

- 59 Deleuze, quoted in the epigraph to Édouard Glissant, *Sartorius* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999). For a detailed analysis of Caribbean community in light of Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy, one that could fruitfully be brought to bear on studies about communities in Faulkner, see Celia Britton, *The Sense of Community*, pp. 37–8.
- 60 Glissant, *Une nouvelle région*, p. 98.
- 61 Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*, p. 49.

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The Faulknerian Anthropocene: Scales of Time and History in *The Wild Palms* and *Go Down, Moses*

As part of what has become a robust body of criticism putting Faulkner's work into conversation with theories and literatures of the Global South, Hosam Aboul-Ela has recently argued for the need to attend to Faulkner's formal strategies for registering modes of historical knowledge that contest the linearity and progressive teleology of Western history. Aboul-Ela challenges a longstanding attention to Faulkner's stylistic repetition as mere modernist aesthetics by claiming that repetition marks a *formal* expression of Faulkner's understanding of the American South as a colonial economy, a post-Reconstruction dependent of the North. Like the postcolonial theorists and writers with whom Aboul-Ela compares him, Faulkner's temporally experimental narration "equates history with continuing processes of peripheralization and disruption, which are better expressed through a narrative that keeps ending up back at the beginning."¹ Thus, Aboul-Ela aligns Faulkner's narrative strategies not with the high modernist writers (Stein, Eliot, Joyce) who exhibited similar nonlinear formal features as an aesthetic escape from the teleology of history, and with whom Faulkner has never quite fit, but rather with the Latin American, Arab, and other third-world writers who have long claimed Faulkner as an influence.

Faulkner's aesthetic strategies are not an effacing of history but rather, like his thematic attention to race, class, gender, and sexuality, another mode of articulating otherness that brings history, and historical violence, into the frame with more precise mimetic accuracy. Because these stylistic features offer a formal expression of ideological confrontations within colonized societies, writers from the peripheries and semiperipheries find in Faulkner useful strategies for "connect[ing] literary form and material conditions," as Aboul-Ela writes of Gabriel García Márquez, who claimed Faulkner as a formative influence. García Márquez, like Faulkner, thus "argu[es] for a kind of experimental neorealism, for a literary phenomenon invested in verisimilitude, more than for a borrowing of modernism's fascination with the aesthetic realm."² Juan Carlos Onetti, José María Arguedas, and Mario

Vargas Llosa also have characterized their affection for Faulkner in similar formal terms. But even before García Márquez and other celebrated Latin American “Boom” novelists of the 1960s and ‘70s embraced Faulkner, Jorge Luis Borges, Faulkner’s near-contemporary, had done so more fully than had readers and critics in the United States. In 1940, shortly after the original publication in 1939 of *The Wild Palms*, for example, Borges translated Faulkner’s experimental neorealist novel under the title of *Las palmeras salvajes*.³ Unlike Faulkner’s earlier masterpieces such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), or *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which had immediately resonated with U.S. readers and critics, *The Wild Palms* had not been well received. That Borges turned to Faulkner’s less well-known novel of interwoven temporalities, mixed literary modes, and primordial psychic and physical nature fresh from his own explorations of similar topics in two of his most powerful stories, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and “El Sur” (“The South”), is a clue to the link between Faulkner’s aesthetics and those of the Global South. Focusing on the fundamental structures of time, reality, and the imaginary, these and other of Borges’s fictions animated the wholesale reconfiguration of Latin American literature under what would become the mode of magical realism. As another form of realism, magical realism can be seen as one unexpected avenue for the confluence of Faulkner, writers of the Latin American boom generation, and the new novelists emerging from South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and other sites of dependency in the Global South during the era of decolonization.

Why vocabularies of the Global South and dependency theories arising from the social sciences and from mid-twentieth-century postcolonial critical traditions are of significance to students of literature is evident when one considers Borges’s and other Latin American novelists’ concern with the real in literature and with the continuing importance of nation-based literary history. Given that the ideas of the real and the nation are still the main ways we categorize literature, what happens when we think *across* nations and national categories to other conceptions of the real? In what follows, we wish to consider Faulkner in the context of the new critical terms that include globalization, concern with hemispheric environmental questions, and the world culture of the Global South.

The idea of the Global South first emerged in the postwar era from the fact that, with few exceptions, practically all of the world’s industrially developed countries lay to the north of the so-called developing countries. According to sociologist Saskia Sassen, the term “Global South” refers to a new phase of global capital and designates primarily the territories that have been subjected to a post-Keynesian financial logic of land grabs, to the imposition of debt as a disciplining regime, to the massive extraction of mineral

and human value, and to the massive expulsion of people from middle-class status into abject poverty.⁴ The key words here are “expulsion” and “extraction.” The underdevelopment of countries at a peripheral remove from the core of metropolitan economic power did not just happen; underdevelopment occurred as the result of active forces shaping regional societies. For this reason, it is fair to say that various southern economies and cultures share comparable experiences of marginalization and unequal access to the resources of globalization that differentiate them from fully developed and hegemonic cultures in their respective locations and the spaces they inhabit.

