Concern with spatial relations is nothing new to modernist criticism, and at least since the publication of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), scholars have been attentive to the ways that literature from the United States, the Caribbean, Great Britain, and West Africa collectively helped to codify a space of oceanic scale. Recent interest in transnationalism builds on the insight of social scientists including James Clifford, whose “Traveling Cultures” (1990) emphasizes the circulation and integration of supposedly fixed local cultures in the twentieth century; he proposes that we focus less on discrete “places” and more on “circuits” in order to rethink locations as “sites of travel” (37). He suggests, for example, that modernist Paris be understood as a “site of cultural creation that included the detour and return of Leopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Ousmane Sowé” (31), individuals who, after attending university there, later returned to homes in Senegal or Martinique. Clifford’s model, like Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic grid, emphasizes the circulation of people and ideas. These transnational models undercut the spatial boundaries that nation and region impose.

Writers William Faulkner and Aimé Césaire complicate the circuits described by the likes of Gilroy and Clifford by insisting that spatial boundaries, including the circulatory logistics of travel from place to place, must also register as temporal problems. These authors’ attention to the composition of time reconsiders how the long historical trajectory of capitalist modernity, and especially the defining commerce of
the transatlantic slave trade, shaped modernist thought. In the poem “Ferraments,” for example, Césaire conflates an event from the slave trade with an event from the twentieth century, allowing the poem to suture the ports of early-twentieth-century life in Martinique to a Black Atlantic that abides. Similar moments occur throughout Faulkner’s works as his characters struggle to confront their personal, familial, and regional pasts bound to larger transnational connections. By superimposing the past onto the present so that it becomes difficult, or even impossible, to distinguish between them, Faulkner and Césaire employ a technique of temporal conflation. Temporal conflation serves as a means to preserve what would otherwise become “lost” histories, lost amidst the confluence of commercial interaction that formed the U.S. South and the Caribbean alike.

Reading Faulkner and Césaire together allows us to envision a Black Atlantic that neither of them could imagine on their own and to see that their temporal experiments are not simply local. Together, these writers posit that a geographic region must be defined across time as well as space. Furthermore, the Black Atlantic both informs the content of their works and gives it literary form at the level of the sentence and line, allowing us to read the macrocosmic scales of modernist histories in the microcosmic scales of their writing. In so doing, they demonstrate how an early-twentieth-century investment in richly situated places could be accompanied by an equal interest in temporal complexity—an interest that in turn requires us to reconsider the time of “modernity” as shaping and shaped by modernism.

The twenty-first century has seen modernist studies rapidly expanding across nations and periods (see Douglas Mao, Rebecca Walkowicz, and Susan Stanford Friedman), and American and southern studies follows a similar transnational turn. Donald Pease has observed that although the term “transnational” is ambiguous and “devoid of semiotic unity” it has been consistently used to denote opposition to studies rooted in exceptionalism and the romanticization of nation-states (4). Certainly, the construction of a Black Atlantic is only one such transnational model that seeks to complicate our understanding of modernity. As southern studies increasingly looks toward a Global South, Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn propose that the U.S. South might best be understood as a liminal space situated within modernity, “a space simultaneously (or alternately) center and margin, victor and defeated,
empire and colony” (9), while Katherine McKee and Annette Trefzer have argued simply for “a new Southern studies . . . that embeds the U.S. South in a larger transnational framework” (678). Édouard Glissant also proposes a transnational context when he argues for an archipelagic model of Caribbean literature and identity. Similarly, the “cross-Atlantic” studies of Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd have compared the African and Irish diasporas to reveal their “points of contact, overlap, and cooperation”—as well as competition and exploitation—across the Atlantic” (xvi). Their work marks a “shift from national to oceanic contexts” that continues to emphasize “movement and exchange rather than integration and settlement” to suggest the benefits of understanding the Black and Green Atlantic as a diaspora space (xv).

However, this shared emphasis on spatialization actually overlooks the very time of modernity that it often seeks to describe. Issues of temporality and spatiality converge in the study of conflated time, which also invites formal aesthetics back into these debates in direct and compelling ways.

