



# *Burning*: silenced rage in Lee and Faulkner

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## Abstract

This article presents a cognitively informed cross-cultural study of how rage is silenced in two narratives: Lee Chang-dong’s 2018 film *Burning* and William Faulkner’s 1939 short story “Barn Burning” that Lee’s film is inspired by. While earlier readings of *Burning* have privileged the individual aspects of the violent rage that is central to the film, a cognitive reading expands the scope by revealing how emotions are always embedded within social systems beyond the individual. This article draws on neurocognitive research as well as feminist investigations of affect to argue that such an expansion is needed to imagine non-violent expressions of rage. Tracing the violent and patriarchal genealogy of silenced rage from Lee to Faulkner, this article offers a comparative reading of intertextuality that focuses on how emotions are expressed in the father-son relationships in the two stories. Specifically, it considers how legal systems and the patriarchal family shape how characters express emotion. By exploring the possibilities for non-violent expressions of rage, the article ultimately considers the political ramifications of considering rage as primarily individual and suggests that we can discern relationships between social systems and expressions of emotion by attending to how complex and culturally situated emotions—like rage—travel across global translations and adaptations.

**Keywords** *Burning* · William Faulkner · Emotion · Rage · Cognitive literary studies · Embedded cognition

## Global rage

Lee Chang-dong’s *Burning* (2018) is seething with rage. Hailed as “the greatest Korean film ever made” by a consortium of 158 international film critics, Lee’s fifth feature was the first Korean film to make it to the shortlist for “Best Foreign Language Film” at the 91st Academy Awards (Korean Screen, 2021, n.p.). The film’s global appeal is arguably connected to its depiction of rage, which is mired in social

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inequalities. *Burning* portrays three young and lonely characters in contemporary South Korea and centers on Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in), an isolated working-class man with literary ambitions who must care for his family's small farm because his father (Choi Seung-ho) has been imprisoned for an act of violent assault on his neighbor. The juxtaposition of Jong-su's working-class reality and the affluent urban lifestyle of Ben (Steven Yeun), his extremely wealthy romantic rival, highlights the social inequalities that underlie the violence and the rage that are mutually informative and central to the film. Indeed, the film was entitled "Project Rage" in its early stages, and Lee has described the movie as fundamentally about Korean as well as global rage (Ganjavie, 2018, n.p.).

Etymologically, the verb "to rage" stems from Latin's *rabere* which is believed to share roots with the Sanskrit word *rabhas*, meaning "to do violence" (Etymologia, 2012, n.p.). While violence is not the only way of expressing rage, it often seems to be the sole option in social systems that silence expression of emotions. As *Burning* illustrates, within such social systems, rage tends to operate in explosive silence. The conditions that shape the raging inequality in *Burning* are paradoxically most salient in moments when the very same conditions stifle possibilities of articulating emotion: in the film's moments of raging silence.

It is in this conspicuously silent nature of the film's rage that crucial connections to "Barn Burning," the 1939 short story by William Faulkner that inspired Haruki Murakami to write the story that *Burning* is based on, emerge. Set in the 1890s U.S. South, Faulkner's story is similarly full of rage and of silence. Both *Burning* and "Barn Burning" depict the relationship between a violent father and a son struggling with familial obligations in a reality severely restricted by socioeconomic inequalities. The intertextual relation between the two is directly addressed by Jong-su who acknowledges that he feels like he is reading about himself when he reads Faulkner. As I will argue, part of why Jong-su feels such an affective affinity<sup>1</sup> with Faulkner's characters is because similar social systems shape the rage that is central to the two works. While connections between the two texts are many, I address how rage and its concomitant social and familial distortions suture *Burning* and Faulkner's "Barn Burning."

By analyzing how two such systems—the legal system and the patriarchal family—shape expressions of emotion, this article explores how rage is silenced in the father-son relationships depicted in *Burning* and "Barn Burning." Tracing the violent genealogy of silenced rage from Lee to Faulkner reveals what these stories from different historical periods, genres, and cultures tell us about how rage can be crafted against systems that create enragingly unequal social conditions on a global scale. Following rage as it travels from the United States through Japan to Korea and then back to the U.S. as American audiences consume *Burning*'s rage in movie theaters and through streaming services, I propose that it is possible to craft rage in non-violent and progressive ways. To do this, however, we need to broaden current common understandings of emotion and approach rage as always embedded within social and cultural contexts. Approaches to emotion as primarily individual preclude

<sup>1</sup> See Ju (2020, p. 40) for a discussion of the importance of affective affinity in transcultural fandom.

non-violent expressions of rage because they obscure socially unjust systems and serve the already wealthy and powerful, purporting inequalities that inflame what Judith Butler terms “understandable rage” (Butler, 2020, p. 51). While there will always be individual differences in experiences and expressions of rage, I contend that we need to shift the discussion from the individual to the social level to better understand how emotions are shaped by culturally situated systems of oppression.