What does all this have to do with Faulkner and the history of the American novel that he helped so powerfully to shape? In the context of issues concerning the mid-twentieth-century era of decolonization and the emergence of a postcolonial Global South, Faulkner’s southern reach is of great importance. Focusing attention on the modernizing processes of the U.S. South and of the southern portions of the Americas, Faulkner helped initiate the transnational and globalizing themes that are of such concern to humanities and social-science scholars today. He did so by focusing on the dependency of the South on the processes of modernization and by shaping his fiction as a formal response to and expression of those processes of dependency. As Susan Willis has accurately noted, “what makes dependency theory so useful for literary analysis is that it defines the historical contradictions of domination in terms which can then be related to the form and language of the literary text.”⁵ This is the crucial point of Willis’s analysis: dependency theory as formalized by the idea of the Global South allows us to see how the economic and racial politics of our time are enmeshed with *the form and language* of the literary texts that describe the modern world.

To this mix, we add one other consequence of placing Faulkner in the context of the Global South. At the same time that we may see Faulkner as hemispheric regionalist, he continues to attend to the classic American theme of the wilderness versus settlement culture and the increasing eclipse of primordial nature by the encroachment of industrial modernization in the post-Reconstruction era. This attention locates Faulkner on another hemispheric plane, namely one offering a much more skeptical view of the romantic notion of a primordially pure natural world “immune from village and town institutions.”⁶ Faulkner’s perspective on wilderness and the impact of modernization on the natural world is tinted by colonial and peripheral economic relations: in the U.S. South, the industries extracting resources and reshaping the Southern landscape were often dominated by Northern capital. The emphasis in literary studies on the trans-Atlantic aspects of modernism have typically prevented critics from seeing the connections between modernisms and modernists in the Americas, keeping northern and

southern Americas oddly separated from each other, and from shared political and cultural events in the hemisphere. In particular, the Eurocentric focus in American literary studies has tended to obscure the numerous ways that Faulkner's connection with the issues of coloniality and postcoloniality also mark much Latin American literature of the pre- and post-World War II years and thus link Faulkner to that other South, the Global South – especially Latin America and its cultural history. By contrast, Latin American writers have often been very clear about their Faulknerian connection. Chief among the themes Faulkner addresses that make his fictions of such moment to Latin America are those having to do with subject formation in relation to racial and social ideologies and the frightening pressures emerging from the colonized world as it begins to throw off its colonial burden, including those pressures exerted on a natural world deeply tied to the identities of the colonized.

Place has always held a central position within Faulkner criticism, but the advent of ecocriticism has led to a reevaluation of Faulkner's representations of the natural world. The same year, in fact, that saw the publication of the field-inaugurating *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) also witnessed the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference elect as its theme “Faulkner and the Natural World.” Though wilderness had long been considered an analog reflecting more deep-seated psychological concerns, ecocritical readings have encouraged critics to see Faulkner's real-world environment as subtending his fiction and to “rethink which are the manifest and which the hidden realms” of Faulkner's novels, as Susan Scott Parrish writes.⁷ For Parrish, references to floods and rising waters in *The Sound and the Fury* allude to the 1927 Great Flood of the Mississippi River, in whose aftermath Faulkner wrote that novel, marking the centrality of environmental disaster within Faulkner's unconscious. The natural world, alongside issues like race, gender, and sexuality, comes to seem an equally compelling manifestation of Faulkner's interest in histories of violence, aligning human and natural histories as structuring traumas.

Critics who have attended to the natural world in Faulkner's work have been quick to note that wilderness often appears as ravaged landscape and thus as the locus of a sentimentalized nostalgia, and increasingly scholars have put these representations into conversation with the environmental history of the South and of the Mississippi Delta. “The Bear,” in particular, with its lament for a disappearing wilderness sold off to logging interests, has been at the center of much of this critique. Lawrence Buell notes that this longest section of *Go Down, Moses* evokes “both a plot of wilderness destruction and an ethos of forest preservation” appropriate to the 1930s in which Faulkner wrote, when deforestation that

accelerated beginning in the 1880s had led to an increase in flooding along the Mississippi.⁸ It is this type of colonial economy, with Northern logging companies extracting Southern resources and leaving the South economically dependent and environmentally ravaged, that leads us to reintroduce a range of social histories into Faulkner's aesthetic experimentation. In particular, recent theorizations of the Anthropocene make it necessary to consider what happens to these human histories when placed alongside the quite different scale of natural history and epochal Time. A consideration of the relationship between these separate but related views of Time in Faulkner's novels allows us to sharpen an understanding of the demarcating quality of Faulkner's place in the literary imagination of the hemispheric Americas.

Only recently has this alignment of human and natural histories emerged as one of the more compelling challenges to traditional humanist thought, appearing in accounts of what has come to be called the Anthropocene. In this reframing of our current geological epoch, humans have become not simply passive inhabitants of an inert planet but a force in their own right capable of altering the fundamental structures and systems of the earth. According to the postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses” has helped to galvanize these conversations within humanist critique, the Anthropocene challenges traditional historical understanding by scaling up conceptions of the human into the category of the species, a shift that challenges attention to the individual and risks obscuring precisely the categories of difference to which scholars of both Faulkner and the Global South have productively attended. This is of course not to say that environmental crises such as climate change transcend social difference. With this in mind, Chakrabarty acknowledges that the Anthropocene necessitates thinking two temporal scales at once, moving between “recorded and deep histories of human beings” – the latter offering up the human as “a species dependent on other species for its own existence, a part of the general history of life,” and the former aligning with “histories of capitalism and modernization” that pull social imbalances into the frame.⁹ Thinking these scales at once is clearly not a simple task, for the species awareness that “arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe” like global warming “point[s] to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world.”¹⁰ Thinking at the scale of the species thus seems discordant with the specificities of human history.

