Chapter Six

Breadfruit, Time and Again: Glissant Reads Faulkner in the World Relation

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Thus what William Faulkner’s avuncular status with me comes down to is precisely the role of the literary artist in the contemporary American mythosphere. . . . [T]he role of the serious literary artist is to provide mythic prefigurations that are adequate to the complexities and possibilities of the circumstances in which we live. In other words, to the storyteller actuality is a combination of facts, figures, and legend. The goal of the serious storyteller is to fabricate a truly fictional legend, one that meets the so-called scientific tests of validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness. Is its applicability predictable? Are the storyteller’s anecdotes truly representative? Does his ‘once upon a time’ instances and episodes imply time and again? I have found that in old Uncle Billy’s case they mostly do.

— Albert Murray

The river tells you at the same time that everything is different and yet nothing has changed. . . . The river does not follow the rules of linear thought; here, one can step in the same water twice.

— Édouard Glissant, Faulkner, Mississippi

BREADFRUIT

Two-thirds of the way through Faulkner, Mississippi, his extended meditation on the prose oeuvre of the American writer William Faulkner, Édouard Glissant remarks on Faulkner’s famous ‘amused refusal to “correct the contradictions”’ introduced into his texts through his constant revisiting of characters across novels not necessarily set in proper temporal relation to one another. According to Glissant, these contradictions are not in themselves problematic because such narrative recursivity is endemic to life in the Americas, as ‘the various ways of telling one single fact’ constitute ‘the stream of consciousness that summarizes (or at least tries to) the circumstances of the country’.²
That Faulkner’s particular brand of temporal play resists certain kinds of critical parsing is unquestionable— at first glance it is difficult to see how much of his prose could possibly meet any measure of ‘scientific standard’, to use Albert Murray’s language. This is also, as Glissant himself notes, why it is so often the case that anything resembling an authorial statement by Faulkner is seized upon in hopes that it might decode his work. Even an utterance as prosaic as his 1949 Nobel Prize banquet speech declaration, that he seeks ‘knowledge of the human heart’, might be, as Glissant puts it, ‘taken as breadfruit from heaven’, taken as the sign that might decode the whole of the rest.³

There is a touch of bemused empathy in Glissant’s assessment of such readerly desperation, especially as Glissant seems to read this search for a key or origin as an enactment of a certain kind of refusal, claiming that, as readers, ‘[o]ften, we hide behind this search for knowledge so as not to see what truly animates his works’. In both form and content, Faulkner, Mississippi is Glissant’s attempt to zero in on what he understands as the source of Faulkner’s narrative success, but also to avoid any kind of reading that might structurally undermine Faulkner’s method. Glissant’s own refusal might thus be heard in his invocation of the breadfruit itself: for even though at first bite one might experience nothing but gratitude for the cipher’s arrival, like breadfruit it on further contemplation brings nothing but more questions, more puzzles in its capacity to taste like anything except what the uninitiated might readily assume it to be. How might one begin to comprehend the vast and complicated channels of such a thing’s arrival? How do we ‘read’ something like breadfruit, as its flavour, its content, takes on its context, thus integrating the idiosyncrasies of any regional recipe?

The breadfruit is a truly worldly food, native to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands and hauled by great enterprise to the Caribbean as a cheap nutritive for enslaved Africans. Finally installed, it was strongly rebuked by its intended recipients; yet generations later it has come to be celebrated by their progeny as a signature Caribbean food. In other words, breadfruit is a truly local, albeit creole, food, rhizomatic in its spread and growth. Newly arrived but clearly native, having fallen, unsolicited, from the sky, it can never be an ‘answer’. In a moment that this essay reads as both emblematic of Faulkner’s writing and as itself explanatory of Glissant’s literary and philosophical attraction to it, Glissant makes his assessment of Faulkner plain: ‘Faulkner writes in rhizomes’.⁴ The rhizomatic generates possibilities for sacred experiences of life in the New World, as we must accept that ‘the sacred “results” not only from an ineffable experience of a creation story but also, from now on, from the equally ineffable intuition of the relationship between cultures’.⁵

