, to invoke "a crisis affecting the cultural order" (49). This cultural order, writes Girard, "is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their 'identity' and their mutual relationships" (49). Thus, in the U.S., the Haitian enslaved, Faulkner shows, hinted at a disturbing image of non-differentiation between themselves and the white community

because, contrary to the narrative of chivalry, their desire for freedom suggested their natural equal as human beings.

Interestingly enough, Sutpen participates as a counter-revolutionary in the Haitian Revolution. Fresh from the southern soil of Virginia's rural Tidewater slums, Sutpen's own desire for wealth and privilege mirrors that of the ideology of chivalry. As Faulkner makes clear, it is an ideology of innocence within the tradition of chivalry that very much depends on slavery and cooperation of the "unfree" in its hierarchal social structure. Sutpen concluded that the only way to combat the aristocratic class was to have what they had: "you got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (*Absalom* 192), he tells General Compson. Consequently, this mimetic recognition of white supremacy he shares with the slaveholding aristocracy puts him in collusion with them rather than against them. Thus, in Haiti, his was the task of overseeing a land "manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation" (202). Sutpen, prepared to defend the sugar plantation he was charged to oversee, could not hear "the air tremble and throb at night with the drums and the chanting" of Haitians cry out for freedom (202). " 'Because of that innocence,' " Sutpen misinterprets the "fear" and "terror" in the planter's display of "gallic rage" (203) and, in turn, joins the counter-revolutionary forces against the Haitians fight for freedom.

As Faulkner's narrative interruptions of chivalry show, violence, that is, sacrifice becomes an independent being, an institution, and a practice for the community who controls its use. It is a way of being powerful in the world and a way of relating to "difference." Faulkner's counter-narrative reveals that Sutpen's decision

to adopt the values and ideology of chivalry draws him to the contagion of violent differentiation. He recounts to General Compson that while still in the U.S. ““all of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew he could never live with himself for the rest of his life”” (178). Before he stepped up to that door and saw the Negro tell him to go to the back door, he did not “even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own” (178). Now in Haiti, his commitment to the ideology of white supremacy was being put to the test. On the familial lever, before the revolt of the Haitians, he dissolves his marriage to the plantation owner’s daughter once he discovered the woman was an octoroon and not Spanish as he was lead to believe. As he recalls to General Compson, this wife of mixed heritage and the child (Charles Bon) “rendered it impossible” for them to be “incorporated” in his “design” (212), which carried a racial distinction between the criteria for wife and for enslaved. Once Sutpen takes up arms against the Haitians, he does so, Faulkner shows, in compliance with the instituted practice of violence, that is, human sacrifice. Thus, in concurrence with Girard’s observation about the relationship between tragedy and violence, Faulkner shows that “tragedy is the balancing of the scale, not of justice but of violence” (*Violence* 45). On a larger scale, his complicity with the hierarchical social and racial differentiation of human beings exemplifies the insidiousness of the ideology of innocence and its impact not only on its victims but also on whites as well. Unlike the Haitians he battles in San Domingo, Sutpen is inspired not by a desire for freedom but by the violent enterprise of

maintaining white supremacy, and as such, he becomes enslaved to the narrative of chivalry, contrary to Rosa's depiction of his difference.