If the Anthropocene poses a challenge for historical knowledge, we should also consider how it simultaneously challenges narrative form, necessitating ways of recognizing that its organizing environmental crisis – global warming – eludes the traditional temporal scales and cause-and-effect impulse of

narrative. As Chakrabarty notes, “[w]e experience specific effects of the crisis but not the whole phenomenon,”¹¹ a formulation that echoes Rob Nixon’s characterization of slow violence – “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”¹² – and Timothy Morton’s concept of hyperobjects, objects massively distributed across time and space.¹³ Effects, in these formulations, become a more powerful form of knowledge than causes, because of the difficulty in locating a cause in the wide-ranging scales at which the Anthropocene necessitates thinking. The seriality of effects, their repeated appearance across space and time, lends them material validity, reshaping another form of knowledge of the real. Read against these formulations, Faulkner’s stylistic and formal repetitions seem not only to reinstall an account of history more resonant with the Global South’s resistance to the violent imposition of linear Western progress but to register another crisis of modernization, the asynchronous but simultaneous temporalities of progress and serialization embedded within industrialization.

Read in light of the Anthropocene’s extensive temporalities and effect-based knowledge, Faulkner’s interest in the effects – often of a singular event – that play out over and on generations begins to take on a new cast. And it is his representations of violence in and against the natural world that often dramatize the cyclicity of this violence, indeed, the cycle as a form of violence: hunting, flooding, logging. Charles Aiken has noted that “Faulkner witnessed a recurrent sequence in the delta: logging of the wilderness, drainage of the land, and establishment of the plantation system.”¹⁴ This sequence contributed to the Great Flood of 1927, but flooding itself was a recurrent structure in Faulkner’s environment: floods in 1917 and 1937 made the event seem a type of generic structure, albeit one caused by the very “commercial nexus ... that imposed modernity upon the rural South.”¹⁵ Thus, it is unsurprising, given these repetitions on the land, that “nature in his writing gets filtered through the lenses of literary convention: stock romantic imagery of pastoral retreat from Andrew Marvell to A. E. Housman, American masculinist wilderness narrative from Cooper to Melville to Twain.”¹⁶ It is as if nature itself comes to follow certain plot structures. These repetitions are not the type of natural cycle that continues without end, however, for Faulkner’s floods and hunts play out as repetitions only until they do not – that is, until they end in dramatically violent fashion. This teleological cyclicity marks the same type of temporal logic Chakrabarty sees in the Anthropocene, in which the repetition of certain modes of social being lead ultimately to global environmental crisis. It is, after all, the repetitive practices of colonialism, modernization, and industrialization – the extraction of resources to the point of exhaustion, the

burning of fossil fuels – that carry us inevitably toward climate change’s violent effects. In both the U.S. and the Global Souths, these practices began to ramp up in earnest in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of which and in which Faulkner wrote.

Thus, at the very moment contemporary scholars have pointed to as an acceleration of the practices that have necessitated the demarcation of the Anthropocene, Faulkner’s fiction registers the challenges we have only recently come to recognize, that this new epoch poses to both historical knowledge and human agency. In exploring the legacies of violence endemic to the American South, Faulkner found parallels between the exploitation of land and of peoples. This alignment is in part what has made Faulkner’s work so compelling across the Global South, in regions whose relations of economic dependency, peripheralization, and immiseration resonate with that of the postbellum American South’s history of resource extraction and large-scale displacements of people. Faulkner’s narrative strategies for articulating this history, thoroughly modern in their interest in progress, challenge modernism’s aesthetic turn toward cyclicity and repetition by seeing in these repetitions a type of alternative progress, rather than an alternative to progress. That he rooted this recognition in representations of wilderness does not make those representations an escape from history into myth but rather a more faithful depiction of a historical moment in which modernity’s economic processes began to exploit natural resources at a staggering pace. Only as our own understanding of the interrelation of human and natural histories has grown more precise have Faulkner’s aesthetic and narrative experimentations come to seem particularly prescient.

These concerns appear strikingly in two of Faulkner’s stories that most explicitly inhabit the natural world, the “Old Man” section of *The Wild Palms* (*If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*) (1939) and “The Bear,” published in edited form as a short story but in its complete form in *Go Down, Moses* (1942). “The Bear,” moving between Major de Spain’s hunting grounds, Memphis, and the McCaslin plantation, recounts Isaac (Ike) McCaslin’s series of hunting trips in quest of Old Ben, a legendary bear who has tormented both the farmers whose livestock he menaces and the hunters who repeatedly fail to kill him. After the hunters finally kill Old Ben, the narrative shifts to a conversation in which Ike, at twenty-one, explains to his cousin McCaslin Edmonds his reasons for relinquishing his inherited rights to the plantation, which he imagines cursed by the slaveholding of his ancestors. The story then returns once more to the hunting grounds, where Ike finds a wilderness irrevocably altered by the intrusion of a logging company to whom Major de Spain has sold off the timber rights. Unlike “The Bear,” “Old Man” strays from Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County as it narrates

the travels and travails of an unnamed prisoner in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, referred to as the “tall convict.” Temporarily released from the prison to aid in the rescue of flood victims in the wake of the 1927 Great Flood of the Mississippi, the convict loses control of his rescue boat and spends the next weeks, saddled with a pregnant woman he rescues from a rooftop, attempting to return to prison. By story’s end, he succeeds in accomplishing his goal, but has ten years added to his prison sentence for what is deemed an attempted escape. In highlighting a natural history that intersects with the regional and familial histories long of interest to Faulkner scholars, both are thus uniquely positioned within Faulkner’s oeuvre to speak to the interrelation between temporal and historical knowledge at a moment when natural and human histories irrevocably align, opening up glimpses of a history that stretches much longer than that to which Faulkner scholars have generally attended.

