Postcolonial Palimpsests: Entwined Colonialisms and the Conflicted Representation of Charles Bon in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*

Who is Charles Bon—that “impenetrable and shadowy character”—and what can he tell us about colonialism in William Faulkner’s postbellum South (Faulkner 82)? The narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) present vastly dissimilar portraits of Bon and disagree as to basic facts of his identity, including his origins, race, and sexuality. All the readers have is a series of seemingly incompatible narrative constructions of him. Miss Rosa describes Bon as an “unseen male caller” or “a gallant ‘*dream*,’” perhaps because of her own status as spinster and wronged fiancée (Gerend 24). Mr. Compson envisions him as a “cynical or fatalistic European charged with the seduction of the South” (Ladd 148). In the final telling of Bon’s origins in the novel, Quentin and Shreve identify him as the son Thomas Sutpen had on a sugar plantation in Haiti with his first wife, Eulalia, whom he abandoned after the discovery of her black blood. Through this association, Quentin and Shreve connect the novel to a story of Caribbean plantation life and the sexual subordination of slaves, and they thus position Bon as a black creole. Such an understanding reveals that Faulkner’s multiplicitous portrayal of Bon is central to the way various forms of colonialism operate in *Absalom, Absalom!* and to what ends.[[1]](#endnote-1) The conflicted representation of Bon’s subjectivity and métissage[[2]](#endnote-2) exemplifies Faulkner’s portrayal of what I call entwined colonialisms embedded in Southern society and gestures towards an alternative to the preservation of colonial ideologies in the twentieth century. I use the term entwined colonialisms to describe the relationship between the imbricated, yet distinct, temporal periods in the US South and the various colonialisms associated with them, as depicted in the novel through Bon’s story. Charles Bon embodies the entwined colonialisms: as a narrative construction, he works like a mirror, concurrently reflecting each narrator’s various colonial commitments. At the same time, however, through his national, racial, and sexual fluidity he also represents the potential for a way out of the cyclical repetitions of colonial crimes.

Through his insistence on colonial continuities, as revealed in his portrayal of the revolt on the Haitian plantation, Faulkner challenges a linear model of progressive history in which the colonial period gives way to a distinct neo-colonial period. For instance, Thomas Sutpen seemingly quells a slave uprising on a Haitian plantation in 1827; however, Haiti had overthrown French rule in 1804.[[3]](#endnote-3) Through this episode Faulkner challenges the neat delineation between the colonial and neo-colonial eras in the plantation societies of the Americas. Similarly, Faulkner represents the antebellum South as a colonized society through the outright domination of one population by another; further, he depicts the postbellum South as part of this history as well—as a neocolonial society[[4]](#endnote-4) in which colonialism is not erased but re-embedded. Neocolonialism occurs when a region appears independent on the surface while its economic and political systems are controlled from the outside: this power structure is evident in the way the black population remains constrained and exploited by the former plantocracy after Emancipation. Further, if the South existed in a colonial relation to the North during Reconstruction, this relationship may be seen as neocolonial in the post-Reconstruction era after the exodus of Northern troops.[[5]](#endnote-5) Additionally, I argue that in *Absalom, Absalom!* there is a temporal period beyond the postbellum era, from Quentin Compson’s turn-of-the-century period to the 1930s when Faulkner was writing, during which the neocolonial ties—the colonization of the black population and the white South by a capitalist North—remain. This period may be seen as a continuation of the neocolonialism of the postbellum period, demonstrating the staying power of colonial hierarchies and ideologies, which have effects that are ingrained in society, including racism, the violence of lynch law, and sexual violence. By depicting the crimes of the colonial past as inescapable in every period, Faulkner proposes a non-linear, repetitive temporality in which colonialism and neo-colonialism inhabit and repeat one another. [[6]](#endnote-6) The colonial power structures are entwined, complicating clean temporal designations such as colonial and neo-colonial as a result of deeply rooted colonialisms that remained central to Southern society into the twentieth century.

As described in relation to the Haitian episode, critical discourse on *Absalom, Absalom!* has adeptly exposed the South’s problematic temporal relation to colonialism; however, I argue that Charles Bon and his multiple narrative manifestations have not received adequate attention. This essay addresses this oversight through reading Bon as the embodiment of a fluidity that confronts the efforts to preserve the hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and familial relations on which colonialism and neocolonialism depend for coherence and meaning.[[7]](#endnote-7) The biracial, sexually fluid figure of Charles Bon and his contradictory depiction by competing narrators of his tale reveal entwined colonialisms that complicate the divide between the colonial and the neocolonial employed in linear surface narratives: Bon is portrayed as living multiple stories of colonialism simultaneously in the novel. For instance, Bon is described as a white cosmopolitan dandy, a “wealthy young New Orlean[sian]”, down to his participation in the plaçage system, from Mr. Compson’s viewpoint in the colonial era, and yet is depicted as a thwarted black rapist and denied black brother from Quentin’s neocolonial perspective (80). While the depictions of Bon differ according to temporal periods, his multiple portrayals expose the narrator’s colonial commitments—commitments that underlie and connect the two seemingly distinct eras. In other words, although Bon is constructed at the crossroads of different colonialisms and competing narrative engagements in these colonial regimes, his various permutations reveal deep entwined colonialisms that challenge conventional designations between the colonial and neo-colonial periods. Nevertheless, with an awareness of the narrators’ divergent colonial mindsets and the layered colonialisms that connect them, we can begin to see the ways in which Faulkner uses Bon’s métissage, or blending of cultural, racial, and sexual categories, to confront the resilient colonial mentalities that persist in the twentieth-century American South through imagining an alternative: the acceptance of this fluidity.