## Embedded rage

Academic and public discourses on feeling often neglect how emotions are embedded within social environments. In this section, I briefly overview how seemingly disparate fields, specifically cognitive science and feminist investigations of affect, approach the social acculturation of emotions. The neglect of the social is evident in a recent analysis of *Burning* in the growing field of criticism devoted to the film.<sup>2</sup> In “FIRE City: *Paju* and *Burning*,” Joseph Jonghyun Jeon analyzes the socioeconomic inequality at the heart of *Burning* and contends that capitalist forces influence the emotional lives of the film’s characters by portraying them as fungible parts of a surplus population (Jeon, 2021, p. 108). While Jeon’s nuanced analysis is germane to understanding the economic structures that are to blame for much of the suffering in the film, it relies on a notion of emotions as primarily private and personal. Jeon writes that the “determining power” of capitalism in *Burning* is “displaced within a melodramatic frame that prioritizes emotional over economic attachments, but is nevertheless seen to abide in the traces it leaves” (Jeon, 2021, pp. 97–98). Because of this displacement, Jeon argues, the characters’ “emotional development, and the late capitalist milieu in which they come of age, epitomized by real estate development, become separated. The latter form of growth stunts the former” (Jeon, 2021, 98). This economic interpretation divides the film into two storylines—one focusing on romantic relationships and one focusing on social conditions. Such a divisive interpretation assumes that emotional development is separable from the social conditions in which it takes place. This reading, I suggest, reinforces the notion that emotions are primarily individual.

Cognitive studies have dispelled this type of divisive thinking. Work in the field of embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition (also known as “4E cognition”) reveals that human cognitive and emotive responses always are embedded within structures that surround the individual.<sup>3</sup> For example, in *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*, neuroscientist Francisco Varela and his colleagues Eleanor Rosch and Evan Thompson maintain that Buddhist traditions of thinking fundamentally eschew the Western custom of centering the individual at the exclusion of everything that surrounds them. Instead of following the Enlightenment tradition of viewing the self as primarily rational, disembodied, and isolated, these traditions approach individuals as decentered and non-unified cognitive beings

<sup>2</sup> For criticism in English, see e.g. Boman (2021); Fujiki (2019); and Warner (2021).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the field, see Newen et al. (2018).

always defined in relation to others (Varela et al., 1991, xxix). We can see a telling example of to what degree individuals are influenced by others when considering group loyalty. In an experiment involving a sweaty T-shirt, social psychologists showed that loyalty to what we consider our ingroup influences not only how we think abstractly about “us vs. them,” but also such fundamental things as our sense of smell and experience of disgust (Reicher et al., 2016). This study found that people experienced a foul-smelling piece of garment as less disgusting if they thought it belonged to someone within their ingroup. Such findings reveal that what we regard as our own thinking or perceiving or feeling may be fundamentally shaped by larger social groups that we feel connected to.<sup>4</sup> As we will see in Lee and particularly in Faulkner, the family can be a very powerful such group.

Cultural studies, and particularly feminist approaches to affect, has also taken to task the presumption of emotions as primarily individual. Sara Ahmed, for example, critiques “the privatisation of emotions” in her feminist and queer investigation of feelings (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11), and Sianne Ngai approaches emotion as “fundamentally ‘social’” (Ngai, 2005, p. 25). The cultural and temporal singularity of the idea that emotions are contained within a bounded individual has been exposed by Teresa Brennan, whose work on how moods and emotions were once thought of as fluid uncovers how individuals have historically been considered as more permeable than they are in contemporary Western cultures (Brennan, 2004). Put succinctly by Ahmed, “Emotions are relational” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8). Similarly, in an analysis of the role of emotion in U.S. viewers’ consumption of K-dramas, Hyejung Ju draws on Eva Illouz’ work to argue that emotions “are generally situated at the threshold where the body, cognition, and culture converge” (Ju, 2020, p. 40). This is one reason for why emotions are particularly useful for elucidating how an individual is never a self-contained, impenetrable, or stable unit. Because of emotions’ position at the nexus between body, cognition, and culture, we need to look to both cultural and cognitive studies to understand how social systems shape the possibility of expressing emotion in Lee and Faulkner as well as in our own realities.