Examining Césaire’s formulation of Négritude poetics alongside the syntax of Faulkner’s prose reveals how temporal conflation works across region and genre to articulate the temporality of modernism’s Black Atlantic. Situating the contributions of Césaire’s fellow Martiniquais, Édouard Glissant, in conversation with Gilroy further elucidates the importance of temporal conflation in discussions of locality. I bring these writers together to advance our understanding of what it means to assume that Faulkner’s “southern” modernism shares political and formal likenesses with Césaire’s Négritude. For these writers, temporal conflation becomes the means to depict modern events all around the Atlantic as informed by the slave trade, even as the Global South begins to lurch toward decolonization.

CÉSAIRE AND THE CONFLATED CARIBBEAN

Space conquered Time the conqueror
me I like time time is nocturnal
and when Space galloping sets me up
Time comes back to set me free

Césaire, “Summons”

In order to articulate the plight of the “black world,” Césaire must conflate differences between various places and times. Indeed, his earli-
est texts seem to work though an understanding of racial or ethnic memory that conflates particular experience, specifically his own as a Martiniquais at home and abroad, with racial memories of ancient Africa. We see this at work in his poems. For example, in “Ferraments” (1960), he conflates the experience of being transported on a slave ship with the act of two bodies making love, two subjects who remain “today as in the past / slaves stowed with heavy hearts” (260–63, lines 9–10). Being held down with “ferraments” by “the shoulders and the loins” (260, line 5) describes both the shackling of slaves aboard that ship and the tight physical proximity of the subjects’ sexual contact. The narrator announces that the other body—the “you” of the poem—has arrived via the same waves that originally brought the boat (the “always known” boat) into port (260, lines 4–5), further conflating the past and present in this encounter. This potentially penetrative image (that might evoke connotations of heterosexual reproduction and, if so, familial lineage) is instead replaced by the archetypal image of a slave ship that serves as the source of bodies, histories, nausea, and physical intimacy:

and as for you a wave carries you to my feet
that boat by the way I have always known in the half-light of half-sleep
hold me tight by the shoulders by the loins
slaves

where we two in the flank of the gluey night today as in the past
slaves stowed with heavy hearts
all the same my dear all the same we’re off
hardly a bit less nauseated by the pitching (lines 3–6, 9–12)

This boat that has historically transported bodies is “known” by the poet in the semiconscious state between waking and sleeping, between reality and the unconscious, between the individual and historical consciousnesses.

Here, the characters reproduce physical nausea from the ship’s journey through being held down flank by flank, to one another’s pitching bodies, suggesting that the ship can also be “known” through a state between sedation and ecstasy (line 12). Historical consciousness does not interrupt their tryst so much as condition it, as seen in lines 9–10—“slaves stowed with heavy hearts / all the same my dear all the same
we’re off”—which assert that the two act *despite* these “heavy hearts,” despite the historical burden of the Atlantic slave trade’s stowage, which continues to induce their nausea and suffering. The line creates an antagonism and struggle between the two acts even as it brings them together. Ultimately, the phrase “night today as in the past” dissolves linear time in this physical union (line 9). In contrast to Gilroy’s circulating boat, Césaire’s travels the depths of time, circulating not only outside of national boundaries, but across temporal and historical confines as well. These transitory bodies continue to be stowed in ferraments as the poem depicts a moment both present and past—a moment of temporal conflation.

Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of erotohistoriography helps to decipher this encounter by forging complex relationships between sex, “time travel,” and the transatlantic trade. She posits erotohistoriography as a corporeal counterhistory, noting that it “does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter” (96). “Ferraments” certainly posits such an encounter in which the body becomes a site that invokes and seemingly reenacts historical events and power dynamics, and Freeman specifically addresses the complications of sex that “mimics the postures and costuming of chattel slavery” (135). Though she situates these questions in the context of sadomasochism, noting that S/M acts “certainly enact a kind of time traveling” while moving “their players back and forth between some kind of horrific then in the past and some kind of redemptive now in the present” (143), her assertions also apply to the ambiguous sex acts of the glued flanks, loins, and shoulders in “Ferraments.” She offers that some versions of S/M function as “a finely honed erotohistoriographic instrument for encountering the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade” (138).