Sutpen's proximity to the first successful revolution of African people in the Americas and his introduction of Haitians to the U.S. soil haunts Rosa's narrative accounting of chivalry because, there, among the intense smell of "burning sugar," Sutpen learns of his "destiny" (*Absalom* 198) not just to rise above those people of color but also to rise above other white men. On his return to the U.S., Sutpen becomes the ideal ambassador for the narrative of chivalry. While her narrative omits any representation of African people as human beings, it also fails to mention Sutpen's friendship with a very "influential" slaveholder, General Compson, Quentin's grandfather. As Quentin discovers later that day, it was General Compson, according to Mr. Compson, "who seemed to have known well enough to offer to lend him [Sutpen] seed cotton for his start, who knew any better, to whom Sutpen ever told anything about his past" (30-31). However, Rosa's account of Sutpen's assault of the land ("tore violently a plantation") (5) omits reference to the cooperation and support of men like her father, Goodhue Coldfield who provides Sutpen further financing for the plantation. Faulkner's narrative states that Sutpen was "not liked [. . .] but he was respected" (57) because he had accomplished the goals of the ideology of white supremacy. What could cause Rosa to suggest his contamination by the Haitians? Sutpen's acquisition of wealth from the profits of slavery in Haiti, of land in the U.S., and of Rosa's older sister, Ellen, for his wife does not differentiate him from other slaveholders in the U.S. Faulkner insists that the town of Jefferson, Mississippi and Rosa in particular challenged not his desire for white supremacy but his open flaunting of its

contradictions represented in the two Haitian women he brings with him from Haiti. One of those women is the mother of his daughter, Clytie, who grows up along side Ellen's children, Henry and Judith. The other issue is that of the omitted narrative of Charles Bon. Both add up to Sutpen's open admission of the practice of miscegenation.

It is not surprising that in Rosa's narrative the "demonic" (4) figure of Sutpen and his slaves coalesce to form a contagious release of violence on the Southern landscape that figures in the practice of miscegenation. Thus, Rosa is compelled to describing for Quentin a virtual gothic nightmare:

a glimpse like the forefront of a tornado, of the carriage and Ellen's high white face within it and the two replicas of his face in miniature flanking her, and on the front seat the face and teeth of the wild Negro who was driving, and he, his face exactly like the negro's [. . .] all in a thunder and a fury of wildeyed horses and of galloping and of dust. (16)

Here is, Faulkner's narrative reveals, Rosa's connection to the ideological practice of innocence. For far from idyllic, this image of horror reveals an uncomfortable association with the ugly reality of chivalric innocence. Rosa wants to impart to Quentin her particular knowledge about the contaminants of the "idyllic sanctuary," those she and others in her culture hold responsible for the ugly marring of culture and its production of literary representations of innocence. Since the contaminants, the Africana people represent that disruptive force which makes writing about the Old South and hearing about the legend of Thomas Sutpen so difficult and painful, the gothic nightmare becomes the motif in which to express the fear and consequences of white engagement with blackness. In Rosa's narrative, Charles Bon's murder is the

“echo” (121) of a shot she does not hear, of the violence she does not see, of the South she cannot accept. She is awakened “into the reality” only briefly to consider not “what used to be,” but “what had not, could not have ever been” (113). She is still “clinging yet to the dream,” when she finds herself running “blind tilt into something monstrous and immobile” (139), “standing before that closed door which [she] was not to enter” (150). The something extended a hand out toward her and touched her shoulder. Remembering what she had been taught as a child—“to instinctively fear” and to “shun,” Rosa “stopped dead” and encountered more than a “woman” and “negro” hand (112). Clytie, whose “Sutpen coffee-colored face” (109) represented, as Rosa recalls,

that debacle which had brought Judith and me to what we were and which had made of her (Clytie) that which she declined to be just as she declined to be that from which its purpose had been to emancipate her, as though presiding aloof upon the new, she deliberately remained to represent to us the threatful portent of the old. (126)

To Rosa, Clytie appears a “perverse inscrutable [. . .] paradox” (126) who “declined” to be free, and “holding fidelity to none like the indolent and solitary wolf or bear” (126). When she raises her hand to slap Clytie aside, Rosa is firmly determined to restore racial and social difference, the disruption of which she registers as a cause for the appearance of the gothic nightmare.

Thus, with Ellen, Henry, and Judith all now dead, Rosa will suffer the association and gossip in order to pass a warning to Quentin about the evils not of slavery and the plantation institution that permitted the idyllic fantasy to be written; but instead, in this image, she issues a warning about the institution’s victims who,

now free, threaten the validity and therefore the restoration of the “idyllic sanctuary.” Quentin is to understand that the legend of Sutpen, which had become “a part of his twenty years’ heritage” (7) is true, but it is a legend that originates from white’s indulgence with blackness (Africana people) rather than from the innocence (chivalry) of the Old South.