In addition to the deep-rooted colonialisms that endured in the American South at the turn-of-the-century, Haiti, the site of Bon’s conception and birth, was held in a colonial relation to the US during the military occupation from 1915 to 1934. At this time the paternalistic discourse that had been employed to justify slavery in the South was used again as propaganda to rouse the American public’s support for the occupation (Gerend 19). This discourse, which positioned Haiti as a wayward child in need of American paternalistic rule, became prevalent in 1910 when Haiti fell under the control of the US and continued through the years of the occupation (Gerend 22). As such, Bon’s Haitian blood carries with it certain implications for the narrators speaking in 1910, and, as Sara Gerend argues, Quentin and Shreve’s “narrative that reconstructs Charles Bon as the abandoned Haitian son must be recognized as a vital part of the emerging paternalistic discourse that came to justify and maintain American imperialism in Haiti” (18). Further, the centrality of this paternalism connects the colonialism of the Haitian occupation to that of slavery in the antebellum South, highlighting the fact that both periods affect Quentin’s mindset in the neocolonial South. Faulkner began writing *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1933, thus, both Quentin and Shreve’s telling in 1910 and Faulkner’s writing might well have been influenced by the discourse of the white American soldiers/father figures guiding the young black nation. Accordingly, I would suggest that Quentin and Shreve’s version of Bon’s story reveals as much about the popular discourse and political climate of their time and the period during which Faulkner was writing as about the social and political situation in Bon’s antebellum South (as well as the relation between these different temporal moments).

Exposing their own colonial mentalities and investment in white paternalism, of the sort that structured both the slave system and the US occupation of Haiti, Quentin and Shreve elevate Bon’s desire for his father’s approval to the sole motivation behind his decisions and actions. They construct Bon as a neglected Haitian son pursuing the acknowledgement of his white American father, or in Gerend’s words, “a sort of foundling raised by an absent white father and a vengeful Creole mother” (25). However, as white middle to upper class men, Quentin and Shreve impose their own understanding of family structures onto their conception of Charles Bon. According to some scholars, such as Hortense Spillers, slave societies were matrilineal as a result of absent white fathers or banished black fathers (203).[[8]](#endnote-8) If the role of the father is different in antebellum black families than it is in early twentieth-century white families and cultural differences exist between the US and Haiti (where Bon spent an undefined portion of childhood), then Quentin and Shreve’s elevation of the drive for his father’s acknowledgement to Bon’s sole motivation reveals more about their own understanding of family relations than about Bon’s actions as projected back into the antebellum period. In short, Quentin and Shreve’s depiction of Bon as an abandoned Haitian son seeking recognition from his white father exposes their colonial commitments and the relation of these commitments to the turn-of-the-century period from which they are reconstructing Bon’s story.

In opposition to Quentin and Shreve’s emphasis on their own white middle to upper class understanding of Haiti or black family structures, we might instead analyze Bon from the standpoint of his multiplicitous sexual identity and Caribbean plantation origins.[[9]](#endnote-9) Exploring the representation of Bon’s story with an eye to the ingrained colonial ideologies and stereotypes invoked by the novel’s narrators—with a focus on Quentin and Shreve’s version—sheds light on the conflicted depiction of his subjectivity that results. Bon is a biracial man from Haiti who, according to Quentin and Shreve, inherited both black and Spanish blood from his mother. While Bon is the product of a sanctioned marriage, his lineage likely results from the rape of slaves or black laborers, given that slavery authorized and even institutionalized sexual violence (or at the very least sexualized, unequal relations between a planter and a slave in pre-revolutionary Haiti). Bon is genetically connected to both planters and slaves. Moreover, as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman argues, modern theories of sexual identity may have been formed in part as a result of the violence and the “sexual deviance” of the slave plantation (224). Abdur-Rahman claims that the “routine rape of black women increased the wealth of slave owners and solidified an enduring association of forbidden sexuality, sexual violence, and blackness” (226-7). While Abdur-Rahman’s essay addresses representation specifically in the context of the US slave plantation, I believe her arguments extend to Bon’s experience on the Haitian sugar plantation. Through his lineage, Bon is connected to the violence of plantation life—“not simply the product of sexual criminality but its very incarnation”—and consequently exposes and embodies the violent sexual perversity of white slave-owners (Abdur-Rahman 228, 225). Although Bon is the offspring of both masters and slaves as a member of the *jaunes* in Haiti, the biracial propertied class that succeeded the white French aristocracy after the revolution, he is positioned on a level analogous to that of Henry and Judith in the US (Matthews 253). However, after he relocates to the US, Bon is aligned with slaves and their violent inheritance, according to the Southern racial hierarchies in Mississippi (which he seems to avoid by passing as white at university). The conflicting positions he inhabits illustrate the multiplicity not only of his lineage but also his experience, caused by different cultural conceptions of race in Haiti and the US.[[10]](#endnote-10) Nevertheless, if the exploitative relations of the plantation affect not only slaves but also the elite class—corrupting “both its victims and its benefactors”—then how is Bon in his bivalent colonial position implicated in the cycle of violation and “sexual deviance” out of which he was produced (Abdur-Rahman 232)?

