DEPICTIONS OF SHAME: WHITE IDENTITY AND CULTURAL BLACKNESS IN FAULKNER'S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!* AND STYRON'S *CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER*

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It would be easy to argue that any critical discourse concerning the metaphor of "shame" in the South has to be interpreted in terms of race. As recent scholarly work has asserted, "Shame is used in America to draw the boundaries between black and white" (Mandible 3). In this sense, contempt is strictly embedded in an ideology of color. This claim, even more prominently in the American South, implied a sense of discrimination identifying blackness as the shameful ethnicity and yet serving power to whiteness as the shameless superior category.[1] The Old South—land of proud aristocrats, faithful slaves, and cotton fields, also known as the Antebellum South—offered the image of a clear racial hierarchy that justified the existence of acts of shame, committed by the whites, in one of its greatest moral and historical burdens, namely the segregation of blacks through slavery. The traditional South, as we may properly define that image of massive social immobility that anticipated the Civil War, revolved around a white-centric ideal, which created a social order deeply rooted in a black/white binary paradigm. The stigmatization of race in the Antebellum period, through actions of disgrace (such as lynching, torture, and rape), cast blackness into an underclass through the "figurative, concrete marginalization of African-Americans as outcasts, criminals, aliens" (Mandible 10).

By employing this categorization, we seek to consider contempt as an active part in that climate of racial inequality that characterized the pre-War South. The notion of shame is deeply inscribed in black bodies, which represent the social stigma of different discriminating identities. Narrowing the scope of analysis onto literature, southern writers used this cliché to epitomize the racial tension between black and white. This essay attempts to shed some light on the ambiguous relationship between the white identity and the meaning of cultural blackness in the American South through the mechanics of shame in southern narratives. However, the line of color in literature is problematized by shades of guilt and humiliation that, as we shall see, reverse the binary logic of these opposing dualisms.

Critical and psychological studies on shame are characterized by a variety of approaches that in its more recent interpretations relate the emotion of shame to the sentiment of grief. In his existentialist debate, Sartre focused on the pseudo-reflective intentional nature of shame.[2] Having first discussed the concept from a philosophical perspective, Sartre's interpretation then runs in two different directions. On the one hand, shame lies in the individual's consciousness ("conscience of the self"), which explains how the notion is accessible to reflection. Shame is what forms the relation of myself to myself, or to one's own self-consciousness in a personal experience in which the sentiment inevitably arises from an internalized mechanism of auto-introspection. In other words, one always feels ashamed of something and, more specifically, of what Sartre defines as the "for-self" (or simply the self to put it in less philosophical terms), which becomes the

exclusive participant exposed to this feeling. While engaged in shameful acts, the ego lives in a state of perpetrated self-reflection. The subject, who then becomes object, feels inevitably ashamed of himself. As Sartre notes, "Shame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself. Through shame I have discovered an aspect of my being" (301).[3]

There is, however, another, more engaging interpretation in which the psychology of shame shifts the attention to a second subject. This hypothesis considers the emotion as being inevitably produced by the exposure to another. "Through the encounter of the objectifying gaze of a second subject, when one is looked at by another, he is reduced to an object that is seen" (Dolezal 426). Simply put, the objectification of the other is for Sartre what defines the experience of shame. In Sartrean terms, the intentional nature of disgrace is produced by the gaze in which the subject becomes the object of exposure to diverse forms of humiliation. In this second, more reliable case, one is ontologically dependent on the presence of the other. As such, one always feels ashamed toward someone. The "other" erupts in the conscience of the self, who then makes judgements not on himself but rather on that subject, who in turn becomes the object of embarrassment. In this regard shame assumes the form of a sense of recognition or rather an identification, of being as others tend to see us. From this perspective, the "other" is what shapes the sentiment of contempt produced by "the look" (Sartre 359). It is on this second interpretation that we will focus our attention in this essay, namely, the metaphor of shame and its relationship to alterity.

