

Introduction

Faulkner in the Information Age

Faulkner's novels express an acute anxiety about the vulnerability of the human subject nestled within the complex systems of modernity. Fascinated by how constructed space culturally co-evolves with the human being, Faulkner crafted a speculative fiction that questions the role of the individual within ever-scaling systems of information. His works painstakingly visualize the architectural intricacies of scale – from houses to plantations, from towns to cities – and imagine how information flows through, and connects, these lived spaces by virtue of an ever-expanding infrastructure of road, rail, energy, and finance. Faulkner was predisposed to his critique of modernity by his own rural upbringing and, like the Romantics, he upheld human consciousness as a mysterious, even sacred faculty that can never be fully enfolded into our social relations. Yet his fiction is poised at a place in history where the rural itself is predicated upon system centralization and the nascent realization that sophisticated flows of information shape the human being's movement, behavior, and thinking across time.

Faulkner, therefore, speaks to us directly in the information age. Never has his vision of the coupling of the exponential growth that began in the eighteenth century and the fragile inner space of the human subject been timelier. And yet for us to benefit from Faulkner's insight, his vision requires elucidation. Faulkner was by no means a systems theorist. Though he spent decades pondering the relationship between external system and internal architecture, nowhere does he outline his conclusions for us. Instead, he self-consciously employed artistic representation itself – from the singular image to the expansive grammatical structure of his long sentences – as the ideal vehicle for investigating human consciousness and its relationship to the sophisticated information networks that underlay the changing plantation system of the South and, beyond it, the industrial networks of global modernity. The work of the scholar, therefore – and the

purpose of this book – is to derive a working theory from the practice that is presented throughout Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels.

Space and Subject in Faulkner Studies

In seeking to understand Faulkner's meditation on modern information systems and their effects on human consciousness, we begin with the basic premise that his fictional world of Yoknapatawpha County is a place at once based upon, and artistically independent of, Northeast Mississippi. It was not until 1961, one year before Faulkner's death, that the distinction between his native region and the landscape of his imagination emerged in any meaningful way among literary scholars. G. T. Buckley was the first to wonder about the validity of the straightforward correspondence between the two. Previously, it had "been taken for granted that [Faulkner's] Yoknapatawpha County is really Lafayette County, Mississippi, and that his Jefferson, the county seat, is really Oxford" (Brown 1976: 223). With an emerging awareness of the vexed relationship between the two cartographies, the job of the literary scholar appeared relatively simple: to determine the ways in which Faulkner had intermixed his own Southern landscape with his invented county. Yet this task was by no means easy, for the "question of the localization of Faulkner's setting," as Calvin Brown put it in 1976, depended upon "evidence" that was "already beyond the reach of the literary researcher" and a landscape that was itself "fast disappearing" (224).¹

Scholars have on the whole attended more to Faulkner's fictional county as its own self-enclosed realm than to its similarities with Lafayette, though there can be no strict dividing line between the two, as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha invariably reflects the place in which he lived and wrote. In recent years, there have been notable efforts to preserve some record of the South's earlier material history as it pertains to Faulkner's artistic vision. George Stewart's photographic reportage (2009) records and recreates that vanishing landscape; and Charles Aiken's *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape* (2009) concentrates on the ways that Faulkner converted his local geography into his fictional world. Another cartographic approach places its primary emphasis on the fictional county. This method has been adopted over the last decade by the University of Virginia's *Digital Yoknapatawpha*, of which I have been a senior editor. Our team of Faulkner scholars and digital technologists has created a database of interactive maps for the key locations, characters, and events of the Yoknapatawpha fiction. As the project has grown, our work

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invariably involves preserving and interpreting the material culture of Faulkner's region.