When Bon was born in 1831, Haiti enjoyed internal stability with low levels of violence and serious crime; however, the nation was nonetheless negatively affected by the color prejudice of President Jean-Pierre Boyer (1818-1843) and the ruling class (Nicholls 69). For example, Boyer’s Rural Code of 1826 restricted the rights of the peasantry and revived “the colour distinctions by which the mulatto regarded himself to be the superior of the black man” (Williams 334). Emphasis on racial or color distinctions was central to the political atmosphere of Haiti during Bon’s life: “Haiti of the thirties, then, presents the picture of a predominately agricultural country ruled by a small group of military officers and politicians, almost all of whom were light-skinned” (Nicholls 71). Given Bon and Eulalia’s light skin (both were able to pass as white) and financial success (as the heir and owner of a sugar plantation), they would not have been subjected to the Rural Code. As opposed to the one-drop rule, which arose in the US South in the 1830s when Bon was born, it was possible “for gradations of white and black to exist between the absolute poles of the racial chromograph” in Haiti, due to its connection to the Mediterranean cultures of France and Spain (Ladd 28, Saldívar 104). As a result of the greater authority assigned to hybrid status and the “legitimation of the mixed-blood mulatto through the legalisms of marriage and property rights” allowed in Haitian society, Bon and his mother did not follow her mother into bondage, as they would have done in the US South (Saldívar 105). Not only were they considered to be citizens rather than property, but given their color, race, and class, the Bons undoubtedly would have held a position of power and prestige in Haiti in the 1830s as part of Boyer’s favored mulatto elite. However, after emigrating to the US, they would have lost their elite position (had they not decided to pass), as in Louisiana, “persons of mixed ancestry were ‘redefined’ as part of the black or ‘slave’ race during the 1830s” when the policy of segregation displaced that of assimilation following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 (Ladd xv, xiv). Therefore, Charles Bon and his mother would have been read in different racial and social terms dependent on geographic location in the 1830s. The Bons would have shifted from their privileged position as the mulatto elite class in Haiti to members of the black race and thus suspected slaves in the US South, illustrating both the fluidity central to Bon’s identity and his bivalent colonial position.

Just as Creoles[[11]](#endnote-11) like Bon might hide a trace of African ancestry, in the nineteenth century it was thought, as Barbara Ladd argues, that white Southerners might conceal a European tinge—threatening national unity through their ties to Europe and the shared policies of colonialism (xv-xvi). Ladd argues that in American Southern literature, “the creole metaphor also marks the southerner as a dangerous border figure, someone who might look like an American,” yet “carries within him- or herself traces of the displaced and who might at some point act traitorously to undermine the progressive nation” (xv-xvi). Bon is located in this literary history, not only through his suppressed slave plantation lineage, but also through his portrayal as a decadent European.[[12]](#endnote-12) Mr. Compson describes Bon “crossing the campus on foot in the slightly Frenchified cloak and hat” or “reclining in a flowered, almost feminized gown, in a sunny window in his chamber” with “some tangible effluvium of knowledge, surfeit: of actions done and satiations plumbed and pleasures exhausted and even forgotten” (76). His fluid nationality, in addition to his shifting racial and sexual identities, illustrates the threat that Bon poses to a unified US-identity both as a Creole and a Southerner with connections to Europe. In addition to Bon’s French and feminine appearance, he is also presented as so experienced and worldly as to be able to seduce both Judith and Henry, his naïve siblings from the country, through his mannerisms and appearance.

Along with his unstable national identity, feminized style, and worldly ways, Bon is depicted as having spent his youth in pursuit of pleasure and indulgence, spending a large portion of his mother’s money “on his whores and his champagne” and having “already acquired a name for prowess among women” (241, 78). If Bon is serious in his intention to marry Judith, as it appears to the reader, then the existence of his octoroon wife and son, Charles Etienne Bon, connects him to the illegal sexual practice of bigamy.[[13]](#endnote-13) Bon was conceived on a plantation where a lack of commitment to patrilineal, patriarchal, and monogamous forms of reproduction, was the norm. Bon’s conception in this space manifests itself in his propensity for unconstrained sexual behavior and may be seen as an alternative explanation for this aspect of his character. Bon’s unconventional sexuality, which reveals him to be both a profligate philanderer and potential bigamist, is an expression of his plantation origins, as opposed to a simulated identity created for the purpose of seducing Sutpen’s children and demolishing his dynasty out of desire for revenge or because even negative attention from his father is better than nothing. By emphasizing Bon’s non-normative sexuality and its potential to subvert existing power structures, such a reading illuminates the centrality of both Bon’s ostensible European identity and Haitian plantation origins to the story—as opposed to his desire for a white father figure. Further, the combination of his European and Caribbean associations, in addition to his multiplicitous sexuality, speaks to Bon’s métissage or social, racial, and sexual fluidity, which I will discuss in full shortly.