Diane Roberts argues that Rosa’s “marginal role” within the Sutpen legend motivates her challenge of the “masculine stories about the South, about history, and about her own ‘embattled virginity’ ” (*Southern* 163).³ However, any characterization of an “embattled virginity” would suggest the state of innocence in the South’s narration of its history and, in turn, it would have to suggest a reflection on those contradictions of innocence, evident in the “masculine stories” of the cavalier slaveholder. To use Deborah McDowell’s phrase, Faulkner represents Rosa as one of the “permanent daughters content to transcribe their father’s words” (*Changing* 137).⁴ Far from representing Rosa, as Roberts suggests, as “an inquisitor, interrogating the masculine versions of the story” (*Southern* 164), Faulkner situates her as the messenger of the past, a spokesperson for a tradition whose message proclaims the “positive good” of slavery. Consequently, for Quentin’s benefit, her first order of duty is to affix herself in the image of a “crucified child” (*Absalom* 4), qualifying herself as an innocent “victim” of the nightmare and projecting, as Thadious M. Davis argues in *Faulkner’s Negro*, “precisely what she has made herself see [. . .] and what she has come to feel after forty-three years of static rage” (194). But, as Faulkner makes clear, Rosa’s racial privilege allows her to benefit both socially and economically from the cultural narrative’s sacrifice of those who represent the narrative’s invading forces of evil. As Faulkner suggests, both Rosa and Sutpen are individuals whose struggles to maintain

their narrative and practical “designs” of racial and social difference mirror the culture’s struggle to maintain the paradoxical idea of white superiority and innocence.

Consequently, Rosa’s memory of innocence links her to the South of the plantations and the carnage of human bondage. Her narrative, like that of the cultural narrative, relies on an invention of the past, of something lost, and in need of restoration. Her memory, then, reflects the cultural narrative of chivalry in that while it deflects white violence through the use of the gothic nightmare, it also re-creates the dream of racial purity. It is not surprising then that in her image of innocence is the dream of racial purity and the violence of racial exclusion. As James A. Snead explains, “a general innocence in white American society: in the first place, innocent or ignorant about the violence that guarantees its sense of identity; secondly, innocent after the prior innocence is outgrown, because it believes that prior innocence can still be feigned” (*Figures* 119).⁵ Thus, Rosa, in recalling her summer visits to the Sutpen Mansion where her sister, Ellen, Judith, and Henry lived provides Quentin with a partial image of the Sutpen plantation, a dreamy surroundings in which time stood still long enough for her to imagine herself as a gentlewoman in a chivalric tale. “Once there was [. . .] a summer of wisteria. It was a pervading everywhere of wisteria (I was fourteen then) as though of all springs yet to capitulate condensed into one spring, one summer” (*Absalom* 115).

The limitations of this image of innocence are notable. It boils down to one summer, one “miscast summer” (116) because how could Rosa have foreseen that Charles Bon, who resembled perfect Southern cavalier gentleman, conjuring up in her mind “an image” of the “idyllic sanctuary” was to cut short her dream, the “fairy-tale

come alive in that garden” (118). For Rosa, it is inconceivable that this dream could contain the racial difference of a Charles Bon. Consequently, at Sutpen’s plantation, Charles Bon, not Sutpen, resembles, for Rosa, a Southern cavalier, as he becomes part of “an image” (118) to conjure up the picture of the idyllic sanctuary.

