Tragedy of Displacement in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*

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**Summary**
A number of critics have ever addressed Faulkner’s South from varied perspectives. It seems, however, that they have not fully explicated his South in terms of its complex, dynamic formation. As the recent studies of place suggest, place is something much more intricate than we may assume: it consists of diverse dimensions such as temporality, spatiality, materiality, and human subjectivity. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner explores how to tell a true Southern story with the South’s spatiality in mind. He does so by foregrounding the main narrators’ ardent attempts to search for the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen as well as by setting multiple places such as New England, West Virginia, the Deep South, and the West Indies. By paying attention to Thomas Sutpen’s traumatized career and the tortured life of Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon in terms of spatial politics, this paper brings to light what might be called “tragedy of displacement” in *Absalom, Absalom!*. While pointing out how Faulkner situates the US South within the New World’s colonial history, this paper discusses at length the characters’ predicaments caused by spatial movements, especially Charles Etienne’s existential tragedy of displacement.

**Keywords**
Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, tragedy, displacement, Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon

**Introduction**

Since the rise of New Americanism in the early 1990s, a number of critics
have paid attention to the trans-national implications of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) with the problematic assumptions of U.S. exceptionalism in mind. The Caribbean context of the novel has been long ignored; “[o]nly during the 1990s did the presence of the West Indies in the novel ‘achieve’ visibility” (Matthews 239).\(^1\) Strongly inspired and informed by the groundbreaking works of Édouard Glissant, the current post-colonial and trans-national approaches to the novel fruitfully provide several meaningful perspectives on Faulkner’s South and its spatial politics in terms of a hemispheric or Global South.\(^2\) But while these recent approaches can situate Faulkner’s South within a global context and even identify in his South some “post-colonial possibility” evoked by terms such as “creolization” or “hybridity,” they do not seem to fully address the characters’ burdened solitude and agony that define not only the novel’s literary intensity but also certain limits of its post-colonial possibility.\(^3\)

Simply put, this paper will bring to light what might be called “tragedy of displacement” in *Absalom, Absalom!* by paying attention to Thomas Sutpen’s traumatized career and the tortured life of Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon in terms of spatial politics. While pointing to Faulkner’s post-colonial problematization of the US South, this paper dwells on the characters’ unavoidable predicaments triggered by spatial movements, particularly the ex-New Orleansian Charles Etienne’s existential tragedy of displacement.\(^4\) This paper will finally evince Charles Etienne’s absolute solitude and agony, which inscribes the harsh difficulty of transcending the ideological burden of the South.
I

First we would draw attention to Thomas Sutpen’s early career, a traumatic experience he has suffered from since his childhood. As is well known, the figure of “Thomas Sutpen” is buried in the enigmatic darkness of multiple layers of the narration: we, like the narrators, cannot easily arrive at the truth of his career. Nevertheless, Sutpen’s background unfolded in Chapter 7 is relatively reliable in that the background is given through Sutpen’s own words, even if the words are fourth-handed: General Compson transmits Sutpen’s words to his son (Mr. Compson), who tells Sutpen’s stories to Quentin Compson, and lastly Quentin repeats those stories to Shreve McCannon, his roommate at Harvard University. Sutpen’s unveiled background gives a different image of Thomas Sutpen from the one Rosa Coldfield’s narration creates.  

According to “Sutpen’s words,” he was born in 1807 to a poor white family in West Virginia, where there existed no aristocrats, no blacks, and no specific property rights: “where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say ‘This is mine’ was crazy” (179). Put another way, West Virginia in Absalom, Absalom! is a primitive, pre-capitalist space, in which Sutpen grew up without knowing any racial and class differences. Indeed, Sutpen “didn’t even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own” (179). After he and his family move to Tidewater, Virginia, however, Sutpen has to become aware of his innocence of differences among human beings in a traumatic
In contrast to the primitive, pre-capitalist space of the Appalachian hills in West Virginia, the flat region of Virginia is a more modern, exploitative capitalist space rooted in a plantation economy, “where property is the foundation on which society is built and the measure by which the worth of all human beings is determined” (Minter 222–23). At a plantation house, Sutpen undergoes a traumatic experience known as “the front-door affront”: he is told by a black servant “never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back” (188). This is Sutpen’s first encounter with the Southern reality, his traumatic initiation into Southern ideology. Given a harsh lesson of the hierarchical society, Sutpen becomes conscious of his innocence of racial and class differences. The following passage, quoted from the scene where Sutpen ponders upon the affront in the woods, succinctly explicates his traumatic experience and delineates its process:

The nigger . . . looking down at him [Sutpen] from within the half closed door during that instant in which, before he knew it, something in him had escaped and—he unable to close the eyes of it—was looking out from within the balloon face just as the man . . . looked out from whatever invisible place he (the man) happened to be at the moment, at the boy outside the barred door in his patched garments and splayed bare feet, looking through and beyond the boy, he himself seeing his own father and sisters and brothers as the owner, the rich man (not the nigger) must have been seeing them all the time—as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally [sic] evacuated into a world without hope or purpose . . . . (189–90)
In the woods, Sutpen re-experiences what he had undergone from the black servant’s and rich planter’s perspectives. Of importance here is that Sutpen ultimately identifies himself with the planter and looks down on the family members, and thereby he virtually gets over or, technically speaking, represses the racial trauma caused by the insult by the black servant. Accordingly, Sutpen, via the affront, discovers Southern class ideology and simultaneously internalizes the ideology itself: the birth of class-consciousness in Sutpen. From another perspective, this incident can be thought of as the moment of estrangement from the original outer world, the estrangement which coincides with the rise of the self-consciousness or the individual as an essential factor of “the modern novel.” Sutpen becomes an individual or a “noveleastic hero,” not in the pre-modern, homogeneous mountain community in West Virginia, but in the modern, capitalist plantation society in Virginia, the world of difference. Anyhow, this is a turning point for him; after the affront, Sutpen, by way of avoiding letting the repressed trauma return, rigidly adheres to a grand design based upon Southern ideology: the design to obtain “money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife” (212).

It is quite ironic or even tragic that Sutpen becomes a member of the patriarchal, hierarchical slave-holding society that has preyed on him and his family, and becomes obsessed with the design deeply tinged with its ideology. Although he victimizes several important characters in Absalom, Absalom!, as suggested by Rosa’s narration, Sutpen could well be called a victim too in light of what he suffers at the front-door. His design is unquestionably defective and sometimes quite immoral, but we should note that Sutpen’s persistent obsession with the design is an inevitable result of his traumatic
experience caused by the spatial movement from the primitive, pre-capitalist community to the capitalist plantation society, which we may call Sutpen’s tragedy of displacement. For Sutpen, the design is the very medium by which he could get over his trauma and his alienated condition.10)

Sutpen’s background evokes another type of tragedy in terms of the novel’s Caribbean context. As unveiled by his own words, Sutpen, after the affront, goes to Haiti, counting on the information he acquired in school “that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich” (195). In Sutpen’s eyes, as in those of the colonizers, the West Indies is the site of fulfilling his design or his internalized capitalist desire. In his conjecture about Sutpen’s career in collaboration with Shreve, Quentin, borrowing his grandfather’s words, refers to Haiti as

a theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty . . . a little island . . . which was the halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization, halfway between the dark inscrutable continent from which the black blood, the black bones and flesh and thinking and remembering and hopes and desires, was ravished by violence, and the cold known land to which it was doomed, the civilised land and people which had expelled some of its own blood and thinking and desires that had become too crass to be faced and borne longer, and set it homeless and desperate on the lonely ocean . . . . (202)

Here, Faulkner illuminates a broad scale of spatial violence—an exploitative economic structure in the colonial world system—by situating Sutpen’s so-
journ in Haiti within a trans-regional, global context of colonial history. In Faulkner’s eyes, Haiti is the tragic center of colonial violence and injustice: the small island is a place where the sugar cane “valuable pound for pound almost with silver ore” rises from “soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation” (202). In addition, it is this colonial economy and its accompanying violence and injustice that shape the plantation South: in John T. Matthews’s words, “Faulkner’s evidence that the plantation South derives its design from new-world models, owes a founding debt to West Indian slave-based agriculture, extracted labor and profit from African-Caribbean slave trade, and practiced forms of racial and sexual control common to other hemispheric colonial regimes” (239). Through the meticulous representation of Haiti as a “theatre for violence and injustice,” Faulkner astutely problematizes the US South’s involvement in the New World colonial system.

