“listen to them being ghosts”:
The Ethics of Spectrality in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Introduction

In a 1956 interview with Jean Stein, William Faulkner famously intimated his artistic ethos: "The goal of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means, and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life" (80). Here, Faulkner twice defines "motion," which can be read simultaneously as the progression of time, the narration of stories and histories, and the movement of bodies, among other forms of motility, as "life." If motion is life, then its opposition, its arrest, constitutes a form of death, a way of representing, or perhaps containing or fixing, the living world in a frozen moment, entombing the world in the printed word on the page. As Katherine Henninger points out, the endeavor of artistic arresting "lends itself to epistemological configurations of subject/object relations," the translation of living beings into objects, a dynamic often described "in ethical terms of mastery or domination, as in the case of the objectifying male gaze or the colonizing racist gaze" (126). Henninger indicates that conceptualizing the arrest of motion in literature also lends itself intermedially "to the photograph," to photography as an art (126), which Roland Barthes also has explored amidst a nexus of subject/object relations, a nexus of life and death.

Barthes proclaims, "in terms of the image-repertoire, the Photograph […] represents the very subtle moment when […] I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter" (13-4). Barthes recognizes photography as producing the self as a spectralized becoming-object, rather than a becoming-subject. What one "seek[s] in the photograph taken of [him or herself] is Death: Death is the *eidos*

of that Photograph" (15). Further, Barthes' proclamation that the photograph shows us something that "has been there" situates photography as a technology of loss, in that the figure pictured repeats an infinitely reproducible return to the present only via its absence (76, italics removed). The photograph augurs a relationship with the past that is eminently spectral, providing an entry point, as María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren assert, for "death into the world of the living" ("The Ghost in the Machine," 201). In other words, occupying as well as instantiating a liminal space between life and death, photography is an art that conjures ghosts.

Given photography's summoning of death and its superimposition of the past on the present, and given Faulkner's literary proclivities for thematic articulations of death and his similar temporal layering, Faulkner's artistic vision affords a consideration of his work in relation to the art of photography, a task taken up by Katherine Henninger, Peter Lurie, Stuart Burrows, and Judith Sensibar, among others. Of course, as is obvious to anyone reading Faulkner's works, "[t]here are no actual, material photographs" (Henninger 122). However, Faulkner stocks his works replete with fictional photographs, written representations of photographs that only circulate within his fictional worlds, and he seizes the prodigious efficacy of the discursive properties of photography to construct a visual-literary form that makes manifest the tensions hovering between motion and arrest, between life and death. Similarly, although much of Faulkner's work is constructed around the figure of the ghost, he doesn't summon them in the supernatural sense, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, whereby the ghost acts directly within and on the fictional world depicted. Rather, Faulkner's ghosts emerge metaphorically as valuable heuristics for understanding and coming to terms with the temporal and spatial

sedimentations of history and tradition, as well as with the interrelations of constructed forms of otherness.

Faulkner's fictional photographs operate under the rhetorical technique of ekphrasis, which James Heffernan has defined as "the verbal representation of a visual representation" (299, italics removed). Because of its double mediation, ekphrasis puts critical stress on the nature of representation itself. As "[r]eference […] is the founding order of Photography" (Barthes 77), photographic ekphrasis, even at its most verisimilitudinous, by its very nature can only be a mode of representation, "explicitly draw[ing] attention to its own impossibility" of representing the unrepresentable (Burrows 119). Although photography conjures notions of fixity and certainty in relation to the past, verbal representations of photography are subject to slippage, and perhaps this is why, as Henninger suggests, Faulkner's photographic metaphors "more often figure becomings, process, and irresolution, than stasis and resolution" (127). The processual characteristics obtaining in Faulkner's photographs lend themselves to conceptualizations of specters, of beings caught in ontological flux between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality, and immateriality, rendering the discursive epistemologies surrounding photography and spectrality as inherently unstable. These instabilities allow Faulkner to elicit questions for both his characters and his readers about the formation of knowledge itself, especially in regard to the roles of history and historiography in constructing a repository rife with, but also contested by, presences and absences.

Further, ekphrasis invites the reader/viewer to probe the motivations and implications of the author's suspension of the temporal progression of narrative. This probing afforded by the halting of narrative speaks to how Faulkner's stated artistic

vision hinges crucially on the second half of its construction: that is, on the phrase, "when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life," a clause that emphasizes the interactive role of the stranger/viewer/reader in reanimating or resurrecting the stilled, dead image. In this way, ekphrasis calls for an active engagement that parallels the ethical demands prompted by both the photograph and the figure of the ghost. As Barthes says, the "Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'; it points a finger" (5), and this imperative culled by the photographic referent "ultimately touch[es] me, who am here" by a "sort of umbilical cord [that] links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze […], a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (80-1). As the photographic referent contains the indelible inscription of its pastness, of its death, this "umbilical" connection forged through its being looked at contains the emanation the viewer's own death: "each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death that each one, however attached it seems to be to the excited world of the living, challenges each of us" (Barthes 97). Viewing a photograph entails a confrontation with our own mortality. Locating the comprehension of mortality outside of ourselves in the Other collapses notions of unbridgeable alterity, forging a recognition of common humanity through our inevitable subjection to death.

The specter, as Jacques Derrida, Avery Gordon, and Colin Davis, among others, suggest, formulates a similar claim upon the one whom it haunts. Derrida defines the specter as "both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance" ("Spectrographies" 39). The ghost is "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known," and crucially, it produces a "something-to-be-done" (Gordon xvi). Or, put in

relation to Barthes' claims about the photographic referent, the figure of the ghost "challenges each of us." This "something-to-be-done," this "challenge," as Davis explicates, falls into the realm of the ethical, as "[a]ttending to the ghost is an ethical injunction insofar as it occupies the place of the Levinasian Other: a wholly irrecuperable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving" (53). The specter's "ethical injunction," Davis continues, consists "in not reducing it prematurely to an object of knowledge" (58). If ghosts are "animated state[s]" representing "repressed or unresolved social violence" in their particular historical contingencies, to respond ethically to them involves an effort to try to recuperate the absences of the past while also acknowledging the impossibility of the past to enter into completely comprehensible or representational terms. From the specific historical patterns that characterize Faulkner's U.S. South, to respond ethically to ghosts entails an obligation to consider carefully the historical elisions borne out by traumatic histories of colonialism.

Absalom, Absalom! is a novel in which Faulkner's treatment of photography and ghosts receive their fullest attention. Crucial moments in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as Michael Millgate has suggested, assume an ekphrastic quality, in that they are "presented in a kind of tableau arrested at particular point of time and held in suspension while looked at, approached from all sides, inspected as if [they] were an artifact, like [a] Grecian urn" (164). Stuart Burrows claims that the novel "constantly resorts to ekphrasis and photographic imagery to describe a history that seems to become more obscure the more it emerges," and the novel as it progresses bears witness to Quentin's attempts at recovering and revealing histories obfuscated by the patriarchal historiographies of the

U.S. South, attempts that mobilize both sociopolitical and ethical reckonings with the construction of history (140).

My effort in this thesis is to trace out how Faulkner's novel formulates ethical injunctions around the figures of ghosts, who across time and space call for us to "listen to them being ghosts" and to take responsibility for their historical elisions (Faulkner 8). To do so, I will explore the relationship between the ontological conditions of spectrality, understood as both the visualization of an invisibility and the untimely return of the past, and other regimes of vision and historical narrativization that reveal the entanglement of the past and present and that conjure ethical notions of how we formulate our responsibility toward a past marred by historical erasures. Specifically, I will examine how Faulkner's fictional photographs, with their narrative and temporal suspensions as well as with their paradoxical problems of approximating visibility, negotiate the liminal paralysis of ghosts caught in between life and death.

Despite apparent phenomenological tensions between listening and looking, *Absalom*'s ethical bid for historical "listening" comes out of its models of critical looking. Connecting notions of sight and seeing to listening, Pat Gehrke claims that "[t]here is something to listening that is decidedly visual and not only aural" (4). In developing this claim from John Shotter's assertion that "to hear is also to see" (15), that listening is attuned to the perception of the Other's visible body and bodily gestures, Gehrke implies that critical and morally sensitive modes of listening involve a careful eye toward the human body, recognizing how the body also produces a sort of speech. Both listening and looking are critical to establishing and maintaining an ethical world, as those who can be placed outside of sight are also those who remain unheard, those who

can be more readily excluded from ethical, social, and political concerns. In *Absalom*'s case, the struggle to render visible those figures historiographically marginalized along lines of race and gender is also a struggle to provide listenable access to their histories. As characters attain greater visibility, they release the potential for narratives of their histories to emerge from the gaps of the past.

In my first chapter, "'I did not see him. I did not even see him dead': Re-embodying the Ghost of Charles Bon," I will consider how Charles Bon becomes "ghosted" through the paternalist historiographies circulated by Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson, probing the ways in which they actively disavow Bon as representative of the traumas of colonialism. Bon's ghostly status and the ethical response demanded by the photograph of his New Orleans family, however, produce spaces for a reconstructive narrative based on human recognition, a narrative that becomes keenly aware of the racial implications emanating from sublimated histories of colonialism. In Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of Charles Bon, I argue, the two Harvard students undergo a transformation whereby paternalist ideology becomes replaced with an intersubjective politics of human recognition.

My second chapter, "The Marvelous Hystery of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen," will use the first as a model. If Quentin and Shreve can radically reconceptualize their relationship to history via Bon and the ethical injunctions inscribed within his ghosted status and within the fictional photographs Faulkner generates, how might we reckon with the novel's irresolution of the ghost of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, whose spectrality and whose photograph mark historical and epistemological lacunae and bespeak an historical incomprehensibility? In other words, since Quentin and Shreve don't "listen" to Ellen

"being [a] ghost" like they do Bon, how might we ethically respond to her erasure promulgated by Mr. Compson's historiography? In order to reclaim Ellen's history, I will put pressure on Mr. Compson's historiographic erasures that are constructed upon the colonialist rhetorical device of the "marvelous," seeking to find a life within these gaps, rather than resigning Ellen, as Quentin does, to a history which was as "if she had not lived at all" (Faulkner 9). Just as Quentin responds to the historical sublimation of Charles Bon by creatively reconstituting his history, I too will respond to the ethical demands of the past as presented in *Absalom* by attempting to reanimate and reconstruct the history of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen.

At stake in this thesis is the crucial thrust of what Derrida means by "learn[ing] to live *with* ghosts" (*Specters of Marx,* xvii-xviii): namely, that our ethical engagements with ghosts and our willingness to be haunted by them allow us to revitalize our ability to conceive of a future radically unlike the one projected by patriarchal histories that operate ideologically through modes of historical erasure. In other words, my effort is to show how Faulkner provides a model for how we might live with ghosts and how we might make them "move again," bringing them back to "life."