In the actual, Rosa does not hesitate to sum this memory of innocence for Quentin, even forty years later when she has more than a hint of the violence beneath the surface of this “image” of innocence. Even when she openly questions the validity of her memory of innocence, “why did I not invent, create it?” (118), Rosa is committed to its ideology and its restoration in the New South. At stake is the right to racial and social privilege and to political and economical dominance, which warrants her efforts in the practice of narrative sacrifice. Consequently, however inventive Rosa’s narrative, “pervading everywhere” is the wisteria, Faulkner’s symbol of the pervading violence necessary for the maintenance of this image of innocence. Rosa’s retrospective image of Charles Bon in the garden on Sutpen’s plantation, replicates images of those romantic characterizations of “happy” (because dehumanized) Africana people in plantation legends. Nonetheless, Faulkner reveals that the reality of Charles’s mulatto identity charges Rosa’s narrative with what Girard terms the “effacement of difference” (*Violence* 79), for his presence in her narrative points to a reality of miscegenation (rape) and human sacrifice⁶ at the core of this narrative of innocence. His murder will prompt Quentin to stop listening to her narrative and focus on an image of Henry with a pistol at his side.

As an “effacement of difference,” Charles is, at once, in collusion with the romantic notion of innocence on that he has had limited experience of the Africana

people's existence under legalized segregation in the U.S. On the other hand, he is in the position by his racial mixture to pose a threat to the cultural narrative and social order it renders. An unenlightened Charles appears to the community in Jefferson, Mississippi much like his father, Sutpen. Charles mastered the "swaggering gallant air" and "pompous arrogance" (*Absalom* 57) of a cavalier gentleman. Stripped of his heritage, he is less flesh and blood and more a reflection of Sutpen, the plantation owner and father. Like Rosa, Charles's ignorance of his heritage and the racial ideology that draws him from Haiti to Mississippi makes for a good image of innocence, because it is an image that removes the threat of retaliation and thus the feeling of guilt on the part of the white readership. Rosa's attempt to use this image of Charles would suit the requirements of her limited representation of the innocence of the Old South. Slavery and miscegenation are omitted (repressed) in this romantic image of innocence. However, Faulkner's narration shows that the source for the process of demystification is one and the same source for the image of innocence itself. However indulgent he is of the privilege of passing as innocent, Charles's racial identity and his familial connections to the Sutpens represent the gothic aberration not only within Rosa's narrative but also within Sutpen's "design." Charles's identity is not a secret to Thomas Sutpen, and he is not willing to assign value to Charles, naming him son and heir of the plantation. In turn, Charles is Sutpen's aberration of a gothic nightmare and, therefore, must be omitted in Rosa's account of the Old South and its innocence, because Charles's presence requires a physical and violent response from Sutpen.

As one and the same aspects of Southern chivalry, the gothic nightmare and romantic innocence bind Rosa's narrative ideology to Sutpen's practical solution for the

removal of racial impurities. When Charles's desire for recognition from his father Thomas Sutpen prompts him to pose as a suitor for his half sister Judith, he waits for a letter Sutpen and erroneously imagines that the father will write: "He will write" a letter that would just have to say " 'I am your father. Burn this' and I would do it" (261). Yet, no letter arrives because, as Faulkner suggest, the act of "writing" Charles away from the family and community as a sacrifice must be enforced through his physical removal—death. In turn, Charles's death, then, paves the way for Rosa to use his image of innocence for her and the community's best interest. The more Charles desires a secret "acknowledgement" (251) from the father, the more visible he becomes to Sutpen and the more invisible he becomes within Rosa's narrative. The latter can only record the "'shot heard only by its echo'" (123) and then remember the "'full weight of the coffin'" (122). The omitted history of white violence (sacrifice) that Rosa's narrative cannot record explicitly, is that history that Faulkner has Quentin imagine between the gothic and romantic shifts in narration.

