Introduction

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Our book attempts to explore the range of environments that conditioned Faulkner's creative work and its transmission to his readers. Our goal has been to provide a broad, authoritative resource that will help readers orient themselves to this widely read yet challenging writer, who lived in a place and time that newcomers to his imaginative world increasingly may find unfamiliar. We hope to provide information about relevant frames of reference for Faulkner's writing itself, but also to suggest how his distinctive imagination can alter our views of those contexts – in representing less familiar strains of modern American life, regional experience, historical consciousness, and modernist artistry. The contexts for Faulkner's fiction hardly determined what he imagined, yet they surely furnished the material his mind worked on during his nearly forty years as a novelist. Faulkner dwelt in his native Mississippi throughout his life, and witnessed from the perspective of a Southerner the crucial events of the first half of the twentieth century that reshaped both his nation and region: the Great War, the Great Depression, the Great Migration, a second World War, the Cold War, and the civil rights movement, to name only the most prominent social and political events of his age. This is not to say that Faulkner was primarily a Southern writer. He once insisted to his editor that he did not consider his writing to be expressly about his region in any narrow way: "I'm inclined to think that my material, the South, is not very important to me. I just happen to know it, and dont [sic] have time in one life to learn another one and write it at the same time" (*SL* 185).

A book like ours takes context to include many domains outside the immediate time and place of the author's writing life. They encompass imagined as well as actual spaces, natural as well as social terrains, cultural as well as political institutions. As Pascale Casanova has shown in her magisterial study of literary prestige, *The World Republic of Letters*, even when Faulkner seemed to be writing about his South, he was doing so as an ambitious modernist from the cultural periphery, bidding for

consecration from the arbiters of high literary culture long associated with Paris. Such aims shaped Faulkner's subject matter and style no less than did his determination to depict "his little postage-stamp of native soil," as he otherwise once put his ambition (*LG* 255). Contexts are sites of interplay, exchange, and mutual effect. They also must be understood as textual material in their own right – composed of documents and their interpretations, and, like literary texts, subject to the constraints of verbal representation, point of view, genre, and authorial desire. Many historians of the South have acknowledged that their inquiries into the Southern past have been conditioned by Faulkner's vivid fictional accounts of it.[1]

The plasticity of Faulkner's texts creates fictions that seem capable, often uncannily, of reconfiguring their central subject matter in response to shifting preoccupations among generations of readers world-wide, inviting us today to think about his writing as a phenomenon of hemispheric affiliations and global affinities. We find Faulkner in the twenty-first century as a voice that continues to matter to writers the world over: he is read ardently in parts of the Middle East and Africa, with special regard for his massive chronicle of rural modernization under market capitalism; he attracts audiences in Europe curious with fresh urgency about the consequences of racial and ethnic division, and others who discover his relevance to "small nations" (Milan Kundera's term) determined to resist modern imperialisms; and he continues to speak to global Souths – to South America, to a post-colonial Caribbean, to Asian ex-colonial states – from double positions within "New World" plantation history: as at once national colonizer and peripheral colonized, at once racial sovereign and regional subaltern.

Recent developments in American studies, Southern studies, and Faulkner criticism itself have begun to secure these new ways of thinking about Faulkner as a world writer. The field-wide pivot toward the hemispheric and transatlantic horizons of US literary culture has brought aspects of Faulkner's writing into view that are only now being appreciated. In the last decade, important book-length studies have intensified scrutiny of Faulkner's fiction in the context of Latin American plantation colonialism and its aftermath.[2] Such investigations extend the pioneering efforts of a special issue of *The Faulkner Journal* in 1996 edited by Michel Gresset that was devoted to Faulkner and Latin America. Continued explorations into the ways the African diaspora shaped US national cultures, into the origins and permeation of Hispanic literary traditions in the United States in the nineteenth century, and into common features of international modernisms emerging from cross-currents of colonial resistance and independence, to cite only a few examples, should create new

