Faulkner’s Caribbean Geographies in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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A faraway land is a person as much as a country

Land of milk and honey, of profit and money, of fear and monstrosity, the West Indies never cease to fascinate the nineteenth-century traveler. In 1887, for instance, the Irish-Greek journalist Lafcadio Hearn, living in New Orleans at the time, writes to his friend W. D. O’Connor, “I am going to run away to . . . the West Indies, for a romantic trip—a small literary bee in search of inspiring honey.” In 1820, Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* “[runs] away from home” to go to the West Indies, after learning from his teacher’s book that “there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich” (*Absalom*, 195). Hearn and Sutpen’s reasons to go to the West Indies couldn’t be more disparate: the romantic Hearn travels there in search of increased emotional experience, literary and sensual, while Sutpen, devoid of all romanticism, goes there for their purely instrumental function, since “they would be most suitable to the expediency of [his] requirements” (194). Nonetheless, Hearn and Sutpen’s West Indies have a lot in common. First of all, both men “run away to” them. The West Indies are a place of escape motivated by a lack in the men’s current location, whether the problem is
boredom for Hearn or poverty for Sutpen. The islands are not worthy for their intrinsic value but used as a remedy or treated as “adjunctive or incremental to [a] design” (194).

In addition, for both men, the archipelago is named, or rather misnamed, by the term “West Indies.” The names “Caribbean” or “Antilles” would have been more suitable historically and geographically to refer to the old or former French colonies of Martinique and Haiti, the two main Caribbean sites of Absalom. As Barbara Ladd explains, “West Indies and Caribbean are used synonymously by many, although for some scholars working in the field, the ‘West Indies’ properly speaking refers to former British holdings of the region, the Caribbean to areas colonized by France and Spain.” In addition, the term “West Indies” is closely linked to Columbus’s mistake, since the term was, to quote the French Grand Larousse Encyclopédique, “the name given to the New World by Christopher Columbus who, following his first voyage, thought he had reached the oriental shores of Asia.” Thus the term is based on a geographical confusion. The same French encyclopedia specifies that in French, the translation of West Indies or “Indes occidentales”—which is the term used by Faulkner’s French translators—strictly refers to the “French company of the West Indies” (Compagnie française des Indes Occidentales), a trading company founded in 1664 “with a capital of 6 million pounds.” In a French colonial context, therefore, “West Indies” or “Indes occidentales” evokes the commercial—not the geographic—region. While the use of the term “West Indies” appears as a geographical misnaming, it is nonetheless faithful to the nature of the islands in Sutpen’s mind, which is not geographic but economic. Indeed, as Sutpen specifies to his friend Compson, what he learned from his schoolteacher’s book about the West Indies substituted for any formal learning of accounting: “I did not know that in that listening I
was equipping myself better for what I should later design to do than if I had learned all
the addition and subtraction in the book. That was how I learned of the West Indies. Not
where they were…” (Absalom, 195).

Sutpen’s subsequent stay in Haiti does not reveal anything more about this non-
place called the West Indies. As John T. Matthews has skillfully shown, “Sutpen’s
famously preserved innocence amounts to the habit of looking without seeing.” This
overlooking of the Haitian environment translates into a skewed vision of Caribbean
geo

graphy and history, as many critics argue. Maritza Stanchich shows how Haiti is
represented according to an economy of stereotypes, or rather “how it is not
represented.” Jeff Karem asserts that Faulkner’s vision of the Caribbean evades “specific
‘historical knowledge,’ in favor of a mythic projection of guilt that is symbolically rich
but historically impoverished.” As Matthews specifies, the reference to Haiti is based on
a gross anachronism since Haiti was independent in 1804: “No white French sugar
planters remained on Haiti in 1827 [when Sutpen arrives], and all slaves had been freed”
(Matthews, 250). Sean Latham comments on the evacuation of the Caribbean on the
foldout map published with the 1936 edition of Absalom: “Indeed, the spaces most
powerfully charged with meaning in the fictional world of Absalom–Kentucky, [sic] Haiti,
and New Orleans–are missing entirely, as if Faulkner were somehow trying to constrain
the vast and terrifying reach of the novel within the imaginative lands bound by the
Yoknapatawpha and Tallahatchie rivers.”

Despite its instrumentalization, evacuation, and misrepresentation, the presence of
the Caribbean in Absalom has opened up a space of transatlantic dialogue, as Matthews,
Ladd, Chris Bongie, George Handley, and Deborah Cohn have importantly shown,
space that J. Michael Dash has called a “New World relationality.” My aim in this essay is to provide an extensive view of the multifarious presence of the Caribbean in Absalom, not only to demonstrate how Faulkner wrote the Caribbean, but more importantly to address what, in Faulkner’s work, has allowed for so many Caribbean writers to adopt the Mississippi man as one of their own.