Approaching emotions as embedded within larger systems is necessary for probing the embedded, social nature of rage. This is particularly important when talking about rage since it is an intense version of anger, an emotion with a history of being categorized as universal or “basic.” Paul Ekman’s influential anthropological research defined seven such universal emotions with corresponding facial expressions: apart from anger, we find disgust, fear, contempt, happiness, sadness, and surprise on the list (Ekman, 1987). A universalist view of anger tends to obscure variations of how emotions are experienced and expressed and thus also how different social systems shape emotions.<sup>5</sup> Cognitive literary scholar Laura Otis points this out as she notes that “even fundamental emotions like anger can’t be presumed to be identical from one country or century to the next” (Otis, 2019, p. 2). A broader

<sup>4</sup> For further cognitive experiments on how group identity affects perception, see Hackel et al. (2017); and Hackel et al. (2018).

<sup>5</sup> For a foundational example of anthropological work on universal emotion, see Ekman & Friesen (1971).

view of emotions as always embedded within social systems allows us to explore what Sue J. Kim terms “the collective, systemic nature of individually experienced emotion” (Kim, 2013, p. 130). Reconceptualizing rage as fundamentally embedded within social systems helps us consider how conditions as well as people around an individual shape how they express this emotion.

Redefining the individual as always in relation to what surrounds them—people as well as social systems—allows for ways of interpreting emotions that do not reinforce the idea of the individual as autonomous and their emotions as created, contained, and controlled within the unit of a single body. Reconsidering the relationship between individuals, emotions, and social systems in this way has consequences not only for how we think about emotions, but also how we think about what constitutes an individual. Considering emotions as primarily individual risks perpetrating the misapprehension that individuals are not influenced by their surroundings. In other words, it rests on a view of individuals as atomized and isolated, or what Judith Butler calls the “founding conceits of liberal individualism” (Butler, 2020, p. 42). As I will argue, we need to move away from this separation of the individual from the social systems around them if we want to imagine ways of crafting rage in progressive and non-violent ways that target systemic inequalities rather than the individuals who suffer under it. By attending to how complex and culturally situated emotions—like rage—travel across global translations and adaptations, we can discern patterns of relationships between social systems and expressions of emotion. We can only do this, however, if we approach individuals not as isolated minds, but as embedded within larger social contexts.

## Silenced rage in *Burning*

Silence in *Burning* is everywhere, and it is particularly noticeable in moments when the audience anticipates an articulation of strong emotion. The most blazing example might be the silent and violent final scene where Jong-su stabs Ben to death, pours gasoline over his Porsche, sets it on fire (using Ben’s own lighter), and drives away without a word. But a slower burn is to be found in moments of silenced rage between father and son. There are only two interactions between Jong-su and his father in the film, and both interactions take place within a courtroom where Jong-su’s father stands accused of violently assaulting his neighbor. Both interactions are steeped in silence and exist within a familial history simmering with rage. In the first hearing, the only communication between father and son takes the form of painfully long, seemingly emotion-less, stares between the two. In the subsequent sentencing, they don’t even look at each other and Jong-su leaves the courtroom before either of them speaks. Connecting the silence of the courtroom to the silence of the final scene where Jong-su metes out his own sense of justice by wordlessly killing Ben, Jeon notes that “there is nothing to say in the face of these determined fates” (Jeon, 2021, p 102). While there might be nothing *to* say, there is indeed much that *is* said through these moments of raging silence.

That the only interactions between father and son take place in the courtroom suggests that this familial relationship is mediated by the bureaucratic system of the

law—a system designed with little room for expression of emotion. Within this system, an expression of emotion able to convey the suffering and the rage born out of the monumental event when one’s father is sentenced to 18 months in prison for violent assault—or indeed any expression of emotion—would lead to an authoritative demand to restore order in the courtroom. Jong-su and his father thus find themselves in a system that makes anything but silence near impossible because of how the social conventions of this system expect and enforce what Lauren Berlant calls “flat affect” (Berlant, 2015, p. 193). While Jeon briefly draws on Berlant’s notions of flat affect and underperformed emotion in his reading of *Ben*, these concepts provide a useful framework for a broader probing of the father-son relationship too. Berlant writes that underperformed emotions are characterized by a “mode of flattened affect” and that they constitute “a cultural style that appears as reticent action, a spatialized suspension of relational clarity that signifies a subtracted response to the urgencies of the moment” (Berlant, 2015, p. 193). This mode creates cultural works, Berlant explains, where “events that would have been expected to be captured by expressive suffering—featuring amplified subjectivity, violent and reparative relationality and assurance about what makes an event significant—appear with an asterisk of uncertainty” (Berlant, 2015, p. 191). The silence in these sole interactions between father and son both constitute striking examples of a system—in this case a legal system—that regulates and suppresses emotion by expecting or demanding a type of flat affect. Within this system, expression of suffering and of rage is stifled, barring any opportunity for “reparative relationality.” Read through the lens of flat affect, these courtroom scenes exemplify how expressions of rage, along with other emotions, are shaped by socially constructed (and constrictive) norms and expectations.