Given this necessary relation between me, myself, and the other, it would be easy to argue that—from a Jungian perspective—shame is also described as a state of physical embarrassment.[4] We hereby refer to what is known as "skin shame," that sense of guilt generated on the skin, by the skin, when one is exposed or expelled from others in a perpetrated state of mortification. This aspect invites us to consider the body as the physical inscription of indignity.[5] Investigating the psychological aspect of shame, Elspeth Probyn recently explained that "the color, the place, the history of bodies all come alive in shame" (Probyn 40). As such, corporeality becomes the bodily incarnation of shame, in which acts of contempt necessarily originate from observation. Such vision would furthermore emphasize the status of shame and its inherent link between body and gaze. In this picture, which emerges from Sartre's ontological definition, observation is the driving force behind forms of contempt. Physical vulnerability, as Sartre has so clearly demonstrated, suddenly becomes the source of the phenomenology of shame. In sum, as Max Scheler would argue, "Shame must be taken as an independent emotion directed toward a self whether my own or someone else" (qtd. in Emad 363). It would be easy, on this account, to mention Sigmund Freud's attitude to personal disgrace with reference to a prominent sense of social inferiority. In *Three Essays on Theory and Sexuality* (1905), considering psychosexual development at the origin of the concept, Freud delineates a new scenario in which guilt and shame are often equated as similar forms of a state of moral inadequacy and personal rejection, both attributable to a state of human suffering. Following Freud's interpretations, recent discussions on shame have further elaborated this distinction, considering shame as an extreme experience of guilt (see Probyn).[6] For Probyn, "shame is deeply related not only to how others think about us, but also to how we think of ourselves. Guilt is triggered in response to specific acts" (45). More recently, in his seminal work *Shame & Guilt* (2007) Ernest Kurtz further elaborates this distinction considering shame as a form of embarrassment produced, in Sartrean terms, by the act of being seen. Conversely, guilt arises from the violation of an infraction, it derives from "a breaking of rules" (3). On this point, the proposition Probyn sets forth considers shame as not necessarily tied to a negative or bad experience. In her words, "shame does not necessarily imply that the experiencer has done something wrong" (38). This statement allows one to consider contempt as a racial prejudice

stigmatizing "difference" as the source of shame. In line with the mechanics of shame in the American South we will further discuss, considering the Australian Aboriginal community, Probyn offers the example of the encounter between aboriginals and whites, implying the construction of an ideology of color. The impossibility for aboriginals to fit the standards of white norms makes them subjected to color discrimination and to a Self/Other dynamic strictly embedded in racial shaming. Aligning with Probyn, Kurtz reminds us that the Other is not merely the origin of shame, it rather becomes the source of shame (2).

The aforementioned mechanisms and their intrinsic connection between self and other, white and colored, would be easily applicable to the American context and, more specifically, to the elusive interaction between black and white in the American South. Moreover, critical whiteness studies have shown how in America the meaning of whiteness has been an essential parameter to measure and thus define African identity. Despite the contradictory trajectories of scholarship on whiteness, from a rather broad angle, recent studies in the field demonstrate that, in the United States, "whiteness circulates as an axis of power and identity" (Rasmussen et al. 3).[7] If on the one hand, as we have seen, whiteness is generally related to a supremacist, shameless ideology, on the other, it becomes the basis necessary to define black identity. As such, the presence of whiteness in America is fundamental to categorize blackness from a social and cultural position. On this point, David Leverenz sees the representation of disgrace in America through racial discrimination. In his study on stigma and the body politics, Leverenz notes that "Fear, honor and shame, are generally used in America to explain the divide between blacks and whites and—more precisely—white skin and black skin become fictions of honor and shame" (2). Getting back to the social structure of the white South, racial shaming prefigured the existence of hierarchical relations between dominants and subalterns, which lends itself to a social categorization "shaming black people's acts to reconsolidate white power" (Leverenz 9).[8] Since early postcolonialism, racial shaming structured the relation between the two races around concepts of weakness and disadvantage and even power and privilege. Taking up this thread, Leverenz goes on to argue, "No one is black or white. Instead, some people have been made to feel black so that others can feel more white" (18). This statement would furthermore support the claim that blackness is considered as a cultural stigma, whereas whiteness is bound to shamelessness and honor. It is thus evident how the honor-shame dynamics in America shape the binary logic between black and white. In his book *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behaviors in the Old South* (1982), historian and critic Bertram Wyatt-Brown applied these issues to the American South, claiming, "The treatment of shame and contempt in the Antebellum South, intensified young southerners' preoccupation with honor" (qtd. in Leverenz 23).