If Faulkner’s novel fails to produce a Caribbean geography as a “description of the surface of the earth” in the strict sense of the term, it nonetheless provides a multiply complex notion of the Caribbean through an incarnation of the landscape in the characters’ bodies. In his compelling study of Faulkner’s phenomenology, French philosopher Claude Romano argues that Faulknerian texts privilege landscape over geography. While a “geographical space is an already idealized space in which constant points are separated by fixed distances, and in which intermediate spaces are ‘empty’ in the sense of neutral and indifferent spaces, the space of the landscape is not made of points linked externally by objective data: it deploys itself from a ‘here’ in its center with a horizon that moves as I move within it” (Romano, 53). It is precisely this propensity to change with the self, and particularly with the positioning or understanding of the body, that shapes the Caribbean environment in Absalom. Sutpen’s burned skin, the wild men’s mud covering, the French architect’s fancy wardrobe, Eulalia Bon’s elusive figure, and Charles Bon’s composite self bring to the surface of the novel a buried or repressed Caribbean, otherwise skewed or evacuated from geographical representations. In her reflection on space and place in Faulkner, Ladd favors the term “place” over “space.” With Edward Casey, she argues that “place unlike space . . . locates things in regions whose most complete expression is neither geometric nor cartographic. . . . The proper
region of place [Casey adds], may well be the body and memory its most complete expression.” In this light, the characters’ most external interface with the world–skin, mud, or clothing–acts as the embodiment of the Caribbean place.

The Caribbean body-landscape, not yet situated geographically, first appears on the second page of the novel with the nightmarish intrusion of Sutpen and his crew abruptly emerging with thunder “upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a school prize water color” (4). Hearing and smell, thunder and sulfur, precede visual images, confronting us with what Romano calls “a phenomenology of feelings,” which he uses to describe Benjy’s primal perception of the world that precedes knowledge. In the second chapter of *Absalom*, the hellish place gets situated more precisely within a stereotypical geography of the Tropics. Sutpen, its emissary, looks like “a man who had been sick. Not like a man who had been peacefully ill in bed . . . but like a man who had been through some solitary furnace experience which was more than just fever. . . . A man . . . with a short reddish beard . . . in a face whose flesh had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven’s fever either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay” (*Absalom*, 24). While they are not yet named as such, we recognize in the description the furnace of the fiery Tropics, associated with both physical and moral disease in the stereotypical economy of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers and historians such as Buffon, Hegel, or Gobineau. Sutpen’s disease causes “more than just fever” since immorality is added to the plain physical illness.

Sutpen is diseased, morally and physically, his skin burned, darkened in a “dishonest suntan” which contrasts with his complexion five years later. As Mr.
Compson tells Quentin, “Your grandfather said that some of the faience appearance which the flesh of his face had had when he came to town five years ago was gone now and that his face had an honest sunburn. . . . [I]t was just that the flesh on his bones had become quieter, as though passive after some actual breasting of atmosphere like in running” (36). The immoral tan is therefore dependent upon the tropical environment which acts like a hand fashioning not only skin, skeletal structure and muscle mass but also morality. Sutpen’s face is not just mud but “pottery” and “glazed clay,” as if nature had acquired technological agency over the shaping of humanity. In this context, the Mississippi air possesses invigorating, healthy, and morally superior virtues, which is in sharp contrast with the idea of environmental contamination of the body and soul, also commonly attributed to the U.S. South by the U.S. North, as Natalie Ring has shown. In this particular passage of Absalom, the Caribbean is instrumentalized to expel south of the South the thickness of the Mississippi air, and with it, the evils projected onto the region.