Throughout “The Bear,” Faulkner establishes temporality as one of the central disjunctions between wilderness and city and as one of the key ways in which modernity imposes itself on regional and rural spaces. When Ike makes his final trip into the hunting grounds that are the setting for much of the story, he is immediately confronted by this asynchrony, a contrast the text emphasizes by setting his retreat into the wilderness on the heels of a trip to Major de Spain’s office in town. Like the text, Ike moves from town to wilderness, where the timing of quotidian activities shifts: Ash, the hunting party’s cook, tells Ike to return to camp in an hour for dinner, and after Ike replies by holding out his watch to insist it will be too early to eat, Ash replies, “That’s town time. You aint in town now. You in the woods” (308). The “town time” to which Ash refers is structured here by Ike’s watch, but throughout much of “The Bear” it most closely follows that other regulator of modern time, the train, as becomes clear when Ike and Boon go to Memphis for a bottle of whiskey in an earlier interlude. Dependent on the train’s rigid schedule for their ability to return to the hunting grounds, Ike and Boon “[miss] the first train, the one they were supposed to take, but [Ike gets] Boon onto the three o’clock train and they [are] all right again” (225). Here, the train both structures time and controls access to the wilderness. Susan Willis has linked Faulkner’s use of the train to its similar appearance in much Latin American literature as an image of “the representation of exploitative progress,” progress that, like the tracks of the train, evokes the linearity so often associated with Western industrialism.¹⁷ In other words, progress comes to appear linear and routinized, an association Faulkner highlights with the train’s “first and only curve in the entire line’s length” appearing at the edge of the wilderness (304).

Against this linearity, the wilderness’s spatio-temporality is cyclical and structured around repetitions, evidenced most explicitly by the hunt itself. Indeed, from its opening sentence, “The Bear” establishes environmental engagement as a form of repetition: “There was a man and a dog too this time,” the temporal marker here nodding toward a series of preceding hunts (183). Hunting may seem an ambivalent form of environmental encounter from our contemporary vantage, but in the early twentieth century, hunters were often among the most ardent conservationists, an ethos exemplified by Teddy Roosevelt. Faulkner’s own awareness of the changing Mississippi environment resulted, as Wiley C. Prewitt has argued, from his hunting excursions in an “environmental mix of diminished wilderness, disappearing large game, and the pursuit of predominantly small game.”¹⁸ For Ike McCaslin, who views the annual retreat into the wilderness in search of Old Ben as a “yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill” (186), the hunt’s outcome is secondary to its ritualized encounter with the wilderness. And it is this ritualistic, repetitious quality that Faulkner so often emphasizes. After an early brush with Old Ben, Sam Fathers, Ike’s Native American hunting companion, muses that while they don’t yet have the right dog for a successful hunt, they might “some day,” a belief somewhat undercut by the narrator’s addition: “Because there would be a next time, after and after,” as if the hunt can continue *ad infinitum*, deferring the violent conclusion supposedly at its heart (195). The hunt’s cyclicity comes to structure human activity in the wilderness, but because it does so at a moment when hunting itself had come to seem a threatened more than a threatening pastime, Faulkner’s “after and after” takes on an ironic cast both within and outside the narrative, seeding repetition with a teleological structure that directs its violence inward.

Faulkner parallels the hunt’s repetitions in the narrative structure and other formal elements of “The Bear” as well, grounding the text’s experimental features in the material practices they represent. The first three sections each reenact the annual retreat into the wilderness, the encounters and near misses with Old Ben, at different points in time. Rather than progressing linearly, however, time loops forward and backward throughout these sections, so that in the first section, Ike is sixteen (“For six years now he had been a man’s hunter” [183]) and then ten (“at the age of ten he was witnessing his own birth” [187]); when the second section opens, he is thirteen; and then he is once again sixteen in the third. Sentences, too, repeat. Sam’s “We aint got the dog yet” in the first section becomes “We aint got that one yet” in the second, after Ike’s too-small but incautious dog rushes straight at Old Ben (192, 203). In the second section, structured around Sam

Fathers's attempts to train the bear-hunting dog Lion, the text circles back three times – mimicking the first three sections of bear hunts – to Ike's recognition that Lion is a harbinger of the hunt's impending end: "So he should have hated and feared Lion" (201, 204, 216). Here, too, Faulkner's repetitions anticipate their own end, their conclusion inevitable in their structure.

This recursive narration, a cyclical progress analogous to environmental engagement, operates alongside the linearity of modernity rather than serving as a corrective to it. It appears in the "The Bear" as one element of a hybrid temporality in which cyclicity and progress coexist, with industrial modernization and wilderness serving as co-constitutive elements of a natural-historical knowledge able to reveal similarities between them that otherwise remain hidden. The most exemplary icon of wilderness within "The Bear," Old Ben himself, becomes visible to the recursive reader – a reader modeled by Ike – as a symbol of the very forces of progress leading to his own destruction. Early in the story, Ben lopes "with the ruthless and irresistible deliberation of a locomotive" (185), and in his final appearance, Ike remembers him not just moving like the train but taking its form: "the thick, locomotive-like shape which he had seen that day four years ago crossing the blow-down" (228). At the same time that Ben takes on the characteristics of a symbol of industrial modernity, Faulkner writes of the train in the repetitious sentences formerly associated with the natural world: first, "It had been harmless once" (304); next, "It had been harmless then" (305). The difference in the repetition here is telling: "once," signifying unrepeatability, is revised to "then," a temporal adverb that nods both forward, in its sequential meaning, and backward, in its demonstrative.