In Glissant’s use, to identify something as rhizomatic is to specifically make a claim about its temporality, a temporality that makes demands on the object, sometimes gesturing towards emplacement, but in most cases instead ripping it away from the assumed space of its being and thus also from an easily locatable narrative origin.⁶ Indeed, when reading Glissant’s Caribbean Discourse (1981), written almost two decades earlier, one could understand why Faulkner’s novels, with their broad casts of characters, carefully situated in geographically small and articulable spaces but nevertheless completely subordinated to the temporal, would hold such an important place in Glissant’s intellectual project. Perhaps the best example of such complication is to be found in
Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*, as this struggle is exemplified in young Quentin Compson, who in the novel is fully coming to see how little of his life is in fact his own, as his listening to/witnessing of Rosa Coldfield’s haunting and haunted narrative—‘and the voice not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand, and the ghost mused with shadowy docility as if it were the voice which he haunted where a more fortunate one would have had a house’—highlights the complex interweaving that in fact constitutes his very being. For Quentin, ‘the mere names’, the march of ancestors, ‘were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was commonwealth’.7

In his later critique of American literatures more generally, Glissant insists that:

> the haunting nature of the past (it is a point that has been widely raised) is one of the essential points of reference in the works produced in the Americas. What ‘happens,’ indeed, is that it is apparently a question of shedding light on a chronology that has become obscure, when it is not completely effaced for all kinds of reasons, especially colonial ones. The American novelist, whatever the cultural zone he belongs to, is not at all in search of a lost time, but finds himself struggling in the confusion of time. And, from Faulkner to Carpentier, we are faced with apparent snatches of time that have been sucked into banked up or swirling forces.8

As set forth in *Caribbean Discourse*, time is generative, always an agent. It subordinates space because in certain kinds of experiences—the diasporic, the migratory, the traumatic—the spatial, where one is and how one has arrived there, is less readily available for parsing than the why of that being, than the what—which for Glissant is the place for poetry, and also a site through which one might come to see the poetics of relation. As Barbara Ladd notes:

> The creole poetics of which Glissant is advocate, performer, and agent is defined in terms of simultaneity rather than chronology or succession, in terms of eruption rather than development, in terms of exile rather than origin. In Glissant’s work, the poetics of the Americas operates as an alternative to a history of the Americas.9

Poetics: never simply a container for action, Glissant’s notion of time constantly describes the human subject as being brought into subjectivity through contingency, through connection and relation. This is embodied in the creole, in the mixed narrative and hybrid origin, and, by the time of his later *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant has identified the rhizomatic power of the creole in configurations well beyond the Caribbean. As Charles Pollard has noted in his own working through of Glissant’s theory of Relation, Glissant defines this term by offering a simple historical narrative of the trajectories of cultural exchange, first a trajectory from the center to the peripheries, then a movement from the peripheries to the center, and finally, in the ‘poetics of relation’, the ‘trajectory is abolished’ and the ‘poet’s word’ reproduces a ‘circular nomadism; that is, it makes every periphery into a center, . . . it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery’.10

Per Glissant’s work in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, it would be remiss to exclude Faulkner because we assume that he is writing from a core position, and also that creole experience is only germaine to
people who are not understood as white. As Brown has pointed out, in the New World ‘Creolization is a fact that ultimately cannot be denied’, and in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, ‘Glissant points to tensions within Faulkner’s work that partially reveal the process of Creolization’. Glissant is taken with the question of what it means to experience life as an entity, even as you carry the intuition that you are, indeed, a commonwealth.

It is important to note that this creolization, this rhizomatic motion in Faulkner’s prose, is not necessarily attached, however, to bodies *per se*. This is important, because to say that Glissant’s notion of the creole in general refers to a specific kind of body would be to miss the hermeneutic project undergirding his poetics. Given Glissant’s intellectual commitment to developing his theory of the rhizomatic—of social configurations and cultural productions that offer insight into an individual’s sense of rootedness in them, even as these configurations clearly grow, thrive and transform both towards and away from an otherwise untraceable location or origin—*Faulkner, Mississippi* is as much an elaboration on creolization as it is an examination of Faulkner per se. In Glissant’s philosophy, processes of creolization are powered by the rhizomatic impulse, and his explorations of the workings of this engine constitute the center of his literary and philosophical enterprises.