In the courtroom setting, Jong-su’s father appears as both de-personalized and de-contextualized, and this appearance obscures the conditions that, as Butler reminds us, we can never be separated from. Shifting the focus from the individual to how the individual relates to whatever is around them, Butler writes, “shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible [...] because we cannot exist liberated from such conditions, we are never fully individuated” (Butler, 2020, p. 46). For Jong-su’s father, the conditions have indeed become impossible, leading to Butler’s “understandable rage,” but the system of the law conceals the conditions that incite his rage (Butler, 2020, p. 51). This legal system also decontextualizes individuals by foreclosing acknowledgment of the social conditions that precede and surround any act of violence. Within the depersonalized structure of the law, Jong-su’s father is identified through numbers sewn onto his prison uniform and referred to only as “the defendant” according to legal jargon. In this courtroom where he must face his son, there is no room for a discussion of the conditions of the unequal system against which his violent rage is a reaction. The omission of the father’s history runs directly parallel to a silencing of rage that goes hand in hand with a silencing of the social conditions that fuel this rage.

These conditions are revealed outside of the courtroom and serve as an invitation to consider the social context of the father’s rage. In a conversation with his father’s lawyer and old-time friend, Jong-su—together with the film’s audience—learns about the events that preceded the father’s act of violent rage that he is now

imprisoned for. After serving in the military, Jong-su's father made a considerable amount of money through construction work in the Middle East. Upon returning to Korea, however, things went downhill. Because of pride and stubbornness, we are told, he made the poor economic choice of not purchasing real estate in Seoul's developing Gangnam district but instead decided to pursue farming in Paju, a smaller city close to the North Korean border. Through this story, Jong-su as well as the film's audience are given important clues to how interconnected social systems such as the military, the real estate market, and late capitalism all fueled the father's rage over time. Blaming individual traits such as pride and stubbornness—like the lawyer friend suggests—hides the larger sociocultural systems that contribute to Jong-su's father's rage but in this retelling of an abridged life story, the audience is invited to reconsider such individualistic reasoning. It is a moment when we are invited to, as Butler puts it, “let go of the body as a ‘unit’ in order to understand one's boundaries as relational and social predicaments” (Butler, 2020, p. 45). Jong-su, however, does not manage to do this. The reason his father is in prison is because, he tells Ben, he has an “anger disorder.” While this unidentified psychopathological disorder may be part of the explanation of his father's violent history, it can never be the whole story. Seeing the father's actions purely or even primarily as caused by an “anger disorder” reinforces the idea of the individual body as an impenetrable and stable unit and obscures how an individual relates to the social conditions they exist in. By focusing on the supposed anger disorder, we adhere to a system that, as Otis writes, “divert[s] attention from situations to psyches” (Otis, 2019, p. 4). This, then, is the view that Jong-su buys into but that we, as an audience watching the events unfold from a more comfortable distance, do not have to accept. This is not to deny individual agency—as we will see in Faulkner, there is room for that in the process of crafting rage even within systems of violent silence and silenced violence—but to acknowledge how the social systems in which we exist shape what we feel and do.

This invitation to consider the father's background is one way in which *Burning* articulates a critique not only of the conditions that restrict social mobility for Jong-su and his father, but also of a systemic tendency to obscure these conditions in a culture built on the myth of individualism. This myth fosters a society where conditions and emotions can be easily separated and where social context always fades away because of the prioritization of the individual. Such a social system rewards self-sufficiency and obscures interdependency, which is a recipe for placing guilt primarily on the individual. *Burning* invites us to question this approach and to see what Jong-su cannot see (because of his proximity and because of his own rage, among other reasons): that his father's violent actions are reactions produced in a system that engenders fundamentally unjust and unlivable social conditions for a large part of the global population. In this way, *Burning* reminds us that, as Ahmed writes, “all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 4). This is something we can only see if we approach emotions as embedded within social systems.

As *Burning* illuminates through the story of a father and a son who both express their rage exclusively through silent violence, silenced rage tends to induce violence in part because it does not leave room for acknowledging context. In this system, a focus on the individual underlies and supports a dangerous decontextualization that

does not distinguish between interior and exterior determinants in a person's life. Ignoring and concealing the systemic nature of emotion in this way reinforces individualistic approaches to emotion that hinder people from finding ways to, echoing Kim, “respond to, articulate, or even understand their anger” (Kim, 2013, p. 5). In this system of muted emotions, it is not surprising that Jong-su's own act of rage—his murder of Ben—is both silent and violent. It is not difficult to imagine a sequel to *Burning* in which Jong-su follows in his father's footsteps and is turned into a case within the criminal justice system after being caught for his act of silent rage in the film's final scene. This imagined turn of events would of course only serve to perpetuate the inequality that shaped Jong-su's rage in the first place, which illustrates how a system that silences rage also ensures that the raging inequalities that fuel the feeling remain in place. It is precisely because inequalities of power that perpetuate socioeconomic gaps in capitalist social systems that Jong-su's father, but not Ben, faces legal retribution for his raging acts of violence.