"I did see not him. I did not even see him dead":
Re-Embodying the Ghost of Charles Bon

Jessica Hurley claims that William Faulkner's 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!* is a "metaghost story, a novel about ghosts and haunting, how ghosts are made and how we come to be haunted and what being haunted and ghosted do to us, but one in which actual ghosts are notably absent" (64). Hurley suggests that "ghosting" operates in the realm of the novel as a "verb" in two forms: "an engagement with history through narrative and [as] a form of kinship" (65). Both the living and the dead assume a ghostly status in the novel, but the living ghosts hovering throughout Yoknapatawpha County in 1909 perform the capacity to "ghost" historical Others in their historiographic representations of the past. Although these historiographies purport to give a complete account of historical realities, they refuse to grant full visibility to its actors marginalized by race. More specifically, both Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson actively repress the identity and agency of Charles Bon, the mixed-race son of Thomas Sutpen, even to the point of decorporealizing him as a means to avoid engaging with the racial histories and colonial traumas sublimated in paternalist accounts of the U.S. plantation South.

Despite his spectralization through historiographic disavowal, however, Bon forges a connection from the past to the present through physical artifacts, allowing ethical injunctions to emanate from the photograph of his family in New Orleans, impelling a historically reconstructive response from Quentin Compson and his roommate at Harvard, Shreve McCannon. A novel rife with photographic "flashes" and "exposures" that erupt from occluded or marginalized histories and peoples, photographic and ghostly metaphors supply sharp contrasts to the historical narratives ideologically entrenched in white Southern paternalism. Since Faulkner deploys photographic imagery

in the novel as symbolizing as well as enacting encounters with the Other, this photograph of Bon's family, I argue, serves as the critical node for the recuperative reconstruction of Bon as the mixed-race son of Thomas Sutpen. Originally absented of his body by Rosa and Mr. Compson, Bon eventually regains in Quentin and Shreve's speculative account a history attuned to his corporeality. Attempting to resuscitate Bon from historical oblivion, Quentin and Shreve engage ethically with the past, bringing to the fore as well as redefining the present's relational ties to histories variably silenced along matrices of race, gender, and class, while also producing an ethical foundation based on an interdependent and intersubjective politics of human recognition.

Throughout history and across different cultures and narrative modes, ghosts have played vital roles in their many representational forms, appearing as anything from imagined visions, otherworldy messengers, benevolent or malevolent ancestors, to ontological disturbances returned from the dead intent on revealing hidden crimes or exacting revenge. Yet the "spectral turn" in critical theory has shown how literary ghosts reveal a striking efficacy for considering phenomena other than the return of the dead. As María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren assert,

> In their new spectral guise, certain features of ghosts and haunting—such as their liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality, and their association with powerful affects like fear and obsession—quickly came to be employed across the humanities and social sciences to theorize a variety of social, ethical, and political questions. ("Conceptualizing Spectralities" 2).

The social, ethical, and political questions summoned by the figure of the ghost run the gambit of interrogating the temporal and spatial sedimentation of history, probing the complex webs of personal and collective memory and trauma, evoking the invisible machinations and effects of technology and media, and haunting the exclusionary,

effacing constructions of identarian normativity pertaining to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. Ghosts considered in this vein are not so much pitted against the material world as aligned with regimes of vision that reveal our entanglement with symbolic and representational systems.

Within his oeuvre, Faulkner does not conjure ghosts in their supernatural sense, as his ghosts are not figures returned from the dead who act directly within and on the fictional world depicted. Rather, Faulkner's ghosts emerge metaphorically as valuable heuristics for visualizing, understanding, and coming to terms with the complex temporal foldings and unfoldings of history, the nebulous formulations of personal and collective memory borne out by histories of colonialism, and the variegated interrelations of constructed forms of otherness. In removing the ghost from the epistemological limits of (im)possible empirical verifiability, Faulkner opens the ghost's figural formations to question the site/sight of the construction and arrangement of knowledge itself, specifically invoking what is consigned to remain outside of the U.S. South's acknowledged past, always thrusting this past into hermeneutic trouble by having the ghost return to the present via its absence. Or as del Pilar Blanco and Peeren claim,

> To believe or not believe in ghosts no longer involves a determination about the empirical (im)possibility of the supernatural, but indicates contrasting validated attitudes—a welcoming seen as ethical and enabling, and a rejection considered unethical and dispossessing—towards the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy that characterize language and Being because of their inevitable entanglement with alterity and difference. ("Conceptualizing Spectralities" 9)

Faulkner never looks to exorcise his ghosts, expunging them from history altogether, but rather, uses the figure of the ghost to consider the social and ideological processes that haunt the present.

As Faulkner constructs the U.S. South as a site where memory follows a dialectical logic of cultural inheritance inflected by personal idiosyncrasies, it will be useful to consider Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's consideration of the phantom as deeply embedded within the discursive realms of personal and collective memory, loss, and trauma. Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy* indicates that a failure or refusal to mourn the loss of an object, as well as the traumatic consequences obtaining in that loss, triggers the psychic process of "incorporation." Refusing to acknowledge the loss of the object, while simultaneously renouncing the very knowledge of this refusal, the subject buries the loss in a psychic "safe," or "crypt." Interred within the dark architecture of the psyche, the lost object exists phantasmically, living on in the host as a presence that articulates itself only via its absence. The lost object perniciously liberates the living from the difficulties of acknowledgement by subsuming the very possibility of ever remembering the trauma of its loss into the reticence of the crypt. But the incorporating subject hazards the paradoxical impasse between knowledge and unknowing that necessitated this radical process, which, put in visual terms, results in a sort of seeing that is actively unseeing. Any possible enunciations of its concealed trauma are blocked in speech: the "absence in the preconscious signifies: trauma never took place. What distinguishes a verbal exclusion of this kind from neurotic repression is precisely the fact that it renders verbalization impossible" (21). Yet the trauma always bubbles back up in the form of linguistic slippages that simultaneously invoke the originary trauma, but disavow it through linguistic difference. Therefore, although the trauma cannot be spoken as such, it

becomes incorporated into a larger system of representations that reveal it only in the subject's attempts to conceal it.

While del Pilar Blanco and Peeren suggest that although acts of "colonial violence" are "seen as eliding and literally rupturing comprehension" and as "past acts which we would like to access again in order to attempt changing them" ("Conceptualizing Spectralities" 12), following Abraham and Torok suggests that an engagement with the traumas of colonialism, directly experienced or culturally inherited, would involve a burial of their impossible histories. In the process of such a burial, the historical subject of and after colonialism becomes himself or herself a symptom of a history that cannot be entirely possessed. Yet from the vantage point of the present, the historical subject must reckon with the past, reconstructing history despite the inability to speak of certain losses obtaining in the colonial enterprise. This production and arrangement of history from a present haunted by phantoms actively suppresses the traumatic losses, but the losses always manifest themselves in their felt return as absence, incorporated as lacunae within the dominant systems of representation.

These concerns of psychologically interred traumas and their haunting of the present and of historical production shape the historiographic narratives of the Sutpen family produced by Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* As Deborah Cohn suggests, the narrators of *Absalom* do the work of historical investigation as they "compile, compare, and attempt to organize information in order to reconstruct the past," albeit unsuccessfully in determining a fully knowable past as their processes of "filtering data" and constructing narratives are "[over]determined by personal factors, taboos, and the historical context" (26). On the one hand, Rosa's partial participation in the history

she reconstructs leaves her knowledge "either too immediate or too secondhand and contingent to stand as 'fact" (Cohn 28); on the other, Mr. Compson's reconstruction of the Sutpen history out of secondary sources admits that "something is missing" (Faulkner 80). What's missing from both Rosa and Mr. Compson's historiographic accounts, as John Matthews contends, is "the whole history of the new-world plantation that makes Sutpen's career from Haiti to Jefferson entirely legible as a story of colonial crime" (256-7). What's missing is not merely an irrecuperable historical silence that problematizes the knowability or legibility of the Sutpen saga, but rather is an actively created elision borne out by Rosa and Mr. Compson's historiographic enterprises, the psychic interment of colonial and racial violence into a crypt that attempts to efface those histories completely. These sublimated histories manifest themselves in the figure of Charles Bon, whose racial identity and history both Rosa and Mr. Compson insistently disavow. But his ghost continues to haunt them, the novel, and the U.S. South as a whole.

Despite being the critical figure in the reconstruction of the Sutpen saga, Charles Bon exists largely through his deferment and absence in Rosa and Mr. Compson's historiographic narratives. In the initial version Rosa delivers to Quentin, she describes Henry and Judith Sutpen in terms that circulate around the absent presence of Charles Bon, as she characterizes Judith as "the same as a widow without ever having been a bride" and Henry as returning to Sutpen's Hundred as a "murderer[,] almost a fratricide" (10). Describing Judith as existing in a widowhood "without ever having been a bride" necessarily conjures the man to whom she was betrothed—Charles Bon—but without acknowledging him or his identity. Similarly, considering Henry as a "murderer" necessarily summons the person he has killed, but again refuses iteration of the victim's

identity. Occluding Charles Bon's name enacts a discursive violence upon his history, rendering him a void or spectral absence around which other characters attain identities—"a widow without ever having been a bride" and "a murderer." Significantly, these identities are constructed and made legible directly by Bon's death and the mortal violence done to him, as if to say that white Southern identity achieves itself on the basis of racial violence whose object is continually erased.

Rosa's description of Bon's murder as "almost a fratricide" reveals a potential historiographic slippage. Using the word "fratricide" indicates that Rosa perhaps actually knows that Henry and Charles were brothers, and in knowing this, would presume Charles' status as the racially mixed son of Thomas Sutpen. Her active avoidance of Bon's name, as well as the adjectival potential of using "almost" to describe Henry's murderous act, suggests that she is actively repressing her knowledge of Bon's racial makeup, and thereby, her knowledge of the racial complexities structuring the colonial endeavors employed by Thomas Sutpen. In a similar moment of historiographic slippage, Mr. Compson also seems to suggest that he knew all along that Bon is Thomas Sutpen's black son: he says to Quentin that Sutpen "named Clytie as he named them all, *the one before Clytie* and Henry and Judith even" (48, emphasis mine). While Cleanth Brooks demonstrates a naively earnest belief that it would be too "incredible that Mr. Compson would have left [Bon's] name out of the list" had he known of Bon's familial relation to Sutpen, it is not quite clear whom Brooks thinks the "one before Clytie" could be, if not Bon (424). Mr. Compson's discussion of Sutpen's naming process evolves out of his sterilized probing of Sutpen's rapacious relations with black women, implicating all those he names in a racial matrix of biological reproduction. Already aware of Sutpen's Haitian

colonial encounter and of the mixed-race marriage obtained there, Mr. Compson situates the "one before Clytie" in a lineage of colonial violence which discursively inscribes the unnamed person as black. That Mr. Compson's first explicit account of Bon directly follows this description of Sutpen's naming process links Bon to the "one before Clytie," which is reinforced further by Mr. Compson's characterization of the love between Henry and Bon as oscillating between fraternal and potentially incestuous, terms used, of course, for biological siblings. Yet, in describing Bon, Mr. Compson indicates that he was "born of no woman" (58), which, with pernicious calculation, distances Bon from any sort of mother figure, and specifically from his Haitian mother, a link that would necessitate an acknowledgment of his racial makeup and Sutpen's colonial exploitation in the Caribbean. Like Rosa, Mr. Compson seems to possess knowledge of Bon's history, but actively refuses to share that knowledge, which renders Bon all the more spectral.