Emerging, as his mother before him from "that state of blessed amnesia" (251), Charles's conscious awakening coincides with that of millions of African people who threw off the shackles of slavery and forgetfulness.⁷ As Faulkner shows, the reality of his situation comes to him through Henry, for it is through Henry's eyes, Quentin imagines, that the now enlightened Charles sees himself a "shadow" of a human being. Faulkner shows that when Charles becomes a witness to the tragedy of "hatred" and "outrage" then he is able to recognize that Sutpen can only recognize him as nigger and not son. Recognized by Sutpen as his "mistake," Charles must be expelled in order to

purge the community of the all too revealing violence of miscegenation. Thus, Sutpen explains to General Compson the necessity for Charles's death:

[E]ither I destroy my design with my own hand, which will happen if I am forced to play my trump card, or do nothing, let matters take the course which I know they will take and see my design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such fashion as to be a mockery and a betrayal.' (220)

When forced to "play his last trump card" or "do nothing" (220), Sutpen, orders Henry to carry out the murder of his brother: "I have seen Charles Bon, Henry" (282). "He must not marry her, Henry. His mother's father told me that her mother had been a Spanish woman. I believed him; it was not until after he was born that I found out that his mother was part Negro" (283).

In Faulkner's demystification of chivalric innocence, the sacrificial mechanisms of romanticism and Gothicism reveal to Quentin a haunting representation of reality. Faulkner's narrative finally permits the foundational reality of white violence (sacrifice) to be come visible in an image of Henry "hatless, with his shaggy bayonet-trimmed hair, his gaunt worn unshaven face, his patched and faded gray tunic" (172), facing Judith with the "pistol still hanging against his flank" (172):

'Now you can't marry him.'

'Why can't I marry him?'

'Because he's dead.'

'Dead?'

'Yes. I killed him.' (172)

In this naked image of white violence, Quentin becomes witness to the knowledge of greed and bloodshed that allows for the establishment of chivalric innocence. Several months later, at Harvard, he sees himself as Henry standing before Charles and hearing Charles utter and him and Henry, “[s]o it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear” (185). Thus, in this ultimate scene of the reality underneath the dream and nightmare motifs of cultural narratives in the U.S., Faulkner makes central to understanding *Absalom, Absalom!* the encounter between white violence and the Africana people’s desire to exist.

Absalom, Absalom! establishes Faulkner as anything but a regional writers. In short, the novel reflects Faulkner’s contemplation and critique of the very foundation of white identity and culture in the U.S. The cultural narrative’s omissions of sacrifice (white violence and the history of slavery) are Faulkner’s return to the sacrificial mechanisms of romantic innocence and gothic nightmare at the foundation of the Euro-American literary tradition.

Notes

¹ See Cleanth Brooks’s *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

² William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and the American National Character* (New York: Oxford Press, 1993).

³ Diane Roberts, *Faulkner and the Southern Womanhood* (Athens: University Press of Georgia, 1994).

⁴ Deborah E. McDowell, *“The Changing Same”: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁵ James A. Snead, *Figures of Division: William Faulkner’s Major Novels* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

⁶ Charles’s incestuous threat to marry his sister Judith foregrounds his implicit desire for recognition from and inclusion in the Sutpen family.

⁷ In his article, “Faulkner and Parades,” Ramon Saldivar argues that as a racially mixed Haitian, Charles Bon’s identity is far more problematic in the U.S. culture:

The category of the racially mixed mulatto and the many other gradations of mixed race mestizaje, problematic as it remains for both Afro- and Hispano-Caribbean colonial societies, nevertheless represent historically a class of racialized identity that is neither black nor white but distinct, even if determined in the last instance by its racial pedigree. No such distinction holds in the context of American Southern racism, where one drop of African blood makes one totally black, as, later, Sutpen to his peril will decisively understand. American slavery and class structures do effectively create identities formed on the basis of dividing lines between master and slave or landlord and tenant, but Haitian colonial society

acts as if the division were precise, all the while living the experiential blur between the two. At least in some instances, notably in the legitimation of mixed-blood mulatto through the legalisms of marriage and property rights, Haitian colonial society, for all its limitations, allows for the complicated experiential reality of racial difference. Phillip M. Weinstein, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to William* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 104).

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