II

The novel accentuates an intense tragedy of displacement in the episode of Charles Etienne Saint Valery Bon as a wretched vestige of colonial history. The life of Charles Etienne enacts an existential tragedy of displacement, the tragedy in which a potential creole subject in New Orleans cannot be such a hopeful subject in the “either black or white” world of Mississippi. He is born of the mulatto Charles Bon and his octoroon mistress in New Orleans in 1859, and he grows up there until he is eleven years old; then, he is taken to the Sutpen mansion in Mississippi and brought up by Sutpen’s white daughter Judith and his half-blood daughter Clytemnestra (Clytie). This spatial movement from a cosmopolitan city of New Orleans to a small town
country of Jefferson in Mississippi yields a crucial impact on his identity for-
mation, as in Sutpen’s case. As Shreve mentions in his dialogue with Quen-
tin, Charles Etienne is supposedly born “subject to no microbe” (159) in
New Orleans: he “could neither have heard yet nor recognised the term
’nigger,’ who even had no word for it in the tongue he knew who had been
born and grown up in a padded silken vacuum cell which might have been
suspended on a cable a thousand fathoms in the sea, where pigmentation
had no more moral value than the silk walls and the scent and the rose-col-
ored candle shades” (161). After leaving New Orleans for Mississippi, how-
ever, Charles Etienne must “[enter] the actual world” (159) and undergo a
“debacle the only life he knew had disintegrated into” (160). That is, the New
Orleans creole subject free from racism is inevitably incorporated into the
racial order of the Deep South.

First, Charles Etienne is initiated into the racialized world on the way from
New Orleans to Mississippi. Accompanied by Clytie, he “[eats] and [sleeps]
with negroes” on the steamboat (160). In crossing the “irrevocable demarca-
tion” (160) into Mississippi, Charles Etienne’s former cultural traces are torn
away from his body: “his very silken remaining clothes, his delicate shirt
and stockings and shoes which still remained to remind him of what he had
once been, vanished, fled from arms and body and legs” (160). As Philip
Weinstein sharply points out, Charles Etienne’s “New Orleans-furnished
body [is] displaced by his Mississippi-furnished body, none of this his own
choice” (“Can’t Matter” 358). In the new place, Charles Etienne or his
body becomes invested in the Southern racial system, which infuses the con-
cept of race into his mind and even engraves “blackness” on it. Tragically
enough, however, Charles Etienne can never be allowed to be easily black.
At the Sutpen mansion, Charles Etienne undergoes a series of forced racialization as well as a concomitant painful dilemma under the supervision of Judith and Clytie:

. . . sleeping in the trundle bed beside Judith’s, beside that of the woman who looked upon him and treated him with a cold unbending detached gentleness more discouraging than the fierce ruthless constant guardianship of the negress who, with a sort of invincible spurious humility slept on a pallet on the floor, the child lying there between them unsleeping in some hiatus of passive and hopeless despair aware of this, aware of the woman on the bed whose every look and action toward him, whose every touch of the capable hands seemed at the moment of touching his body to lose all warmth and become imbued with cold implacable antipathy, and the woman on the pallet upon whom he had already come to look as might some delicate talonless and fangless wild beast crouched in its cage in some hopeless and desperate similitude of ferocity . . . (160–61)