In thinking about Yoknapatawpha as an imagined landscape, two critical tendencies can be roughly discerned. On the one hand, a neo-Romantic or idealist mode emphasizes Faulkner's attention to the immanent, or inwardly inviolable, value of human consciousness. On the other hand, a poststructuralist reading opposes the project of human inwardness and advocates a view of the human subject as determined by the material and ideological contexts of its time. The camp that we have roughly designated as "neo-Romantic" or "idealist" is not so much in favor of a Faulknerian self that lies above or beyond its social context; rather, this view holds that the material relationships of Faulkner's novels – whether social or textual – are infused and permeated by the primacy of the human mind. John Pikoulis, in 1982, was one of the first to propose that Yoknapatawpha be understood as a "mental landscape" (2) with an aesthetic quality that offers a spiritual subtext. In this sense, Faulkner's "characters are facets of their author's mind brooding on itself and extended on to the page with all the complexity of art, fictions masking an inner identity" (1). Pikoulis, therefore, articulates a Romantic notion of the "inner identity" of the artist mirrored in an invented world that simultaneously forms an extended mind construct: "Faulkner treats people less as parts of an observed world than as players in a private drama whose origins may have lain outside himself but who have become, like figures in a family history, part of his expanded consciousness of self, as intimate as memory" (2). Here, consciousness is paramount; inwardness exerts power over a network of material relationships. Pikoulis also suggests the developmental character of an idealist reading. Faulkner's characters "have become" part of an "expanded consciousness," indicating that the artistic process is ongoing, prospectively connecting the author and the latent memory of the text to the dynamic consciousness of the present reader.

Joseph Urgo (2001) has likewise questioned the supposition that Yoknapatawpha signifies place and place alone. Similarly predisposed toward an idealist reading, Urgo argues that Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha manifests "a way of thinking" that "signals less a series of representations and more a mode of cognition" (106). "Faulkner went to the trouble," Urgo (2004) observes, "to implicate [Yoknapatawpha] as a place conceptually or intellectually distinct from the place on which it is so closely modeled." It "may be less a place than a perspective, less significant for mapping a landscape than for mapping a mode of consciousness" (639). As a consequence, "Yoknapatawpha comes into being to articulate the

interior lives of those who people its cartography.” And we, the readers, may read Faulkner’s map so as to contact “the deeper, spiritual existence shared within the boundaries of its time and place” (647).

This idealist notion of cognitive mapping, however, has been largely overshadowed by other theoretical paradigms. Contemporaneous scholars to Pikoulis and Urgo proposed Yoknapatawpha as a mental landscape outside the terms of an inner life. In 1991, Marc Baldwin emphasized the cultural and economic processes involved in Faulkner’s “cognitive mapping.” Here the concept of interiority is elided in favor of a transactional paradigm that is historically contingent, since the assignment of value rests not upon any intrinsic qualities, but upon power and capital. Baldwin unpacks Faulkner’s “curious metaphor” of Yoknapatawpha as a “postage stamp of native soil” and argues that it enforces “a union between cultural and natural, civilized and primitive, industrial and agrarian” (196). “Like the postage stamp,” Baldwin contends, “the land has been squared and measured, zoned, demarcated, assigned a value and bartered.” From this perspective, a cartographic reading of Yoknapatawpha entails a transactional paradigm in which “humankind is nearly split up the middle by the joint spaces of real estate and capital, for ownership of land depends upon the spacious resources of a financial institution.”

J. Hillis Miller (1995) also provided a brief, farsighted reading in which Faulkner’s topography is staged not upon individualistic preconditions, but upon the interlocking mechanisms of capital and ideology. “Faulkner has a strongly topographical imagination,” Miller begins. “The events of his novels take place within an elaborately mapped mental or textual landscape in which characters are associated with places” (211). Miller goes on to develop a poststructuralist reading of space to consider the role of ideology in the shaping of Faulkner’s topographic vision. “Subjectivity, including its ideological presumptions, is . . . diffused into the landscape,” Miller writes. “It is not just projected there but incarnated there.” From this point of view, “ideology is not something abstract and dreamlike, the confusion of linguistic with material reality. That confusion is, literally, embodied. It is marked on bodies of the human beings who are mystified by the ideology” (212). For Miller then, ideology shapes subjectivity. Human beings perceive the marks of a culture’s ideology in the landscape and are mystified by it. This ideology appears too ubiquitous and material to be mere concept; indeed, it is interwoven into the invented world about us and, as a result, into our very being, since we do more than apprehend it; we internalize and individuate it.