It is in this light that we need to consider Ben's act of enraging violence: his murder of Hae-mi (Jeon Jong-seo). While the father-son relationship and its relation to silenced rage is paramount, I would be remiss not to discuss Hae-mi. Omitting her story would be an example of silencing violence against women, and her role in the film reveals the wider and violent pitfalls of considering rage as primarily individual. I will return to this point and the political ramifications of articulating rage in the conclusion. While the film leaves it famously ambiguous what happens to Hae-mi, there are certain and, I contend, decisive indications that Ben does murder her. There is, for example, her watch in his bathroom that Jong-su finds in a box full of women's accessories that have suspicious similarities with the kind of “trophies” that serial killers often collect from their victims. There is also Ben's verbatim repetition of Hae-mi's declaration that she wishes she could disappear “like she never existed” when he tells Jong-su that he can make a greenhouse disappear “like it never existed.” While it is never confirmed that Ben murders Hae-mi, the signs are too many and too striking to ignore. Additionally, a literal interpretation of what it means to burn a greenhouse will prove to have fatal consequences.

The symbolic meaning of the greenhouses that Ben brags about burning is central to the story as told by Lee as well as Faulkner and Murakami. While Murakami's story leaves the meaning behind the burned barns even more ambiguous than *Burning* and only ever suggests violent rage, this suggestion is emblematic for the relationship between rage, silence, and violence discussed in this article. While ambiguous, the barns in Murakami's story—like the greenhouses in *Burning*—have been read as symbols for missing and murdered women. Read this way, the greenhouse functions as a misogynistic metaphor for women: nurturing and warm but ultimately disposable. The suggested violence of this metaphor served as a catalyst for Lee to make the film. As he elaborates in an interview, when his co-writer Oh Jung-mi suggested that he adapt Murakami's “Barn Burning,” he was initially not intrigued. The story, he thought, “seemed neither here nor there. It seemed like a play on words and a story about plays on words” (Ganjavie, 2018, n.p.). It was only after grasping the meaning behind this play on words—the meaning behind the barns being burned in the story—that he became interested in the project. This meaning was revealed to him through Oh's rage. As Lee



describes, his co-writer had been enraged by the way the mysterious pyromaniac in Murakami's story—Ben's precursor—describes the “useless barns” he likes to burn because she interpreted them as symbols for young women (Ganjavie, 2018, n.p.). Once he had teased out this metaphorical interpretation, Lee was convinced that he should turn the short story into a film.

Like Lee, Jong-su does not tease out the metaphorical meaning of the barns at first. As Jeon notes, Jong-su fails to recognize the connection between burning greenhouses and murdering women because he is remarkably bad at understanding metaphors (Jeon, 2021, p. 107). What Jong-su—like the narrator in Murakami's story—is unable to understand is that for Ben, a greenhouse to be burned is a metaphor for a young woman with no friends and a family that will not let her come home until she has paid off her credit card debts: a woman that he can murder without consequences. Like the man in Murakami's story who only burns barns that “won't cause major fires,” Ben picks women whose disappearance won't cause major investigations (Murakami, 1993, p. 141). For Ben, such women are women he can murder entirely without consequences because, after their death, it will truly be like they never existed. Because Jong-su interprets Ben's bragging about burning greenhouses literally, he fails to understand Ben's role in Hae-mi's disappearance in time. In this light, Jong-su's morning runs to check on greenhouses appear as not only a quixotic, but a deadly misguided mission.

Hae-mi's murder might be totally silenced in that it is not portrayed on screen, but it should be a murder that enrages an audience more adept at reading metaphors than Jong-su. The burning of greenhouses and barns are violent acts that we, as audience members, need to be wary of reading literally. As Jong-su's belated realization shows us, a literal interpretation of this act has fatal consequences. When it comes to Ben's destructive violence and pyromaniac pleasures, we must consider that there is no smoke without fire.

Hae-mi's disappearance and contingent murder thus appear as one example—grievable in itself—of a systematic violence against women and those deemed “useless” by a system that enrages people across the world. Like the collection of trophies in his bathroom, Ben's immediate replacement of Hae-mi with another young woman hints at how she was neither his first nor last victim. Writing about feminicides in Latin America, where nearly 3000 women-identifying individuals are killed because of who they are every year, Butler writes that “The systemic character of this violence is effaced when the men who commit such crimes are said to suffer personality disorders or singular pathological conditions” (Butler, 2020, p. 188). This is why we need to approach Ben's serial killing as fundamentally connected to social conditions rather than as a case of individual psychopathology. Through this move, we can begin to acknowledge that neither the murder of a woman in Latin America, the violent acts of a poor farmer in Paju, nor the silent disappearance of a young woman in Tokyo or Seoul are isolated, unique, or even rare events. Rather, these events all take place in a system structured by silence and rage. A narrow focus on the individual obscures the systematic nature of this silenced violence. While Ben may very well be a psychopath, focusing on his potential individual psychopathology deflects attention from critiques of social systems in which men like Ben can murder women like Hae-mi with impunity. Similarly, if we, along with Jong-su,

blame his father's violent acts solely or primarily on him, we obscure the social systems that make his actions so common.