Sutpen’s “wild negroes” serve a similar function of demonizing the Tropics. They appear as a huddled mass devoid of individuality, which one of the narrators terms “the absolute mud” (Absalom, 27). The “wild negroes” are systematically associated with animals: “like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men” (4), “like a pack of hounds” (27), “like a sleeping alligator” (27). However, when we give it a closer look, the “negro clump” is not as deprived of humanity as it seems. As the narrative unfolds, this lack of humanity or individuality is attributed to the failing perception of the town, not to the inherent qualities of Sutpen’s men: “The negroes could speak no English yet and doubtless there were more than Akers who did not know that the language in which they
and Sutpen communicated was a sort of French and not some dark and fatal tongue of their own” (27). The muddy sight, the ignorance, the clump is thus not that of the men but that of the “coon-hunter” Akers, who, like so many others in town (“and doubtless there were more than Akers who did not know”), fails to perceive the men’s tongue as articulated language. Compson—or Faulkner speaking through Compson’s narrative—knows best. He describes their language, which we can assume to be Haitian Creole, as “a sort of French,” demonstrating an accurate-enough linguistic consciousness for the time. Compson also associates the men with a country, “a much older country than Virginia or Carolina but it wasn’t a quiet one” (11). That country, in Compson’s speech, acquires a stronger temporal grounding than the Southern states. The much older country is identified as Haiti in the rest of the novel. As I pointed out earlier, there is a clear anachronism in the story of Sutpen acquiring slaves in Haiti in 1827. Instead of attributing this inaccuracy to Faulkner’s poor knowledge of the Caribbean, I agree with John Matthews that “Sutpen’s material links to the West Indies tend to be obscured by Absalom’s narrators” (255), and I also tend to think that “a country much older than Virginia” might provide a trace of Faulkner’s awareness of Haiti as an old “country” in the sense of state—the first Black Republic—and not just in the sense of land inhabited by a group of people, as in No Country For Old Men. Armed with articulated language (“a sort of French”) and a country, Sutpen’s men are also equipped with survival tactics and technology. Their huddled mass is indeed a survival strategy: “they would sit in a curious quiet clump as though for mutual protection” (Absalom, 28). Similarly, the absolute mud, or absolute un-division, turns into a survival tool: “So [Sutpen] and the twenty negroes worked together, plastered over with mud against the mosquitoes” (28). They thus evolve
throughout the narrative from a state of lack to a lack of need for such things as clothes that become superfluous and harmful, as one of the narrators subtly perceives: “during that first summer and fall the negroes did not even have (or did not use) blankets to sleep in” (27). The difference between need and absence of need presents the so-called wild men above a state of depravation and in control of the natural environment, which is not the case with another of Sutpen’s Caribbean accessories, the captive French architect.

At first sight, the French architect’s body is the polar opposite of the Caribbean wild men’s. His first portrait in Mr. Compson’s words (chapter 2) points to the complexity of his geographical belonging: “a small, alertly resigned man with a grim, harried Latin face, in a frock coat and a flowered waistcoat and a hat which would have created no furor on a Paris boulevard, all of which he was to wear constantly for the next two years. . . . This was the French architect. Years later the town learned that he had come all the way from Martinique on Sutpen’s bare promise and lived for two years on venison cooked over a camp fire” (Absalom, 26). The small man has a Latin face. In Faulkner’s novels, the state of being “Latin” in the sense of Spanish-speaking America often marks an ambivalent state at the limit of whiteness and blackness21 as is the case with Joe Christmas’ alleged Mexican father in Light in August or with Eulalia Bon’s mother of supposed Spanish heritage in Absalom. The architect’s flowery clothing, which reappears in a strikingly similar way in Charles Bon’s wardrobe, also introduces gender ambiguity. Thus, the architect stands at the limits of whiteness and masculinity. Linked to “Latinness” by his face, the architect is attached to Paris by his clothing. The outfit, to which he clings in the ill-adapted Plantation and swamp environments, is to him as integral as his own skin. After his capture out of the swamp, it is not his injured leg nor
the wounds on his skin that lead to his utter despair but the loss of his hat, a loss that
“seemed to gather all misfortune and defeat that the human race ever suffered” (Absalom, 207). More than accessory, the architect’s clothing warrants him humanity. After the
dismemberment and castration of his outfit, he becomes a vulnerable swamp creature with “little dirty coon-like hands” (207).

After years have passed, the town realizes that the French architect has sprung not from a European boulevard but from the Caribbean island of Martinique. While
Martinique and Haiti—formerly Saint-Domingue—were both old French colonies and are thereby historically linked, since the Haitian Revolution, Martinique and Haiti have been represented in popular, literary, and political discourse as polar opposites. While Haiti has been demonized from its revolutionary inception to the recent earthquake (as, for instance, in Pat Robertson’s infamous claim about its “pact with the devil”), Martinique has been described as a summit of civilization and sophistication. 22 The city of Saint-Pierre in Martinique was called the “Paris of the Antilles.” When the French architect arrived in Mississippi in 1833, Saint-Pierre was at its height. It is likely that Faulkner would have heard of Saint-Pierre and of the massive destruction of the city by volcanic eruption in 1902. It is also likely that he would have encountered Hearn’s writings on Martinique, Hearn being his near predecessor in New Orleans and, like him, a regular contributor to the Times-Picayune. In his Two Years in the French West Indies, published in 1890, Hearn portrays Martinique as a place of utmost sophistication, in contrast, for instance, with the British colony of Barbados: “Compare [the population of Martinique] with the population of black Barbadoes [sic], where the apish grossness of African coast types has been perpetuated unchanged;—and the contrast may well astonish!” 23 For Hearn,
Martinique is also a site of linguistic, fashion, and cultural sophistication, and a site of feminization of people and landscape. Thus the choice of Martinique as the place of origin of the architect seems appropriate and demonstrates Faulkner’s literary awareness of the place. Despite this certain recognition, the references to Haiti and Martinique remain schematic. As Stanchich has argued, for instance, “Nothing … is mentioned or known about Martinique except in mock descriptions of the architect’s fashions [and] a poor imitation of the French.”