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Miller's line of reasoning echoes a larger interpretative and influential framework that Philip Weinstein applied earlier that decade in his seminal *Faulkner's Subject* (1992), which presents Faulkner's subjectivity in the context of critical theory. Weinstein articulates a Faulknerian paradox in a manner closely related to Miller's reading. "The subject," Weinstein writes, "is simultaneously the free human being and the human being subjected to an exterior system of beliefs and practices. Ideology is the missing term that enables this paradox, for ideological practice and the free human subject mutually constitute each other" (89–90). Like Miller who sees ideology incarnated both in the landscape and in ourselves, Weinstein views the construction of selfhood in terms of our "hegemonic consent" to "social scripts" that lie initially outside the self (89–91). For Weinstein, therefore, our very sense of cognitive depth – our subjective perception of an inner life – depends entirely on the process by which we internalize society's scripts.

In these readings, Yoknapatawpha has become its own spatial practice, related less to either Faulkner or Oxford than to the cultural, ontological, and epistemological concerns of the late-twentieth century. In this practice or, at least, in these theoretical versions of this practice, the inner life of the Romantics has been eclipsed in favor of a self wholly submerged in ideology and absolutely reliant upon its environment. Weinstein's ultimate claim is telling and for some may not appear at all questionable. Where he begins with the supposition that our very sense of interiority emerges out of our willful acceptance of social inscription (a model of "noncoercion" [90]), he concludes with the poststructuralist axiom that there is nothing outside this process – in short, there is only an ideological self and, as a consequence, "appearing to be beyond ideology is ideology's defining move" (161). Weinstein's seminal work is now thirty years old, but his conclusions about Faulknerian subjecthood stand more or less uncontested. And this reality puts us at risk, I submit, of losing sight of a vital ethics of interiority in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha fiction. Indeed, if we assume that there is only the flow of ideology through social and cognitive space, that there is, in short, no "domain deeper than ideology" in our social relations and in our individual person, then we take Faulkner's *warnings* to us as the whole of his humanist project and lose sight of the constructive dimensions of his thought and poetics.

The view of the socially and ideologically constructed subject that Weinstein and Miller attribute to Faulkner is of course symptomatic of a more widespread orthodoxy in the humanities. And yet, despite the continuing critical prevalence of this model, there are some Faulkner

scholars who have held to the possibility of a more constructive ethics; who attend, that is, to Faulkner's attempts to preserve notions of interiority and agency even within an ideologically saturated fictional landscape. Already in 1979, Gary Lee Stonum posited a middle path. He recognized that the individuals in Faulkner's fiction are "from the outset part of a world constituted by their relationship[s], constituted, that is, by already established forms which in turn help to determine their subjectivity" (155). Yet this does not preclude the possibility of an emergent individual ethics. According to Stonum, Faulkner abandons the modernist privileging of aesthetics over morality and assumes responsibility for his art, for his own role in transmitting values to his audience (157–9).

Theresa Towner (2000) also sees a Faulkner who is continually "sensitive to the history of the South's peculiar institution and to the precarious means by which any individual's identity forms and develops" (14). She thereby gives voice to a fiction that "repeatedly probes the terrifying moments wherein culture and identity collide" and affirms the possibilities of individual agency therein. Karl Zender (2003) directly questions what he sees as an "irreversible (and largely salutary) change in Faulkner criticism" where "avoidances and silences . . . mark the limits of [Faulkner's] artistic vision." While the twenty-first-century critic is predisposed to "read beyond, rather than within, the manifest content of Faulkner's fiction," Zender proposes an "alternative to the present consensus" that can still perceive a "valuable and livable, even a desirable politics . . . inside" of Faulkner's fiction (120–1). Hortense Spillers (2004) skillfully maneuvers the idealist and the poststructural interpretations of Faulknerian space, maintaining that the spatial relationship between the self and the environment "remains the problematic encounter that both exceeds the map and remains representable by it" (535). Faulkner's "affirmation of the artist" is thus "one of the most compelling," even while offering an unexpected site of "derangement" (565). Jay Watson (2019) has likewise achieved a fine balance of reading both beyond and within the fictional world of Yoknapatawpha. The Faulkner that he engages is an author self-consciously working to uncover a "legacy" that "disturbs" and defiantly resounds within "a sensibility handed down from the European Enlightenment to the New World Plantation" (277).