Temporal conflation is a formal way to encounter that trade outside of conventional history as it specifically addresses the gaps of loss, absence, and missing information within those supposedly linear accounts. After all, Saidiya Hartman reminds us, “in every slave society, slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave’s memory, that is, to erase all the evidence of an existence before slavery” (155). Conflating the past with the present bypasses similar “gaps” within linear history—gaps stemming from absences like a loss of identity, kinship, and ancestry—
by joining discrete moments in time. Temporal conflation offers to “fill” those gaps by manipulating a linear, pitted, and pocked model of time into a plastic and fluid one; this alternative temporal model challenges presumed notions of linear progress. “Ferraments” demonstrates how Césaire uses temporal conflation to directly confront the history of slavery in a form that would be inconceivable within the confines of linear time: he explicitly conflates the Caribbean slave trade with the colonial condition of Martinique to interrogate the idea of progress there by depicting the “heavy hearts” of the former slaves and the colonized as one.

This conflation resonates with the work of Benjamin, who recognized modernity’s anachronistic temporality and observed that “history decomposes into images, not into narratives” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 220). Benjamin’s works on these topics coincide with Césaire’s: Césaire’s Notebook of a Return to My Native Land (Cahier d’un retour au pays natal) was first published in 1939, and Benjamin’s “Some Motifs on Baudelaire” and “Theses on the Philosophy of History” appeared in 1938 and 1940, respectively, while both writers were living under the Vichy regime. Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” contests the assumption that history provides a linear, causal relationship between events, a model that, he argues, orders events “like the beads of a rosary,” to fill in the abstract void of time (263). He objects to a temporal model that envisions time as a spatialized void (i.e., “empty homogenous time”) that forges false causalities, and he instead proposes a model of time that constellates past, present, and future:

A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (Illuminations 263)

This quote depicts a juxtapositional notion of a historiography that interoses past and present in nonlinear ways. Constellations do not establish causal connections or linear time; rather, they help to situate the past in configurations with the present—as does Césaire’s temporal conflation. For Benjamin, this constellation is a result of “shock”—that is, the shock of modern experience, in which one becomes inundated with modern, urban stimuli. For Césaire, however, that “shock” stems from the confla-
tion between modernity and the trauma of the Middle Passage.

For Césaire, this conflation relies on formal experimentation and the rhythmic effects of free verse; his manipulations of syntax and grammar alternatively accelerate and halt poetic meter, forging “gaps” and “openings” that manifest literary moments of conflated time. Consider the following excerpt from Césaire’s most celebrated poem, *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land* (a.k.a. “Return to my Native Land”) (1939):

```
voum rooh ho
voum rooh ho
to charm the snakes to conjure
the dead
voum rooh ho
to compel the rain to upset
the tidal waves
voum rooh ho
to prevent the turning of my shadows
voum rooh oh that my own skies
may break open
—me on a road, a child, chewing
one sugar cane
—man dragged on a bloody road
a rope around his neck
—upright in the centre of an immense
circus, on my black forehead a crown
of daturas (61)
```

The first stanza offers an incantation, or perhaps, as Thomas Hale suggests, the Western stereotype of an African witch doctor (170). The narrator attempts to conjure the past, to address “the dead” and “my shadows” through the chant of “voum rooh ho” before each of four wishes (to charm, to compel, to prevent, and to break open). The repetitions and alternating line lengths create an acceleration in tempo that after “skies break open” immediately drops into an empty visual space—the white page. The physical emphasis on space not only evokes the breaking “open” of the skies, but also creates a visual tension between form and content or between the spatial and the temporal.
After this invocation of the past and a subsequent visual “break,” the next stanza attempts to conflate time. It creates a montage of the narrator’s past (as child), the unidentified corpse of a lynching victim, and the narrator as an immense circus spectacle crowned not with thorns, but daturas (an exotic island flower). These lines move through time via conflation: the narrator is both child and crucified man, and the circus that gawks at him invokes the young boy mocked by his priest and teacher in a previous stanza. The poem’s juxtapositions of African heritage with moments of modern-day Martinique put pressure on linear history by conflating them. The epic poem narrates a Martiniquais’ contempt and disgust for the poverty and racism of the region, with growing, sardonic outrage against its colonizers, then culminates with an affirmation of African identity—a universal cry for “Négritude.”