vantages on principal US writers such as Faulkner. Keith Cartwright's work on the effaced presence of African cultural forms in American literature locates convincing examples in Faulkner.[3] Research into the widespread disavowal of the Haitian revolution by slave-owning classes in Cuba and Santo Domingo, such as that by Sibylle Fischer, should provide larger contexts for the work already done on Faulkner's mindfulness of hemispheric US imperialism, plantation economics, and New World slavery.[4] One recent social history of the American Gulf plantation world begins with a rehearsal of Thomas Sutpen's travels as an imaginary indication of the transnational society that drew Havana and New Orleans into a once-flourishing network of Caribbean agricultural production, trade, cultural exchange, and social cosmopolitanism.[5] Projects comparing Faulkner and Toni Morrison with Francophone Caribbean authors such as Saint-John Perse and Édouard Glissant, or setting Faulkner in the context of the black Atlantic (the focus of the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference in 2013) are beginning to suggest fuller transatlantic dimensions of post-plantation modernity, while Hosam Aboul-Ela's *Other South* has already transformed our view of Faulkner as a writer expropriated to "Third World" situations in the Middle East and South America.[6]

Such contexts reframe Faulkner's fiction, even as the familiar concerns of his imaginative world are being revolutionized from within. New scholarship in the history of the US South, for example, invites fresh attention to the southwest, Appalachia, and the extended Mississippi Valley as they figured in Faulkner's sense of region; Jennifer Rae Greeson's broad reinterpretation of the importance of "Our South" to national imaginings should provoke further reconsideration of Faulkner's Southernness in the context of the American past; continued research on the Hollywood film industry has deepened our appreciation of its cultural and intellectual penetration into Faulkner's imagination; new work on modern sexuality and gender has begun to produce more sophisticated accounts of homosociality and homosexuality, and of the polymorphism of desire and identity in Faulkner's fiction; research in Cold War archives may lead to more projects like ones underway on Faulkner's travels to Japan, the Philippines, Iceland, Greece, Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela under US Department of State sponsorship in the 1950s; rising appreciation for the importance of popular and mass culture in the early half of the twentieth century has stimulated, for instance, a challenging new look at the paperback publication history of Faulkner's fiction during the period of his once-assumed obscurity, before the Viking Portable edition of his work appeared in 1946; philosophical, psychological, material, and social histories of race continue to illuminate

Southern writers' complex negotiation of political positions and cultural traditions under racial apartheid (as in Leigh Anne Duck's account of the segregated South as abject other to national modernity); more extensive studies of Southern native Americans have brought Faulkner's imaginary "Indians" into sharper focus; eco-criticism has spawned reconsideration of Faulkner's preoccupation (unusual among US modernists) with the natural environment, and animal studies may raise questions about how Faulkner represents a range of effects deriving from the ownership of living beings. Many of the scholars responsible for these new lines of thought are represented in the pages that follow, and the reader will find additional references in their writing to specialized studies by other experts.[7]

I have divided the immediate contexts for Faulkner's writing into three major categories: *Places*, *Times*, and *Genres*. The pieces in *Places* develop Faulkner's imaginative (and in many instances personal) engagement with the geographies that organize his fiction: the small towns of northern Mississippi where his ancestral families flourished (Weinstein); the natural, economic, and cultural force of the Mississippi Delta and the countryside it dominated (Jackson); the international plantation society that linked the Deep South to a cosmopolitan Gulf world for more than a century (Guterl); the powerful afterlife of such Caribbean histories in the engagement with his fiction of Francophone Atlantic writers like Glissant (Loichot); the modern metropolises of New Orleans, Paris, Hollywood, and New York that jolted Faulkner's provinciality and offered him new ways of thinking about what it meant to write as a modernist (Hagood, Bloom); his fiction's symptomatic Southern disavowal of the African presence in the plantation states (Cartwright). These essays are not so much descriptions of the actual features of locales that appear in Faulkner's writing, as considerations of the interchange between historical spaces and imagined places that engage and inform his creative work.

Faulkner's *Times* focuses on the sequence of transformations that grafted a modern world onto his region's past. The essays in this section begin with a consideration of the effects that rural modernization, the electrification of small towns, for example, or national New Deal programs, had on Faulkner's methods of representation. The first prompted patterns of plot and narration based on models of connectivity (Hannon), while the crisis of labor in the 1930s that was reorganized around the question of wages proves to be a trauma that manifests itself in the minutest linguistic details of Faulkner's thick description of his world (Godden). In the social sphere, modern sexual mores changed with startling speed, exposing the violence of traditional forms of sexual domination and ideologies of gender (Fujie,

Matthews); national practices of segregation finally began to yield to civil rights activism over the first half of the twentieth century (Duck); the emergence of US hegemony after World War II and into the Cold War challenged the then-Nobel laureate Faulkner to imagine his writing as part of the broadest international geopolitical contexts (Stecopoulos, Kodat).