These are, of course, just a handful of scholars who implicitly aim to preserve a Faulkner who self-consciously and earnestly attempted to work through the moral dilemmas of his Southern heritage and of global modernity itself. This book makes the case that Faulkner's spatial practice requires extensive reconsideration. In a time where visual mediation has

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risen to new heights, Faulkner's repeated representation of a self overwhelmed by visual surfaces takes on new urgency. The constructive solutions that he considered in his mature fiction are both nuanced and applicable to our cultural and individual crises today. From his first Yoknapatawpha fiction onward, Faulkner imagines the dilemma of a self that is bombarded with an ever-expanding field of visual surfaces and, in a manner that speaks directly to the antiracism protests of the coronavirus pandemic, he visualizes the monumental statue as a coercive object, erected in the principal vertices of social space to transmit its ideology directly into its perceiver. Faulkner's anticipation of both our increasing reliance on information technology and the rebellion against monumental architecture is no mere happenstance. Indeed, his invention of Yoknapatawpha entailed that he develop a symbolic cartography of social and cognitive space, one capable of representing the manner in which human beings transition from smaller distributed networks to hierarchies of power, privilege, and belief. Instead of an "exterior system of beliefs and practices" that we willingly assume, as Weinstein insisted, the landscape in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha fiction is a nexus of trajectories in which outer and inner overlap to constitute an intersubjective, dynamic, and adaptive networked system. As they scale, these networks can become tyrannical and coercive – not at all willingly internalized. In Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, the coercive character of such centralized human networks is a persistent theme and, from *Flags in the Dust* onward, the individual self – with its fragile architecture of interior space – is under threat of being subsumed by the larger flows of ideology through our networked systems.

The case for individualism in Faulkner's fiction involves first taking these coercive processes seriously and, second, recognizing that Faulkner was an expressly anti-ideological writer. Although these centralized networks seem both omnipotent and ubiquitous, they are not primary for Faulkner, but emergent properties that can be reconstituted and transformed according to the underlying movement, behavior, and thinking of the individuals that constitute them. The postmodern rejection of an older "paradigm of identity as an essentialized sacred space" (86), as Weinstein (1992) called it, misrepresents the character of Faulkner's individualism, conflating the inner life with "enclosed essences" that I argue, here and elsewhere, are caricatures of an idealist way of thinking about cognitive interiority. This book offers a different interpretation of the relationship between self and social body by moving chronologically through the Yoknapatawpha novels to outline an intersubjective way of understanding

Faulkner's spatial practice that hinges upon a deeper architectonics within the self, one that is grounded in our biological and social makeup. Where Faulkner engages in stream-of-consciousness experimentation in many of his earlier Yoknapatawpha narratives, this perspective is always located within an intersubjective vision of dynamic and adaptive networks in which the immanent value of individual life potentially operates as a vital source of novelty and change.

Above all, Faulkner was not responding to nebulous or generic aspects of modern life. His fiction continually focuses on the emergence of the lien-centered plantation system of the New South, placing it within the contexts of industrialization and the way that Jim Crow legally and culturally reinstated the racial and class hierarchy that had existed during slavery. What makes Faulkner's critique of his own heritage all the more striking is that the ethical dimension in his fiction is rarely abstract; rather, it is generated within a clear-sighted systems view of human relations. Faulkner of course lived in a different time, but this book makes the case that he was involved in developing a narrative form that could describe – with a prescience that has aged remarkably – the manner in which this social system scaled from rudimentary interaction networks to complex and coercive hierarchies. It is easy to minimize how immense was the transformation of Mississippi within just a few lifetimes – the shock of which lies at the heart of Faulkner's artistic project. Don Harrison Doyle (2001) reminds us to defamiliarize “our understanding of the Old South” for it “rests on images of older, more settled and finished eastern states like Virginia and South Carolina. In Mississippi, we witness the freshest expression of a dynamic southern society as it regenerated itself in the West” (3). Granted statehood in 1817, Mississippi had been home to indigenous peoples who had practiced nomadic ways of life for thousands of years and whose systemic removal from their homeland began in the 1830s, giving way to slave plantations controlled by a small number of white families. This transition occurred within the lifetime of Faulkner's great-grandfather and, within a few more generations, Mississippi had been completely transformed again. While the antebellum plantation system had occupied at most a mere ten percent of the land (with most of Mississippi remaining wilderness), the state was intensively settled after Reconstruction, with a new lien-centered plantation system and burgeoning industrialization.