To contextualize this claim, Wyatt-Brown asserted that honor and its opposite, shame, played a fundamental role in the construction of slavery in the plantation era. The concept functioned as a mask to escape the implications of weakness and inferiority. In the Old South's aristocracy of whiteness, there was an overall sense of unacknowledged shame, which is transformed into hostility and rage toward a discriminated black identity. Following the South's racist ideology, considering its diverse forms, the metaphor of shame becomes a sort of moralistic violence toward those endangered bodies that carry the social stigma of victimized identities.[9]

However, in any critical discourse on shame and the meaning of blackness in southern culture, it would be incorrect not to mention Frantz Fanon's theory. Acknowledging the importance of humiliation as a fundamental component of black subjectivity, Fanon contends, "The interiorization of shame is part of black discrimination-subordination and manifests itself on the plantation-colonial relation or even in the single hostility in which black subjects live" (qtd. in Drabinski 126).[10] By addressing this issue, Fanon looks at the abjection of black bodies. The

debasement of the body in its social context produces a subject fundamentally structured by shame thus implying a sense of disgrace and disrepute which questions the meaning of its identity. As for colonialism, blacks in America carry a decisive stigma of their racial condition. Fanon calls into question the so-called "Inferiority Complex," a perpetrated state of inadequacy generated in blacks by the vilification of their bodies. In the colonizer-colonized relationship, expressed in the Old South by the bond between slave and master—dominator and dominated—to be colonized or to submit to a so-called superior race is to be psychologically wounded, stigmatized for difference, and thus, to be an object of shame. As Hegel has shown in the Master-slave dialectic, the master obtains recognition from the other by imposing himself as the slave's value, whereas the slave can only acknowledge his "true" identity in the presence of the other, the master. This conception, although it is full of contradictions, proves the need to objectify the value of the slave as a person, eventually producing a form of contempt. At this point, it would therefore be easy to assume that the main structure of raciological thinking in the South is based on this sense of inferiority, which implies the existence of acts of humiliation toward blackness. The old order of the plantation logic and the society of the white South function in relation to acts of contempt in which black subjects are isolated and marginalized by the power of white domination. To analyze this statement even further, the human vs in-human distinction has been later epitomized by the Jim Crow laws which constituted an example of visible and public shame.

Indeed, the weaponry of shame in the Old South materializes also in those violent acts of sadism and torture, such as lynching and whipping, which symbolize racial injustice through physical punishment. Slavery, as the South's Holocaust, produced forms of mortification such as suffering and abuse that were publicly used as acts of intimidation toward blackness. In this sense, shame in the Deep South—embodied in the practice of slavery—assumed also the form of a public spectacle.[11] As famously discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), torture has often been considered as a form of communal shame imposed by society to construct a public spectacle of humiliation. For Foucault, punishment has been well epitomized by the theatrical phenomenon of executions, which have evolved in the prison system and, as Foucault suggests, have become an important form of punishment instituted by the state to impose its own form of public power.[12] According to this view, as Toni Morrison has pointed out, "Race is an important arbiter of difference […] and it is about power and the necessity for control" (*Origin* 3).

