Faulkner's Ecological Disturbances

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A disturbance is any relatively discrete event in time that disrupts ecosystem, community, or population structure and changes resources, substrate availability, or the physical environment.

—P. S. White and S. T. A. Pickett, "Natural Disturbance and Patch Dynamics: An Introduction" (7)

The convict was hearing again that sound which he had heard twice before and would never forget—that sound of deliberate and irresistible and monstrously disturbed water.

—William Faulkner, If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem (The Wild Palms) (199)

William Faulkner’s novels often contain textbook examples of ecological disturbance. References to floods, fires, deforestation, mining, and disastrous agricultural practices dot his books just as they mar the actual South. Patricia Yaeger writes, “[P]lace is never simply ‘place’ in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape” (13). In ecological terms, such trauma falls under the category of disturbance, and these disturbances illustrate a strong connection between environmental abuse and human suffering—especially in terms of racial oppression. Ecological disturbances largely involve concepts that not only speak to environmental concerns but also work within the realm of human communities. After all, ecology is the science of communities. It is reasonable to connect a science that so elegantly overlaps with human communities with Faulkner’s writing, which often addresses the complexities of human interaction within a disturbed natural world. Lawrence Buell argues that for Faulkner, “[E]nvironmental issues were usually of a secondary concern,” and he asserts that Go Down, Moses should be read as “more of a race book than as an environmental book” (“Faulkner and the Claims” 14). However, as a number of Faulkner’s novels demonstrate, he often merged these concerns. For Faulkner, race, poverty, class, and other social factors are environmental issues.

The flourishing of Faulkner’s literary career coincided with perhaps the worst period of environmental abuse the South has ever known, and it is unsurprising that he incorporates such desolation into his writing.
Southern environmental historian Thomas D. Clark explains that for the South, the “mid-decade of the 1920s ... was the point of no return to the days of reckless agricultural practices or the slashing away of the magnificent first forest” (73). Clark further points out that “in some fashion every major social problem in the South had grown out of the land and its mismanagement. Never in the whole scope of southern history had such a large proportion of the land been caught in so harsh a crisis” (73). As his writing suggests, Faulkner recognized the relationship between this environmental crisis and racial oppression. “In Faulkner’s mind,” Louise Westling writes, “white men’s crimes against the land are paralleled by, and implicated in, crimes against dark-skinned people” (128). Through this connection—a connection made both in Faulkner’s mind and in the outside world—of the land and race, Faulkner explores ecological disturbances that embody an environmental paradox: they are simultaneously caused by, and facilitate, broad social impoverishment. He portrays the land of the South as symbiotically linked with the plight of African Americans, since after all both suffer from a form of parasitism on the part of whites. Ultimately Faulkner portrays an enslaved and exploited land that, like a vengeful slave, revolts against its oppressors.

Anyone who understands the effect of seasonal changes on the land and the relationships between animals, or knows the best place to hunt or fish is thinking not only environmentally but ecologically. This way of knowing the natural world is based upon an understanding of community, and few writers understood community, human or non-human, as well as Faulkner. Bart H. Welling writes that “[m]odernists like Faulkner, especially, can complicate and enrich ecocriticism through their deep awareness of the inter-workings of race and gender in the physical imaginative construction of landscape, through their pained understanding of environments that are anything but benignly maternal to those who must live and work in them” (461-62). Faulkner’s South represents a collection of disturbed ecosystems, and studying his fiction within a framework of ecological disturbance theory reveals the way that his writing comments on the complicated interactions between humans and the environment of the South.

*Disturbance* is one of the more important concepts employed in ecological theory. Ecologists P. S. White and S. T. A. Pickett explain that
“[t]he most obvious role that disturbance plays in ecosystems is in the deflection of a community from some otherwise predictable successional path” (373). Ecological succession, the “sequential change in vegetation and the animals associated with it” in a given ecosystem, is a key factor in ecological thought (Allaby 374). Communities of organisms develop within an ecosystem, and through this process of development alter environmental factors such as the amount and type of available nutrients. This alteration of the environment causes conditions favoring certain species over other ones and results—in the absence of disturbance—in a gradual change in the composition of an ecosystem. Biologists John Cairns, Jr., and James R. Pratt argue that human disturbance to ecosystems “constitutes a serious and probably irreversible loss of unique plant and animal communities. Their replacement by impoverished grazing lands, agriculture, and scrub constitutes one type of biotic impoverishment that is all too common . . . there has been comparable damage to freshwater and marine systems” (496). As later examples illustrate, along with biotic impoverishment, Faulkner’s ecosystems also suffer social impoverishment and his environments sometimes move from a passive to an active role in responding to abuse.