As a result of his origins on a slave plantation where non-patrilineal sexuality is standard, Bon is associated with queer sexuality during the nineteenth century—a time when alternative sexual identities, such as auto-monosexualists, pedophiles, and homosexuals, were constructed and recognized by society (Abdur-Rahman 225). Yet, while non-patrilineal sexuality was the norm, “strict heterosexuality in the context of monogamous marriage was reserved for members of the master class,” since the status of the child followed that of the mother from the early eighteenth century (Abdur-Rahman 229, Ladd 21). In this way, nineteenth-century plantation sexual practices reinscribed the social hierarchies of slavery. Bon, however, subverts these power structures through his fluid sexuality and actions as a biracial man wooing both a white man and white woman, which I will return to below.[[14]](#endnote-14) As a result of his sexual agency, Bon rewrites and reverses what Spillers calls the “pansexual potential” of the female slave, or the ability of the slave to be “invaded/raided” by both men and women of the plantocracy: Bon, a descendant of slaves (and masters), can seduce both the men and women of the master class (222).[[15]](#endnote-15) Greg Forter states that Bon’s is “an adult masculinity strangely freed from the rigidities of conventional gender” (130). I agree and argue that Bon’s fluid sexuality exists in a liminal space, which challenges the efficacy of constructed and contained gender identities. Sexual inverts, who reverse their “proper sex-roles by adapting a masculine or feminine style at variance with what was deemed natural and appropriate to their anatomical sex,” were introduced in opposition to the heterosexual, masculine male in the nineteenth century as an early theory of homosexuality (Halperin 15-16). As heterosexual womanizer as well as “Frenchified,” feminine cross-dresser in Mr. Compson’s version, Bon embodies both constructed identities simultaneously. This doubleness underscores the failure of the masculine male/sexual invert binary to encompass his sexuality, mirroring the capacity of his bivalent colonial position, as the embodiment of master/slave, colonizer/colonized, to destabilize those binaries.

Furthermore, Bon’s bigamy and the philandering also position him as queer in the sense that these acts are not oriented towards patrilineal reproduction, and his connection to Henry links him more specifically to the emergent figure of the homosexual. To consider Bon’s friendship with Henry on Eve Sedgwick’s “continuum of male ‘homosocial desire,’” connects it to “a cultural system in which male-male desire became widely intelligible primarily by being routed through nonexistent desire involving a woman” (*Between Men* 1, *Epistemology of the Closet* 15). Judith can be seen as an empty vessel linking the men and providing a socially acceptable outlet for their feelings for each other. Mr. Compson supports this view of the homosocial desire between Henry and Bon, stating: “Bon not only loved Judith after his fashion but he loved Henry too and I believe in a deeper sense than merely after his fashion…seeing perhaps in the sister merely the shadow, the woman vessel with which to consummate the love whose actual object was the youth” (85-6). As far as the narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!*, and consequently the readers, are aware, the relationship between Henry and Bon is never physically consummated. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two men has the potential for creativity and resistance in its alternativeness. In the mutuality found in his relationship with Henry, Bon pursues what Michael Bibler calls a “horizontal model of egalitarian social relations” and disrupts the colonial hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality central to the plantation South (6). While relations between white men and black women were accepted in the South (and Bibler argues even relations between white men of the planter class), egalitarian relationships between black and white men were not, as they threatened core racial plantation hierarchies. This threat of racial egalitarianism proves to be too much for Henry. He shoots Bon shortly after discovering his race.

In addition to the emergent figure of the homosexual, Bon’s love for Henry connects him to the taboo practices of incest and miscegenation. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, the traffic in women (exemplified by Henry “seducing” Judith for Bon or betrothing Judith to Bon) is used to create relations between men (115). Interestingly, Bon violates both of the restrictions placed on the traffic in women: endogamy or marrying too far into the tribe (incest) and exogamy or marrying too far outside of the tribe (miscegenation). Incest may be seen as a mode of racial narcissism or familial self-love, which are forms of preservation from within, and is more acceptable than miscegenation in the South, as a result of the overvaluation of blood, purity, and lineage.[[16]](#endnote-16) However, incest between Judith and Charles Bon constitutes fornication with a nonwhite body, which would preserve familial but not racial purity. Given the South’s preoccupation with both familial and racial purity, it is understandable that in Quentin and Shreve’s retelling, Henry ultimately accepts the fact that the marriage would be incestuous, yet kills Bon to prevent miscegenation. Marriage between a white woman and a man with even a trace of African ancestry would have been considered a threat to the colonial hierarchies at the heart of the South’s plantation culture.

Moreover, in Quentin and Shreve’s multivalent portrayal of Bon and his fluid national, racial, and sexual identity, he seems to encompass what Valérie Loichot, borrowing from Édouard Glissant’s Antillean discourse, refers to as métissage (Loichot 117).[[17]](#endnote-17) Indeed, Bon’s uncertain racial heritage, coupled with his sexual fluidity, makes him a fitting example of a métis.[[18]](#endnote-18) Bon clears room for new social, racial, sexual forms in the segregated South with his Caribbean-infused fluidity (Loichot 130).[[19]](#endnote-19) As a social métis, Bon lives like an elite white Creole in New Orleans, yet is technically black—a mutability which identifies him also as a racial métis. If Quentin and Shreve’s version of events is to be believed (an account which Faulkner tells the reader is “probably true enough” and Barbara Ladd states “probably comes as close to fact as any other detail concerning Bon, which is to say not very close at all”), then Bon has black ancestry on his mother’s side[[20]](#endnote-20) and for all intents and purposes is passing (Faulkner 268, Ladd 141).[[21]](#endnote-21) Through living as a white man regardless of his black blood, Bon disrupts the black/white binary accepted as law in the colonial South. Further, Bon is a sexual métis. In his attraction to and love for both Henry and Judith, Bon is bisexual, an additional form of non-normative sexual practice that we might add to those discussed above, including miscegenation, cross-dressing, attempted incest and bigamy, homosocial desire, and philandering.