Formally, the poem’s juxtapositions of prosaic and lyrical lines, along with its passionate repetitions and exclamations, create a radical free-verse piece that, in his introduction to the 1943 edition, André Breton declared “nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of this time” (Hale 163).

The poem’s sudden shifts in structure and tone are indicative of its physical and emotional violence. The tenuous political situation of Martinique throughout the 1930s–40s created a volatile backdrop for “Notebook” and helped contribute to its explosive form. Césaire’s personal involvement in local politics, as well as his collaboration with Pierre Mabille (who wrote extensively on Jung and published often in Tropiques), suggest that in the 1940s Césaire may have desired to create a collective shock throughout Martinique (Arnold 59). This idea of collective shock is expressed in Mabille’s understanding of “egregore,” which, in Arnold’s interpretation, he defines as a “human group possessing a personality different from that of its members taken individually, [which] can arise only when an intense emotional shock has, so to speak, galvanized the collectivity” (59). Interested in the potential of poetic form to enact such a galvanization, Césaire began to explore the notion of a universal unconscious.

In 1944, he delivered the eccentric “Poetry and Knowledge” to an international philosophical conference in Haiti. Influenced by his readings of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Henri Bergson, and even Friedrich Nietzsche, the essay proclaims poetry’s ability to communicate a universal symbolic. He insists upon “hereditary images that only the poetic atmosphere can bring to light again for ultimate decoding” (liii). By
navigating between the “buried knowledge of the ages” and the present, these poetic devices can conflate time—a capability that, for Césaire, makes poetry a singular and “serious business” (liii).

A. James Arnold argues that this ability to invoke a universal unconscious makes poetry uniquely suited to depict the violence of colonization. He describes its potential to connect colonized peoples both collectively and individually to their unknown pasts:

If the poetic exploration of the psyche could unlock the treasure of symbolic knowledge, then perhaps the disinherited sons and daughters of colonialism and slavery could travel a short route to their ancestral past. . . . His own historical past and that of his people having been obliterated, Césaire in the early forties wagered heavily on the power of poetry to find a subterranean passage to his origins. (61)

Arnold’s descriptions of a “short route” and “subterranean passage” to the past might be better described in terms of conflated time. As we have seen in “Ferraments” as well as “Notebook,” conflation enables Césaire to articulate the temporality of a twentieth-century subject defined along the axis of the African diaspora—one who must manage both the (presumably) linear and progressive order of modernity and the historical vertigo and disenfranchisement of the transatlantic slave trade. For this modern subject, notions of origin are never static; rather, they implicitly entail displacement, fragmentation, and circulation.

In a 1956 preface to Daniel Guérin’s Antilles Décolonisées, Césaire clarifies the relationship between the slave trade and the modern Caribbean subject: “this dangling between a past that one denies, and a present that one cannot accept because it does not accept one, one hazards the thought that in the Antillean conscience there still echoes deeply a first shock, that of the slave trade” (Césaire qtd. in Ojo-Ade 12). Here, Césaire explicitly connects the transatlantic trade to a modern subjectivity left “dangling between” past and present—a suspension that emphasizes this trade’s influence on his formal aesthetic.