Moreover, Charles Bon never assumes corporeal integrity in Rosa or Mr. Compson's accounts, as a historical acknowledgement of his body within the paternalist ideological framework that upholds confidence in the absolute visibility of racial difference would yield either an acknowledgement of his blackness or, conversely, an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of race. In other words, as Bon is a man of mixed-race who passes as white, troubling demarcations of race based on biology and its (in)visible manifestations, Rosa and Mr. Compson refuse iterations of his corporeality, of his body as the site/sight of racial difference, both to disavow colonial histories of miscegenation and to defer a culturally reflexive engagement with the determining fetishistic factors of racial identification in the U.S. South. Bon's existence is "curious" and "enigmatic" to Mr. Compson, who describes Bon as only able "to hover, shadowy,

almost substanceless" (74). In his account of Bon and Judith's courtship, Mr. Compson relegates him to even greater intangibility: "You can not even imagine him and Judith alone together. Try to do it and the nearest you can come is a *projection* of them […], two *shades* pacing, serene and *untroubled by flesh*, in a summer garden—the same two serene *phantoms* who seem to watch, hover, impartial attentive and quiet" (77, emphasis mine). Even after Bon's death, Rosa cannot provide evidence for Bon's physical body: "I remember how as we carried him down the stairs and out to the waiting wagon I tried to take the full weight of the coffin to prove he was really in it. And I could not tell. I was one of his pall bearers, yet I could not, would not believe something which I knew could not but be so. Because I never saw him" (122, italics removed). Already ghosted by Mr. Compson in an imagined account of his life, Bon apparently cannot even attain corporeal integrity through a direct experiential encounter with his corpse. While Henry ultimately shoots Bon, confirming the existence of his physical body through violence, Rosa and Mr. Compson launch acts of discursive violence that leave Bon without a body at all, and thus, without a racial identity.

Soon after telling Quentin about her inability to detect the reality of Bon's corpse, Rosa recalls imagining the traces left by Judith and Bon from their walks in the garden paths of Sutpen's Hundred:

> [I] would walk those raked and sanded garden paths and think 'This print was his save for this obliterating rake, that even despite the rake it is still there and hers beside it' […]. I dreamed […] upon the nooky seat which held invisible imprint of his absent thighs just as the obliterating sand, the million finger-nerves of frond and leaf, the very sun and moony constellations which had looked down at him, the circumambient air, held somewhere yet his foot, his passing shape, his face, his speaking voice, his name[.] (119)

Although Rosa is able to see or to imagine the traces of Bon's body despite the "obliterating rake," her references only catalogue a record of his absence, citing places where he is no longer. Her description of Bon as possessing only a "passing shape," rather than a physical human body, is an ultimately ironic slip given that for much of the novel he appears as a black man *passing* as a white one. As Stuart Burrows maintains, "This sense that Bon's very existence breaches the barrier between the metaphorical and the literal is compounded by Rosa's insistence that he leaves behind him 'no more trace than . . . [if] he had been but a shape, a shadow' [Faulkner 120], for black identity is so persistently spoken of as a 'shadow' in Faulkner's fiction that it almost comes to seem like a literal designation" (Burrows 139).

Even more troubling for Bon's lack of a representable history and body is the photograph of him that apparently only Rosa sees. While photographs seem to offer the promise of epistemological certainty for which the narrators strive, showing transparently something that "has been there" (Barthes 76, italics removed), the picture of Bon in Rosa's account continues to refuse the knowability of his history. As much as Rosa insists upon the authenticity of eyewitness account, she admits, "I had never seen [Bon] I never saw him. I never even saw him dead. I heard a name, I saw a photograph, I helped to make a grave: and that was all" (117). Unseen by others, this photograph provides, through Rosa's litanous claims of vision and nonvision, connections with spectrality and with death itself. As Stuart Burrows declares, Rosa recognizes that basing her account of Bon's existence upon only a photograph "throws into question the very notion of what seeing is" (144): she says, "even before I saw the photograph I could have recognised, nay, described, the very face. But I never saw it. I do not even know of my own

knowledge that Ellen ever saw it, that Judith ever loved it, that Henry slew it: so who will dispute me when I say, Why did I not invent, create it? […] this pictured face" (Faulkner 118, italics removed). Seeing a photograph, obviously, is not the same as seeing Bon for herself, but the photograph compels Rosa to imagine "a different kind of seeing altogether, one that invents rather that records its subjects" (Burrows 144). Burrows recognizes that "this different kind of seeing" situates photography as not "the sign of the real but its opposite—the collapse of reference, the vanishing of the visible world, the impossibility of establishing not only who someone is but what he or she looks like" (144).

Although Burrows chides Rosa's way of seeing for its lack of recording power, he seems to place too much faith in photographic logics of transparency and immediacy, as if it were an artistic medium of truth that would make Bon's racial identity self-evident. If anything, the capacity of the photograph to subject the referent to a flattening of his or her otherwise human content, proposing its ability to signify a legible essence written clearly on the body, resonates powerfully with the effacing and dehumanizing function of essentialist articulations of race that consider race to be legible at the epidermal level. That Rosa refuses an actual description of Bon's face, leaving him faceless as the other narrators do and subject to her own "invent[ion]," characterizes photographic images as hosts for ideology determined by acts of looking. In other words, Bon's face is blank, unpictured, and erased of its marks of experience and identity, so that Rosa can inject it with her own ideological assumptions. She "creates" or "invents" Bon's facelessness as a means to overwrite his identity and the racial histories of colonialism that he embodies, and like Barthes' Photographer, Rosa becomes an "agent of Death" (92)

In decorporealizing or ghosting Bon through their historiographic discursive violence, excluding him from conceptions of what is normatively human, Compson and Rosa refuse Bon's entry into what Judith Butler calls "the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own" (28). Butler inscribes the body, with its implications of "mortality, vulnerability, [and] agency," as the critical locus for formulating ethical human communities (26). Based on Rosa and Mr. Compson's narratives, then, Bon has no access to a human community, for he is without a common bodily condition. The discursive violence of dehumanization, or of the derealization of Bon's corporeality, suspends him spectrally between life and death, rendering him an "ungrievable" figure, which negates Bon's life from being a life at all and positions him as a liminal figure inexhaustibly subject to further violence: "on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture" (Butler 34). In disavowing Bon and the colonial histories he represents, and by situating him as an object of determined violence, Rosa and Mr. Compson refuse to bear witness to the traumas of a colonial past, unable to give themselves over to any sort of reciprocal exchange with the Other.

In the final sections of the novel, however, Quentin and Shreve ultimately read beyond the discursive violence enacted upon Bon, allowing themselves to become active participants in an historical exchange with the Other based on a politics of human

recognition—Faulkner's way of learning to live with ghosts. Quentin and Shreve organize their reconstruction of Bon's identity and history around the photograph of Bon's mixed-race family in New Orleans. This photograph evidences photography's capacities to formulate ethical injunctions upon the viewer. Quentin and Shreve, I argue, by reading efficaciously Mr. Compson's incidental photographic metaphors as illuminating the photograph as a potential site for the ethical encounter with the Other, are able to tease out the full ethical implications of Judith's engagement with the photograph found on Bon's corpse. Seizing upon the reconstructive potential of material evidence and upon the model of Judith's actions, Quentin and Shreve restore Bon's corporeality and agency, allowing his ghost to reenter history in a way that makes legible the racially inflected colonial violence that helped create their present. In recognizing the Other, Quentin learns to recognize himself, which bespeaks an ethical interaction that both instigates a personal as well as potentially collective transformation and petitions the future as always predicated upon human recognition and intersubjectivity.

In Mr. Compson's account of Bon's introduction of Henry to New Orleans, the novel develops its most sustained use of photographic metaphors in order to describe Henry's gradual "exposure" to a culture wholly Other to that of the Mississippi plantation. Before travelling to New Orleans, Henry's "entire worldly experience consisted of sojourns at other houses, plantations, almost interchangeable with his own, where he followed the same routine which he did at home" (86). In exposing Henry to a new culture and way of living, Bon "took the innocent and *negative plate* of Henry's provincial soul and intellect and *exposed* it by slow degrees to this esoteric milieu, building gradually toward the *picture* which he desired it to retain, accept" (87, emphasis

mine). As Bon continues his tour, Peter Lurie suggests, "the slow build of Bon's exposure—his camera's shutter speed—increases, becoming what Benjamin would see as the momentary shock of the photographic click" (245): the exposures become "brief, so brief as to be cryptic, almost staccato, the plate unaware of what the complete picture would show" as Bon guides him through the city (Faulkner 88). Lurie recognizes the twofold importance of what Bon's showing reveals:

> One of them is the inference Henry draws from Bon's exposing him to the supposed decadence of New Orleans. For that is a recognition of a difference, not only in his own and Bon's supposed racial and sexual values, but in Henry's awareness of history. Exposing Henry photographically to what Mr. Compson calls "the surface aspect" of New Orleans, Bon also shows Henry a relationship to capital and to labor different than the one Henry has known. (245)

In other words, Bon's "exposures" reveal to Henry a world and system of labor and exchange entirely Other to what he had heretofore experienced.

While Lurie emphasizes the economic milieu of New Orleans as what Bon desires to show Henry in "building gradually toward the picture," the narrative sequence climaxes with Bon's ethical and recuperative response to alterity, as he cites the marginalization, hypersexualization, and exploitation of mixed-race women not to be derived from some fatalistic biological determination, but rather to be "created and produced" by white men, which resonates with Rosa's "creat[ion]" and "invent[ion]" of Bon's unpictured face (91). In this way, Bon tries to make Henry visualize the invisible machinations by which marginalization along race and gender lines in the patriarchal South take hold: the "white men […] made the laws which declare that one eighth of a specified kind of blood shall outweigh seven eighths of another kind" (91). Ultimately, Bon exposes Henry not only to racial and gendered differences and how they are constructed, but also to the reliance of white Southern patriarchy upon those

constructions, making legible the mutually imbricated sociality and economics of race and gender that have been sublimated by white hegemony. Of course, Henry, like Mr. Compson himself, remains too tied up in the essentializing patriarchal mode to accept Bon's teaching, despite acknowledging its truth: he says, "Yes. I know. I know that. […] It's not right. Not even you doing it makes it right. Not even you" (94). While Bon has shown Henry a space in which relationships and constructions of identity are ordered quite differently from Yoknapatawpha County, Henry struggles and ultimately refuses to grasp the differences and experiences located outside of his limited cultural knowledge.