The most complex presence of the Caribbean in *Absalom*, outside of this “economy of stereotypes,” to use Stanchich’s expression (6), is embodied in the person of Charles Bon. The Caribbean revealed in Bon’s body is not so much the irretrievable site of “that Porto Rico or Haiti or wherever it was he understood vaguely that he had come from” (*Absalom*, 239) but the city of New Orleans, which inscribes the presence of the Caribbean within the geographical borders of the U.S. South. In this particular example, the Caribbean is not so much an accessorial detachable faraway land but a pervasive presence that shapes humanity within the limits of this “country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own” (*Absalom*, 179), as young Sutpen imagines the Plantation South from his childhood West Virginia mountains.

Like his home, the city of New Orleans, Bon is “foreign and paradoxical, with [an] atmosphere at once fatal and languorous, at once feminine and steel-hard” (86). He is defined precisely by his resistance to stereotypes and multiplies himself in a series of images that resist being synthesized as a whole. Among these composite images, some do participate in an economy of stereotypes based on amalgamation and interchangeability.
In Rosa’s mind, for instance, Bon’s New Orleans becomes interchangeable with the fantasized Arabian Nights of another continent, another time, and another level of reality altogether. Mr. Compson “like[d] to think” that Henry “looked upon Bon as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights” (76). Bon is alternately described as “a catholic of sorts” (75), frenchified, and phoenix-like in a portrait drawing from nationality, religion, and mythology, conceptual realms hard to fuse in a single stereotype.

In this, Bon represents the “absolute composite” which, for Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant, is a defining pattern of Caribbean societies, a Caribbean space in which Glissant includes Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha as well. For Glissant, this composite world clashes with “atavistic” societies that ground and legitimize lineage in a land of which Sutpen’s design provides a clear example. Bon escapes Sutpen’s atavistic thinking through his groundlessness: “a young man . . . with for background the shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents—a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman” (Absalom, 58). The image of the phoenix, born and reborn of its own ashes, or more pragmatically, the legal situation of Charles Bon, defines him as a result of the composite world described by Glissant, which gnaws at the “fixed and neat” borders of Yoknapatawpha County. The “fixed and neat” geography is disrupted by the intrusion of blood that sprang from a Caribbean métissage or miscegenation, which is particularly why Glissant considers Faulkner as a Caribbean writer: “Absalom, Absalom! . . . is precisely about . . . a possibility of incest, a perversion of filiation. But the decisive—fatal—element will be linked to another type of causality: the intrusion of ‘black blood.’ Undetectable at first in the first Haitian wife of the planter Sutpen . . . it will provide the
necessary conditions to forever dissolve the chain of filiation.” 26 It is thus this composite, miscegenated genealogy, this mixing, that perverts geography. It is blood that reshapes land. Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, for Glissant, is not only a perversion of space, an accident due to the intrusion of Caribbean miscegenation, but “structurally reproduces the Caribbean family”: “In all of Faulkner’s works, the clashing mess of names, the forced or willing miscegenations, the double (black and white) lineages, relentlessly reproduce . . . the extended-family style that has contributed for so long to the building of the Caribbean social fabric. It’s no accident that Sutpen met his fate in Haiti.” 27

While Glissant includes the world of Yoknapatawpha in his Caribbean, Bon dismisses the Caribbean as a non-place. As Quentin and Shreve ponder in chapter eight, Bon creat[ed] for himself (without help since who to help him) his own notion of that Porto Rico or Haiti or wherever it was he understood vaguely that he had come from like orthodox children do of heaven or the cabbage patch or wherever it was that they came from, except that his was different in that you were not supposed (your mother didn’t intend to, anyway) to ever go back there (and maybe when you got as old as she was you would be horrified too every time you found hidden in your thoughts anything that just smelled or tasted like it might be a wish to go back there) . . . and hence no man had a father, no one personal Porto Rico or Haiti, but all mother faces . . . all boy flesh that walked and breathed stemming from that one ambiguous eluded dark fatherhead. (Absalom, 239-40).