In his final collection, Moi, laminaria (1982), the poem “i, laminaria” models such a “dangling between” past and present by manipulating spatial and temporal referents. The poem uses the empty space of the page as two-thirds of its aesthetic content: the titular “i, lamin-
naria . . .” is printed on the top of a page that is otherwise empty. This structure is repeated on the poem’s following page, although “i, laminaria . . .” is then italicized. It is only on the third page that after the double emphasis of white space, we encounter the poem’s prosaic content, carefully centered on the page:

Nontime imposes the tyranny of its spatiality on time: in any life there is a north and a south, and the east and the west. . . . Such is this book, between sun and shadow, between mountain and mangrove swamp, between dawn and dusk, lame and divided. Time also to settle one’s account with a few phantoms and a few ghosts. (81)

Settling accounts with the phantoms and ghosts will require temporal conflation. Life is described geographically and then scattered in all directions, as is the material book that contains the poem. As the stanza progresses, the referents change from spatial to temporal, as the cardinal directions give way to temporal signals, such as dusk and dawn. Césaire suggests that although spatiality tyrannizes time, by the poem’s final line, time (though not linear time) reigns once more. Here we might also remember “Summons” (1950), in which he writes that when “Space galloping sets me up / Time comes back to set me free” (32–33; emphasis added).

These quotes also serve to elaborate Faulkner’s infamous lines “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Requiem 92). Faulkner, too, demonstrates that modernity forges temporal relations that vivify not only a “past” but specifically the triangle trade and its pressing influence on modern consciousness. His works draw the stakes of Césaire’s claims into a U.S. context and demonstrate how the circuits of the Black Atlantic pervade the U.S.’s Reconstruction South.

FAULKNER’S NAMELESS ARCHITECT

Already he can feel the two instants about to touch: the one which is the sum of his life, which renews itself between each dark and dusk, and the suspended instant out of which the soon will presently begin.

And I know that for fifty years I have not even been clay: I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed.

Faulkner, *Light in August*
Though Faulkner’s novels center on the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi—lending them an air of fixed locale and establishing his reputation as a regionalist writer—his works, in fact, illustrate the complications of assuming any insular notion of locality. In *The Sound and The Fury* (1939) Quentin travels to Harvard, Caddy travels to Hollywood and Paris, and Miss Quentin runs away with the circus. In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) Thomas Sutpen brings a Martiniquais architect and Haitian slaves to Jefferson and divorces a woman from Haiti to marry one from Tennessee; meanwhile, his sons travel to New Orleans and to Civil War battles across the nation. Lena Grove, who opens *Light in August* (1932), hitchhikes from Alabama to Jefferson, though this novel centers around Joe Christmas, of unknown origins, and whether or not (or why) he murdered Joanna Burden, the daughter of a “Yankee.” In short, Jefferson County and its most familiar residents are in constant flux, and Faulkner’s regionalism is permeated with the circuits of the triangle trade. Like Césaire, Faulkner uses temporal conflation to illustrate that the Black Atlantic forges temporalities that connect the modern era to its precedents.

*Absalom, Absalom!* articulates these connections through the narrative of Thomas Sutpen. Sutpen’s experiences on a sugar plantation in Haiti, a cotton plantation in Mississippi, and in the Confederate States Army emphasize the influence of the triangle trade on the construction of the U.S. South’s plantation economy. Sutpen, a nineteenth-century West Virginian, is in search of the archetypal plantation: his will is bent upon owning one that will both make him rich and sustain that lifestyle for his male (and, for Sutpen, exclusively “white”) heir. Toward these ends, he travels across the Atlantic to Haiti, where he believes men “got rich in the West Indies” (253). There, employed by a French sugar planter, he learns both patois and French and single-handedly suppresses a slave uprising—an uprising that “condenses” time in the following description from Quentin Compson:

No more detail and information about that than about how he [Sutpen] got from the field, his overseeing, into the besieged house when the niggers rushed at him with their machetes, than how he got from the rotting cabin in Virginia to the fields he oversaw: and this, Grandfather said, *more incredible to him than the getting there from Virginia because that did infer time, a space the getting across which did indicate something of leisureliness*
since time is longer than any distance, while the other, the getting from the fields into the barricaded house, seemed to have occurred with a sort of violent abrogation which must have been almost as short as his telling about it—a very condensation of time which was the gauge of its own violence, and he telling it in that pleasant faintly forensic anecdotal manner apparently just as he remembered it . . . because that was all it was to him—a spectacle, something to be watched because he might not have a chance to see such again. . . . (260, emphasis added)