While Henry, and likewise Mr. Compson, fail to read Bon's picture of racial and economic relations in New Orleans, the scene provides a model for reading the ideological import of Faulkner's semiotics of photography that prove integral to the novel, in that it sets up his modernist rendering of photography as constituting a medium for encountering ethically the Other, releasing the narrative impulse to make legible the subsumed interdependencies of human communities across rigidly demarcated lines of race and gender. While David Krause insists that Bon's letter to Judith is the text "that most insist[s] on being read in *Absalom, Absalom!*" and "that provoke[s] Faulkner to re-present in detail the work of reading" (228), I believe that the fictional photographs in the novel function in the same way: as visual semiotic mediums that "insist on being read." As Judith reads and responds to Bon's letter by circulating it so "at least it would be something just because it would […] be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another" (101), she also reads and responds to the photograph found on Bon's corpse, but, I contend, with much greater fervor and social

efficacy, providing a model of reading for not only Quentin and Shreve, but also for ourselves as readers.

The photograph that Judith Sutpen finds on Bon's corpse flashes up a number of times in the novel as evidence for the various narrators' historiographic narratives, flashing up, however, always with a difference. Within Mr. Compson's account, the photograph assumes three different characterizations: first as "the photograph of the other woman and the child" (71), then as "the photograph which was not [Judith's] face, not her child" (73), and finally as "the picture of the octoroon mistress and the little boy" (75). Greater specificity resolves out of each description until it climaxes in the racial iteration of Bon's wife. Doreen Fowler suggests that this information of Bon's picture of his black family forms "Mr. Compson's most significant contribution to the story" because it is absent from Rosa's account and because it becomes revised and revitalized in Quentin and Shreve's account (101). In Rosa's version, the photograph retrieved from Bon's newly dead body is actually of Judith, not Bon's other wife: as Rosa remarks, in Judith's "hand was the photograph, the picture of herself in its metal case which she had given him" (114). The male narrators' confusion and conflation of the image of Judith with the image of Bon's first wife points not only to the inherently unstable ontological condition of the photographic medium, but also to the ideological formations undergirding the attempts at narrative construction from the still image. It also exceeds their narratorial grasp by proposing a collapsibility between Judith and Bon's mixed-race wife, bringing them into direct relation.

Despite the fact that this photograph is never seen, but rather imagined, it operates as the racial nodal point that mobilizes historiographical constructions. The unseen

photograph, rather than providing fixed evidentiary certainty, releases an embryonic narrative impulse that becomes colored by the ideological dispositions of its narrators. According to Katherine Henninger, in "telling the photograph(s), each male narrator embodies his own cultured vision in the image the metal case contains" (133). For Compson, Bon's switching of the photographs proves him to be "at least an intending bigamist even if not an out and out blackguard" (Faulkner 71), which, to him, is reason enough for Judith to spurn him and for Henry to murder him. In his joint narration with Quentin, Shreve revises Mr. Compson's harsh estimation, speculating that Bon's switching of the photographs becomes a moment of romantic enunciation, an attempt to release Judith from pain: "It was because he said to himself, 'If Henry dont mean what he said, it will be all right; I can take it out and destroy it. But if he does mean what he said, it will be the only way I will have to say to here, *I was no good; do not grieve for me*'" (287).

In Faulkner's unpublished 1931 short story "Evangeline," a story that anticipates *Absalom, Absalom!*, the photograph in the metal case plays a clear-cut role as the climactic piece of evidence of Bon's history. Although Bon goes off to war carrying with him "Judith's picture in a metal case that closed like a book" (588), by story's end the metal case holds a photograph of "the smooth, oval, unblemished face, the mouth rich, full, a little loose, the hot, slumberous, secretive eyes, the inklike hair with its faint but unmistakable wiriness—all the ineradicable and tragic stamp of negro blood" (608). To the narrator of "Evangeline," this "doomed and passionate face" of Bon's black wife is the ultimate evidence of "what to a Henry Sutpen born, created by long time, with what he was and what he believed and thought, would be worse than the marriage and which

compounded the bigamy to where the pistol was not only justified, but inescapable" (609). Unlike in *Absalom*, the ontological conditions of the photograph in "Evangeline" are never in question, and the picture "operates as an alibi for both the narrator and the history he is determined to recover, the woman's blackness neatly explaining the ruin of the Sutpen family while absolving the narrator from any responsibility for his story" (Burrows 141).

Rather than the precise delineation of black and white in "Evangeline," the refusal of such distinctions in *Absalom* leaves its narrators wholly accountable for their constructions of history. As Henninger remarks, "While 'Evangeline' turns on a simple mystery, solved by an unproblematic photographic 'truth,' *Absalom, Absalom!*'s use of fictional photographs marks a shift from epistemology to ethics that may model a productive encounter between visual and oral forms, and between reader and text" (134). Taking cue from David Krause, I would like to suggest that this photograph operates at a similar ethical register as Bon's letter to Judith does. Krause contends that Bon's letter "assumes or demands a response that remains scrupulously attentive to the readable text," and from its emphasis on "what he requires of 'you' (the reader)" emerges a writer/reader "relationship mutually determined and dependent" that allows its "silences" to be read (235-6). Through Bon's letter, Krause indicates, he "attempts to write the unwriteable and name the unnameable, forcing […] all subsequent readers […] to read the unreadable" (237). In switching the photograph of Judith with the one of his New Orleans family, Bon literalizes for Judith his "building gradually toward the picture" for Henry in his tour of the city, as he exposes Judith to the formerly "unnameable" interrelations of racial difference.

As an ethical reader of the photograph of Bon's "octoroon mistress," Judith listens to Bon from beyond the grave, so to speak, reading the photograph as a message in death to open hospitably Sutpen's Hundred to this other woman and their son and to allow them to mourn at Bon's grave. Despite Mr. Compson's baffled incomprehension of "how the octoroon came to be [at Sutpen's Hundred], how Judith could even have known about her to write her where Bon was dead" (157), the figures from the photograph come to Sutpen's Hundred by Judith's request, and specifically they come to mourn Bon at his grave, a site where Judith now becomes "the other woman" (157). Grieving, as Butler claims, "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (22). Judith not only redefines Bon as a grievable figure, inserting him back into the human sociality that Rosa and Mr. Compson refused him, but she also demonstrates an inclusivity that moves across lines of race. Or as Fowler asserts, "Judith reads this image as a sign of Bon's acknowledgment of his wife and son, and because he recognizes them she attempts to follow his example" (102).

Eventually, when Bon's son is orphaned, Judith brings him to live with her and Clytie, marking her response as catalyzing a number of acts of inclusion, rather than disavowal. Although Mr. Compson characterizes Judith's treatment of Charles Etienne Saint-Valéry Bon as defined by a "cold unbending detached gentleness more discouraging" than Clytie's treatment of him, her actions exceed such a characterization, as she allows him to "sleep[] in the trundle bed beside [her]" in his youth and to "rent[] his parcel of land" on Sutpen's Hundred after his run-ins with the law (160, 167). Her

acts of inclusivity reach their climax when she insists against Charles referring to her as "Miss Sutpen": she says, "Call me Aunt Judith, Charles" (169, italics removed). In this moment, Judith does what her father never could do. She acknowledges and grants entrance for a person of mixed race into the Sutpen family.

In their speculative historiography from their Harvard dormitory, Quentin and Shreve do the same, acknowledging for the first time Bon's racial identity and his place in the Sutpen family fold. Simply, Quentin and Shreve creatively reconstruct Bon's history and racial identity, making historically visible Bon's status as the black son of Sutpen, acknowledging what Rosa and Mr. Compson in their historiographies so actively repressed. In this final section of the novel, Quentin finally removes himself from his patriarchal interpellation, significantly evidenced by his statement at Harvard about his shifting vision, "If I had been there [in the South] I could not have seen it this plain" (155, italics removed), as well as by the dropping out of his oft-used citation phrase, "Father said." As Terrence Doody claims, the inexplicability of Bon's portrait and the lacunae that comprise his history as developed by Rosa and Mr. Compson are for Quentin and Shreve "both a motive and an opportunity to respond to him with full sympathy and to provide the most moving and coherent account of the character Sutpen will not recognize" (464).

Significantly, as Charles Bon faces a triangulated ghosting—in Sutpen's refusal to recognize him as his son, in his racialized Otherness as black in the U.S. South, and in the active repression of his identity throughout Rosa and Mr. Compson's historiographic accounts—Quentin and Shreve's speculative account pays keen attention to Bon's body. Giving voice to Bon's speculated thoughts, Shreve paints his recognition of being

Henry's brother as predicated upon the relations of their physical bodies: "he looked at Henry's face and thought, not *there but for the intervening leaven of that blood which we do not have in common is my skull, my brow, sockets, shape and angle of jaw and chin and some of my thinking behind it, and which he could see in my face in his turn if he but knew to look as I know*" (254). Departing quickly from his biological difference from Henry, from the "intervening leaven of that blood which [the two] do not have in common" and which marks Bon as a racial Other to Henry, Bon emphasizes the bodily commonalities between them. He simultaneously instantiates his own corporeal integrity and assumes autonomy over his body through Henry's body, seeing in Henry "*my* skull, *my* brow," putting Bon's embodiment in a dialectical relation. He also demonstrates an epistemological prowess founded upon vision by critiquing Henry's metaphorical blindness, indicating that Henry "could see" Bon as his brother only if he "knew to look as [Bon] know[s]" how to look.

While Bon seeks Henry's fraternal acknowledgment, he desires most Thomas Sutpen's fatherly recognition:

> Because he knew exactly what he wanted; it was just the saying of it—the physical touch even though in secret, hidden—the living touch of that flesh warmed before he was born by the same blood which it had bequeathed him to warm his own flesh with, to be bequeathed by him in turn to run hot and loud in veins and limbs after that first flesh and then his own were dead. (255)

For Bon, the potential fatherly recognition he desires entails a host of physical interactions that effectively re-embody him. Significantly, Shreve constructs Bon's imagined encounter with his father in explicitly photographic terms, suggesting that Bon believes that seeing and "touch[ing] flesh with him" (278, italics removed) "would reveal to him at once, *like a flash of light*, the meaning of his whole life, past—the Haiti, the

childhood, the lawyer, the woman who was his mother" (250, emphasis mine). The addition of intercorporeal contact in this imagined encounter is significant because of the novel's insistence of the breaking down of social barriers through touch:

> Because there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both […]. [L]et flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too. (112, italics removed).