The expelling of the Caribbean as origin corresponds to the evacuation of the Haitian mother’s body. While other bodies (the French architect’s, the wild men’s, or Sutpen’s)
signify and even perform the Caribbean landscape, Eulalia Bon’s body remains mute. In this context it is worth noting that the name “Eulalia” comes from the Greek Eulalos, one who “speaks well,” or one with a good speech (“lalein” referring to speaking or chattering and “eu-” meaning “good” or “bon”). Faulkner’s Eulalia ironically remains without speech. The name “Eulalia” also importantly refers to the first written collection of French poetry, “La Séquence de Sainte-Eulalie” (circa 881), a prayer to a 12-year-old martyr, a text that was also the first transcription of a sacred language—Latin—in secular French. In the Latin version of the sequence we can read, “Spiritus hic erat Eulaliae / Lacteolos, celer, innocuus” (It was the soul of Eulalia / White as milk, quick, innocent). French, in the time of the crumbling Empire of Charlemagne, a vernacular entering the written sphere of the dominant Latin language, occupies a similar position to Creole in post-revolutionary Haiti, which gets inscribed as a written language in official documents. In both cases, the feminine and the vernacular gain access to the symbolic dominant masculine writing. As Sutpen named “with his own mouth his own ironic fecundity of dragon’s teeth” (Absalom, 48), we can suspect that Faulkner too, named Eulalia with a particular intent. It is not clear whether Faulkner knew about the French and Latin sequences devoted to Eulalia. However, we can at least be certain that he was familiar with the literal meaning of the name, which would have been available in any etymological dictionary, and perhaps with the cult of Eulalia, a saint whose story was well known across the Mediterranean in Portugal, Spain, and France.

Faulkner’s naming of Eulalia seems to be in line with this “ironic fecundity.” His Eulalia does not have a sequence, does not have a song, nor does she have a body. She is the absent relay which gave birth to Charles Bon and which, through her disappearance,
turns the phoenix-like city of New Orleans into a space of parthenogenesis or self-birth. On a political level, the evacuation of Eulalia Bon, the Haitian mother, and of her Creole “bon parler,” also dismisses Haiti as a crucial cultural and political matrix of New Orleans. As Ned Sublette has shown in *The World That Made New Orleans*, Saint-Domingue, later Haiti, were fundamental to the construction of the city, politically, legally, linguistically, religiously, and culturally. The Caribbean state of Haiti disappears as a nation altogether since it loses its proper name to become a common noun, a phase among others in Bon’s development: “the Haiti, the childhood, the lawyer, the woman who was his mother” (*Absalom*, 250). The Caribbean mumble-jumble, whose names refer to many different political or linguistic realities, merges with religious and childlike tales of origins and originations: “Porto Rico or Haiti . . . or the cabbage patch or wherever it was that they came from” (239). Place of fictional, fictitious, or plain silly origin, the Caribbean further loses its status as geographical space and place to become a taste and smell: “anything that just smelled or tasted like it might be a wish to go back there” (239). Unlike the place of childhood nostalgia that a more orthodox literary child traveled back to through the taste of a madeleine dipped in an herbal tea, the Caribbean site of origin, for Bon, acts as a place of horror that forbids any return of the mind to a memory: the opposite of a Proustian nostalgic journey to a lost past.

Despite its evacuation as a maternal, historical, and political origin through the dismissal of Eulalia Bon, the Caribbean endures in the New Orleans of *Absalom* as a place of miscegenation and compositeness, finding its most compelling manifestation in the practice of *placage* that New Orleans, Saint-Domingue, and later Haiti shared. This practice is of course exemplified by Bon’s union to the unnamed “octoroon woman.” It is
no accident that Faulkner expels the word “plaçage” from his novel. One could argue that he does so to avoid folklorism. However, he does use the word “lagniappe,” clearly marked as New Orleans parlance. Faulkner, or his narrators, opt for the term “morganatic” (80) to describe Bon’s relationship to the woman, linking the practice of plaçage to Germanic, European, and royal origins, not to the common law practice of concubinage inherited from Saint-Domingue.