Approached through a cognitive lens that acknowledges the embedded conditions of emotions, *Burning* illustrates the compounding effects of a conglomerate of systemic pressures through the story of the father's raging act of violence and through the depiction of how Jong-su follows this trajectory of silent violence when he murders Ben. Speculating about Ben's potentially sociopathic personality does not provide a way to critique systematic violence against women, just as blaming Jong-su's father's "anger disorder" does not help us understand the complex reality that places him in prison. Moving away from a discussion of individual personalities and potential pathologies, we can bring into focus the social systems that enable and perpetuate these acts of violence. It is within such systems of what can seem like an endless cycle of silent violence that Faulkner's "Barn Burning" will offer surprising possibilities for non-violent articulation.

### From silence to silver voices in "Barn Burning"

In Faulkner's fiction, the system that silences rage most explicitly is the patriarchal family. The family functions as a repressive force in "Barn Burning," and Faulkner's families are one reason why Jong-su feels such affective affinities with his characters—why he feels like he is reading about himself when he reads Faulkner.

In Faulkner's fictional South, families do everything together. They travel to bury their kin as family (*As I Lay Dying*), they raise children and care for aging parents and disabled siblings under the same fraught household (*The Sound and the Fury*), and they tell stories of their families' pasts over and over (the whole oeuvre). These families are never and by no means even remotely functional, but family is nevertheless a fundamental part of any character's identity. For example, when the vitriolic Jason Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* (the Shakespearean title's connection to silence and rage may not be a coincidence) drives his beloved car to the Jefferson town square, he is constantly embarrassed by how people will look at him not for who he is as an isolated individual, but for what family he comes from. His fear of the town's judging gaze seeps into one of few stream of consciousness passages in the self-proclaimed "rational" Jason's section. Here, Jason worries about how the town will watch and judge him because of his familial affiliations:

And there I was, without any hat, looking like I was crazy too. Like a man would naturally think, one of them is crazy and another one drowned himself and the other one was turned out into the street by her husband, what's the reason the rest of them are not crazy too. All the time I could see them watching me like a hawk, waiting for a chance to say Well I'm not surprised I expected it all the time the whole family's crazy. (Faulkner, 2014, p. 153)

This passage reveals Jason's most buried fears—all related to how his family affects his identity and, importantly, his virility and masculinity—to the audience and, perhaps, to Jason too. While group loyalty influences how we perceive the world and thus who we are, Jason's anxiety stems from his knowledge that it works the other

way around too: his group identity affects how the world perceives him. In “Barn Burning,” we see a similar structure that reveals how familial ties shape emotion and identity.

Faulkner’s short story follows ten-year-old Colonel Sartoris “Sarty” Snopes on a moral and material journey where he must decide whether to expose his violent father as a barn burner. This exposure would require Sarty to break the silence that protects his father’s habitual arson, Abner Snopes’ preferred method of expressing rage towards what Caroline Miles has called “the diabolical socioeconomic conditions of his own life” (Miles, 1999, p. 157). As Sarty travels across the South, he is—until the very end—always surrounded by his father, mother, brother, aunt, and two sisters. Just as with Jason, these familial ties influence how he perceives the world around him. We learn this already in the opening paragraph, where Sarty sees the man who is accusing his father of burning barns in the store doubling as a makeshift courtroom and instinctively thinks “*our enemy [...] oun! mine and hisn both! He’s my father!*,” seemingly correcting the narrator—or himself—after the initial introduction of the man as “his father’s enemy” (Faulkner, 1995, p. 1, emphasis original). This man is not only his father’s enemy: he is Sarty’s enemy too—“*mine and hisn both!*”—because of familial ties. Sarty’s furious classification of the other as enemy is based on his sense of loyalty toward his family—a loyalty that makes his own view of the world merge with that of his father’s. Here, then, we see an example of how group loyalty shapes antagonistic emotions. Sarty’s rage toward his father’s enemy is based not on who he is, but what family he is from. Just as for Jong-su, rage is intimately connected with family for Sarty. As we will see, it is also intimately connected with silence.