This passage, narrated by Shreve, first depicts Charles Etienne’s incorporation into the racial order in a symbolic manner: he sleeps in “a trundle bed beside Judith’s,” but Clytie sleeps on “a pallet on the floor.” The difference between their positions, as David Paul Ragan observes, seems to reflect a racial hierarchy (87–88). More importantly, the passage indicates how Charles Etienne, arranged between the “white” Judith and the “black” Clytie, suffers a bitter inner conflict “in some hiatus of passive and hopeless despair”; he appears to sense their latent desires to racialize him—Judith’s to “whiten”
him and Clytie’s to “blacken” him—behind their gaze and behavior ("look and action toward him"). “[F]eeling them thinking about him” (161), Charles Etienne cannot help but “hear” their latent desires in a sort of paranoid way: “You are not up here in this bed with me, where through no fault nor willing of your own you should be, and you are not down here on this pallet floor with me, where through no fault nor willing of your own you must and will be, not through any fault or willing of our own who would not what we cannot just as we will and wait for what must be” (161). Charles Etienne here falls into a kind of “double-bind,” where he senses the opposing forces of desires to racialize him. No longer can he be a creole subject immune to racism; Charles Etienne is now put in a torturous, confusing situation, in which he is interpellated as a racialized subject “through no fault nor willing of [his] own” (161).

On the other hand, however, Charles Etienne’s substantial predicament is not necessarily of the forced racialization or the “double-bind” situation but rather of that, even though he knows that he should or must be black, townspeople do not allow him to be black. This seems to be implied by his hostility toward Judith: the reason why he feels Judith is “more discouraging [than Clytie is]” is that Charles Etienne, who “had not resented his black blood so much as he had denied the white” (168), looks upon Judith’s hidden desire to “whiten” him as a futile, complacent meddlesomeness.¹⁴) Unbearable or absurd for Charles Etienne is that although he knows or even accepts that he should or must be black according to the town’s racial law, the townspeople do not see him as such because of his white appearance.¹⁵) This absurdity drives Charles Etienne into his deliberate but desperate revenge against the townspeople, though his revenge is destined to fail.

When he grows up, Charles Etienne causes trouble with black people at a
“negro ball” held in a cabin a few miles away from the Sutpen mansion. In the witnesses’ eyes, there was apparently “no cause, no reason” (164) for the white man to fight with black people: “none to ever know exactly what happened, what curses and ejaculations which might have indicated what it was that drove him” (164). Only General Compson, however, senses the real meaning behind the fight: “the presence of that furious protest, that indictment of heaven’s ordering” (164). Charles Etienne’s fight is a manifestation of his rage, a protest or a deliberate but desperate act of revenge against the reality—the racialized world which forces him to be black but does not allow him to be black. The trial scene after his arrest indicates how Charles Etienne’s revenge or “indictment of heaven’s ordering” works at a site of order, the courthouse.

As a symbolic and collective representative of the town and its law, the judge Hamblett, in the trial, initially lectures the postwar Southern nationalist discourse in a diction that divides black and white men, even though he emphasizes how important both black and white men’s “pride and integrity and forbearance” (165) is for reconstruction of the South. When Hamblett attempts to preach Charles Etienne the white man’s duty under the firm assumption that he is a white man, General Compson manages to stop Hamblett’s voice and his “whitening” of Charles Etienne because he presumably senses that what is now happening is a part of Charles Etienne’s “indictment of heaven’s ordering,” a revenge against the racial law in the South. The judge is gradually embarrassed by his racial ambiguity; ultimately, the judge, the symbolic and collective figure of the town and its law, cannot help but cry in a sort of panic mode (“short circuit” [165]), “What are you? Who and where did you come from?” (165). In a deliberate but desperate manner,
Charles Etienne with his racial ambiguity subverts the judge’s assumption that he is pure white, by way of indicting the racialized world, though his “indictment of heaven’s ordering” does not work so well as to alter the townspeople’s conviction.

According to Shreve, General Compson, after the trial, takes Charles Etienne out of jail and advises him to leave the South: “Whatever you are, once you are among strangers, people who don’t know you, you can be whatever you will” (165). General Compson’s suggestion would complicate Charles Etienne’s predicament: he is forcibly taken to Mississippi, where his creole identity is erased and articulated anew as black, but he is now required to leave there because he or his body cannot be “black” enough in the townspeople’s eyes, even though he knows and accepts that he should or must be black. In this quite absurd situation, Charles Etienne cannot help but repeat the revenge against the townspeople despite his realization that such revenge is actually fruitless.