The essays in *Genres* assess the range of imaginative modes Faulkner understood himself to be working in at various turns in his career. Genre constitutes a field of conventions, expected effects, precedent literature, and opportunities for sale and publication that conditions individual artistic creation. In novels like *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Unvanquished* (1938), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942), for instance, Faulkner engages self-consciously with the plantation romance tradition he knew well (one renewed at several historical moments before his own) (Schmidt). At other points in his career he wrote mindfully in and against the generic conventions of detective fiction, film noir, and 'tragic mulatto' fiction. Essays in this group concentrate on the features, history, and position in the field of imaginative production of the genres Faulkner addressed. The ones illustrated here are Anglo-European modernism (Pothier); commercial film romance and epic adventure formulas (Gleeson-White); race fiction, a category newly complicated by debates about the definition of African American literature (Ladd); the American Gothic (Hinrichsen); and cheap paperback fiction, a market for which materialized during Faulkner's heyday (Earle).

In our last section, *After Faulkner: A World of Readers*, attention turns to the question of how later readers receive Faulkner's fiction. Readers, that is, bring with them their own intervening contexts in the forms of the later historical moments they occupy, the intervening cultural developments that have shaped them, the books that have been written since Faulkner, and the interpretive traditions and evaluative standards that have been decisive to his present reputation in various parts of the world. The arc of the more public phase of Faulkner's post-Nobel career includes a three-week tour of America's defeated World War II enemy, Japan, at the request of the US State Department. His visit deepened the special interest Japanese writers had taken in his work even before the war, and promoted the development of a sizable literary critical establishment devoted to studying and translating his writing (Tanaka, Fujihira). Several of these last pieces reflect on other ways Faulkner's writing matters today: directly, as in his continuing stature as a writer reckoned with by successive generations of US writers (Watson), or in the longstanding dialogue of Latin American writers with his fiction (Esplin). Efforts to popularize Faulkner's aptness to readers whose life stories are taken to resemble those of his characters, also raise

difficult questions about whether reading for such sympathetic identification may distort Faulkner's avowed devotion to literature not as communication with the many but as exceptional artifice for the few (Kreyling). Perhaps one answer lies in the way Faulkner's writing matters to so many readers from underdeveloped countries around the globe less because it actually depicts lives like theirs, than because it originated under similar conditions of literary production from a disadvantaged periphery (Aboul-Ela). From this standpoint, all participants in the mutual exchanges that constitute reading – writers, publishers, readers, critics, teachers, students – operate in contexts that condition meaning and value. Such a view suggests that context is not an optional background to reading Faulkner, but an essential factor in the transactions of all reading, both within and across cultures.

NOTES

1 The historian Joel Williamson describes how he taught seminars in Faulkner's fiction early in his career, as he was working on his study of the South after the Civil War (*The Crucible of Race* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1984]), and how these led to his writing his biography *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 435–6. The historian Leon Litwack began his course in Southern history at the University of California at Berkeley by assigning Faulkner's novel about the Civil War, *The Unvanquished* (1938).

2 See, for instance, George Handley, *Postslavery Literature in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Deborah Cohn, *History and Memory in the Two Souths* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), and *Look Away! The US South in New World Studies*, eds. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

3 Keith Cartwright, *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

4 Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Eiko Owada, *Faulkner, Haiti and Questions of Imperialism* (Tokyo: Tankobon, 2003); Barbara Ladd, *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), and Richard Godden, *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

5 Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

6 Valérie Loichot, *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia

Press, 2007) and Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariategui Tradition* (University of Pittsburg Press, 2007).

7 Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Peter Lurie, *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), and forthcoming works by Julian Murphet and Sarah Gleeson-White; Michael Bibler, *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same–Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936–1968* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); John Duvall, *Faulkner's Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw and Unspeakable Communities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Harilaos Stecopolous, *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and US Imperialisms, 1898–1976* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); David Earle, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009); Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and US Nationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Annette Trefzer, *Disturbing Indians: The Archaeology of Southern Fiction* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 2008) and Melanie Benson Taylor, *Reconstructing the Native South: American Indian Literature and the Lost Cause* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); a forthcoming study of Faulkner and the Great Flood of 1927 by Susan Scott Parrish.

Places

Oxford, Mississippi