Faulkner’s fiction is famously full of silence in its moments of suppressed emotion: moments when characters are emphatically described as *not* feeling, *not* looking, and *not* saying. Such emphasized absences draw attention to subtracted emotions that readers often expect in emotionally charged situations (of which there are as many as there are silences in Faulkner’s stories). As such, Faulkner’s writing is suffused with examples of underperformed emotion in Berlant’s sense, and “Barn Burning” is no exception. Throughout the story depicting the poor white Snopes family’s struggles as sharecroppers, Faulkner uses negations to draw the reader’s attention to what is lacking—to what is absent that could and should have been present. Just as in *Burning*, it is not that there is no emotion in the story. Faulkner’s story, too, is seething with rage: rage fueled by inequality as well as by racism and misogyny in a system of sharecropping where, in Abner Snopes’ words, the worker is “owned body and soul” (ibid, p. 5). And, just as in *Burning*, this rage is silent.

Like in *Burning*, it is the father figure who is the most telling example of how rage is silenced and why this toxic relationship between rage and silence leads to violence. Abner Snopes is identified and recognized through his silence. He is often and markedly silent, and when he does speak, he does so with an ominous version of flat affect: always with a “harsh, cold voice” (ibid, p. 3). Abner’s flat affect characterizes not only how he talks, but also how he uses violence: he strikes his mules with “savage blows” that are nevertheless “without heat” (ibid, p. 15); he hits his son “with the flat of his hand on the side of his head, hard but without heat exactly as he had struck the two mules at the store, exactly as he would strike either of them with

any stick in order to kill a horse fly, his voice still without fear or anger” (ibid, p. 4); and he abuses his wife with the very same coldness as he flings her “not savagely or viciously, just hard, into the wall” (ibid, p. 12). Observing a man unable to express emotion other than through silent violence, Sarty sees his father as a man “cut from tin,” an imposing authority with “that impervious quality of something cut ruthlessly from tin, depthless, as though, sidewise to the sun, it would cast no shadow” (ibid, p. 4, 6). In other words, flatness appears as a defining trait of Abner Snopes; it does not only affect what he says or does, but how he says it as well as how he acts in the world that so enrages him. Flatness appears as the consequence of a system that, like the courtroom, does not allow for emotions to be expressed through either looks or words and that reinforces the idea that individuals can ever be “impervious” in the manner that Abner Snopes appears to his son. Again, we see that there is little *to* say in these situations, but also that the defining silence of these moments act in coercion with violence that we can see as misguided and misdirected rage against the unequal conditions of the 1890s sharecropping South. Tellingly, Abner’s rage against a system that owns him “body and soul” takes the silent form of not only burning landowners’ barns, but also abusing his family.

It is within this familial and familiar system of silence and violence that Sarty’s journey toward articulation and non-violence is so remarkable. Sarty’s inner monologue is full of strong emotions signaled through exclamation points: “*ourn enemy [...] ourn! mine and hisn both! He’s my father!*” (ibid, p. 1, emphasis original). Through this introduction to Sarty’s interiority, we see that silence and flat affect does not come naturally to this young boy. His father repeatedly and violently attempts to discipline him into adapting his own affective style, nevertheless. Abner Snopes beats his son for “fixing to tell” about his barn burning, which would mean betraying his family through articulation (ibid, p. 4). For Abner, even thinking about breaking the silence that protects him from legal consequences—“fixing to tell”—constitutes not only a betrayal of the family, but also a failure of masculinity that is characterized by flat affect and silence.<sup>6</sup> In the Snopes family, masculinity is equated with and characterized by silence: the reason Abner gives to Sarty for beating him into compliant silence is, notably, “You’re getting to be a man. You got to learn” (ibid, p. 4). These violent reprimands for articulation do quiet Sarty for a while. He begins to silence his own thinking as we see after a hopeful rumination on how perhaps this was the last time his father burned a barn: “*Maybe he’s done satisfied now, now that he has ... stopping himself, not to say it aloud even to himself*” (ibid, p. 3, emphasis original). Soon thereafter, he has to silence his mind again as it races into thinking that “Likely his father had already arranged to make a crop on another farm before he ...” (ibid, p. 4). Reading the ellipsis here as both standing in for Abner’s pyromaniac habit and symbolizing how familial (loyal)ties silence Sarty’s mind by stopping treacherous thoughts, we see how expectations seep into his interior monologue in a similar way to how the town’s judgment seeped into Jason’s mind in the Jefferson town square. Through these depictions, Faulkner—like Lee—shows us

<sup>6</sup> For scholarship on Faulkner and masculinity, see Donaldson (1999).

how deeply social systems that exist beyond and seemingly outside individual characters condition their thoughts and feelings.