A few months later after General Compson allows him to leave the town, Charles Etienne reappears with “a coal black and ape-like woman and an authentic wedding license” (166). The following passage most notably exemplifies Charles Etienne’s subversive but futile revenge:

. . . the man [was] apparently hunting out situations in order to flaunt and fling the ape-like body of his charcoal companion in the faces of all and any who would retaliate: the negro stevedores and deckhands on steamboats or in city honky-tonks who thought he was a white man and believed it only the more strongly when he denied it; the white men who, when he said he was a negro, believed that he lied in order to save
his skin, or worse: from sheer besotment [sic] of sexual perversion; in either case the result the same: the man with body and limbs almost as light and delicate as a girl’s giving the first blow, usually unarmed and heedless of the numbers opposed to him, with that same fury and implacability and physical imperviousness to pain and punishment, neither curing nor panting, but laughing. (167)

On the one hand, the passage attests to Charles Etienne’s subversive nature—his intention to display his black wife before the people who believe he is a white man and thus should get so frenzied as to beat (“retaliate”) against him. On the other hand, his behavior, as the passage suggests, never changes the townspeople’s assumption of his racial identity. Neither the blacks nor the whites give up considering him as a white man. Rather, they are to “whiten” him all the more for his denial of his whiteness; they are even to look upon him as a sexual pervert. His action can never alter the status quo but rather makes it firmer. Charles Etienne knows the fruitlessness of what he does, but he repeats the same action again and again in a sort of “repetition compulsion.” Arguably, his desperate action—i.e., after “giving the first blow,” he just passively receives counterblows “with that same fury and implacability”—even indicates Charles Etienne’s masochistic invitation of the counterattack in order to “punish” his own body, even if he is physically impervious to the pain and punishment. To Charles Etienne, who has deeply internalized the Southern epistemology of race, his body now appears to be ontologically transgressive.

Triggered by the spatial movement from New Orleans to Mississippi, Charles Etienne’s tragedy of displacement is not only that of the forced era-
sure and racialization of his creole identity but also that of his painful realiza-
tion that he can never rightly conform to the racial order of the Deep South. Presumably, his tragedy and consequential absolute solitude are distilled into his mysterious but meaningful “laughing.” While it seemingly reflects Charles Etienne’s desperate state of mind, his laughing would be a sneer or indictment directed against the incurably sick, racist society.

Conclusion

Faulkner’s South thwarts the naïve hope for transcendence: the novel’s characters cannot be easily liberated from the ideological burdens of the South. Thomas Sutpen is traumatically initiated into the economically and racially stratified Southern society; then, he ironically falls victim to the grand design derived from exactly what traumatized him. Charles Etienne must be transformed into a racialized subject in “either black or white” Mississippi even though he is potentially a creole or a hybrid. The novel may include a post-colonial possibility or, in Barbara Ladd’s words, “creole voice[s]” that relativize the Southern homogeneity and racial system, but it’s worth noting that *Absalom, Absalom!* must register the acute difficulty of being a creole subject in the racially split world of the Deep South. Furthermore, Charles Etienne, quite tragically, cannot be allowed to be black even though he accepts his blackness. In short, what the novel gives to Charles Etienne is not certain forms of identity such as “white,” “black,” or “creole,” but an absolute solitude and agony as being ontologically singular and therefore unnamed. Dramatizing a series of tragedy of displacement, especially Charles Etienne’s unbearable existential tragedy of displacement, Faulkner elaborately renders *Absalom, Absalom!* a grim Southern novel that strictly restricts the charac-
ters’ transcendence from the ideological burdens of the South.