While such practices remain unnamed or silenced—both New Orleanian, Haitian, or Caribbean—they nonetheless invade the “fixed and neat” borders of Yoknapatawpha and ruin Sutpen’s atavistic desire. This clash between compositeness and atavism is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the following questions that Charles directs at Henry: “Have you forgot that this woman, this child, are niggers? You, Henry Sutpen of Sutpen’s Hundred in Mississippi? You, talking of marriage, a wedding, here?” (Absalom, 94). Charles Bon’s irony traps Henry into his own fallacy. Bon presents Henry–Henry Sutpen of Sutpen’s Hundred—as the extreme result of atavistic thinking in which the land, in aristocratic fashion, receives the Plantation owner’s patronymic, which in turn legitimizes the presence of the family on that land in a circular fantasy of reciprocal creation and belonging. The opposition between the words “woman” and “nigger” further reinforces the atavistic world based on “fixed and neat” lineages. This opposition also foreshadows the opposition between the terms “brother” and “nigger” introduced in the dramatic confrontation between Henry and Bon in chapter eight. These oppositions seem to forbid any inclusion of “blackness” within the family. The use of the word “nigger,” in the context of anti-miscegenation laws, would annul the possibility of a marriage. Despite it all, Henry sees the “morganatic wedding” as an act of bigamy, even if he views this
marriage through other cultural norms and laws (for instance Islamic, as when he envisions his sister as “a sort of junior partner in a harem” [94]). The “fixed and neat” bordering between legal citizen and slave, human and non-human, Yoknapatawpha and New Orleans, Yoknapatawpha and Haiti has failed. The mess of métissage cannot be expelled on a remote island; instead, it is already at work within the continental geographical body of the United States, in New Orleans, no matter how “foreign and paradoxical” a city.

Thus the Yoknapatawpha world has become a Caribbean place through the intrusion of unruly blood into the land. I now want to turn to an unexpected connection between Faulkner and the Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire, who both perform, I argue, a geography of blood. I am using the word “unexpected” because Césaire, a poet and politician born in Martinique in 1913, considered as one of the three founding fathers of the Negritude movement, a voice for the oppressed of the world with a sharp political consciousness, would appear to be an unlikely literary partner for Faulkner. However, in his celebrated 1939 ode to Negritude, *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land*, Césaire develops a geographical consciousness surprisingly similar to General Compson’s—or Faulkner’s own—vision of the region. To summarize, Césaire’s geography is not based on cartographers’ maps but shaped by the impression of the blood of slaves and other oppressed people on the land. One verse of his poem, which refers to the similarity between the red earth of Martinique and that of the Southern states of “Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama,” encapsulates this vision: “Terres rouges, terres sanguines, terres consanguines” (red earth, sanguine earth, consanguine earth) (Césaire, 46). The red of the earth evolves from a literal geological reference to the blood that the earth has absorbed,
to a relation of consanguinity, a cross-fertilization of the earth and the blood of slaves.

Compson’s geography of the West Indies, in this long and dense passage retold by Quentin to Shreve in the Harvard dorm room, functions in a similar manner\textsuperscript{34}:

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\ldots \text{a spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself,} \\
\text{grandfather said, as a theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed} \ldots \gram{a little island set in a smiling and fury-lurked and incredible indigo sea, which was the halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization,} \\
\text{halfway between the dark inscrutable continent from which the black blood, the black bones and flesh and thinking and remembering and hopes and desires, was ravished by violence} \ldots \gram{a little lost island in a latitude which would require ten thousand years of equatorial heritage to bear its climate, a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers and sugar cane sapling size and three times the height of a man} \ldots \gram{but valuable pound for pound almost with silver ore, as if nature held a balance and kept a book and offered a recompense for the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not.} \ldots \\
\text{[T]he planting of men too: the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance. And he [Sutpen] overseeing it, riding peacefully about on his horse} \ldots \gram{not knowing that what he rode upon was a volcano, hearing the air tremble and throb at night with the drums and the chanting and not knowing that it was the heart of the earth itself he heard… (Absalom, 202)}
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This is the only evocation of the Caribbean in the novel that performs a true geography as
measurement and inventory of the surface of the earth, which provides a sharp contrast with Sutpen’s impressionistic sea shanty or with Charles Bon’s confused feeling. Terms such as “latitude,” “half-way point,” and references to the equator clearly situate the passage in geographical thinking. References to indigo sea and volcanoes, precise tropical plants such as crimson flowers and sugar cane, demonstrate an environmental consciousness of geological structures and flora. The most surprising aspect of this geography, however, resides in the fact that the Caribbean landscape is not simply measured mathematically but described by means of an active form of geography or writing of the earth, which intertwines the land with its human presence, in a shared geography of blood. The landscape would be nothing without the cross-fertilization of the presence of its human inhabitants, and more specifically without the “black blood” of the oppressed slaves who have “manured” its “soil,” without the sacrifice to the earth of “torn limbs and “outraged hearts,” without, in short, the “planting of men.” Miles away from the accounting thinking of Sutpen,\textsuperscript{35} the West Indian landscape evoked here is based on blood, not on gold. The passage also introduces an idea of justice and ethical thinking. While men–and heaven–fail to pay their moral debt, nature does it for them in a recompense of botanical luxury. Such a thinking of the environment as both shaped and written by human blood, and as avenger, is surprisingly close to Césaire’s depiction of the earth. The “planting of men” in Faulkner’s text also strongly echoes in Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat’s novel \textit{The Farming of Bones}, in which sugar cane stalks and bones of the buried form one inextricable text.\textsuperscript{36}