Considered in this vein, touch becomes a form of interaction that is intersubjectively reconstructive, in that it "makes" both the one who is touching and the one being touched. When "flesh touch[es] with flesh," the "eggshell shibboleth of caste and color" proves its fragility and instability, "abrogat[ing]" the construction of hierarchical racial categories, "the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering." Sutpen's recognition of Bon as his son based on intercorporeality, then, would provide "meaning" to Bon's life in that it would both acknowledge his "past," a past defined by racial interrelations and exploitations borne out by colonialism, and place him within a realm of social interaction based on a common bodily humanity that collapses racial distinction and hierarchy. Yet Sutpen's impassive reaction to meeting his son "face to face" (256) does not bear out the sign of acknowledgment Bon longs for, as he looks at Sutpen's "expressionless and rocklike face, at the pale boring eyes in which there was no flicker, nothing" (278, italics removed). Signaled by his lack of expression and lack of a "flicker" of recognition, Thomas Sutpen refuses Charles Bon as his son, refusing to bring a mixed race figure into any sort of intimacy because he threatens the reproduction of a "white" Sutpen dynasty.

But despite Sutpen's disembodying refusal of recognition, Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of Bon functions as the recognition Bon desires. In rewriting Bon's body

back into history, Quentin and Shreve provide "greater access to Charles's interiority," allowing him to "become more human for us" (Hurley 71). In making Bon "more human," the two Harvard students discover a "more fitting truth about Bon's behavior and motives" surrounding the events leading up to his death (Doody 466). While the other narrators indicate that Henry simply murders Bon, making him a passive victim of violence, Quentin and Shreve speculate that Bon cooperates, even coordinates to some degree, his own death by giving it "the character of a romantic suicide" (Doody 466). The climax of reconstructing this "romantic suicide" revolves, of course, around a photograph, as Quentin and Shreve give Bon the perfect act of final compassion towards Judith through the switching of her photograph with the one of his New Orleans family: "it will be the only way I will have to say to her, *I was no good; do not grieve for me*" (287). Judith, of course, grasps the gesture perfectly, as she recognizes the importance of inclusive community formation based upon human grief.

Re-embodying and re-humanizing Bon engenders what Jessica Hurley refers to as the "collapse of subjectivity between Quentin and Shreve," forming a "shared being among the speakers, listeners, and subjects of the story: Quentin and Shreve, Charles and Henry" (68-9). Or as the novel shows: "it was not two but four" in the Harvard dormitory (Faulkner 267). While Rosa and Mr. Compson spoke about and around Charles Bon, Quentin and Shreve speak *as* Bon, giving a dialogic voice through their own. This "collapse of subjectivity" has a physical element to it as well, in that not only does Quentin and Shreve's speculative narrative alter the perception of Bon's corporeality by reinstantiating it at the level of discourse, the experience of reconstructing Bon's history also physically affects them: Shreve emulates his historical subject, "panting himself, as

if he had had to supply his shade not only with a cue but with breath to obey it in," and the two students in their chilly Harvard dormitory "did not retreat from the cold. They both bore it as though in deliberate flagellant exaltation of physical misery transmogrified into the spirits' travail of the two young men during that time fifty years ago" (275). In reanimating and re-embodying the ghost of Charles Bon, Quentin and Shreve bear physical witness to the transformation of learning to live with ghosts, following a process of simultaneous self-subordination and self-reflexivity that enables the apprehension of alterity, an intersubjective process of bringing the Other into the self.

Quentin and Shreve's speculative co-creation of Bon's history replaces the ideological constraints of the U.S. South, namely in its ability to look beyond regimes of vision contaminated by the South's social and political milieu, and toward a "moral union grounded in mutual selflessness and sustained by open, intuitive, charitable understanding" (Doody 462). In looking precisely for what is human in Charles Bon, rather than relying on reductive identarian constructions, they attain a historiographic power that no other narrator shares, for they never complain about the inadequacies of language. They attain this power through a process of what Faulkner calls "overpassing":

> [I]t did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it, performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave and cordoned and forgot the faulting of the other—faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived—in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false. (253)

Terrence Doody reads this passage as indicative of Quentin and Shreve's formation of the "kind of community that suspends social and political orders to accommodate more urgent human needs" (455). Historical actors, storytellers, and listeners all merge

indelibly together in the recuperation of a history wholly enmeshed with what is human. While they admit potential "paradox and inconsistency," in speaking of the human and of love, they utter "nothing fault nor false." In other words, they resist reducing Bon to an object of knowledge as the other narrators do, underscoring their understanding of the past's insistent refusal to enter into completely comprehensible terms. But in their reconstruction of Bon, they respond to and preserve Bon's alterity with "love."

Altogether, as the disembodying refusal of recognition produces what Judith Butler describes as the "ungrievable life," whereby "on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized" (24, 25), Quentin and Shreve's reclamatory recognition of Bon renders him wholly human, and the resulting collapse of their subjectivities corresponds to a shared humanity across racial lines and across history. A figure "arrested" by the ideological and historiographic strictures of the U.S. South, Bon becomes reanimated and re-embodied by "strangers"—Quentin and Shreve—who thus set him back in motion, "which is life." Bon's ghostliness, or rather his absence-as-presence in history, as well as his switching of the photographs to compel from beyond the grave a response from Judith, mobilizes Quentin and Shreve's ethical response to the past, modeling, as Henninger suggests, "the hoped-for interaction between reader and text" (136). Simply put, out of Quentin and Shreve's ethical response to the ghost of Charles Bon emerges the revivification of human communities. Learning to live with the ghost of Charles Bon and the host of racial and colonial traumas he comes to represent ultimately allows for the (re)imagination and (re)articulation of a possible present and future radically different from the one mapped out by the white paternalism entrenched in the U.S. South.

The Marvelous Hystery of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen

Early in *Absalom, Absalom!* when Quentin Compson questions Rosa Coldfield's motivations for summoning him to her house to retell the communally notorious story of the Sutpen family, his father responds, "Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?" (7-8). With apparent wit, but also with perhaps unintentional irony and with certain misogynist condescension, Mr. Compson's remark contains a host of issues integral to the novel: namely, the patriarchal construction of gender-based categories that follows an insidious logic of spectralization, as well as the active and ethically responsible engagements with the past and how the past exercises power over the present through its narrativization. Of course, Mr. Compson hardly follows his own advice of "listen[ing] to them being ghosts," as his historiographical accounts of the Sutpen saga consistently deny, suspend, or elide female subjectivity and agency from their own histories. In other words, Mr. Compson doesn't listen to them; he talks over them. Compelled "to take responsibility for knowing Sutpen's past that he embodies […] now, in the present" (Ramos 51), Quentin, by novel's end, eventually distances himself from his father's ideologically inflected historiography by responding to the ghost of Charles Bon, teasing out and revealing in his co-created and speculative account the formerly unspeakable histories of race in the U.S. South. However, Quentin ultimately fails to reckon with individual histories spectralized along gender lines. "Since Faulkner draws many [female] characters who exude [a] ghost-like image," Elisabeth Muhlenfeld contends, "the implication would seem to be that he is rather unusually concerned with examining those social and psychological forces which render so many

women's lives fruitless or ineffectual" (291). Yet Quentin and Faulknerian scholars alike demonstrate a tendency to ignore these "social and psychological forces" that render spectral so many of Faulkner's female characters.

Since Quentin and Shreve achieve a radical reconceptualization of their relationship to history via Bon and the ethical injunctions inscribed within his historiographic ghosting and within the fictional photographs Faulkner generates, it is my effort in this chapter to reckon with the ghost of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, whose spectrality and depiction in an imagined family photograph mark historical and epistemological lacunae and bespeak an historical incomprehensibility unconsidered within the realm of the novel. Ellen's characterization follows an inverse logic of Bon's with relation to their represented embodiment, in that her body and her whiteness are emphasized early on in the novel, only to be decorporealized through what I call Mr. Compson's rhetorical device of the marvelous. In reading beyond Mr. Compson's historiographic erasure of Ellen, I hope to illuminate her as a figure of colonial resistance.

Ellen's first appearance in the novel occurs during Quentin's conjuring of a psychic photograph of the Sutpen family. As the first photograph encountered in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the portrait of the Sutpen family provides the perfect foundation for the novel's epistemological, historiographical, and ethical interactions and injunctions with photography, as well as with ghosts on account of its spectral ontological status. While first hearing Rosa Coldfield's account of the Sutpen saga in September of 1909, Quentin develops an image that recedes from the dark and claustrophobic material world of her home, as apparitions of the Sutpen family emerge in his mind's eye:

> the invoked ghost of the man whom [Rosa] could neither forgive nor revenge herself upon began to assume a quality almost of solidity, permanence. Itself

> circumambient and enclosed by its effluvium of hell, its aura of unregeneration, it mused […] with that quality peace and now harmless and not even very attentive—the ogre-shape which, as Miss Coldfield's voice went on, resolved out of itself before Quentin's eyes the half-ogre children, the three of them forming a shadowy background for the fourth one. This was the mother, the dead sister Ellen: this Niobe without tears who had conceived to the demon in a kind of nightmare, who even while alive had moved but without life and grieved but without weeping, who now had an air of tranquil and unwitting desolation, not as if she had either outlived the others or had died first, but as if she had never lived at all. Quentin seemed to see them, the four of them arranged into the conventional family group of the period with formal and lifeless decorum, and seen now as the fading and ancient photograph itself would have been seen enlarged and hung on the wall behind and above the voice and of whose presence there the voice's owner was not even aware, as if she (Miss Coldfield) had never seen this room before—a picture, a group which even to Quentin had a quality strange, contradictory and bizarre; not quite comprehensible, not (even to twenty) quite right—a group the last member of which had been dead twenty-five years and the first, fifty, evoked out of the airless gloom of a dead house[…]. (8-9)

Quentin's ekphrastic photographic image offers an alternative space of reproduction of the Sutpen family, as it allows us to see the unseen emanating from "the airless gloom of a dead house." Of immediate importance in this passage is Quentin's representation of the Sutpen family as "arranged into the conventional family group of the period with formal and lifeless decorum." By envisioning the ghostly Sutpens as if in a family portrait, Quentin inserts them into a type of documentary sociality shot through with eugenicist ideology. As Shawn Smith asserts, "In eugenics the family became central to the discursive production of race and of racial hierarchies, as the family album became one of the social institutions through which heredity was charted" (198). Further, as Dana Mihailescu notes, the family portrait at this time had "agency," as it "participated in determining power relations and systems of value by representing a mode of domestic self-representation which was structured around […] the dignified middle-class white woman" (118). A visual family archive as well as a record of ancestral legacies, the family album promoted notions of biological purity through its repetitions of whiteness,

cultivating national racial narratives that situated white women at the locus of superior biological inheritance. That Ellen is defined with rare frankness by Quentin here ("This was the mother") and that she emerges out of the "shadowy background" provided by her husband and her children, highlights both gendered social positioning and her whiteness, fixing her within white patriarchal paradigms of Southern identity that are reinforced to Quentin in the narratives told by Rosa and his father. In Rosa's account, Ellen possesses a "high white face […] with no drop of [black] blood" in it (16), and in Mr. Compson's, she attains a sort of hyper-whiteness, as on her wedding day she "wear[s] powder on her face" (37). Quentin, like Rosa and Mr. Compson, ushers in Ellen's whiteness and her maternity as her defining, and perhaps only important, characteristics.