Among the different modes that illustrate race in literature, shame is certainly one fundamental way to explain its ideology. Recent scholarship on shame has explored literature's complex approach to the concept from multiple perspectives. Drawing on the African American experience of cultural shame, in *The Origin of Others* (2017) Toni Morrison observes that "literature has played an important role in the history of race in America" (xiii). As she masterfully conveys in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), American literature is also shaped by the black and white encounter and the presence of a racial view. As such, the psychological mechanism of Othering, recurrently illustrated by American fiction, suggests there is a sort of "natural and divine delineation between the enslaver and the enslaved" (Morrison, *Origin* xiii). In this way, American literature has employed skin color prominently to reveal signs of innate white superiority, relating the question of shame to black inferiority. Stephen Pattison's recent work on shame, therapy, and theology notes that the issue of contempt is embedded, hidden, and anatomized in many fictional works (Pattison 43). Within the wide spectrum of American literature, shame in its relation to blackness has been recurrently used as a key theme which served a multiplicity of meanings, tackling, for instance, deviance, difference, and black discrimination.[13] Indeed, Toni Morrison's fiction has repeatedly disentangled the problematic issue of shame through the trauma of racial discrimination. Morrison's literature increasingly draws on the damaging impact of racism, rooted in shameless

whiteness versus shameful blackness. This dynamic is masterfully illustrated in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) where "she explores the chronic shame of being black and poor in white America" (Bouson 24). Pecola's sense of humiliation comes from the white sense of otherness which considers her unable to achieve the white ideal of beauty and thus discriminates against her for physical appearance.[14] As Bouson puts it, "Morrison's novels deal not only with the effects of shame, contempt and disgust, but also with the feeling of shame-shame, being ashamed about shame in an endless and paralyzing spiral of feelings" (4). Delving into the depths of contempt as a strategy to explain the dynamics of whiteness and blackness, we can certainly draw the conclusion that configurations of blackness in literature come from a constant confrontation with whiteness as a parameter to define black identity, in part through the phenomenology of shame. Indeed, blackness and enslavement in the Old South fueled the minds of novelists, who used the polarity created by skin color as a trope for novels constructing "a unique image of Otherness and American Africanism" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 38).

After thoroughly investigating this concept, we can now turn our attention to the literary representation of shame in two canonical southern novels: William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). Indeed, shame is a recurrent refrain in much of Southern literature, becoming the trope of narratives about black versus white dynamics. If, as we have seen, the emotion of disgrace in the South tends to be associated with the black as a discriminated subject, vehemently demarcating the distinction between races, the boundaries of shame in literature have thus become porous. The line of color in southern narratives is problematized by shades of guilt that mutually shift between black and white subjects, redefining the White South's social dynamic and eventually subverting standards and patterns of color perception.

As Morrison suggests, for framing the meaning of color for the horror of race, there is no better guide than William Faulkner. In his fiction, colorism is necessary to explain race and disentangle the problematic issue of racism through the fear of racial contagion. *Absalom, Absalom!* can be considered one of William Faulkner's major fictional achievements and one of the toughest, most complex, and at the same time realistic depictions of the plantation era. Set before, during, and after the Civil War, the novel is permeated by scenes of mortification. The narrative is based on parameters of power and shame, and it is rich in motifs that illustrate psychological introspections of contempt. With one of Faulkner's distinctive narrative traits, the story is explained in terms of racial conflict. However, if one looks more closely at the repetitive presence of grief, one would easily argue that the mechanics of shame in Faulkner are polarized. They go in the direction of both blackness and whiteness, challenging the myth of one dominant race.

In the novel, Thomas Sutpen, a white man from Virginia, tries to avoid racial shaming right from his arrival in Jefferson, as he is initiated into a society based on preordained conventions of race and class. His "design" requires the construction of a white empire, forged through the logics of slavery and the plantation, so as to allow the decontamination from blackness. Nonetheless, slavery becomes for Sutpen an instrument of revenge, a project of building his white empire by avoiding "contagion" with the blacks.[15] In spite of this, the racial distinction between black and white in the novel is never fully delineated. In fact, many scenes show both the contamination and the physical contact between the two races; this is well demonstrated by the scene of Sutpen fighting with his own slaves, which symbolizes a reshuffling of bodies that is strongly ambiguous, even from a sexual standpoint. The more constantly the separation is threatened by the intermingling of the two races, the more clear is the fact that it is never well defined. Most notably, the purity of whiteness leaves space for a perpetual and ambiguous

intersection with blackness in cases of *métissage* and miscegenation.[16] As a consequence, racial impurity becomes a recurrent trope in a continuous blend between the two.