I will not conclude by saying that Faulkner could be viewed as a thinker of Negritude, which would be far-fetched. However, I will argue that there is a Caribbean
geographical consciousness present in at least one of the voices of the rich polyphony or cacophony of the novel. This consciousness is juxtaposed to many other evocations of the region that sharply lack the lucidity of this passage. With this one exception, the novel is indeed full of characters who do not see the Caribbean, beginning with Sutpen, who oversees the plantation and rides the land on his horse not knowing, not knowing (repeated twice in the text) that he is hearing “the heart of the earth” in the drum beats.

Nevertheless, through the variety of its shapes—dreamed, simplified, stereotypical, jumbled up, political, and ethical—the Caribbean speaks in the text and continues to be heard by Caribbean writers, for whom Faulkner is deeply, and paradoxically, an inescapable source. We could name Wilson Harris, Maryse Condé, Vincent Placoly, Suzanne Césaire, and finally Edouard Glissant, who has devoted a monograph to Faulkner’s works, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, and who has made countless references to Faulkner from his early writings in the 1960s to his last essays in the 2010s. Having paid close attention to the Faulknerian presence in the entirety of Glissant’s corpus, I can say with confidence that Faulkner is Glissant’s most important putative father and literary master. I say this with an awareness of the problematic use of the terms “father” and “master” when evoking the relationship of Glissant, a descendant of African slaves, and Faulkner, a member of the white plantocracy.

While reading Glissant’s last long critical essay, his *Philosophie de la Relation* published in 2009, I was struck, and moved, by the acute presence of Faulkner in the text of a writer who saw his death approaching. Towards the end of his book, Glissant searches for his mother’s birthplace in Martinique and gets lost. He describes the experience of going astray in his native landscape as akin to the experience of being lost
in Faulkner: “If you get lost like this in a postage stamp (for example, Faulkner in his Yoknapatawpha), it means you really know it is yours.” Glissant’s landscape of origin, his mother’s birthplace, is inhabited by the Faulknerian landscape that acts as its explanation and its origin. An image of a “postage stamp of native soil” in which one can get lost explains precisely why the Faulknerian landscape evades geography. The contours, while tiny and precise as those of a stamp, can never chart a landscape which becomes yours, which becomes you, because it moves with you.

After spelling out his mother’s full name, and after recounting the story of her burial, in the last paragraph of his last book of essays, Glissant leaves the reader in the company of Faulkner: “We pursue the prophetic disorder of the man of the South, who told without telling all the while telling. It’s William Faulkner I’m talking about.” Why give such a place of honor to a white Southern writer in what appears to be the literary will of a Black Caribbean writer? What is there in Faulkner’s landscapes that speaks in the Caribbean? Glissant would have answered this question by the notion of common-place or “lieu-commun.” In *Philosophie de la Relation*, he contrasts what he calls common-place (with a hyphen) with the commonplace referring to a cliché. The “common-place is “a place that always calls upon another world view and sheds light onto it”.” The propensity of the Faulknerian landscape to act as a common-place resides in the potentialities that the landscape contains because its borders (geographic, temporal, bodily, racial) are not “fixed and neat.” No other than Glissant’s last words can best evoke Faulkner’s legacy: “Faulkner’s lessons reach much beyond Yoknapatawpha. . . . [T]he landscape of the County has expanded far, far away, in space and in meaning. . . . The ‘South’ fell asleep, awaiting more changes, whose nature no one
can yet predict. In that, it encounters many other regions of the world, erupting or
slumbering, chaotic or torpid, Polynesias or Switzerlands, continents or archipelagoes,
meandering their way into the enormous Relation of world-totality. It is precisely . . .
what endures beyond the County that helps us.”

1 “Une personne autant qu’un pays, est l’ailleurs” (Édouard Glissant, Poétique de la
Relation [Paris: Gallimard, 1990], 325). Martinican writer Glissant made that claim in
reference to Quentin Compson’s Canadian friend Shrevlin McCannon. All translations
are mine unless otherwise indicated.

(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 3.

305. From now on, the abbreviated title Absalom will be used to refer to this edition.
Page numbers will be indicated parenthetically after the citation.

4 Barbara Ladd, “William Faulkner, Édouard Glissant, and a Creole Poetics of History
and Body in Absalom, Absalom! and A Fable,” in Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century:
Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 2000, ed. Robert W. Hamblin and Ann J. Abadie
(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 47n2.


6 Ibid.

7 John T. Matthews, “Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back,”
American Literary History 16.2 (Summer 2004): 238.