Faulkner's narrative form involves a stylistic and metaphoric miniaturization of this historical arc into individual experience. The novels, in other

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words, treat historical macrocosm in the form of personal microcosm. To aid in the task of elucidating Faulkner's spatial practice, I introduce the term cognitive cartography to denote a narrative form that attempts to condense elements or even the entire arc of this civilizational transition from nomadic life to settled social organization into present experience – to mirror macrocosmic geographies in microcosmic space. I thereby define a cognitive cartography as a history of movement, behavior, and thinking compressed into social space. I show that Faulkner's earliest Yoknapatawpha fiction required much more narrative exposition to produce these cognitive cartographies than in his mature fiction. During the course of his career, the author became increasingly adept at compressing these cartographies into the structure of his prose style, attempting to make the grammatical unit of the sentence capable of enveloping the recurrent behavior of the social body as it builds the complex institutions of the New South. From wilderness to highly systemized infrastructure largely bent on the production of monocultures, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha serves as a cartography not just for a small rural community that gradually grew in scale, but for the larger human transition to ever more intricate bureaucracies of social interaction and control, bureaucracies in which ideology appears to possess an independence and quasi-agency.

In analyzing these cognitive cartographies, I necessarily employ some of the basic terminology of network theory to assist in close readings of a number of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels: *Flags in the Dust* (1927), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Unvanquished* (1938), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959), most prominent among them. I show that the modernist author was already discovering the epistemology of networked systems in the creation of his own imagined landscape. Before providing readers with a chapter overview, I first need to describe briefly the language of networks and complexity, a body of theory that does not determine my approach to Faulkner, but offers a frame of reference. Simply to say that Yoknapatawpha is composed of many overlapping interaction networks that together compose a complex system does not, in itself, convey very much about Faulkner's art or the fictional world he populated. Interaction networks can take many different forms – and they also express themselves at different scales ranging from microbiology all the way up to ecosystems and beyond, from the neurons in brains to the individual relationships that constitute a larger community of beings.

Network Theory, a Brief Synopsis

The formal study of networks dates back to 1735 when Swiss-born mathematician Leonhard Euler invented the geometry of position, using basic units of graph theory, namely, nodes or vertices and edges or links (Ferguson 2018: 24–5). Once it was established, nineteenth-century scientists applied Euler's "framework to everything from cartography to electrical circuits to isomers of organic components. That there might also be *social* networks certainly occurred to some of the great political thinkers of that age," but no investigator attempted "to formalize this insight" until the turn of the twentieth century (25–6) when Euler's geometry of position came to underlie the study of networks and the distinct, but overlapping field of complex systems. Put simply, we can visualize a network as a graph where each dot (each vertex or node) represents an object, and the lines between them (the edges or links) represent the connections or relationships between objects.² In real life, networks are "weighted," meaning that there are certain nodes that are more important than others for the system; these objects are referred to more often, visited continually, and therefore become central to the information that flows through that system. These nodes are therefore more weighty than other nodes.³ The layperson can imagine the direction in which information flows through a network. These information flows constitute a self-organizing pattern of behavior – and the more weighted a system, the more such flows favor certain nodes, thereby indicating the centrality of certain nodes in the network.

Nineteenth-century mathematical attempts to calculate and visualize the dynamic nature of networks entailed, moreover, the transition from the flat space of Euclidean geometry to a projective or speculative geometry (Delanda 2016: 115). Toward the end of the century, Henri Poincaré (1854–1912), sometimes called the forefather of relativity theory, made major innovations in the calculation of dynamical systems by capturing "all the possible states" of a two-dimensional space. Exploring the behavior of trajectories in a body of water, Poincaré "noticed that curves tended to converge at *special points* in the space, as if they were attracted to them: it did not matter where the trajectory had its origin, or how it wound its way around the space, its long-term tendency was to end up at a particular point" (120). These "special, remarkable, or singular points were eventually named attractors. When a state space has several attractors, these singularities are surrounded by an area within which they affect trajectories, an area called a 'basin of attraction'" (120). Poincaré's work was