In this twist of ambiguities, Faulkner disarticulates the racial experience through the consistency of shame. Contempt is the decisive element that leads Sutpen to that desire for revenge and racial decontamination. The first and probably most pivotal scene of embarrassment in the novel comes when young Sutpen, who lives in conditions of absolute poverty, when asked to deliver a message to the front door of Pettibone's plantation, is humiliated by the black butler who forces him to enter through the back door, a treatment usually reserved for slaves.[17] To repair his shattered self-esteem after mortification, Sutpen—in a state of profound shame—runs into the woods and hides in a cave. The passage which follows is worth citing in its entirety:

> He didn't even remember leaving. All of a sudden, he found himself running and already some distance from the house, and not toward home. . . . He went into the woods. . . . He said he crawled back into the cave and sat with his back against the *uptorn roots*, and thought. Because he couldn't get it straight yet. . . . He was just thinking, because he knew that something would have to be done about it; he would have to do something about it in order to live with himself for the rest of his life and he could not decide what it was because of that innocence which he had just discovered he had, which he would have to compete with. (Faulkner 233- 34)

As the quote clearly indicates, shame is provoked by the subversion of roles prompted by the butler. The "uptorn roots" are a clear symbolic reference that further emphasizes the subversion of roles. In this moment, Sutpen formulates his design and then leaves for Haiti to subvert that order, somehow converting the passive experience of being ashamed into becoming ruthless and shameless. He feels the need to acquire what a planter has: "money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife" (Faulkner 263). He wants to turn others away from that threshold, which represented to him the exclusion from the social order that made up the Old South. Quite simply, Sutpen turns the reality of being dismissed from the front door into being the white owner who forbids entrance on the threshold of his own plantation. Furthermore, to heal his assaulted self, he scorns his first wife as soon as he discovers she has mixed blood. She is thus suddenly repudiated as she might destroy his dream of decontamination.

However, in a succession of acts of humiliation, Sutpen is also denigrated by Rosa, his wife's younger sister, and stigmatized as the outrageous demon responsible for racial impurity. His major guilt originates from his inability to preserve the cleanliness of the white race. In this sense, shame in the novel coincides with the incongruity of being "Other." Black, white, mulatto, owner or butler, all forms of contempt in *Absalom Absalom!* exist in their convoluted relationship to otherness. It would therefore be obvious to claim that all characters in the novel are pursued by shaming behaviors. Sutpen is originally humiliated by the black butler, Rosa is shamed by Sutpen, and slaves and blacks become objects of contempt in Sutpen's white dynasty.[18] In this continuous chain of shaming acts, Rosa is also prevented from entering the plantation by Clytie, Sutpen's mulatto daughter born from his adulterous relationship with a black slave. Rosa's reaction to the black woman's gesture is another example of a perpetrated act of racial shaming.

> "Don't you go up there, Rosa." That was how she said it: that quiet, that still, and again it was as though it had not been she who spoke but the house itself that said the words. . . . Because it was not the name, the word the fact that she had called me Rosa. . . . I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage and that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh. . . . Yes, I stopped dead—I crying not to her, to it; . . . I spoke:

"Take your hand off me, nigger." (Faulkner 138-40)

For Rosa, "the inquisitor's face belongs to Clytie who—like the balloon face that haunted Sutpen—penetrates right to the core of Rosa's self, becoming an internalized face that shames" (Clarke 178).[19] We can therefore draw the conclusion that "shame filters down through the generations of Faulkner's novel" (Clarke 178) and that the sentiment is caused by a sense of incongruity and inappropriateness. Blacks and whites respectively feel embarrassed in a society that, as Faulkner shows, targets them both as marginalized and excluded. In this ambiguous scenario, Faulkner's South is populated by a continuous subversion and mingling of races in which the danger of *métissage* and contact itself is the inevitable source of infection, eliciting those racial controversies rooted in a sense of shame that questions the kinship between black and white.