Yet again, we see Gilroy’s transatlantic ship complicated: Faulkner situates the ship’s journey from Virginia to Haiti in time. The ship’s journey implicitly “did infer time,” but rather than conflating it, as in Césaire’s “Ferraments,” this ship carries the white male spectator out to make his fortune; as such, it’s firmly anchored in linear, progressive time—“longer than any distance.” By contrast, the time of the revolt is condensed in a “violent abrogation.” Faulkner’s depiction of the Haitian Revolution (which he enigmatically situates in the mid-nineteenth century, though it occurred in 1791) recalls that French planters were leading buyers of slaves, importing roughly 864,000 in the century prior to the revolution (Prince 11). Haiti thus serves as a symbol of the trade’s extremes: it is cited as the richest plantation colony, as having the highest death rates among slaves, and as holding the first successful revolt against colonial rule. Richard Godden further reminds us that “the Haitian revolution had lasting consequences for the slaveholding states of the South, where, during the 1790s, white panics about slave revolts were endemic. . . . Nor does the Haitian example fade with the onset of the Civil War” (685). Sutpen experiences the revolution and its aftermath (and, Faulkner tells us, naively so) as mere spectacle (evoking Césaire’s “immense circus”). Yet the parallels Sutpen draws between Haitian and Mississippian plantations emphasize that the transatlantic trade and the American Civil War equally inform the narrative of Absalom, Absalom! (and that the two are in many ways inseparable).

While narrating these events in 1834, Thomas Sutpen and Mr. Compson (Quentin’s grandfather) sit beneath a tree in Jefferson, Mississippi—a tree by which “the French architect” has escaped Sutpen’s Hundred (Sutpen’s cotton plantation). The architect arrived a year earlier “all the way from Martinique on Sutpen’s bare promise” in order to
design Sutpen’s plantation home (31). He’s described as a “small, alertly resigned man with a grim, harried Latin face, in a frock coat and a flowered waistcoat and a hat” (31). As Sutpen begins to reminisce about his experiences in Haiti, we learn that the architect has just made use of a bamboo stick and a set of suspenders in order to physically vault himself out of Sutpen’s estate and flee. Sutpen then uses both dogs and slaves to hunt him through the wilderness before finally catching up with him two days later. The nameless architect and sole Martiniquais of the narrative, though he enters the plantation a free man, becomes subsumed into its economy so completely that he’s transformed into “a little harried wild-faced man with a two-days’ stubble of beard, who came out of the cave fighting like a wildcat, hurt leg and all, with the dogs barking and the niggers whooping and hollering with deadly and merry anticipation” (268). (He is, weirdly, released upon the house’s completion, making him legible neither as enslaved nor free and defined neither as black nor white.) Faulkner deliberately intersperses this narrative of the architect throughout the memory of Haiti, linking Martinique to Haiti and linking American anxieties about both the Haitian and French revolutions to its desires for a plantation economy.

Sutpen’s stories thus insist that the triangle trade connects these locations not only in space, but also across time. Faulkner then expands this concept by constructing an elaborate metaphor that depicts time as a series of pools moved and connected by fluid “waves”:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn’t matter: that pebble’s watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space to the old ineradicable rhythm thinking Yes, we are both father. (Absalom 273)