What "The Bear" learns by its final section is that "natural" cyclicity is not only unable to forestall forward progress but becomes actively complicit in a violence it seeks to obscure by assigning it to progress. The train's harmfulness comes not from any material change, for Ike notes in the final section that it is "the same train, engine cars and caboose" that carries him into the wilderness (306). But "this time it was as though the train ... had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid" (306). Its harmfulness appears, retrospectively, to have been there all along, the "as though" marking the irony in Ike's belief that the train "had been" harmless. Significantly, this shift in meaning occurs after Major de Spain sells off the timber rights on the hunting grounds to a Memphis company, a sign of the dependent economic relations between semiperiphery and metropole and the increasing imbrication of the South in a modern economy. With that dependency made visible, Ike realizes that he cannot simply blame

modernity for dooming the wilderness, for it is "not only the train but himself" that carries the "portent" of modernity into the wilderness (306). Thus, the final pages, focalized through Ike, take on a desperate cast as they attempt from within a knowledge of modernity's cyclical progress – "dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression" (313) – to unwrite the narrative: Ike first imagining the dead Sam Fathers aware of his visit to the woods, then "Old Ben too, Old Ben too; they would give him his paw back even, certainly they would give him his paw back: then the long challenge and the long chase" (313). Again the text repeats itself as if to ward off the violence it has already performed. This belated narration aligns the text's temporal understanding with history's interest in understanding the past but calls attention to repetition's insufficiency to forestall change, its own violent teleology made visible in retrospect. It also designates a profound epistemological shift in the narrative from what we have described earlier as knowledge based on causality – an action producing a decided effect – to understanding from accretions of effects rather than accomplished ends.

The necessity of a longer temporal awareness to recognize the violence that emerges through accretion leads Faulkner to offer glimpses of deep time, the *longue durée* of natural history. Thus wilderness in "The Bear" does not lie outside of History, as critics have often argued – there is no outside-History, we might say, in Faulkner – but rather pulls another mode of historical knowledge into the frame. Indeed, Faulkner's glimpses of this elongated temporal scale work precisely to align human and natural histories, for the woods are "bigger and older than any recorded document" (183). The woods may be "bigger and older" than the documents that record human history, but those spatio-temporal markers merely mask the fact that they have been made coextensive via the material history of Southern forestry, a fact echoed by the text's repetition of this assertion much later when we are told the wilderness is "older than any mill-shed, longer than any spurline" (307). Paper, a byproduct of a Southern lumber industry run primarily by Northern companies, was made from the seemingly valueless waste wood and sawdust.¹⁹ Thus, recorded history itself comes to be both subordinated to natural history and associated with the cast-off refuse of Northern industry, a byproduct of a colonial economy that attempts to manage knowledge by managing time, literally writing over natural history with the violent histories, and in Faulkner's case *stories*, of man – a palimpsest in which the bottom layer, the material layer, is both the most visible and the least seen.

The material practices of the lumber industry, which highlight the increasing imbrication of the South in a colonial economy that shifted power to

urban spaces and to Northern capital, contributed in no small way to the devastating 1927 flood in which Faulkner sets “Old Man.” As Parrish writes of Ike’s observation in “The Bear” that “*man has deswamped and denuded and derivered*” the land, “what Ike McCaslin refers to here is a complex of anthropogenic changes such as wetlands drainage, cotton monoculture, massive deforestation by the timber industry, and the building of ever-higher levees to manage the Mississippi and its tributaries by straightening and containing their courses.”²⁰ But “Old Man” inhabits this post-ecocatastrophe world more explicitly than “The Bear,” even as it shares similar temporal schemes, allowing us to attend to the effects of Faulkner’s cyclical progress.

When situated in the larger context of Faulkner’s original plan for the publication of “Old Man” as one of the two alternating movements of *The Wild Palms* [*If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*] the temporal characteristics “Old Man” shares with “The Bear” appear even more pronounced. In cycling between the two narratives of “The Wild Palms” and “Old Man,” devoting five chapters to each of the intertwined segments of the novel, the entirety of *The Wild Palms* is like a modernist rendition of *Bleak House*, creating a composite whole out of two parallel but non-intersecting story vectors, which together emphasize the cycles of temporality rather than the disparities of narrative point of view. Set ten years apart, the narrative of “Old Man” begins “in the flood year 1927” (20) while “The Wild Palms” marks the historical moment of “this Anno Domini 1938” as its narrative present (118). Borges’s translation emphasizes the interlocking temporality of the two stories by adding a table of contents page not included in Faulkner’s original that names the dual phases of the combined temporality of the novel. And while both “Old Man” and “The Bear” employ the archetypal topos of the deep temporality of the wilderness as counterpoint to the cycles of modernization, “The Wild Palms” uses the temporal rhythms of the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast, the charted chaos of urban New Orleans and Chicago, and the spatial stasis of Utah and the Rocky Mountain west to similar effect.