Following the literary trajectory of shame in the Old South, William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* offers a similar and yet different form of indignity. In this fictive retelling of the true story of America's most famous Virginia slave revolt, led by African American slave Nat Turner, who led the insurrection in 1831, murdering more than fifty white people, Styron depicts disgrace in the form of shameful guilt and shameless cruelty.[20] However, Styron's attempt to penetrate the mind of one of America's most famous black slaves and ambiguous figures inevitably produces racial controversies in the novel. The traditional southern order is unavoidably reversed in different ways. Turner, a slave, rebels against the white South's system that is responsible for the cruel white carnage. His action suppresses the white social order which considered him discriminated in his condition of being black and enslaved. In addition to this, in Styron's fictional representation, the figure of the ruthless slave falls in love with one of his white victims, Margaret Whitehead, the wealthy daughter of a cruel southern landlord.[21] Here, Styron reverses the traditional southern model and its hierarchical order in the contamination and consequent suppression of racial boundaries.

It is also important to emphasize that the term "confession," per se, presupposes an implied formal statement admitting guilt, thus acknowledging a preexisting form of contempt. In this view, the novel opens with a seemingly guilty slave who, awaiting his execution, confesses his remorse as the perpetrator responsible for the massacre of the whites. Therefore, repentance, which seems to never arrive for Turner, is transformed into a form of guilt for the crimes committed, namely the extermination of the whites. As such, shame in the novel coincides with remorse in relation to violence. In this sense, shame is for Nat the sense of blame produced by the rebellion. Although Turner never presents a form of explicit culpability, being tarnished even by Styron's introspective narration, the real conclusion of the events exposes him to physical and communal shame. His body is publicly dissected and skinned, his flesh made into grease, and his bones sold as trophies. Despite Styron's effort to give authenticity to the character and to humanize the violent figure of Nat Turner, the slave's struggle for freedom and the brutality with which the events take place lead us to implicitly consider Nat as a shameless murderer. According to a recent body of criticism, there is at the core of the novel the stereotyped belief that black people primarily rebel because of an unfulfilled psychological need to become white, thus being ashamed of their condition of blackness (Poussaint 18). Following this thread, Alvin Poussaint suggests, "Nat Turner as a character seems to be quite white. His speech sounds more like Styron's than that of a heroic black slave of nineteenth-century America" (19). Turner's affection for the white woman is another example of his need to encompass the white stereotype, thus feeling less black. All his gestures in the novel are somehow imitations of a desire to appear more white. In this sense, Nat feels ashamed for his condition and at the same time is longing for shamelessness so as to embody the white ideal.

This state of mortification is well epitomized by Nat in the following passage when he declares,

> Now, looking down at the shops and barns and cabins and distant fields, I was no longer the grinning black boy in velvet pantaloons; for a fleeting moment instead I owned all, and so exercised the privilege of ownership by unlacing my fly and pissing loudly on the same worn stone where dainty tiptoeing feet had gained the veranda steps a short three years before. What a strange, demented ecstasy! How white I was! What a wicked joy! But my blackness immediately returned, the fantasy dissolved, and I was again overtaken by wrenching loneliness and a pang of *guilt*. (Styron 227; emphasis added)

As this quote clearly indicates, the sense of humiliation targets Nat as shameless in his cruel behavior and, at the same time, ashamed of his condition of being black, slave, submissive, and discriminated. Following this logic, the metaphor of shame in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* can be interpreted as a state of human affliction.

Bearing in mind the porosity of the boundaries between races, let us look at another scene portraying a moment of emotional guilt and embarrassment, involving Nat's first benevolent master. In Styron's version, the sadism and the brutality generally associated with the figure of the white owner leave space for remorse and benevolence.[22] When Nat's first compassionate master cannot guarantee him freedom and moves to Alabama, his reaction is a concrete example of shame and humiliation over the brutalities committed in slave trading. The narrator avers,

> He ceased speaking for a moment, then again the weary voice resumed: "What should I have done instead? Set them free? What a ghastly joke!" . . . He fell silent and then finally he said . . . "I sold them out of desperation to hang on pointlessly a few years longer." He made an abrupt gesture with his lifted arm, and it seemed that he passed his hand in a quick angry motion across his eyes. . . . "How else account for such cruelty? . . . Ah, what bitter tears God must weep at the sight of the things that men do to other men!" He broke off then and I saw him shake his head convulsively, his voice a sudden cry: "In the name of money! *Money*!" (Styron 215-16; original emphasis)