“the dark and fecund earth”

Faulkner’s communities are ecosystems of oppression. Near the end of the “Dilsey” section of The Sound and the Fury, he creates a scene of an African American community located outside of the Compson estate. On her way to church, Dilsey passes “trees that partook . . . of the foul desiccation which surrounded the houses; trees whose very burgeoning seemed to be the sad and stubborn remnant of September, as if even spring had passed them by, leaving them to feed upon the rich and unmistakable smell of negroes in which they grew” (291). The relationship between those who live in the cabins and a remarkably disturbed ecosystem reveals how Faulkner envisioned the relationship between the land and African Americans. Lawrence Buell writes, “[N]ature has historically been not only directly exploited but also the sign under which women and nonwhites have been grouped in the process of themselves being exploited” (Environmental 21). In describing the association between these two oppressed entities, I use the ecological term symbiosis, and I do so in its most conventional meaning, as “an interaction between members of two species which benefits both”
The African Americans’ reliance upon the land for survival is evident; they derive their basic food and shelter from the earth on which they live. The trees that must metaphorically “feed upon the rich and unmistakable smell of negroes” (291) indicate that both the land and the African Americans depend upon each other to survive—they are joined by oppression. However, in constructing a natural world that subsists in part upon people—at least upon African American people—Faulkner himself risks falling prey to problematic racial complications that reside in linking African Americans with the environment. In his attempt to describe a form of metaphorical symbiosis, Faulkner becomes guilty of exploiting nonwhites by grouping them with the rest of nature. These linkages—particularly those implying that African Americans serve as a form of fertilizer for the surrounding trees—simultaneously dehumanize African Americans while attempting to portray a complicated ecological connectedness to the land.

Faulkner partially redeems this perspective by including whites in the system of ecological disturbance. While the African Americans depend upon the land for basic survival needs, the land requires a more subtle form of sustenance: it must remain useful to whites or else face further, more catastrophic, forms of disturbance. A good example of what happens to land deemed useless occurs in *The Sound and the Fury*. Though the mentally handicapped Benjy Compson inherits a family pasture, his handicap, along with the family’s inability to hire people to work the land, makes retaining the pasture economically pointless. To gain something from their land-rich but cash-poor situation, the Compsons sell Benjy’s pasture to finance Quentin’s education at Harvard. The land moves from a state of controlled exploitation to a state of destruction and sterility after it is sold and made into a golf course. Faulkner’s awareness of this transition from fertility to sterility emerges in his parallel between the destruction of the land and Benjy’s literal castration. Benjy’s land moves from the controlled exploitation of a pasture, a piece of cleared land that might potentially become a field of crops or grazing land for livestock, to a site that, like Benjy, provides local amusement.

Just as Faulkner connects Benjy’s existence to that of his pasture, he also links the plight of the African Americans to the land on which they live. In *Light in August*, the ecological disturbance of deforestation serves, in part, as a metaphor for the detection of blackness.
Deforestation is an exposure of the land, a revealing of the surface. As trees are cleared, the soil emerges. The soil that fed the trees becomes the defining feature of the landscape. Faulkner's awareness of this environmental condition explains his concern with what he calls, in *Light in August*, the South's "dark and fecund earth" (229). As the timber industry removed the arboreal exterior of the South, it exposed the dark, rich soil from which the trees sprang—the black beneath the green—at least until erosion set in. For in a novel in which the putatively racially mixed Joe Christmas struggles against social categorization, the deforestation that runs throughout *Light in August* becomes an ecological mirror of Joe's social status as a "white nigger" (344). The color of the land and the color of the man depend upon their treatment by whites.

Through Joe, Faulkner reveals how this connection between the land and victims of racial injustice at times represents a personal bond. Throughout the novel, Joe takes refuge in the wilderness, where solitude momentarily frees him from human social categorization. At one point, even though he has a cabin to live in, he takes up residence near a forest spring. Near the spring he starts a small fire, reads a magazine, sleeps, and upon waking even shaves by his reflection in the water (110-12). Later, when on the run from the law, Joe hides in the woods where he "desires to see his native earth in all its phases for the first or the last time. He had grown to manhood in the country . . . . For a week now he has lurked and crept among its secret places, yet he remained a foreigner to the very immutable laws which earth must obey" (338). While Joe sees himself reflected in the land when he shaves at the spring, he remains an outsider because Faulkner's land represents a separate community to which he remains a "foreigner." Nevertheless, Joe's status as an outsider in the white and African American communities still makes this connection with the land his most rewarding relationship in the book.