Although Quentin functions as the primary reading/listening subject in the novel, taking up the critical task of framing and reframing the Sutpen saga from its nebulous accounts, his initial framing of the Sutpens here implicates him within the very patriarchal and historical structures he will come to interrogate. Or, as Sair Edelstein iterates, "that Quentin imagines the Sutpens in a 'conventional' photographic setting, despite the contradictory and arbitrary nature of such an arrangement, elucidates his reliance on a mode of historical imagination centered in the visual representation of the family" (152). Despite never seeing the Sutpens, Quentin "already knew" them because they were a "part of his twenty years' heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about [them]" (7). Subjected to his father's historical rendering of the Sutpen saga, Quentin figures himself as a "barracks filled with stubborn backward looking ghosts," identifying his subject-formation as haunted by the repressive and repressing ghosts of the U.S. South, his existence constructed simultaneously by and as a collection

of histories older than he is (7). Although Ellen had been dead for over "fifty" years, Quentin describes her as a figure "who even while alive had moved but without life […], not as if she had either outlived the others or had died first, but as if she had never lived at all." Ellen, it seems, has always been a ghost, a dehumanizing characterization that anticipates his father's numerous depictions of her as a nonhuman "butterfly." Unable initially to escape his ideological interpellation into patriarchal structures, Quentin's conjuring of the ghostly Sutpen photograph operates under both the "objectifying male gaze and colonizing racist gaze," marking Ellen's life as not a life at all as it relies on essentializing constructions of white Southern gentility as the only modes of characterization (Henninger 126).

Despite the fact that Quentin's extraordinary image is envisioned as "resolv[ing] out of itself," he does nothing to "resolve" it, and there remains to him something "strange, contradictory and bizarre[,] not quite comprehensible, not […] quite right" in the photograph. As Judith Sensibar claims, "the frame [Quentin] wants to put around the Sutpens, the photograph he wants to see, won't stabilize, won't bend to his need to preserve convention" (303). Simply, Ellen and her family cannot be reduced to knowable entities. Quentin's epistemological uncertainty regarding the imagined photograph's frustrating status links to Mr. Compson's metaphorical alchemic process of historical reading:

> We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable—Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of

> them. They are there, yet something is missing, they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy, inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (80)

Just as Quentin imagines the ghostly family portrait as "not quite comprehensible," Mr. Compson cannot read with confidence the Sutpen family saga, despite the supposed absence of complication in "their acts of simple passion and simple violence," as the repository of physical artifacts and oral stories passed down generations are "inexplicable," "almost indecipherable," and when brought together to form a narrative, "nothing happens: just the words." Like the envisioned photograph, history exceeds attempts at linguistic binding into narrative, proving to be an unruly antagonist of epistemological assuredness. Despite Compson's complaint about the insufficiency of language to represent the past, he nonetheless continuously resumes his narration, acting as if this insufficiency does not matter, ignoring his own assertions that a knowable history is always out of reach. Building from my previous chapter, the "something" that "is missing" when Mr. Compson brings the words together and, as I argue, when Quentin tries to read his ghostly vision of the Sutpen family, is the acknowledgment of traumatic colonial histories.

While Quentin "overpasses" what is "missing" during his co-created reconstruction of Charles Bon by acknowledging the racial effects of colonialism and by responding to issues of human recognition that remove him from his father's paternalist ideology, his narrative never fully considers the historiographic erasure of Ellen Coldfield

Sutpen, as he never provides a human portrait of her during his co-created narrative with Shreve. As my last chapter argued for an ethical response to the past and its marginalized figures, I will follow its model: namely, by laying out how Mr. Compson "ghosts" Ellen in a way that overwrites possible reformulation by Quentin and by attempting to reclaim her history from its historiographic oblivion. In order to reclaim Ellen's history, I will put pressure on Mr. Compson's historiographic erasures that are produced by the colonialist rhetorical device of the marvelous, seeking to find a life within these gaps, rather than resigning Ellen, as Quentin does, to a history in which was "she had not lived at all." Just as Quentin responds to the historical sublimation of Charles Bon by creatively reconstituting his history between and among its erasures, I too will respond to the ethical demands of the past as presented in *Absalom* by attempting to reanimate and reconstruct the history of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen. In attempting to recover this history, I hope to avoid an insistent sounding promise to provide the key that will unlock the character of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, since, to borrow a phrase from Philip Weinstein, the "game of penetrating/mastering is itself distinctly phallic," and such an aggressive pursuit of her character would align me with Mr. Compson himself (3). Rather, I hope to articulate the possibilities surrounding Ellen's character and her patriarchal subversion.

In a Q & A session at the University of Virginia in 1957, a student asked William Faulkner about the differences between writing female and male characters. Faulkner's response: "It's much more fun to try to write women because I think women are marvelous, they're wonderful, and I know very little about them, and so I just—it's much more fun to try to write about women than about men—more difficult, yes" (*University* 45). As Deborah Clarke suggests, Faulkner's "use of the terms 'wonderful' and

'marvelous' brings a particular aura to women, an aura that, when considered in the light of the women of *Absalom*, becomes uncannily fantastic" (125). The concept of the "uncannily fantastic" that Clarke invests in—namely, the "contradictory nature of women [that] exceeds the bounds of conventional reality"—evolves from Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic, a mode that, as Clarke puts it, "caus[es] a hesitation while characters or readers try to decide whether the events stem from natural or supernatural causes" (126). Using this idea, Clarke passes quickly over the mothers of *Absalom, Absalom!* and centers her focus around the "notmothers" of the novel, fixating primarily on Rosa Coldfield and Judith and Clytie Sutpen (125). While Clarke's analysis is a valuable intervention in the criticism surrounding *Absalom*, as she gives voice to Faulkner's marginalized women, her claims about the novel creating "hesitation" in deciding "whether the events stem from natural or supernatural causes" seem largely unfounded, as Faulkner's ghosts never assume the force of the supernatural. Instead, I aim to expose concepts of the "marvelous" as functioning on a colonial historiographic register, in order to read against it in recovering the silenced history of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, the "foolish unreal voluble preserved woman" who rises "like the swamp-hatched butterfly […] into a perennial bright vacuum of arrested sun" (Faulkner 54-5).

Shifting definitions of the "marvelous" from the "uncannily fantastic" that Clarke utilizes to its critical upsurge á la Stephen Greenblatt as a colonialist rhetorical device, I argue that through his marvelous and misogynistic narrativization of Ellen Mr. Compson comes to possess her history, not only by denying her agency and by casting her as hysterical, but also by silencing her resistance to patriarchal structures after experiencing the colonial traumas of the U.S. plantation South. The central aim of Stephen

Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* is to render legible the "European discourse of wonder" (132), a discourse rooted in legacies of exploration that, in the context of the New World, ameliorates the shock of the colonizers' unanticipated contact with a reality previously unknown, a reality troubled by indigenes. Colonizers invoke "wonder" and the "marvelous" as instruments of imperial appropriation that enable them to administer formal notions of sovereignty and possession to the New World without fully comprehending the radical alterities nor the cultural realities of its indigenous peoples, marking the rhetorical strategy as one that prohibits actual cultural exchange. "For Columbus," Greenblatt asserts, "taking possession is principally the performance of a set of linguistic acts: declaring, witnessing, recording," and these acts "are performed entirely *for a world elsewhere*" (56-7). As a set of "linguistic acts" performed "for a world elsewhere," the marvelous discursive strategy finds a "comfortable home" in narrative (61). Since every ritual of colonial possession required non-contradiction on the part of the natives, which they fulfilled by their lack of Spanish linguistic competency, colonizers' marvelous narratives simultaneously arrogate the New World and put natives under erasure. The imaginative work of the colonizers does not allow for a stable counter-discourse, in that its speculative (re)construction of claims of possession linguistically reterritorialize the New World, its peoples, and its histories. In its construction upon privative gestures against observable reality, the "marvelous" rhetorically (re)enacts dispossession, as well as a narratological elision of the Other's experiences of colonial trauma. In this way, "words in the New World seem always to be trailing after events that pursue a terrible logic quite other than the fragile meanings that they construct" (Greenblatt 63).

While Stephanie Merrim asserts that U.S. Southern discourse largely "charges wonder with salving the wounds of history," acting as an "emollient force, even a patent myth, […] [to] provide a platform for diverse moves against the dominant cultures" (317-8), Mr. Compson's use of wonder and the marvelous salves "the wounds of history" only to the extent that he is able to repress them, situating him not as counter to dominant culture, but rather as very much participating in a historiographic process shot through with paternalist ideology. Mr. Compson's characterization and narrativization of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen assumes the sociocultural force of Columbus's marvelous discourse, and his elaborately fanciful historiography both camouflages and underpins his appropriation of Ellen's history. Just as the natives' lack of specific linguistic competency denies them the ability to contradict Columbus, Ellen's voicelessness cannot contravene her marginalized narrativization. As the radical alterity of the indigenes troubles Columbus, so too does the radical alterity of women trouble Mr. Compson, so much so that he relies on paternalist ideology to configure paradigmatic roles for women as well as to unmake their physical bodies: again, he says, "Years ago we [men] in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts" (7). Like Columbus, whose linguistic acts are performed for "a world elsewhere," Mr. Compson's intervention in the Sutpen/Coldfield histories is too for another world—his present familial world, as he (re)constructs the past for his son Quentin. If Columbus's narratives legitimate the colonizers' claims to possession, Compson's narrative legitimates the paternalistic ideology handed down through generations of men, dispossessing women of their agency and eliding the realities of colonial trauma: "They lead beautiful lives—women. Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably

excommunicated from, all reality" (156). As Minrose Gwin suggests, "Mr. Compson constructs women who are absent to their own historical voices" (111).