**COMMONWEALTHS**

To be clear, it would be an overstatement to claim that Faulkner’s oeuvre demands a certain degree of response, even vis-à-vis matters of race and region. But to say that his work deserves response might in fact be another matter, for it offers one a sense that there might actually be a there ‘there’. As Glissant himself points out, in the classroom, Faulkner can be a hard sell. Indeed, some of his motivation for writing *Faulkner, Mississippi* came out of his experience of trying to teach Faulkner’s work to initially unreceptive black students at a university in the American South. The idea that he might have something to offer, not even in spite of but perhaps *because of* how he deploys black characters, easily seems far less compelling in practice than it does on paper, and, in such cases, Faulkner’s acceptance in the classroom ultimately depends on getting students to turn to exactly that, paper— the text itself rather than an idea about the text, which Glissant identifies as a kind of negative acceptance, more so even than a legitimate negation: ‘What a bias it is’, he writes, ‘— inherited from the practice of the oppressors—to suppose that a work of art cannot arise from the house of the master just as easily as from the shack of the oppressed. That would be as judgmental as its opposite’.

But this doesn’t quite get at the matter of ‘Why Faulkner?’. Answers come in simple and complex ways, all equally applicable. As Hortense Spillers reminds us, in general ‘Faulkner’s writing, arguably the single most inimitable and dynamic stylistic innovation of his century, turns out to be a desirable destination for writers across locations, most notably along different latitudes and longitudes of the Americas’. And when speaking of his own relationship to Faulkner, the writer and critic Albert Murray grounds his ‘avuncular status’ in what Glissant might characterize as a trace of the modernist poetics underlying Faulkner’s work:
William Faulkner’s stylization of the idiomatic particulars of the Deep South is very much a part of what impressed me about his fiction from the very outset. Moreover, even then it was not simply a matter of regional or provincial atmosphere or local color, not as such. Even then there was something about it that had the effect of transforming all too familiar everyday downhome environmental and demographic details into the stuff of poetry, the stuff that the so-called avant-garde poetry of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, e.e. cummings, Marianne Moore, and Robinson Jeffers, among others, was made of.  

Like Spillers and so many other critics, Murray reminds us that much of what might be most important or lasting about Faulkner is embedded in his style. On its own, this might not seem particularly interesting, and it is definitely not new. But when set alongside Glissant’s philosophical concerns, particularly vis-à-vis the notion that the creole and the rhizomatic are not about objects—race, bodies, nations—as much as they are about the relation between objects, constitutive configurations, then the stylistic concern gains momentum, for it offers us a way of getting at how Faulkner might be experienced as relevant or pleasurable, even when his writing can be, on its surface and in the spread of ink on the page, easily offensive and, very literally, difficult to look at.

In Faulkner’s writing, then, we are given a special opportunity to observe how meaning might arrive via a reader’s experience of a text’s formal structure, which is about something different from the words themselves. Again, this phenomenon is not necessarily different from many other experiences of reading; it is just that in Faulkner’s case, the contrast between dread and satisfaction makes the possibilities of this dynamic more apparent. In Glissant’s reading, this is of course intentional on Faulkner’s part, insofar as he reads Faulkner as ‘not alienated from the situation of the South’, for ‘he is not caught up in dreams of a racial panacea. Using everything at his command, he wants only to ground the enigmatic relation between Blacks and Whites in a kind of metaphysics’ (Faulkner, Mississippi, 69). This ‘only’, however, is a powerful drive, as one might argue that, in Faulkner’s novels, relation continually subordinates revelation, which brings us to another cornerstone in Glissant’s philosophy, deferral. As Peter Brown reminds us, ‘Readers of Faulkner are familiar with deferred revelation, the ways in which a phrase or image or piece of dialogue that makes little sense when initially encountered becomes meaningful and resonant as one continues reading’, and, as Laurence Goldstein notes, in Faulkner, Mississippi, Glissant argues that in Faulkner ‘a format of “deferred revelation” holds true for the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, and the whole work’. According to Glissant, part of the ‘only’ of Faulkner’s task, which is embedded in the method that dominates the bulk of his texts, is to thus ‘point out and to hide a secret or a bit of knowledge (that is, to postpone its discovery)’. Glissant reads his commitment to deferral as Faulkner’s great contribution to American literatures, as it offers an alternative model for understanding the United States and, by extension, the play of power and defeat in the Americas.