Notes
1) For the criticism’s long underestimation of the novel’s Caribbean context, see Owada, pp. 27–64.
2) Édouard Glissant’s Caribbean Discourse and Faulkner, Mississippi present Faulkner as a “creole” writer who goes beyond the scope of Euro-American literary tradition; for Glissant, Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! is a representative “novel of Americas” (Caribbean 81, 144–45, 149–50). For a lucid discussion of the novel in terms of “spatial politics,” see Aboul-Ela, pp. 130–59.
3) Glissant uses the term “creolization” not only to suggest a mixing of races but also the “long-unnoticed process’ of integration and regeneration to which it gave birth” (Ladd 32). In addition, Glissant notes that “creolization adds something new to the components that participate in it” (“Creolization” 269). Building upon Glissant’s view of Faulkner and his “creole poetics,” Barbara Ladd, for example, reads in Absalom, Absalom! “the creole voice [that] speak[s] an aesthetics of the body, of memory, and of place in their critique of the Western aesthetics of mind manifest in History” (47). Ladd’s discussion is quite insightful and meaningful when she finds in Faulkner’s South a post-colonial possibility: that the “creole” characters such as Charles Bon and Jim Bond have a potentiality to relativize the Southern (or US) nationalism and its racial system. But she does not seem to adequately elucidate the characters’ burdened solitude and agony, especially those of Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon.
4) In this paper, I use the term “tragedy” not in a strict dramatic sense but in a more general one: it points to events or situations causing great suffering or distress. Meanwhile, I use the term “existential tragedy,” by which I would like to suggest situations where a novelistic character confronts unbearable absurdity but desperately attempts to overcome or counter it despite his or her realization of its impossibility.
5) Rosa’s narration tends to demonize Sutpen, even though she sometimes heroicizes him. Rosa’s demonization of Sutpen originates in his later insult to her: old Sutpen proposes to Rosa that they breed, and if the child
turned out to be male, he would marry her.

6) As Shreve implies through his refusal to let Quentin call Sutpen’s mountain home West Virginia, there was no West Virginia in the early 1800s. “This territory becomes West Virginia when, on the eve of Civil War, it repudiated slavery—at least in part because it had no cotton or tobacco crops dependent on slavery—and declared its separateness” (Weinstein, “Land’s Turn” 22).

7) The theme of Sutpen’s innocence is quite significant in the novel, as it is suggested by the passage, “His [Sutpen’s] trouble was innocence” (178).

8) Jonathan S. Cullick reads “the front-door affront” as the moment when Sutpen enters the Symbolic Order (51).

9) My discussion here is to some extent indebted to Georg Lukács’ theory of the novel: Lukács states in “The Epic and the Novel” that “the hero of the novel . . . is the product of estrangement from the outside world” and “[w]hen the world is internally homogeneous, men do not differ qualitatively from one another” (66).

10) I don’t mean to underestimate Rosa’s view of Sutpen in order to defend Sutpen or his design. As Fujihira astutely notes, Rosa is a very significant character who counters and indict the male-dominated society: she is presumably the only character who senses the evil business carried out by her father (Mr. Coldfield) and Sutpen—slave smuggling (339–44). Additionally, for a shrewd, detailed discussion of Sutpen’s innocence with its relation to his design, see Suwabe, pp. 379–85.

11) As a number of critics have noted, Haitian history in the novel is problematic or confusing “since by 1804, more than 20 years before Sutpen arrived there, Haiti had overthrown French rule and become the first free black republic in the New World” (Matthews 259). For provocative interpretations of Faulkner’s “anachronistic” treatment of Haitian history, see Godden, pp. 49–79; Handley, p. 137; Matthews, p. 253. In light of the early 20th century U.S. diplomatic context, Faulkner may criticize the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 in the Caribbean context of the novel.

12) In one sense, we can find here Faulkner’s keen insight into the constructedness of cultural identity or into body politics: Charles Etienne’s body is an inscribed surface of cultural events. For a further discussion of this issue, see Weinstein, Faulkner’s Subject, pp. 131–35.
We can speculate from Shreve’s narration that Charles Etienne has been informed by either Judith or Clytie that he has black blood: “your grandfather did not know either just which of them [Judith and Clytie] it was who told him [Charles Etienne] that he was, must be, a negro” (161).

On the contrary, even if Clytie scrubs his body “with repressed fury as if she were trying to wash the smooth faint olive tinge from his skin” (161), Charles Etienne does not seem to feel that she is as much “discouraging” as Judith is. It is because he detects in Clytie’s “invincible spurious humility” her desire that he should (must) be black too, as she is.


**References**


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