Although most remember and subsequently dismiss Ellen as the madwoman of Sutpen's Hundred, she begins the novel as a figure of respectability and a paragon of white Southern purity. A churchgoing woman "with no drop of [black] blood in her face" (16), Ellen Coldfield exemplifies pristine [white] Southern womanhood. Rosa, unlike Compson, grants Ellen a dialogic voice, which, far from Compson's depiction of Ellen's "shrieks of amused and fretted astonishment" (60), is characterized by the "rhetorical mildness" of "ladylike language" (Wittenberg 102)—compassion, poise, and politeness (Faulkner 10, 19, 21-22). Yet the arrangement of her marriage by Sutpen and her father, Goodhue Coldfield, inscribes her as a slave to be traded: Sutpen "had now come to town to find a wife exactly as he would have gone to the Memphis market to buy livestock or slaves" (31). Spoken by Mr. Compson, this analogy of marriage to slavery illuminates not only the patriarchal South's construction of women as objects able to be purchased and traded, as not human lives at all, but also the lack of agency Ellen has in the arrangement of her marriage. Although at some level Mr. Compson might be trying to distance himself from Sutpen and his treatment of a white woman as an object or slave, the irony lies in the fact that what Compson does at the narrative level is not much different. When Mr. Compson later links Southern women with "the old blood that crossed uncharted seas and continents and battled wilderness hardships and lurking circumstances" (68), he unwittingly draws another connection between plantation wives and slaves, a connection borne out by colonial histories of plantation owners purchasing women from the Old World to be their wives. As Catherine Clinton observes, "Women were an economic

commodity. Much like slaves, these early women settlers were plucked from the Old World and deposited in the New. Shipped across the ocean like stock, they were sold off into marriage with little regard for their human status and dignity" (3-4).

Sold into matrimonial slavery, Ellen becomes subject to Sutpen's sexual violence, as Rosa implies that she conceived Henry and Judith through being raped, by linking how Sutpen "tore violently a plantation" with how he "without gentleness begot" children by Ellen (5, italics removed). Exchanged as if a commodity in an economy of chattel slavery, subsequently raped by her husband, and dealing with the harsh realities of plantation life, Ellen experiences extreme colonial traumas. Her subsequent removal from reality and her emplacement by Mr. Compson into the narratological web of the marvelous occurs only after she has "served her purpose" in Sutpen's design, a "purpose" that renders her the compliant and necessarily Anglo-Saxon social and biological instrument—wife and mother—Sutpen requires to create the dynasty he desires (61). For Sutpen as well as Mr. Compson, Ellen's "purpose" is directly enmeshed in her body and biology, so once she marries and has children, her body no longer matters, and she becomes a hysterical "butterfly," a marvelous aesthetic ornament to Mr. Compson's paternalist historiography, a way of representing her in nonhuman terms, eliding completely any human subjectivity and agency. In this way, Ellen's history follows the inverse of Charles Bon's in relation to embodiment. Initially ghosted and deprived of both his corporeality and his identity, Charles Bon eventually is re-embodied by Quentin and Shreve. Ellen, however, is fully embodied at the onset of her history, namely due to her whiteness and to her biological capacity for reproduction, only to be ghosted or decorporealized after birthing Henry and Judith.

After Ellen serves her "purpose" as wife and mother, according to Mr. Compson, she "vanishe[s] […] out of life […] into an edifice like Bluebeard's and there transmogrified into a mask looking back with passive and hopeless grief upon the irrevocable world, held there not in durance but in a kind of jeering suspension by a man," by Thomas Sutpen (47). Here, Mr. Compson partially reveals Ellen's subjection to Sutpen's colonial violence by inserting her into the longstanding fairytale of "Bluebeard," making her one of Bluebeard's wives who will die at his hand. Despite implying the violence Ellen faces through his analogy of Bluebeard's wives, Compson characterizes her only as being in a "state very near hysteria" (42), and he refers to her as a butterfly on eight different occasions (Faulkner 55, 58, 61, 63, 66, 67, 77, 100), always expanding the metaphor to more marvelous lengths, suspending her "in the gale[s]" of history, leaving her to be "blown against a wall and clinging there beating feebly, not with any particular stubborn clinging to life" (67). Feminist scholars such as Laura Briggs, among many others, declare hysteria a diagnostic fiction, claiming, "nineteenth-century physicians called upon narratives of nervous illness to denounce women's agitation for expanded social roles" (Briggs 247). Briggs adds a racial component to the nineteenth-century diagnoses of hysteria, indicating cultural evolutionism and other sciences of racial difference encoded hysteria proportionally into the notions of "overcivilized" for white women and "savage" for black women (246).

Mr. Compson's characterization of Ellen's hysteria follows this diagnostic history, as Ellen's madness is most prominent during her shopping sprees with Judith, a commercial enterprise typical of cases of "overcivilization":

> Ellen bade merchant and clerk fetch out to her the cloth and the meager fripperies and baubles which they carried and which they knew even better than she that she

> would not buy but instead would merely finger and handle and disarrange and then reject, all in that flow of bright pettish volubility. Not contemptuous, not even patronising exactly, but with a bland and even childlike imposition upon the sufferance or good manners or sheer helplessness of the men […] with that meaningless uproar of vanity […]. (57-8)

While Compson highlights Ellen "in that flow of bright pettish volubility" and "with that meaningless uproar of vanity," his concatenation of Ellen's idiosyncratic shopping habits with a petulant childishness depicts her as hysterical, all the while ignoring her exertion of female agency. Having been reduced to a commodity herself, Ellen actually seems to revitalize herself through shopping, as she "displays her capacity to purchase and command and hence reverse her earlier relation to men and merchants" (Parker 244). Because she expands her role through her purchasing power and by acquiring a dominant position in relation to men in a commercial space, Mr. Compson perhaps experiences anxieties about the possibilities of women accruing greater social potency, so his historiography inhibits her agency by denouncing her as hysterical and overcivilized.

As a woman "probably not even suffering but merely filled with baffled incomprehension" (63), Ellen's language is described by Mr. Compson as "nonsense," little more than a string of "bright set of meaningless phrases" (54). It's almost as if she speaks another language, like the Caribbean natives, but Compson, like Columbus, disclaims her alternative linguistic capacities (as he cannot be contradicted) and he even denies her ability to suffer altogether. According to Compson, she is so far removed from reality that she is "unimpeded by weight of stomach and all the heavy organs of suffering and experience" (55). As Jenny Jennings Foerst asserts, "instead of repeating what Ellen had said or had written for herself, Mr. Compson bypasses her authority, effectively silencing this 'woman who, if she had had the fortitude to bear sorrow and trouble, might

have risen to actual stardom in the role of the matriarch…' [Faulkner 54, italics removed]" (Foerst 55-6). According to Compson, Ellen cannot "rise" into the role of the matriarch because

> the woman who had quitted home and kin on a flood of tears and in a shadowy miasmic region something like the bitter purlieus of Styx had produced two children and then rose like the swamp-hatched butterfly, […] into a perennial bright vacuum of arrested sun. (Faulkner 54-5)

"Ironically," Foerst suggests, "Mr. Compson is saying that Ellen might have risen to stardom to the extent that she had stayed put in the 'shadowy miasmic region' to which she as maternal function is presently consigned" (56). As the "shadowy miasmic region" comparable to "the bitter purlieus of Styx" abstracts the harsh realities of plantation life, Compson iterates that her matriarchal status relies on her subjugated position to Sutpen and that she abjures her claim to matriarchy through her hysterical exertions of agency.

Before Ellen's death, Compson relegates her to a total recession from reality: "Ellen was not visible (she seemed to have retired to the darkened room which she was not to quit until she died two years later)" (62). Significantly, Ellen retreats to her bedroom at the onset of the Civil War, removing herself completely from the violence and trauma of history, and providing a model for her father's similar retreat. However, Compson does not provide Ellen's movement toward self-imposed oblivion with political impetus as he does for her father, despite linking their two actions: "But after the die was cast [for war], he seemed to change overnight, just as his daughter Ellen changed nature a few years before. As soon as troops began to appear in Jefferson he closed his store […] [and] lived in the back of the house, with the front door locked and the front shutters closed and fastened" (64). Apparently Ellen suffers from a madness divorced completely from reality, while her father remains sane through his conscientious objection to the

Civil War, a stark dichotomy that highlights Compson's paternalism and denial of female agency.

While Compson relegates Ellen to her bedroom and to oblivion, he also seems to be overcompensating for his own wife, Caroline Compson, who reigns his family's household from a sickbed and too suffers from a real or imagined illness in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Philip Weinstein asserts that the "picture of Mrs. Compson that emerges is of a woman whose life ceased to be narratable after her entry into marriage and its sexual consequences," a clear parallel to Mr. Compson's version of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen (5). Ellen's similarities to Caroline Compson might provide the rationale for Quentin's refusal to engage with her story during his conversation with Shreve at Harvard: Quentin's relationship to his mother is fraught at best, as she consistently repudiates her Compsonhood. Twice in his schizoid monologue, he thinks to himself, "If I could say Mother" (*SF* 95, 172, italics removed), and he conceives of her as a "dungeon" (*SF* 173). The conversations between Quentin and his father in *Absalom* stem from their remembered discussions in *The Sound and the Fury*. Just as Quentin's incestuous desires for his sister Caddie impinge upon his understanding of the incestuous histories of Charles Bon and Henry and Judith Sutpen, his estrangement from his mother influences his view of Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, so much so that he allows her to fall out of his historiographical purview. As Mr. Compson employs marvelous discourse in order to elide the actualities of a woman eerily similar to Quentin's mother, he interpellates Quentin into paternalist ideology, establishing a patriarchal ideological line in a novel whose characters insist upon patrilineal inheritance. Of course, Quentin breaks from this ideological mold in his reconstruction of Charles Bon, but the only reconstruction of

Ellen's story that he can offer is slightly altering the photograph he initially imagines of the Sutpen family. Before his spectral photograph contained four figures, but later, "the photograph, the group"—apparently this time a real photograph in the library of Sutpen's Hundred—contains only the "mother and two children," and Quentin imagines Sutpen himself sitting in front of it, blocking it from view (236).

Despite Compson's misogynistic attempts to reduce Ellen to her biological capacities in Sutpen's design and to reduce her further into madness, she becomes a force of a resistance in the novel, even in her very maternity and in her death. Far from obsequious to her "purpose" to propagate a legitimately white Sutpen dynasty, Ellen births two children that undermine Sutpen's patriarchal ideal: her "doomed children" ultimately "destroy one another and [Sutpen's] own line" (12). As Christie Waken suggests, "Ellen's production of the two children threatens patriarchy further through the incestuous nature of the siblings" (72). The eventual triad of incest formed between Henry, Judith, and Bon stands in direct opposition to Sutpen design, as it stagnates the Sutpen bloodline, and as Henry and Bon's potential incest is non-reproductive altogether. Even more, Ellen troubles the proscriptive whiteness of Sutpen's design by allowing Judith and Clytie to sleep "both on the pallet, and once in the bed together," perhaps exhibiting a model for Judith's later allowance of Bon's son to sleep on the pallet next to her (112). The overtones of miscegenation, incest, and homosexuality all undermine Sutpen's patriarchal desire to engender a pure Anglo-Saxon dynasty, and Ellen allows these to persist.