None of this is to say, by the way, that Glissant has somehow missed the political implications attached to his deep interest in Faulkner’s work. As Valerie Loichot notes, Glissant understands himself as participating in the kind of critical work ‘Toni Morrison calls for in her essay “Romancing the Shadow”, in which literature marginalizing black voices must be reborn in the hands of writers of the African diaspora’. Further, as Glissant sees it,
Faulkner could not have done otherwise than to include Blacks among the people who inhabit the lands of his novels. The role he gives them is so specific and particular, however, that it must be scrutinized by a criticism in which they themselves take part before it can be recognized as part of a poetics of the real.  

Nonetheless, to separate an author from his words is deeply problematic—even upon the insistence, also Glissant’s, that ‘[l]iterature matters more than making testimonies or taking sides, not because it exceeds all possible appreciation of the real, but because it is a more profound approach and, ultimately, the only one that matters’.  

One cannot help but wonder if the recognition of such a problem helped motivate Glissant’s decision to travel to Faulkner’s home, as if he too were suspicious of his paper pleasure. There is a sense in Faulkner, Mississippi that Glissant cannot help but first look for the place and then look for the man. Again, there is nothing necessarily interesting in this; it is easily chalked up to homage, curiosity, vacation or so on, to the kinds of attention one might pay one who has come before. But what is interesting in this case is again the contrast between Glissant’s assertions and what plays out in the text as his intentionally deferred but nevertheless deep need to meet, find or witness place and man.  

Glissant frames his visit to Faulkner’s family home, Rowan Oak, by first recounting his impressions of a plantation he had visited previously, Nottoway, which is now a resort/museum/tourist destination outside Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and is today billed as ‘the South’s largest remaining antebellum mansion’. As one might imagine, at Nottoway ‘there is no trace of slave shacks which would have been alongside the outbuildings and grounds. Everything has been cleaned, sanitized, pasteurized’, for it is a place where ‘a desire to inform visitors is mixed with a compulsion not to frighten them with useless memories, the equivalent of a slave era film-set.’ Rowan Oak, on the other hand, provides a very different experience for its Caribbean visitor, and Glissant describes the place and its ‘human scale’ rooms in clearly intimate terms. Faulkner’s Rowan Oak, it seems, catches a pass, as Glissant assigns to the place the very characteristics that, over the course of Faulkner, Mississippi, he elaborates as central and redeeming to Faulkner’s writing: ‘It was as though the aura of his works had elevated the building and its surroundings to a state of splendid indifference, so that they transcended their origins’. Effect, today’s meaningfulness, somehow trumps materiality, in this case, place.  

Whether this trump is truth or sleight of hand, it is difficult to say. Glissant’s narrative of his time at Rowan Oak feels both emptied out and strangely intimate. Sitting on the ‘narrow staircase that leads up to the bedrooms’, he insists that he has ‘no desire to go upstairs, an utter lack in the personal’. At the same time, in this section Glissant repeatedly channels Faulkner, conjecturing about the man in authoritative terms (his preference for London, his daily habits and other things that support Glissant’s sense of how they are alike as writing men). Then, just as suddenly, he claims that one must ‘get away from this family atmosphere’, get away from the house and all it signifies, if one is at all to ‘understand, that is to imagine for yourself, in the extreme purity of abstraction, what led the writer, William Faulkner, with such savage tenacity, to hide everything while revealing it: the deferral of the South’s damnation’.  