As in “The Bear,” human history appears in “Old Man” inseparable from natural history, and Faulkner uses the flooded Mississippi River to trace an awareness of this. With the first sight the inmates gain of the flooded river, the human and the natural scales appear coextensive. The water “sound[s] like a subway train passing far beneath the street” and appears “as if ... in three strata,” a placid top layer of “frothy scum” that “screen[s] ... the rush and fury of the flood itself, and beneath this in turn the original stream, trickle, murmuring along in the opposite direction” (53). Here, the river, like Faulkner’s narrative technique in “The Bear,” moves backward and forward at once. Though the “original stream” is the least visible in Faulkner’s

tripartite articulation of the waters, its association with deep time is clear to the convict, whose boat is carried by the floodwaters into “the channel of a slough, a bayou, in which until today no current had run probably since the old subterranean outrage which had created the country” (122). The “until today” in the sentence, coming as it does after the flood, emphasizes that an understanding of deep time emerges as an effect of environmental disaster; without the flood, that is, deep time remains invisible and unknowable. Now situated within this longer span of time, the river asserts its agency, not just in its geologic capacity to carve out the landscape but because it “occur[s] to [the convict] that its present condition was no phenomenon of a decade, but that the intervening years during which it consented to bear upon its placid and sleepy bosom the frail mechanicals of man’s clumsy contriving was the phenomenon and this the norm and the river was now doing what it liked to do” (135). The levees controlling the river’s path during periods of calm are mere blips on the temporal radar. Rather, it is the cycles of flooding that become normalized, the river exceeding its pre-flood boundaries both spatially and temporally.

As the natural world gains agency, human agency comes to seem circumscribed by the type of circular progress evident in “The Bear.” When the convict first loses control of his skiff, he attempts to paddle back upstream in search of his lost partner, who has been swept up into a tree. But the boat begins a “vicious spinning” before finally settling into the current and rushing away from where he hopes to go (123). And though the convict “[thinks] he must already be miles away from where his companion [has] quitted him ... actually he [has] merely described a big circle since getting back into the skiff and the object ... which the skiff was now about to strike was the same one it had careened into before when it had struck him” (124). Crucially here, the text links the boat’s cyclical motion to violence, emphasized by the repetition of strike/struck, a theme that will recur throughout “Old Man” as this initial blow across the face leads the convict’s nose to gush blood repeatedly. When he finally reaches the woman he has been sent to rescue, she comments, in recursive sentences, on precisely the type of circularity the text has foregrounded: “I thought for a minute you wasn’t aiming to come back ... After the first time. After you run into this brush pile the first time and got into the boat and went on” (125). Eventually the convict learns “from experience that when [the flood’s recurrent waves] overtook him, he would have to travel in the same direction it was moving in anyway, whether he wanted to or not” (143). He must fit himself into the river’s flow, not fight this circular motion but “utilis[e] the skiff’s own momentum to bring it through the full circle and so upstream again, the skiff travelling broadside then bow-first then broadside again” (127). While “being

toyed with by a current of water," he finds that "it [does] not much matter just what he [does] or [does] not do" (124-5). In relinquishing a certain amount of his own agency, the convict is able to move more easily through the flooded landscape, but in a direction that rarely follows his own wishes.

This vision of human agency subordinated to the will of a natural world older and more powerful than humans is curiously at odds with the environmental history that lies behind the flood. Even as it opens up into a deep time that seems to normalize it, the flood gains its agency as a result of a complex of human action – the economic practices of industrial modernization that led to substantial environmental degradation. These communal actions exacerbated the conditions necessary to wreak havoc on the landscape and led to increased flooding in Faulkner's time. The tall convict's plight thus highlights two forms of human agency – societal and individual – for the flood operates contradictorily at these two scales. The flooded river is both determined by and determinative of human action.

The question of agency is a central concept throughout Faulkner's work, as characters so often find themselves living out the violent legacies effected by the actions of earlier generations – legacies of slavery, of incest, of poverty. In the fourth section of "The Bear," which interrupts the wilderness narrative with a long debate between Ike and his cousin McCaslin Edmonds over Ike's decision to give up his grandfather's land, Ike calls this inheritance a curse. In Ike's view, land ownership and slave ownership become inextricable, and thus any inheritance of one comes laden with the historical burden of the other, a legacy of violence that in his account encompasses the Civil War and Reconstruction along with complex histories of settler colonialism. At one point, Ike compares his inheritance of the land to the Biblical story of Noah, whose "grandchildren had inherited the Flood although they had not been there to see the deluge" (*GDM* 276). The flood, operating here as a symbol of cross-generational inheritance setting the limit on individual human behavior, thus calls attention once again to "Old Man," for in yoking agency in both texts to environmental disaster, Faulkner finds in ecocatastrophe a structure of dependency better able to articulate the challenges posed to human agency in industrial modernity, set against a backdrop of violence perpetrated both on and by the natural world.