Reading against the grain of the historiographic construction of Ellen also allows us to recognize her very direct resistance to patriarchal structures, which take the forms

of speech and action. When Ellen's father asks her if she loves Sutpen ("Do you love this—"), she responds with one word, "Papa," and Rosa remarks, "That was all. But I could see her face […] with that same expression which it had worn in the carriage on that first Sunday and the others" after their marriage (19). While Joseph Urgo simply asserts that this exchange indicates that "Ellen refuses to discuss her husband and her marriage with her father" (16), I think her response and reaction require closer reading. She interrupts her father, refusing to allow him to utter Sutpen's name by halting his speech, as if to expose the inanity of her father's question, repudiating both Sutpen and her father in one fell swoop. That her face bears the "same expression" as when Rosa sees her in the carriage is even more telling, as in that vision of Ellen, Rosa remembers a "struggle" and "battleground" being waged between Ellen and Thomas Sutpen over the reckless carriage races to Church that he organized. Eventually, Ellen wrests control of the ride to church from Sutpen, as she and only the children begin to ride to church in the phaeton, "a buggy not made for fast speeds and reckless management" (Urgo 15). In further attempts to protect her children from Sutpen's recklessness, she rescues Henry and Judith from continuing to witness the scenes of Sutpen fighting his slaves. While her limited dialogue in these scenes is marked by what Wittenberg calls "ladylike language," what she says offers both a resistance to Sutpen's colonial violence and a hope to protect her children from becoming imbricated in such violence.

As Waken observes, "just as her spawning of children jeopardizes the constructs of patriarchy, Ellen effectively orchestrates the subversive relationships and launches the series of events that eventually destroy Sutpen and his dream" (72). While Mr. Compson reduces Ellen's orchestration of the relationship between Judith and Bon to only an

instance of "mothers who want to […] make themselves the brides of their daughters' weddings" (59), Ellen's arrangement has more to do with distancing the Coldfield line from the brutality of Sutpen's: "I certainly hope and expect you to feel that the Coldfields are qualified to reciprocate whatever particularly signal honor marriage with anyone might confer upon them" (60). In planning Judith and Bon's union, Ellen conceives of Bon as "a garment" to adorn Judith, "a piece of furniture" to complete the house, and "a mentor" to influence Henry (82, 59). As Bon displays characteristics of civility far beyond Sutpen's capacity, Ellen seizes the opportunity to replace the colonial violence of Sutpen with the sophistication and intellectuality of Bon. Though Mr. Compson casts this as mere social climbing—her attempt to acquire polish through Bon—she actually seeks to repair or to overcome her subjection to colonial violence. Identifying Bon as a commodity to serve various domestic purposes, Ellen, albeit problematically, attempts to reverse the gendered power dynamic that relegated her as a slave to be traded. As Bon's role in the Sutpen drama ultimately engenders the dynasty's collapse, Ellen's orchestration of the relationship gives her a hand in the destabilization and subsequent destruction of the patriarchal line.

That Faulkner utilizes Mr. Compson's marvelous discourse to configure Ellen as hysterical ultimately bespeaks the inability and the illogicality of reproducing the response of the Other's experience of illness and colonial trauma through dominant ideological modes. Compson defines Ellen out of human existence, inscribing her first as a white mother, then an insect, and then out of existence altogether, even before she dies. Her death, just as her life, persists as a mystery, a stone remaining unturned in Quentin and Shreve's creative and speculative historiography. Yet, if we read beyond Mr.

Compson's narration, we find a woman whose actions attest to her subversion of the patriarchal constructions that attempt to colonize not only her body, but also her history. Having birthed the "doomed children" who problematize Sutpen's design, and having orchestrated the subversive relationships that ultimately destroy it, Ellen withdraws to her bedroom, not into a hysterical oblivion, but to "remov[e] her body, the site of conception, from Sutpen's impregnating reach," thus, granting her the agency and proper motivation that Compson silences (Waken 73). While Quentin and Shreve grant Charles Bon the perfect final gesture of compassion in his switching of the photographs right before he is killed, a gesture that Judith understands perfectly as one of love and human recognition, Ellen's last gesture before dying contains similar compassion, although Rosa misunderstands it. With Henry already "vanished and doomed to be a murderer," Ellen begs of Rosa, "Protect her, at least. At least save Judith" (15). Rosa fails to read her sister's dying ethical injunction: "Protect her?" Rosa asks, "From whom and from what" (15). Quite simply, Ellen asks Rosa to protect Judith from Sutpen's colonial brutality and from her becoming imbricated in the dehumanizing colonial regime. By novel's end, Judith, of course, escapes Sutpen's design, doing what he could never do: acknowledge human and familial connections across racial lines, instantiating in the process a community of inclusivity that rejects the violent hierarchization of Sutpen's design.

As Rosa describes Ellen's recession to the bedroom twice as "when *she lay dying*" (10, 15), one cannot help but connect her death to Faulkner's Addie Bundren in his novel *As I Lay Dying*. In that novel, Addie self-wills her death as a liberating existential triumph against patriarchal structures, and by virtue of the novel's title aligning with the description of Ellen's death, we are prompted to read Ellen's death

similarly. “[U]nringed” (67), Ellen symbolically divests herself of Sutpen by removing the icon of her marriage to him, and etched into her tombstone is “not beloved wife of. No. Ellen Coldfield Sutpen” (153, italics removed). In this way, she does not become entirely subsumed into the rabid Sutpen design. As Rosa declares and repeats passionately upon returning to Sutpen’s Hundred, the land and mansion belong to “Ellen and her descendants” (290). Echoing Rosa, we might also say that Ellen’s history, a history silenced by the marvelous discourse of Mr. Compson’s historiography, but a history that nonetheless engages with modes of patriarchal subversion out of colonial trauma, belongs to Ellen and her descendants, if only her descendants can learn to live with her ghost.

Conclusion

While this thesis has explored the ethical injunctions conjured by the spectral ghosts of Charles Bon and Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, recuperating figures from the past caught between visibility and invisibility, corporeality and incorporeality, humanity and nonhumanity, and life and death, I would like to conclude by briefly considering the ghost that most completely haunts both the present and future of *Absalom, Absalom!*—the ghost of Jim Bond, Charles Bon's grandson and Thomas Sutpen's great-grandson. After Quentin and Shreve appear to finish their speculative reconstruction of the Sutpen family saga via their recuperative historiography of the ghost of Charles Bon, the ghost of the living Jim Bond and of future Jim Bonds remain, exceeding the bounds of their narrative and of Faulkner's novel as a whole. Situated at the novel's climax, Jim Bond simultaneously haunts Sutpen's Hundred, the novel itself, and the entire U.S. plantation South. Significantly, his haunting presence operates on a different temporal plane than the ghosts of Charles Bon and Ellen Coldfield Sutpen do. Rather than producing a "something-to-be-done" via an interaction with the past in the present, the ghost of Jim Bond produces an ethical injunction based upon the future. But by no coincidence, his spectrality follows similar patterns of ghosting as those that complicate the histories of Bon and Ellen.

When Sutpen's daughter Clytie burns down Sutpen's Hundred, Bond, though still alive, becomes a ghost: "the creature which bellowed followed them, *wraithlike and insubstantial*, looking at them out of the smoke, […] whereupon he retreated, fled, though the howling did not diminish nor even seem to get any further away" (300, emphasis mine). Illumined from behind by the fire as if photographically, Jim Bond

appears as a silhouette, making him visible to Quentin and Rosa only as a black body, flattened of his human features. Initially defined physically as a "hulking slack-mouthed saddle-colored boy" (173, italics removed), Bond, like Bon in Rosa and Mr. Compson's accounts, is decorporealized during the fire, as he becomes "wraithlike and insubstantial." Jessica Hurley places Bond's body in an inherited line of racial violence, as if his biology molded to the victimization of his grandfather Charles Bon and his father Valéry Bon, who is "beaten into his own body" (Hurley 72). According to Hurley, Bond's mouth "is not built for speaking, [and his] color signifies an object, dead skin" (72). For this reason, to consider Bond's body, not to mention the connotations of slavery summoned by his name, is to consider the consequences of the continual racial violence, oppression, and silencing throughout the U.S. South. In describing Bond as "wraithlike and insubstantial," Quentin fails to incorporate the ethics of human recognition that he learned from the past into his present situation, struggling to come to terms with the present and future of the South.

As the fire rages on, Bond escapes from view altogether, but remains as a felt and heard presence, troubling Quentin: "they couldn't catch him. They could hear him; he didn't seem to ever get any further away but they couldn't get any nearer and maybe in time they could not even locate the direction of the howling anymore" (300-1). As Christopher Peterson asserts, "Everywhere present yet nowhere visible, Jim Bond defies any fix on his direction, place, or location. His proximity is chiasmatically related to the obscure distance from which his unintelligible howling hovers over the ruins of the former plantation" (241). Bond's "remaindering," Peterson continues, "demands that we

reckon with his revenance" (241). Or perhaps more simply, we must "listen to [him] being [a] ghost."

Bond's howling initially seems to defy any effort at interpretive containment, much like the lacunae that shape Bon and Ellen's histories. But Quentin notes that the howling is not altogether nonhuman, as he remarks that the "bellowing was in human speech," that Bond was "howling with human reason now since now even he could have known what he was howling about" (300). Quentin is beholden to the howling, as he "still hear[s] him at night sometimes" (301), and in his mind, the howling "was becoming quite distinct; he would be able to decipher the words soon, in a moment; even almost now, now, now" (301). With its ubiquity and its demand for attention, Bond's howling leads Shreve to cast his and Quentin's joint narration into a far distant future: "I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. […] and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (302). As Peterson claims, "The proximity of the future anterior to the present form 'I who regard you (now)' plunges this future past into Shreve's present. His present is already his future past" (243). The greater irony here is that Quentin, in many ways, has already "sprung from the loins of African kings," as he belongs to a culture founded upon slavery. Imbricating the past, present, and future together in a spectral ensemble, the ghost of Jim Bond yolks the aesthetics and ethics of retrospection with an orientation toward a future horizon, a shimmer of anticipation that provokes a response. Simply, if Quentin cannot "listen" to the ghosts of the past, as well as of the present and future, they will continue to haunt him and the U.S. South as a whole. Therefore, if we are to learn to live with ghosts, as Faulkner's novel suggests, we must continually exercise our

capacities for ethical engagement with those excluded by dominant ideological modes from what is normatively human. Simply, by practicing an intersubjective politics of human recognition, rather than by continuing to operate within dominant systems of representation that refuse visibility or communal entry to historically and contemporarily marginalized figures, we might begin to learn to live with ghosts by bringing them back "life."

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