"soil manured with black blood"

In examining the connection between African American oppression and the land in Billie Holiday's stirring rendition of "Strange Fruit," Farrah Jasmine Griffin writes, "Holiday's Southern earth is fertilized with the blood of black people . . . . On the surface it is a land of great physical beauty and charm, but beneath it lay black blood and decayed
black bodies. Beneath the charm lay the horror. Like the cotton they
pick, the lynched black bodies are also a Southern crop . . . . The horror
is organically linked to the place” (16). Griffin’s argument strikes to the
core of the association between the land and African Americans.
Connected by a form of organic horror, African Americans and the land
feed upon each other to survive within an ecosystem of oppression. The
most potent representation of the merger between racial and ecological
oppression emerges in the slaveholding plantation system. Absalom,
Absalom! presents a powerful example of this system in the section
detailing Thomas Sutpen’s experiences as an overseer at a Haitian sugar
cane plantation, a horrifying and beautiful land:

a Little lost island in a latitude which would require ten thousand years of equatorial
heritage to bear its climate, a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years
of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful
greenery and crimson flowers and sugar cane sapling size and three times the height
of a man and a little bulkier of course but valuable pound for pound almost with
silver ore, as if nature held a balance and kept a book and offered a recompense for
the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not, the planting of nature and
man too . . . the planting of men too: the yet intact bones and brains in which the old
unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for
vengeance. (202)

The plantation in Haiti represents the whole of Southern racial
oppression, and demonstrates how Faulkner’s South extended well
beyond traditional geographical boundaries. In this passage he crafts a
landscape that supports, almost to the word, Griffin’s concept of a South
“fertilized with the blood of black people” (16). Faulkner’s vision of
nature as a bookkeeper of misery helps explain how, in his writing, the
suffering of the African Americans becomes symbiotically bound to the
land itself in a way that borders on the energy dynamics of an ecosystem.
The result is a triangular ecology of exploitation in which whites enslave
African Americans who in turn sow the land with their own sweat and
blood. The land incorporates the very bodies and suffering of the African
Americans and transubstantiates it into the crops and other natural
resources that economically fed the white-controlled South. The land
and the African Americans subsist on their own mutual oppression while
parasitic whites reap the benefits. Even the sugar cane itself represents
a sort of parasitic weed, as it is an introduced species—originally
transplanted to the Americas by the Spaniards—that thrives upon the disturbed Caribbean ecosystem.

Like any parasite, Sutpen depends upon his host for survival. This dependence leads him to transplant the Haitian ecosystem of oppression into the one hundred square miles of Mississippi bottomland he acquires from the Chickasaws. In Quentin’s imagination, Sutpen returns to the American South

[O]ut of quiet thunderclap... upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color... grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men... carrying in bloodless paradox the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest... . . . Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing. (4)

Faulkner’s description makes it clear that Sutpen does not build his mansion and plantation so much as rip them from the Mississippi mud. Part of the mystery of Sutpen’s persona resides in his having brought very little to Mississippi other than slaves and an essentially kidnapped French architect. He even borrows seed cotton from General Compson (30). What Sutpen does bring with him is the ecosystem of oppression he learned to control in Haiti, and this is all he needs. Like the island of Haiti, Sutpen’s estate becomes an island of racial and environmental abuse. After all, Sutpen’s children are described as “marooned at birth on a desert island: the island here Sutpen’s Hundred” (79). For all of Sutpen’s acreage it represents only a microcosm, a petri dish-sized example of the systematic racial and environmental domination that took root throughout the South. As the trees that consume the essence of African Americans in The Sound and the Fury reveal, this symbiosis became an integrated component of the Southern ecological experience.

“a burning plantation house”

Commenting on the final product of social and environmental impoverishment, Faulkner portrays a brand of subjugation that fosters internal, or endogenous, disturbance. Endogenous disturbance arises from within an ecosystem, and while in ecological terms it might indicate depletion of nutrients or loss of sunlight, in Faulkner’s ecosystems of oppression it emerges as revolt. Patrick D. Murphy writes, “[N]onhuman others can be constituted as speaking subjects, rather than
constituted merely as objects of our speaking” (14). Such nonhuman speech emerges in Faulkner’s endogenous disturbances that represent a response from a victimized environment to its human oppressors. In Faulkner, both slave revolts and ecological disturbances serve as this form of “speaking.” Both form a discourse of outrage. Faulkner’s slave revolts and minority uprisings, even on an individual level, arise as the result of compounded white injustice against the oppressed. In short, Faulkner’s endogenous environmental disturbances should be read as slave revolts, as revenge by nature for abuses against the land. While ecologists certainly frown upon such anthropomorphized approaches to understanding the environment, Faulkner actively pursues this humanized representation because it further reveals the link of oppression between African Americans and the land they work.