The complex understanding of human agency that emerges in "Old Man" and "The Bear" thus resonates with what Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued are the two contradictory scales of agency in the Anthropocene: at one end, the individual human subject; at the other, the collective species operating as a geological force. As humans have collectively become powerful enough to alter planetary systems and cause widespread global warming, the human *qua* species becomes an actor alongside the more traditional

modern subject. Visible only at a temporal scale in which earth-systems data can be tracked across millennia, this newly visible form of agency can be told through neither a purely natural nor a purely human history, necessitating the type of hybrid historical knowledge we have seen in Faulkner's understanding of modernity. This type of history, however, poses two issues for narrative of relevance to Faulkner's work. First, Chakrabarty's conceptualization makes clear that the Anthropocenic alignment of human and natural history requires a form of recursive narration: as soon as we entered the Anthropocene, we began to assert our agency at the scale of the species, but because the effects of that agency are visible only after hundreds of years, our achievement of species agency can only ever be narrated in retrospect. This formulation also brings up the second issue, which is that effect, more than event, becomes the Anthropocene's privileged site of knowledge. Because we can never experience ourselves as a species, we can only "experienc[e] the impact of it mediated by other direct experiences – of floods, storms, or earthquakes, for example."²¹ These impacts, or effects, serve as both markers of our species agency and as the effects through which we can know of a temporally and spatially diffuse object like climate change – or colonialism. It is for these reasons that Faulkner's wilderness stories, written in a moment when the ramping up of industrial modernization was beginning to exacerbate the effects of species agency, strain against the type of linear narrative temporality of human history. Thus, in "Old Man," Faulkner's narrative style comes to register challenges to agency that emerge precisely at the intersection of modernity and nature we have come to call the Anthropocene.

Narrated in retrospect, "Old Man" calls repeated attention both to its retrospection and to the gap between how the convict remembers his time on the river and how he narrates it to the gathered inmates hearing tell of his time away from the prison. We are thrice told that the protagonist "didn't tell how he got the skiff singlehanded up the revetment and across the crown and down the opposite sixty-foot drop, he just said he went on," repetitions that return us, once more, to the narrative mode that dominates these works, for they include both the repetition and the conclusion (210).²² The most extended disparity between narration and knowledge, however, comes in an extended passage in which the convict, his female companion, and her baby find in the Louisiana swamps near New Orleans a Cajun man who ekes out a living hunting alligators. To the gathered inmates, the convict says only, "'After a while we come to a house and we stayed there eight or nine days then they blew up the levee with dynamite so we had to leave.' That was all" (211). His memory of those days, however, becomes one of the longest passages in the story, detailing a utopian space that appears to

transcend the type of relationships of dependency much of the rest of the text emphasizes.²³

While the flood exposes the convict's subordination to the natural world, it simultaneously usurps another form of dependency, for the flood disrupts the labor practices that undergird economic relations. When the inmates first hear of the possible flood from newspaper reports, they are interested primarily in its ability to keep them from the fields. The Mississippi State Penitentiary, also called Parchman Farm, was a working plantation, where, mimicking slavery, "the land [the convicts] farmed and the substance they produced from it belonged neither to them who worked it nor to those who forced them at guns' point to do so" (26). With the flood threatening, the inmates are pulled from their fields to provide aid, and Faulkner makes clear repeatedly that theirs are not the only emptied farms: "A little later the motor launch with its train of skiffs came up across what was, fifteen feet beneath its keel, probably a cotton field" (63); "It's a right smart of cotton-houses around here. With folks on them too, I reckon" (127); "An hour later the skiff came slowly up an old logging road and ... into (or onto) a cotton-field" (128); "if he had pondered at all about his present whereabouts ... he would merely have taken himself to be travelling at dizzy and inexplicable speed above the largest cottonfield in the world" (134).

But when the tall convict and his companion come upon the Cajun, the two men form an alliance through labor that, rather than emphasizing dependence, as do the cotton fields' allusions to slavery, transcend it. Though the man speaks only Cajun French and so the two cannot communicate through language, they form an alligator-hunting partnership, agreeing to split any profits from the skins equally. This utopian arrangement of labor freed from exploitation seems to offer one particularly optimistic extension of the flood's ability to nullify borders and boundaries – the two men, brought together by the flood, cooperate despite linguistic and cultural differences. Within this utopian space, time itself is effaced: the economic activity they enter into remains absented from the progressive temporality and future orientation of modernity, aligning "hill-billy and bayou-rat, the two one and identical because of the same grudging dispensation and niggard fate of hard and unceasing travail not to gain future security, a balance in bank or even in a buried soda can for slothful and easy old age, but just permission to endure and endure to buy air to feel and sun to drink for each's little while" (214). The two work not for a secure future – a concept rendered suspect by the flood – but for a seemingly suspended present, the convict and the Cajun "stalking their pleistocene nightmares" (214). Even the recalcitrant space of fanciful romance, denoted throughout "The Wild Palms" by the "incontrovertible and plain, serene ... clashing and

murmuring dry and wild and faint" (272) of the wild palms symbolically shaken by disembodied memories of love, is consistently overridden by an elemental relationship to the natural world and prehistoric time. Thus what seem the most idealized of Faulkner's post-ecocatastrophe spaces exist curiously outside of time, enduring in a type of temporal suspension intruded on once again by both modernity and its environmental effects when the dynamiting of a nearby levee, a flood protection measure, forces their evacuation of the Cajun's home. This temporal suspension, then, accounts for the convict's later inability to narrate his time with the Cajun.