My reading of Bon, which emphasizes his fluid sexuality and Haitian plantation origins, challenges Quentin and Shreve’s portrayal and the reductive colonial stereotypes on which they rely. For instance, as a result of his non-normative sexuality, Charles Bon subverts the figure of the “mulatto revenger” to which scholars, such as Melvin Seiden, link him, as well as the stereotype of the black rapist with which Quentin and Shreve associate him. Biracial blood relatives were barred from white Southern family trees, and “mulattos” were not only seen as the off-spring of “unnatural” relationships who did not have the right to live, but also “the rapists and criminals of the present time” (Fredrickson 277). The black rapist of the neo-colonial period was “‘nearly always a mulatto,’ with ‘enough white blood in him to replace native humility and cowardice with Caucasian audacity’” (Fredrickson 277). Thus, in the US South, white racists associated biracial men with violent sexual tendencies due to the mixture of blood and the combined characteristics of both white and black men. In Quentin and Shreve’s version, Henry shoots Bon to prevent him from being “the nigger that’s going to sleep with [his] sister,” placing the novel in dialogue with the figure of the black rapist (286). As no rape occurs, however, and Bon is the victim and not the propagator of the violence that claims his life, the novel subverts Bon’s alignment with the figure of the black rapist in the same way that it destabilizes his association with the mulatto revenger. Nevertheless, through his death at Henry’s hands for the protection of his white sister’s sexual honor in the final telling of his story, Bon becomes both lynched rapist and abandoned black lover/brother for the white collective, which includes not only the Sutpens and Aunt Rosa, but also Quentin and Shreve, due to reverberations of the trauma which ripple out through the generations.

Bon’s portrayal as rapist and forsaken brother is indicative of Quentin and Shreve’s adherence to colonial ideologies, such as the myth of the black rapist and the denial of black branches to white family trees, which remain central to white authority in the neo-colonial period. As noted above, Bon plays different roles in relation to diverse colonialisms’ understanding of him (such as white European philanderer, incestuous bisexual lover, forbidden brother, abandoned Haitian son, and lynched black rapist), resulting in conflicting representations of his subjectivity. The multiple colonialisms at play in Faulkner’s South produce incongruous conceptions of Bon, yet at the same time, each colonialism reveals that intimate violence is written into the structure of power. Intimate violence is the constant in each story of colonialism in which Bon participates, from the violence and sexual abuse of the plantation to the violence of lynch culture. This violence culminates in Bon’s death at the hands of his brother.

Although their story concludes in an act of intimate violence, Faulkner nevertheless encourages readers to transpose the story of Henry and Bon in the colonial era onto that of Quentin and Shreve in neo-colonial period. Faulkner collapses the four characters into two: “not two of them there and then either but four of them riding two horses through the iron darkness” (237). Even at the level of meta-narrative, then, Faulkner’s conflates the experiences of characters in the colonial and neo-colonial eras, challenging such conventional temporal designations through tracing an interconnected web of different colonialisms throughout the novel. In related terms, scholars such as Michael Bibler, Richard Godden, Noel Polk, and Erin Pearson, have pointed to the submerged love story between Quentin and Shreve as one that mirrors that of Henry and Bon.[[22]](#endnote-22) Faulkner merges Quentin and Shreve together as one, as their voices become indistinguishable: “the two who breathed not individuals now yet something more and less than twins, the heart and blood of youth” (236). Bibler writes that the two “share a homoerotic bond that has to be read as egalitarian homo-ness because it challenges the heterosexist conventions that define male homosexuality in terms of gender inversion and masculine difference” and that “they turn to the story of Henry and Bon to find an identical model of queer relations that would explain and validate their own queerness in the present” (64).[[23]](#endnote-23) While the incestuous aspect of the love triangle between Henry, Judith, and Bon may speak to Quentin’s feelings for his sister Caddy, as has been argued by John Irwin, Henry and Bon’s homoerotic relationship addresses Quentin and Shreve’s feelings for each other. However, given that Bon is ultimately killed by Henry, the message of Bon’s story for Quentin is that his love stories with Shreve or Caddy are not permissible in his neo-colonial period in the same way that incest and homosexuality were forbidden for Bon in the plantation South.

If we are to take the final retelling of the Sutpen family saga as the most telling, then Bon represents not only the threat of incest and homosexuality, but also, and most importantly, that of miscegenation. Accordingly, the love stories between Quentin/Henry and Shreve/Bon exist at the same time that Bon is portrayed by Quentin and Shreve as the mythical black rapist of the Southern Radical mentality popular between 1889 and 1915 (Godden 23). Given the layered nature of the narrative and the constant reiterations of the Sutpen story with revised evidence, an understanding of Bon as lover and as black rapist—another example of Bon’s hybridity and conflicted representation—operate simultaneously in the text, in the same way that Bon can be both incestuous heterosexual and homoerotic lover. The multiple roles assigned to Bon are confirmation not only of his bivalent status, but also of different colonialisms’ contradictory conceptions of him: for example, he is both sophisticated white brother/lover in Mr. Compson’s colonial-era version and banished black brother/rapist in Quentin and Shreve’s neocolonial reconfiguration.