For example, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin appears aware of the way that the land revolts against the whites. He asks his father, “[W]hat is it to me that the land or the earth or whatever it was got tired of him [Sutpen] at last and turned and destroyed him? ... It’s going to turn and destroy us all someday” (7). Quentin’s comment echoes Faulkner’s own description of the book in a letter to Harrison Smith: “roughly the theme is a man who outraged the land, and the land then turned and destroyed the man’s family” (*Selected Letters* 79). Faulkner’s land holds its oppressors accountable in a way that reveals its status as a cognizant party in a system of exploitation, a system that injures two to benefit one. Like a slave, this sentient environment remembers misdeeds and even plots revenge.

Such ecological revenge takes place during *Absalom, Absalom!*’s Haitian slave revolt, a good example of how Faulkner’s ecological disturbances emerge as uprisings against human oppressors. In describing the atmosphere leading up to the revolt, Faulkner writes that “the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance” (202). Sutpen’s ignorance of the coming slave revolt finds him “not knowing that what he rode upon was a volcano, hearing the air tremble and throb at night with the drums and the chanting and not knowing that it was the heart of the earth itself he heard” (202). Slave drums beat out the rhythm of the land’s heart, a heart filled with two centuries’ worth of African slave blood. The Haitian slave revolt represents a combination of human violence against oppression and ecological disaster. The slaves kill their oppressors and, significantly, also
set fire to the cane. Sutpen remembers: "the air filled with the smoke and smell of burning cane and the glare and smoke of it on the sky and the air throbbing and trembling with the drums and the chanting" (204). Faulkner links the chanting and murders with the burning cane, a disturbance that represents the two oppressed sides of Faulkner's triangle.

By telling the story through Sutpen, Faulkner makes this cautionary tale of human oppression and environmental disturbance as much about Sutpen as about the revolt. In Sutpen's version of events, those barricaded inside the plantation house engage in a series of futile attempts to fight back against both the slaves and a disturbed natural world, a situation in which the whites combat a vengeance beyond humanity. Sutpen recalls how "he and the father fired at no enemy but at the Haitian night itself, lancing their little vain and puny flashes into the brooding and blood-weary and throbbing darkness" (204). This scene, reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, underscores the folly of attacking the inscrutable natural world. In Sutpen's description of the rebellion, the dark of the environment matches the dark skin of the slaves, and after the slave revolt ends, Sutpen describes a scene that mirrors the aftermath of many of Faulkner's ecological disturbances:

and then daylight came with no drums in it for the first time in eight days, and they emerged (probably the man and the daughter) and walked across the burned land with the bright sun shining down on it as if nothing had happened, walking now in what must have been an incredible desolate solitude and peaceful quiet. (205)

In the aftermath the environment turns from "throbbing darkness" back to a "bright sun shining down." The absence of slaves leaves the impression that the land, with its burning cane and conspiratorial darkness, was the larger threat in this revolt. After all, it is the environment—in its refusal to grant the plantation rain—that forces Sutpen to sacrifice himself to end the revolt. Apparently, his torture at the hands of the slaves "subdued them" (204), but both the slaves and the land leave him with scars. His body carries wounds from torture, and his mind remains so scarred by "the smell of the burning sugar [that] he had never been able to bear sugar since" (201). Later in Mississippi, Sutpen manages to tame both the land and his slaves by physically dominating both on an individual level. He works alongside his slaves in breaking
the land (28), and he matches his own physical power against that of his slaves when he fights them for blood sport (30). From his experience in the Haitian slave revolt, Sutpen knows that to retain control he must subdue both the slave and the land. Because he rules from the mud, the ecological and racial revolt must come from disturbances outside of the system—the Civil War and Charles Bon.