In so claiming, however, Glissant enacts his own deferral, for despite his comfort with the place, with the contours of its materiality, the house works against Glissant’s prior relationship to Faulkner’s work and its meaning, for the house itself inevitably reiterates the ink, the words without the reader’s experience of the words:

[W]e cannot stay away from Rowan Oak and harbor questions about it as the place where the work took form, with the place as its model. It was unexpected and paradoxical—and perhaps even inconceivable—that work of Faulknerian dimensions could have been created in such a place. This most ordinary prototype of ‘colonial’ style exuded or presupposed narrow minds and hardened hearts.

Soon after, Glissant admits that he and his travelling companions must turn away from the paradox and continue their journey otherwise: ‘Happily, we abandoned this line of thought even before we had a chance to put into words and discuss it among ourselves’.22

If we return to poetics of relation, to Glissant’s account of the ‘circular nomadism’ wherein ‘trajectory is abolished’ and writers and other cultural workers transport us between nodes in ever-shifting configurations, we can begin to understand the theory’s value to literary criticism, because Glissant’s own concern with Relation heightens what is at stake in many of the demands made on narrative and narration, and in so doing soothes some of the tensions between models of intersubjective reading and models of intertextuality—in the sense that it very much offers a vision of infinite yet equally efficacious routes without roads.23 As Laurence Goldstein has pointed out, vis-à-vis Glissant’s reading of Faulkner:

The truth, being so various and ambiguous, can never be manifested directly in Faulkner’s fiction; it must be suggested, intimated, dramatized or performed, turned around and examined from all sides, and then advanced upon but never entirely seized. Faulkner’s sentences enact the effort of human consciousness to grasp the fundamental actuality of a person, place, or situation. Since knowledge is made up principally of what other people have told us is true, an accurate transcription of how we come to know anything involves the sifting of evidence and assertion presented to us by many sources—and then our tentative formulation must be evaluated, often contradicted or elaborated, by a listener, and then re-formulated for another effort. ‘Vertigo’ is the word Glissant, and/or his translators, choose to describe the effect of Faulkner’s discourse.

Insofar as it offers a special kind of return to the central tenets of his own literary and philosophical work, Glissant’s exploration of Faulkner’s fiction reproduces this poetics. In many ways, Faulkner, Mississippi is haunted by this uncanniness, by the clear resonance between Faulkner’s commitment to producing writing out of the space between things, and Glissant’s sense that this space—relation—is really, ultimately, where it’s at. The house, in other words, is a big letdown, too much a stopping place: [I]t is only Faulkner, not Faulknerian. There is no there.
NOTES


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 115.

6. It is important, of course, to note the possible intersections between Glissant’s philosophical work and that of Gilles Deleuze, as Glissant himself notes in Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 11ff. Also, one might see here how Glissant’s assertions about time, space and narrative touch and broaden some of Hayden White’s considerations, particularly vis-à-vis questions of how and why linear narratives came to dominate European history and literature, or at the least discussions thereof. A useful primer on the meaningfulness of different conceptualizations of temporality, particularly for those interested in Glissant, is to be found in one of White’s earlier essays, via his discussion of emplacement versus the ‘heaving ocean of time’ in ‘Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground,’ 37 (History and Theory, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1973): 23–54).


9. Barbara Ladd, ‘Faulkner, Mississippi’ (review), The Mississippi Quarterly (Summer 1999). It is also important to attend, as Ladd elaborates elsewhere, to how ‘in Caribbean Discourse, Glissant takes up this idea of creolization and identifies a representative “novel of the Americas” possessed of its own distinctive creole poetics, using the work of Faulkner to do so’ (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 [Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2003], 32). In this same essay, Ladd then goes on to offer a rigorous discussion of what Glissant identifies as the features and characteristics of the ‘novel of the Americas’, as also briefly noted in this essay, above.


11. Glissant, Faulkner, Mississippi, 11.

12. Ibid., 16.


18. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 64.


21. Ibid., 15.

22. Ibid., 16.