Nevertheless, it is significant that Bon becomes both disavowed black lover/brother and thwarted black rapist in the final retelling of the story from Quentin and Shreve’s turn-of-the-century moment, due to the colonial ideologies that remain central to their neo-colonial era.[[24]](#endnote-24) Just as Quentin and Shreve’s portrayal of Bon as abandoned Haitian son reveals much about the discourse of paternalism prevalent in their time, this fantasy of Bon as black rapist and mulatto brother exposes much about their fears in the neo-colonial period and is an almost anachronistic construction of Bon’s experience in the antebellum era. Faulkner thus contests the traditional boundaries separating the colonial and neo-colonial eras in order to show not only the interrelation between the two but also their entwinement in the novel, due to the layered colonialisms connecting them. In a similar way, Shreve’s speech at the end of the novel, in which he postulates that “in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere…they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won’t show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings,” should be understood as indicative of the fears of the time period Quentin and Shreve represent (302). The threat posed by Bon as a mixed race man who could pass as European jeopardizes the purity that is so valued in the South. This threat is central to Quentin and Shreve’s characterization of Bon as rejected black lover/brother and their telling of the Sutpen story specifically in the Radical era.

While Bon’s contradictory roles as both abandoned black lover/brother and lynched rapist in different colonialisms’ versions of his story result in his death, his multivalent nature also has the positive consequence of challenging rigid plantation hierarchies, particularly as presented in Quentin and Shreve’s neo-colonial moment. Glissant claims that “creolization is the very thing that offends Faulkner: *métissage* and miscegenation plus their unforeseeable consequences” (83).[[25]](#endnote-25) Bon’s fluidity of race and sexuality may have made Faulkner—a white Southerner born near the turn-of-the-century—uneasy in the way that it disrupts the plantation hierarchies and ideologies his generation frequently lamented. However, I argue that at the same time, Faulkner may recognize the potential for something more in this mixing. Greg Forter states that as a result of the intertwining of slavery, patriarchy, and capitalism in his works, “Faulkner’s fictions grasp the destructiveness of the manhood they seek to mourn with a degree of historical acuity,” or in other words, Faulkner recognizes the devastating effects of the antebellum South’s colonial ideologies as a white male descendant of the planter class, at the same time that he mourns their loss (97). Faulkner eulogizes the downfall of the Sutpen family in *Absalom, Absalom!*, yet is also critical of Sutpen’s methods and actions: Sutpen’s racism in refusing to accept Eulalia and Charles Bon into his family is what ultimately destroys his design. Thus, through the narration of Bon’s story, Faulkner gestures towards an acceptance of métissage as an alternative to the replication of destructive colonial relations.

Exclusive of the patriarch Thomas, the Sutpen family embraces Bon—the social, racial, and sexual métis—until the father’s will is reasserted through Sutpen’s influence over Henry. If Bon’s secrets (or at least his race) had stayed buried (or had been accepted) or Henry had not acted on Sutpen’s will, perhaps the family could have avoided its tragic outcome, i.e. if Henry had not murdered Bon and fled, then Sutpen would have retained his legitimate, as well as illegitimate, male heir and not have offended Miss Rosa or fathered a daughter with young Milly Jones and been slaughtered by Wash Jones as a result. While I recognize the unrealistic nature of this claim, as in the South at that time Bon would never have been accepted for the differences for which he was ultimately killed, I would nonetheless suggest that Faulkner sets up the recovery of Bon and the métissage and difference he embodies as a gesture to an alternative path, if not possible in Sutpen’s time, then perchance in Quentin and Shreve’s period which overlays the former, or in Faulkner’s own time which is superimposed onto both.[[26]](#endnote-26) Perhaps Faulkner means to insinuate that through embracing métissage, symbolized by the figure of Bon, and recuperating him as black brother/lover as opposed to lynched rapist, the South might have another option in addition to its inheritance of entwined colonialisms, plantation hierarchies of race, gender, and class, and reiterations of trauma—a way to break out of the cyclical repetitions of hatred and violence in neo-colonial period. In Glissant’s model of generalized métissage, “the category of métis disappears altogether,” becoming the norm as opposed to the exception (Loichot 156). Indeed, perhaps this generalized métissage in which racial hierarchies lose their significance is not far from what Faulkner envisioned at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, both through Shreve’s fantasy of racial amalgamation and Quentin and Shreve’s acceptance of Bon (whether intentional or not) through merging with him and Henry.[[27]](#endnote-27) At the same time that Quentin and Shreve fear Bon and the racial and sexual fluidity he represents, they become one with him, leaving room for the possibility of his acceptance and recuperation by latter generations, such as Faulkner’s own, and an alternative to the reiterations of the tragedies that result from continued adherence to outmoded colonial ideologies.