12 “New World relationality is the destabilizing of the inherent meaning of island ground, whether the Plantation South or the Martinican hillside, in favor of an idea of archipelagic space activated by horizontal relations and indirect detours” (J. Michael Dash, “Martinique/Mississippi,” in Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn [Durham: Duke University Press, 2004], 97).


14 Ladd, 201.
15 “[U]ne phénoménologie du sentir” (Romano, 40).


17 On the level of the narration, this would constitute for Glissant an act of “respectful opacity,” in not trying to project onto the other that which cannot be understood according to one’s own cultural parameters. See Poétique de la Relation, 203-209.

18 In contrast, in 1895, linguist, tale collector, and Tulane Professor Alcée Fortier described the Louisiana Creole used in oral folktales in the following manner: “While singing, [the storyteller] writhes in a horrible manner and gesticulates wildly… to the tune of the primitive music” (Fortier, Louisiana Folktales in French Dialect and English Translation [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1895], x).

19 “I assert that Faulkner’s vision of the Caribbean and Africa simultaneously evades such specific ‘historical knowledge,’ in favor of a mythic projection of guilt that is symbolically rich but historically impoverished” (Karem, 162).


21 See José Limón’s contribution to this volume.


24 Stanchich, 606.

25 See Glissant, Poétique de la Relation, 59-75.

26 “Dans Absalon, Absalon! . . . il s’agit bien . . . d’un inceste possible, d’une perversion de la filiation. Mais l’élément décisif–fatalitaire–sera impliqué à une autre série de causalité: c’est l’intrusion du ‘sang nègre’. Il était d’abord indécelable chez la première femme haïtienne du planteur Sutpen. . . . voilà les conditions réunies pour que la chaine de la filiation soit dissoute à jamais dans l’étendue nouvelle” (Glissant, Poétique de la Relation, 70).

27 “Dans tout l’œuvre de Faulkner, le carambolage des patronymes, des métissages forcés ou non, des lignées doubles (noire et blanche) reproduit avec acharnement . . . le style de famille étendue qui a si longtemps contribué à la formation du tissu social dans la Caraïbe. Ce n’est pas par hasard que Sutpen a . . . rencontré son destin en Haïti” (Ibid.).


29 See Berger and Brasseur, Les Séquences, 25-34.


33 It is unlikely that Césaire would have read Absalom, Absalom! in its original English version published in 1936. Rimbault’s French translation of the novel was published only in 1955.
For compelling analyses of this passage, refer to Farah Jasmine Griffin and Ryan Heryford’s respective contributions to this volume.

Melanie Benson reflects on Faulkner’s obsession, as well as more generally, Southerners’ obsessions for this type of mathematical thinking. She explains this fixation by the South’s attachment to “an American capitalist economy of limitless opportunity” as well as to “slavery’s calculations of worth, value, certainty, and hierarchy.”


Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Penguin, 1998). To push the comparison further, the aesthetic of blood, bones, and earth present in Faulkner’s description is also very close to that of Wilfredo Lam, a Cuban painter who was also Faulkner’s contemporary. In Lam’s famous painting “The Jungle,” exhibited in New York in 1944, human bodies, sugarcane stalks, and tropical flowers are part of one inextricable tropical mass. A white hand holding the sharp blades of scissors evokes Faulkner’s description of the violence inflicted upon the tropical environment. For a reproduction of the painting, see http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=34666


On this topic, see my *Orphan Narratives* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 15-29.


The cabin in which his mother was born is “swallowed up in a collapsed piece of soil” (engloutie … dans un enfouissement de terre) (Ibid., 117).

“[Vous] vous perdez ainsi dans un timbre-poste (par exemple Faulkner dans son Yoknapatawpha), c’est si vous le connaissez réellement vôtre” (Ibid., 142).

“Nous poursuivons le désordre prophétique de l’homme du Sud, qui a dit sans dire tout en disant. C’est de William Faulkner qu’il s’agit là” (Ibid., 156).

“Un lieu où chaque fois une pensée du monde appelle et éclaire une pensée du monde” (Ibid., 25).

“La leçon de Faulkner dépasse de beaucoup le Yoknapatawpha. . . . [L]e paysage du Comté s’est étendu en loin, d’espace et de signification. . . . Le “Sud” s’est endormi, attendant d’autres transformations, dont nul ne peut dire ce qu’elles seront. Il rejoint par là combien d’autres régions du monde, cahutées ou somnolentes, chaotiques ou torpides, Polynésies ou Suisses, continents ou archipels, qui entrent par tâtonnements dans l’énorme Relation de la totalité-monde. Mais l’effort épique est cela même … qui reste, et, par delà le Comté, nous aide” (Ibid., 262).