In this scene, the evils of slavery represent a moment of mortification associated with a sense of dishonor. The voice broken with tears and the hand passing stealthily across the eyes visually represent shame generated by guilt produced after an act to be considered as shameful per se. Again, then, the novel offers a complex representation of the sentiment of disgrace, which represents the distinction between races but redefines their boundaries in a state of contempt that shifts respectively from black to white.

On the basis of this literary evidence, one might conclude that shame is the element that explains and illustrates the intricate relation between opposed dualisms of color in the Deep South, where the concept is rooted in the circularity between black and white. Increasingly, however, the literary boundaries of acts of ignominy become porous. Embarrassment, which tends to be consistently associated with the black individual as the discriminated subject (and therefore object) of humiliation, in its literary representation becomes the human emotion that describes race relations and yet is correlated with both races. As seen, the black aims to regain his identity through contamination and contagion with the white.

We might draw the conclusion that Americans talk about the meaning as well as the sense of white identity through what Toni Morrison defined as "the always chocked representation of an Africanist presence" (*Playing in the Dark* 17). This is what occurs with the psychology of shame that becomes the essential parameter through which to interpret racial ideology. In many ways, southern narratives show that the metaphor of shame is the analogy that serves, in part, to reaffirm the role of blacks in a society that marks them as inferiors. In such an interpretative approach, we

can therefore consider contempt as the unstable and thus necessary narrative trope to interpret the meaning of cultural blackness and its bond with white identity. Shame is therefore the crucial element that illustrates the dynamics of race and that represents the deep and unresolved racial tension that characterized the Antebellum South.

NOTES

1. Shame per se is an umbrella term that combines varied and multiple experiences. In a short essay, I cannot hope to provide a philosophical, detailed analysis of all forms of contempt. For a discussion on the relationship between power and shame, see Slavoj Žižek. Žižek contends that the power of the state inhabits the unconscious, provoking shameful acts that expose the subject to a sense of passive shame through its connection with forms of power produced by the state.

2. Despite recent contemporary theories, Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), can still be considered the most accurate text for his exhaustive debate on existentialism and his extensive analysis of shame as the essential structure of human existence.

3. This is the line of argument taken up also by the German philosopher Max Scheler. In his phenomenological insights into shame, he considers this phenomenon to be associated with being ashamed of myself. For a discussion of Scheler's theory, see Parvis Emad.

4. For a preliminary discussion on shame from a Jungian perspective, see Mario Jacoby. Drawing heavily on Jung's theory, Jacoby provides a comprehensive exploration of the many aspects of shame, showing its importance in our emotional experience. Jacoby demonstrates that a lack of self-esteem is often at the root of excessive shame.

5. We can think, for example, of leprosy as a pathology that generates a sense of physical and bodily shame.

6. In her seminal text *Blush, Faces of Shame* (2005), Probyn also devotes a chapter to discussing the question of shame in relation to gender and feminism.

7. Criticism in this field suggests that even the meaning of whiteness is rather complicated for its general association to violence and terror in relation to blackness. In his recent book *Whiteshift* (2018), Erik Kauffman refers to what he terms "whiteshift," explaining that the widespread presence of immigrants and the rather complicated meaning of "otherness" today leads society to a cultural shift, ranging from white-centric to minority-centered, producing a demographic decline of whiteness as a prevailing community. For a preliminary discussion on critical whiteness studies see David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991); Toni Morrison's pioneering analysis in *Playing in the Dark* (1992); Brigit B. Rasmussen, Erik Klinenberg, et al., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (2001); and the recently published volume co-edited by David Roediger, Stephen Middleton, and Donald Schaffer, *The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race and the Meaning of a White Identity* (2018).

8. With the phrase "White South," we refer to the Old South or the Deep South of the antebellum period, prior to the Civil War, when society was grounded in the old order of the plantation ideal.