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Notes

1. A significant amount of existing scholarship calls into question the all too neatly demarcated temporal and geographical boundaries that form when applying postcolonial concepts to the US South. To characterize the South merely as the periphery to the core of the North would be simplistic, given that the South technically exists within the boundaries of a First World nation, and is a bivalent space that is simultaneously center and margin, colonizer and colonized, global North and global South (Smith 105). The anthologies *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* and *Global Faulkner: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 2006* provide a good overview of the relation between the US South and postcolonial theory. Further, a number of scholars have shed light more specifically on Faulkner’s connection to postcolonial issues, including Hosam Aboul-Ela, Charles Baker, Sara Gerend, Édouard Glissant, Taylor Hagood, George Handley, John T. Matthews, and Maritza Stanchich. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. According to Valérie Loichot, métissage, “unlike *miscegenation*, not only defines race, but can also describe cultural, social, and gender blurring” (117). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Many scholars who have questioned the efficacy of defining colonialism and neocolonialism in the US South have focused on Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* as a text that helps to develop this more nuanced thinking, for example, through the novel’s Haitian episode (and the date discrepancy that accompanies it). Richard Godden argues that Faulkner purposely rewrote an important event in order to portray Haiti as the country of eternal slave revolution, foregrounding “the continuous potential for revolution within the institution of slavery” (49, 53). John Matthews believes that Faulkner could have had his dates right: Sutpen and Quentin refer to the black sugarcane workers not as “slaves” but as “niggers” and may have been describing an insurrection in the decades following the Haitian Revolution (252). I argue that Faulkner takes advantage of the symbolic potential of Haiti’s revolutionary past to portray a neocolonial uprising of free black laborers in a manner that would be indistinguishable from a scene depicting a revolt of slaves during the Haitian Revolution. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. To emphasize Faulkner’s representation of persistent colonialisms in the postbellum period, I will refer to this era as neo-colonial as opposed to post-colonial. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This view results from the spreading of modernity and consumerism to the South at that time, the South’s economic dependence on the North, and role of white Southern capitalists, such as Faulkner’s Flem Snopes [who in *The Hamlet* (1940) succeeds at the expense of others in the neocolonial South’s modern capitalist system, for example, lending money at a high interest rate in Varner’s store] as the native elite, facilitating the transition to a modern capitalist system. Although modernity—in the form of free market ideology and labor mobility—may have been introduced in the South following the Civil War, it did not effectively supplant the plantation economy until the World War I period, which marked the beginning of the end of the plantation system (Mandle 68-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In recognizing the continuities between the different periods, it is important also to note that the periods are not the same, in order to avoid reducing the multifaceted colonialisms in play at any given moment to a single layer. Similar mindsets and behaviors resulting from ingrained colonial ideologies, such as racism and violence, are identifiable in each era, yet recognizing the historical specificities of the distinct periods is essential, in order not to conflate them. While I argue that to an extent Faulkner collapses different historical eras—the antebellum, postbellum, and twentieth-century periods—into each other in the novel to elucidate their commonalities, I do not mean that he erases the important differences between them, which would result in non-identifiable temporal settings. For example, slaves are technically free in the neo-colonial postbellum South and the Northern troops have left, illustrating the ways in which the periods are distinct yet simultaneously enmeshed due to similar colonial power structures, which, for example, grant white men power over nonwhite and female subjectivities. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. While depictions of Bon as racially and sexually fluid are most solidly connected to Mr. Compson’s construction of him, I argue that they also result from the multiplicitous depictions running throughout all of the narrative formulations of him. As a result of the various narrative constructions, he is necessarily multiple and mutable. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In contrast, Frances Smith Foster challenges the accepted narratives of African American familial dysfunction rooted in slavery, using writings published in the early African American press, family histories, folk stories, memoirs, and other historical documents to present a fuller picture of early African American marriage and family life. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. As identity has been proven to be fluid (even for literary characters), I do not mean to imply that I will present the authentic or true version of Bon. I propose another way of seeing his character that tries to be conscious of Quentin and Shreve as narrators and the baggage they bring to their task of storytelling. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. It is important to note that the multiplicity I describe here exists within one narrative construction of Bon as a biracial Haitian immigrant and does not take into account the various versions. The fluidity of Bon’s identity exists within singular narrative constructions of him, such as his shifting racial positioning due to differing cultural conceptions of race, but also on another level as a result of the fact that there are multiple, varied versions of him. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. According to white Southerners in the nineteenth century, Creoles with a capitalized “C” are white, whereas creoles with lowercase “c” are biracial (Ladd xv). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In his portrayal of Bon as an extravagant European, Mr. Compson may be aware of the phrase’s potential as a euphemism for biracial, as a result of the racial flexibility connected with the French and Spanish colonies, or he may not have taken it this far, seeing in Bon only a foreignness that positions him outside Compson’s acknowledged boundaries of the American South. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. As Bon was believed to be white and his wife black, this marriage would not have been legal in nineteenth-century Louisiana. According to Quentin and Shreve, there was a ceremony, which is the part that Henry could not ignore: “it would be the ceremony, a ceremony entered into, to be sure, with a negro, yet still a ceremony” (87). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. At the same time that Bon challenges plantation power structures through his relationships with Henry and Judith, he also would seem to reaffirm them through the racist, sexist plaçage relationship he engages in with his biracial wife. Forter argues that “the ‘feminine’ commitment to sensual pleasure [represented by this relationship] thus turns out to be identical to the masculine ruthlessness that Sutpen enacts” (132). However, in my mind Bon’s plaçage relationship tempers but does not undo the subversive effects of his sexual fluidity. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Bon’s sexual agency is complex. While Bon acts to seduce Henry and Judith, he is repeatedly described as a fatalist with his “sardonic and indolent detachment” and the “impenetrable imperturbability with which he watched them [Henry and Judith]” (Faulkner 74-5). Bon’s belief that his fate had been determined by forces outside of his control manifests itself in his and Henry’s theory that through serving in the Confederate army, the violence of the war may make their decisions for them. Bon’s deterministic conviction that his fate is predestined may also be a consequence of the brutality of life on a slave plantation, such as the one upon which he was conceived. Just as slaves have no agency over the violence to which they are subjected, Bon believes that he has no control over what happens to him, emphasizing his connection to the violence of slavery. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. I credit John Matthews with this observation. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The lack of an English equivalent of the French *métissage* and the Spanish *mestizaje* is “explained by the extreme binary classification of people of the imagined ‘black’ and ‘white’ races in the United States while the French and Spanish legal systems included articles on various intermediate categories” (Loichot 124). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Loichot notes that Joe Christmas of *Light in August* embodies métissage and is the most threatening of Faulkner’s mixed race characters because his blackness is speculative (125). However, as far as each of the narrators before Quentin’s final retelling of the story is concerned, Eulalia Bon is a white Creole, making Bon’s racial origins as uncertain as Christmas’s. I agree with Loichot that Christmas is a social métis who embodies the neither-nor stretch in between social categories, yet while Bon lives as a refined upper class white Creole in New Orleans, even down to his participation in the plaçage system, in reality he too is a social métis as a rich black man who offers an example “of difference becoming sameness” (127). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The Caribbean has been stereotypically associated with fluidity, license, and licentiousness from the interracial sex rampant during the colonial period, which brought into being an elaborate and precise color scale for determining social rank, to the modern-day portrayal of the Caribbean as America’s tourist playground (Mohammed 25). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. And perhaps even on his father’s side as scholars, such as James Snead, have understood Sutpen to be “the source of a certain censored blackness in the narrative” who merges with the wild slaves he meets in the ring and his biracial son through “the characteristic ‘not smiling’” (132-133). Similarly, Richard Godden argues that Sutpen’s “mastery (white), embodied in Sutpen’s Hundred (‘*Be Light*’ [p. 4]), derives from the labor of the slave and is experienced as doing so by a master who almost made himself black to get his Hundred built” (54). In laboring with his slaves, Sutpen blackens himself; however, he reaffirms his mastery by fighting his slaves in the ring, as slavery “rests on a continuous repression of revolution” (6). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. His status as a law student at the university, his plaçage relationship with his black “wife,” and his engagement to the white planter’s daughter Judith are experiences that would have been closed off to Bon in the antebellum South due to his race and lineage. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. For example, Bibler points to the fact that Quentin and Shreve are shivering in their dorm room together in various stages of undress, “each one’s body becom[ing] an erotic spectacle for the other,” but remain chaste by “channeling their sexual energy into the act of storytelling,” which culminates in a type of orgasm with Quentin “violently and uncontrollably” jerking all over (68, Faulkner 288). Godden agrees that their “‘marriage’ of voices (p. 253) is framed as erotic” and claims that “Quentin plays virginal girl to Shreve’s virginal youth,” but also reads a labor trauma as lying beneath their relationship, as a result of their entwinement with Henry and Bon (175). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. According to Bibler, “‘homo-ness’ refers to the effect produced when sexual sameness supersedes all other factors of identity to establish, however provisionally, an egalitarian social bond between individuals” (7). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Barbara Ladd supports the argument that Bon’s multivalent depiction in the final version of his story is directly connected to the narrators’ neocolonial preoccupations: “As African, as ‘black beast,’ as ‘the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister,’ and yet as brother nonetheless, Charles Bon represents all that the post-1890 white southerner most feared: the gradual usurpation of political, familial, and economic purity—legitimacy, recognition by the national body or by the father—by a mulatto brother or brother-in-law” (150-151). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Creolization is defined by Loichot as an object whose intrinsic differences can cohabitate. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. This narrative structure highlights the palimpsestic nature of colonial crimes. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Faulkner was a supporter of school integration (although he did not believe it should be forced on the South from the outside). In a letter published in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* in March, 1955, Faulkner positions himself against the segregation of public schools. He argues that instead of allocating funds to improve the schools, which at the moment are “not of high enough quality to assuage the thirst of even our white young men and women”—let alone the “thirstier” black students—Mississippi would just end up with “two identical school systems neither of which are good enough for anybody” (*Essays, Speeches & Public Letters* 216). However, in “Letter to a Northern Editor” published in *Life* in March, 1956, Faulkner speaks out against compulsory integration, in his words, both as a result of principle and because he doesn’t think it would work. In this letter, Faulkner warns the NAACP and other pro-integration organizations to “Stop now for a moment. You have shown the Southerner what you can do and what you will do if necessary; give him a space in which to get his breath and assimilate that knowledge” (*Essays, Speeches & Public Letters* 87, 91). While this change in view may seem extreme, I agree with Charles Peavy that Faulkner may not have actually altered his opinion in so much as he senses the danger in the Supreme Court’s enforcement of its ruling in favor of integration (65). He is still on the side of integration but emphasizes caution in its implementation and is against the compulsory aspect of this solution. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)