Complicated types of disturbance, both social and ecological, reside at the core of Faulkner’s concept of the intersections between humanity and nature. Comparing Faulkner to Aldo Leopold, Lawrence Buell argues that unlike Leopold, Faulkner “never fully formulated an environmental ethic because his knowledge of environmental cause-and-effect was spotty: he understood deforestation as a social problem better than he understood flooding as such” (“Faulkner and the Claims” 6). However, Faulkner’s work seems to contradict this statement. The “Old Man” section of *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* [*The Wild Palms*], and the other ecological disturbances found throughout his writing, demonstrate an understanding of disturbances—including floods—as socially linked ecological catastrophes originating from environmental abuse. A good example occurs in the passage from “Old Man” in which the “Tall Convict” surveys the damage of the great Mississippi Flood of 1927:

> It occurred to him that its [the river’s] 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, had waited patiently the ten years in order to do, as a mule will work for you for ten years for the privilege of kicking you once. (135)

In this passage Faulkner delivers a lesson in the cost of poor riparian practices that overtly condemns such mismanagement, a gesture that places him ahead of his time environmentally. So while Faulkner may at times romanticize the natural world through personification, or think “of natural force as potent human adversary” (Buell, “Faulkner and the Claims” 6), he understands that anthropogenic stress creates the ecological disturbances that stand as both cause and effect of environmental and human impoverishment. For Faulkner there are legitimate reasons for anthropomorphizing the land. Such a view allows those who are uneducated—a group that often finds itself abused along with the earth—to grasp a type of ecological understanding. The “Tall Convict,” who repeatedly suffers the hazards of the flood, views the
disturbance as the hand of an outraged and sentient entity. While this romanticized vision of the land is flawed, it still helps the convict understand his place in the flood when he hears the "sound of deliberate and irresistible and monstrously disturbed water" (199).

*I If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* [*The Wild Palms]* takes a more traditional conservationist approach than is normally present in Faulkner's other books. Along with the fascinatingly atypical portions of the book dealing with the mistreatment of Polish miners at a Utah mine, Faulkner drops subtle hints that the other major disturbance of the book, the great flood of the "Old Man" section, is two-fold in origin. When the convicts see the flood's destruction through the prison bus window they witness the surreal image of "a burning plantation house. Juxtaposed to nowhere and neighbored by nothing it stood, a clear steady pyre-like flame rigidly fleeing its own reflection, burning in the dusk above the watery desolation with a quality paradoxical, outrageous and bizarre" (59). Later the "Tall Convict" watches the rapid human-imposed decomposition of a "wooden barn. . . . jammed by the current against the levee while a crowd of negroes swarmed over it, ripping off the shingles and planks . . . the taller convict watched the barn dissolve rapidly down to the very waterline exactly as a dead fly vanished beneath the moiling industry of a swarm of ants" (62). These two passages firmly link the plight of African Americans with the flood. The paradox of a burning plantation house marooned in high waters invokes the end of formal slavery. The "moiling industry" of antlike African Americans, along with the dangerous labor forced upon the convicts themselves, demonstrates that servitude, both human and environmental, remains long after the death of the plantation system.

So rather than fully explaining the overtly environmental causes of flooding such as upstream deforestation, Faulkner instead chooses to address how the exploitation of humans so often accompanies ecological disturbance. In his book on the Mississippi Flood of 1927, John M. Barry makes the sociopolitical character of the disaster painfully clear by devoting much of his history to explaining how the flood illuminated racial injustice against African Americans. For example, Barry writes that in Greenville, Mississippi, African American men were not allowed food unless they bore special tags proving they were flood relief workers: "[t]he tags were given out with a job assignment and also used to keep track of those who had received typhoid shots; they were large, like
laundry tags, worn on shirts. To wear one was humiliating. Without one, a man could get no food for himself or his family” (314-15). Similarly, in analyzing the gender politics of If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem /The Wild Palms/ Cynthia Dobbs points out that through Faulkner’s portrayal of the flooded Mississippi, he reveals how such ecological catastrophes originate from the capitalistic oppression of lower social classes. Dobbs argues that “[w]hile it was a natural event of nearly mythic proportions, the flood was also a sociopolitical event, resulting as much from corrupt public policy as from the whimsy of nature” (814).

Faulkner’s literary symbiosis between African Americans and the land helps reveal his environmental consciousness—his view of the South as a place of complicated racial and natural conflict. Faulkner’s ecosystems, in their intricate relationships with the people of the South, echo Aldo Leopold’s warning that “[t]here is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus’ slave-girls, is still property” (203). Leopold, like Faulkner, invokes the concept of slavery as an abuse akin to the mistreatment of the natural world. However, unlike Leopold’s passive, “good . . . land mechanism” (190), Faulkner’s Southern ecology is a broken timepiece with hands pointing to a troubled past. His environment is infinitely complicated by widespread poverty and racial oppression, conditions in which people gladly forsake the land for a survival of diminishing returns as the soil erodes into a polluted Mississippi River.

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