9. For a thorough discussion on race and shame in America, see Steven Selden. By incorporating eugenics into his analysis of shame and race, Selden looks at how racist discrimination and contempt in America manifested in eugenics becoming an integral part of education in popular culture through the publicly sponsored sterilization of the so-called "inferior blood."

10. For a preliminary discussion on Fanon and his study of shame, see his seminal work on black identity and race theory *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Despite his postcolonial-centric analysis, Fanon's work can certainly be used to explain those dynamics present in the Antebellum South as

well as in Postcolonialism represented by the relationship between binaries of color, respectively black and white.

11. For further discussion of violence and public shame in the South, see Clarke.

12. On this point, Angela Davis vividly argues that, through what has been defined as the "Prison Industrial Complex," the prison labor system in the United States is rooted in slavery. To a certain extent, "Mass Incarceration" aims at perpetuating the criminal activities of blacks, thus perpetrating a form of shame determined by racial confinement. For more on this, see "Slavery, Civil Rights and Abolitionist Perspectives Toward Prison" in her *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

13. An implicit reference here goes to Hawthorne's visual and physical representation of contempt in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), where humiliation serves to achieve religious control, repressing sin as a deviant attitude of the Puritan society.

14. For more on Morrison's analysis of shame, see Bouson.

15. The events of the story, before Sutpen's return to Jefferson, take place in Haiti during the Haitian slave revolt in 1821. Sutpen leaves to return to Mississippi with a gang of "wild" Haitian slaves and a captive French architect that will serve to form the social model of that white conformist society which characterized the White South.

16. Prior to his voyage in the Caribbean, Sutpen abandons his first wife Eulalia once he discovers she is of mixed race. The son from this marriage, Charles Bon, who fortuitously reappears in Jefferson as the friend of his white son from his second marriage, Henry, will also become engaged to his white daughter Judith. Bon will be murdered by his white brother, Henry, in front of the gates of Sutpen's plantation once he discovers that Bon, his stepbrother, is in part black.

17. This fact is historically ratified in the history of the United States by the case of Rosa Parks in the 1950s.

18. Also important is the episode in which Sutpen engages in a bloody fight with a black man, and his whole white family, including Henry and Judith, watches the scene, peeking into the barn in which a black slave lies bloody and wounded at Sutpen's feet. The scene, as an act of profound humiliation of the slave, plays out in front of a desperate Ellen, who tries in vain to persuade her husband not to let their children see such a violent confrontation.

19. "Balloon-face" was the insult that Sutpen used to refer to the butler after he was prevented from entering Pettibone's plantation. The profuse balloon imagery is another example of the white South's discrimination against blackness.

20. The novel, published in 1967 during a period of intense racial tensions, is based on the realistic confession of Turner to the white lawyer Thomas Gray. The reliability of the document, however, remains questionable. Styron was strongly criticized for his choice to humanize the figure of the Nat Turner and for his controversial depiction of issues of race and class. White landlords are depicted as generous and benevolent, whereas Nat Turner and his fellow slaves fantasize about sexually assaulting white women. The greatest controversy, in this sense, lies in the impossibility of a white southern novelist inhabiting the mind of a black slave.

21. One should remember that the "Myth of the Black Rapist," or white female racial anxiety, was common in the postwar South and above all in the Reconstruction Era. As one of the great fears of post-war racial integration, this alleged abuse justified racist violence. In this regard, it is important to recall the famous scene of D.W. Griffith's epic film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), in which the female protagonist, trapped on a precipice after being chased by a black man, leaps to her death to avoid sexual assault. This scene is proof of how violation in the South was part of a popular xenophobic ideology, becoming a cultural trauma for white women, demonizing blacks, and thus creating a racist stereotype.

22. Turner is treated like a slave for most of the novel, and he is certainly whipped by his second landlord. However, Nat's first master was extremely benign, instructing him and then trying to guarantee his freedom. This narrative choice differs from the reality of the facts that generally associated the figure of the landowner with acts of cruelty, violence, and torture toward slaves. In this sense, Styron portrays slavery as a somehow positive institution.

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