But in this failure of narration at the text's moment of absenting itself from progressive temporality, Faulkner seems to envision the modern world as so thoroughly imbued with the type of relations that circumscribe human agency – in economic relations as in environmental – that there is no language outside of those relations with which to make alternatives knowable. Agency *or* progress, the text seems to argue; agency *or* narration. Indeed, narrative comes to be associated not with freedom but with its opposite in "Old Man." The tall convict is serving a prison sentence for robbing a train, an act he decides on after reading dime-novel westerns: "he had saved the paper-backs for two years, reading and rereading them, memorising them, comparing and weighing story and method against story and method, taking the good from each and discarding the dross as his workable plan emerged" (21). Faulkner makes the dangers of repetition thus all the more explicit here, linking genre – narration's apotheosis of repetition – to incarceration. In telling of a man incarcerated for his adherence to outmoded narratives, Faulkner shows that not only are the old stories no longer sufficient, using them as a guide can do real harm. And yet, "Old Man" seems pessimistic about finding alternatives. At its end, the tall convict is once again an inmate of Parchman Farm, with ten years added to his sentence for the trumped up charge of attempting to escape.

At a time when modernist aesthetics had turned away from the linearity of nineteenth-century Realism, Faulkner recognized that its alternative, cyclicity and repetition, was not an escape from teleology but rather its own form of it. This inevitable forward motion seems in Faulkner's work to lead, again and again, to a violence that is at once material and psychic, a circumscription of individual agency within the confines of structures so large as to seem inescapable. A retreat into wilderness becomes not an escape from these structures or from the progression of history but instead a further embedding in the radical shifts of agency taking place in industrial modernity. Claiming Faulkner as an environmentalist may be a step too far – as Buell writes, "for Faulkner, environmental exploitation was one among a range of interlinked forms of regional pathology, among which ...

racism would certainly have seemed more important”²⁴ – but his representations of the natural world help to reveal why certain formal strategies in his work have resonated not just in the U.S. South but throughout the Global South, where the exploitation of land and of people at the hands of colonial economic relations have often gone hand-in-hand. The resonances between his understanding of the interrelation of human and natural histories and recent accounts of the Anthropocene, a formulation that necessitates thinking across national boundaries, help us to see the importance of reading Faulkner at these wider scales. They also help us recognize how repetition – and with it, genre and serialization – seems to emerge within the Anthropocene as a privileged site of knowledge formation, revealing much about our contemporary understanding of human agency in a world in which our repetitions of asserting that agency against the natural world have increasingly shown us both how much and how little control we have. But even if a certain pessimism exists in Faulkner’s work over the ability to escape our historical – and narrative – repetitions, the power he ascribes to the old stories should make us consider all the more how necessary it is to find the words to tell new ones, even if they require new forms in which to speak.

NOTES

- 1 Hosam Aboul-Ela, “The Poetics of Peripheralization: Faulkner and the Question of the Postcolonial,” *American Literature* 77.3 (September 2005), 485.
- 2 Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), p. 134.
- 3 The 1940 edition was published by Editorial Sudamericana. We cite the 2002 Ediciones Siruela edition. Tanya T. Fayen notes that “*Las palmeras salvajes* is one of the few early Latin American translations of Faulkner to be reprinted in Spain” (*In Search of the Latin American Faulkner* [Lanham: University Press of America, 1995], p. 230).
- 4 Saskia Sassen, “A Savage Sorting of Winners and Losers: Contemporary Versions of Primitive Accumulation,” *Globalizations* 7.1–2 (March–June 2010), 23–50.
- 5 Susan Willis, “Aesthetics of the Rural Slum: Contradictions and Dependency in ‘The Bear,’” *Social Text* 2 (Summer 1979), 82.
- 6 Lawrence Buell, “Faulkner and the Claims of the Natural World,” *Faulkner and the Natural World: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1996, ed. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999, p. 10.
- 7 Susan Scott Parrish, “Faulkner and the Outer Weather of 1927,” *American Literary History* 24.1 (Spring 2012), 35.
- 8 Buell, “Claims of the Natural World,” p. 181. On the region’s environmental history, see also Parrish, “Outer Weather,” 38–44.
- 9 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009), 218–19.

- 10 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 221.
- 12 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.
- 13 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- 14 Charles S. Aiken, “A Geographical Approach to William Faulkner’s ‘The Bear,’” *Geographical Review* 71.4 (October 1981), 455.
- 15 Thomas L. McHaney, “Oversexing the Natural World: *Mosquitoes* and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem [The Wild Palms]*,” *Faulkner and the Natural World: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1996, Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie (eds.) (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 38.
- 16 Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 174.
- 17 Willis, “Aesthetics of the Rural Slum,” 92.
- 18 Wiley C. Prewitt, Jr., “Return of the Big Woods: Hunting and Habitat in Yoknapatawpha,” *Faulkner and the Natural World: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1996, ed. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie (eds.) (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 204. See also Judith Bryant Wittenberg, “Go Down, Moses and the Discourse of Environmentalism,” in *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*, Linda Wagner-Martin (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 49–72.
- 19 See Michael Curtis, “Early Development and Operations of the Great Southern Lumber Company,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 14.4 (Autumn 1973), pp. 347–68.
- 20 Parrish, “Outer Weather,” 34.
- 21 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (Winter 2012), 12–13.
- 22 The second account of this elision in the convict’s story occurs moments later: “He did not tell it that way, just as he apparently did not consider it worth the breath to tell how he had got the hundred-and-sixty-pound skiff single-handed up and across and down the sixty-foot levee” (211); the third, further on: “nor did he tell, anymore than about the sixty-foot levee, how he got the skiff back into the water” (231).
- 23 For a similar reading of labor in the novel, see Richard Godden and Pamela Knights, “Forget Jerusalem, Go To Hollywood – ‘To Die. Yes. To Die?’: A Coda to *Absalom, Absalom!*,” in Godden’s *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South’s Long Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 179–232.
- 24 Buell, *Endangered World*, p. 188.