Abner's repeated attempts to discipline expression out of his son through violence do not ultimately succeed, however. After being forced to help prepare the kerosene intended to start his father's next barn burning, Sarty verbalizes his objections to this violent plan and must be physically restricted by his mother so that he does not run to warn the owner of the soon-to-be-burned barn. Rather than using physical force to escape the hold, Sarty cries—the verb is important in its potential for a double meaning indicating vulnerability—“Lemme go! ... I don't want to have to hit you!” (ibid, p. 13). While still existing in a culture of silenced emotions and still threatening to use his masculine power to dominate, Sarty's articulation in this moment serves as a striking contrast to the lack of emotion, the lack of heat and fear and anger, of his father. His cry foreshadows the crucial cry of the story: the one where Sarty cries “Barn!” to warn Major de Spain that his violently silent father is about to strike (the match) again (ibid, p. 13). It is in these two moments that Sarty breaks free from the violent cycle of raging silence imposed by his family. To break free of his family's constraints, he must literally break free from the grasp of his mother, which is the only way in which he can move from silent violence toward non-violent articulation.

Whereas Jong-su follows the patriarchal tradition of silenced rage and *Burning* ends with a scene of fiery violence, Sarty actively resists physical violence as an articulation of rage. “Barn Burning” thus leaves us with an image of the young Sarty Snopes walking down a hill “toward the dark woods within which the liquid silver voices of the birds called unceasing” (ibid, p. 14). In this exercise of authentic choice against his family, Sarty proves that there is room for agency and articulation even in systems that oppress through silence: that it is possible to turn away from raging silence and walk toward a future filled with liquid silver voices.

## Crafting rage

How, then, is Sarty able to break free from this system of silenced rage? How does he manage to craft an affective style so radically different from that of his father? The difficulty of answering these questions and the fact that Sarty is an anomaly both in Faulkner's fictional worlds—he does not make an appearance in any of the writer's other 124 short stories, 19 novels, or 20 screenplays—and in the contemporary South Korea depicted in *Burning* indicates how difficult it is to break habits of expressing emotion. We cannot understand this difficulty unless we approach emotions as embedded within social systems, and this is how and why *Burning* and “Barn Burning” can be helpful for understanding rage. Instead of isolated individuals, the main characters in these works emerge as crucially defined in relation to their families and to the larger social systems beyond these families. As such, Jong-su and Sarty remind us that something as seemingly individual as emotion is constructed and constricted through and with our surroundings.

Seen this way, the ending of “Barn Burning” is not free of rage, but it presents rage crafted in a different and—importantly—non-violent way. Audre Lorde

reminds us that anger—rage’s milder, more well-mannered relative—“is loaded with information and energy” (Lorde, 1981, p. 8). This information and energy can be used to craft emotions into progressive actions because “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (ibid, p. 8). Trans activist, author, filmmaker, and scholar Susan Stryker presents one example of such channeled rage as she compares her experience as a transgender woman to that of Frankenstein’s monster: “my exclusion from human community,” Stryker writes, “fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must exist” (Stryker, 1994, p. 245). How to direct rage is imperative to consider in a world where rage is a global force to be reckoned with. As Judith Butler says in a 2020 interview, “People in the world have every reason to be in a state of total rage” (Gessen, 2020, n.p.). The ubiquity of rage is confirmed if we turn on the news. Here, on an hourly basis, we are met by reports of terrorism and mass shootings, of insurrections and invasions, of domestic violence and hate crimes, and of collective demonstrations against structural injustices. Of these examples, only the last presents a non-violent expression of rage. Because rage is inevitable in an unjust world, the challenge in such a world is to find ways to express rage in non-violent ways. Butler sees rage as a “form of politics,” as something that can be crafted through violence or through non-violence (Gessen, 2020, n.p.). This kind of crafted rage—rage formed as a tool or a source of energy that can be directed against violently unequal conditions—is what a view of rage as primarily individual precludes.

But, as we saw with Jong-su and with Sarty, crafting rage is far from easy. If we fail to see the social embeddedness of rage, we are doomed to direct our rage against other individuals instead of against the underlying conditions because of how this view obscures systems that are hard enough to notice in the first place given the personal, human, and limited scale we are confined to as individuals. We are doomed to fall into the individualist trap, along with Jong-su, and read rage as confined to the individual if we neglect the social conditions that cause rage, be it socioeconomic inequalities, systemic violence against women, institutionalized racism, or exclusionary practices targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals. *Burning* and “Barn Burning,” together with other stories of rage, are useful in this process because they illustrate both how social systems silence rage and what opportunities there are for crafting non-violent expressions of an emotion that will last as long as the inequalities that fuel this feeling. To understand rage as it emerges and travels across cultural, geographic, and medial spheres, we need to understand it as a collectively embedded emotion rather than as a feeling that arises primarily within an individual. It is only after this that we can begin crafting.

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