This quote begins with movement originating from a singular event—a pebble breaking the surface of one pool. But this event spreads to a second pool, one that receives, “has fed and did feed” from the first.
Though the second pool is distinct and unique, it also reflects the shock of the stone though it never saw the pebble: the event “echoes” across its surface too. The result is the dissolution of the pools’ boundaries; both incorporate the shock waves of the stone despite their distinct locations, linking them by event. Faulkner’s play with verb conjugations and syntax demonstrates the dissolution of distinctions between past and present as well; verb tenses becomes confused and interchangeable. The initial claim: “Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished” is enacted throughout the passage, becoming “maybe happen is never once” as the pools “feed” and “have fed” and “did feed” before dissolving into “Yes, we are both father.”¹⁵ One event is never unique or distinct in time: rather, events move through time to happen “never once”—and not repetitively, but to effect past and present synchronously (and perhaps offering another account for Faulkner’s misdating of the Haitian Revolution). Faulkner’s model uses the spatial figure of the pool (or, we could suggest, the Atlantic) to express a temporal relation (in which the past ripples through the present) and simultaneously illustrates how a “past” event can redefine and complicate spatial relationships.

Like Césaire, Faulkner uses temporal conflation to link subjectivities across time and space. The passage’s proposition “maybe nothing ever happens once” concludes with “yes, we are both father.” Each moment here engenders the others continuously as one event.¹⁶ Individual subjectivities conflate along with time, as Quentin asserts that he and his university roommate, Shreve, are both his father. Yet this is not an inheritance, but a conflation, as elaborated in the passage’s next lines as Quentin continues: “Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us” (273). The “making” might go forward, backward, or unilaterally as it ripples through time and space—even highlighting spatial relationships between Canada (Shreve’s birthplace), Haiti, and the United States.

This conflation of subjectivities also arises in Light in August, in which Gail Hightower, Jefferson’s disgraced minister, seamlessly travels between the early years of his career, his retirement, and his grandfather’s death (which occurred before he was born). He has the capability to fluidly move from one temporal realm to another because, as we are informed, he lives beyond the reach of mechanical (i.e., linear) time: “He knows almost to the second when he should begin to hear it, with-
out recourse to watch or clock. He uses neither, has needed neither for twentyfive years now. He lives dissociated from mechanical time” (346). This allows Hightower to effortlessly conflate his present with events outside of his own lifetime—events he cannot possibly remember—by continually invoking the instant of his grandfather’s death during the Civil War. In Hightower’s final analysis, he confesses: “And I know that for fifty years I have not even been clay: I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed. And if I am my dead grandfather on the instant of his death, then my wife, his grandson’s wife . . . the debaucher and murderer of my grandson’s wife, since I could neither let my grandson live or die” (465). As Hightower becomes his grandfather by conflating his own fifty years into that “single instant of darkness,” his wife becomes “his grandson’s wife,” and his inability to live or die becomes his grandfather’s disapproval of both possibilities.

Yet, Hightower’s grandfather did not die in battle but in a chicken coop, shot while stealing birds during a cavalry raid. Jeffrey Folks points out that Hightower’s obsession with his grandfather’s inglorious death ironically mocks the “mythology of the Lost Cause” (15), revealing Faulkner’s skepticism towards the glorification of the Confederacy by making the Confederate officer not a hero but a fool (and a thief at that). The death becomes a parodic symbol, but it also conflates all of Hightower’s existence into a single moment—that happened to someone else. By living as his dead grandfather “on the instant of his death,” Hightower conflates his modern subjectivity with that of his ancestor and modernity with the American Civil War. In a novel that interrogates racial identity in the Reconstruction South (as Light in August so chillingly does), this move further highlights the influence of the transatlantic trade on modern consciousness. Light in August uses temporal conflation to interrogate notions of progress while creating a formal means to encounter the past—and even one’s ancestors—outside of conventional history.

Temporal conflation in Faulkner and Césaire reminds us that the transatlantic slave trade constructs modernity and that any understanding of modern space, including that of its circulation and production, necessarily invokes the temporal circuits of the Black Atlantic. For Faulkner, and his characters of Jefferson, Mississippi, the conflation of time responds to the decline of the Southern United States throughout the Post-Reconstruction and Progressive eras. Each of Faulkner’s novels
vivifies not only the Confederacy’s loss of the Civil War, but also the persistent influence of the triangle trade. In a U.S. context, the loss of the “Confederate South” is, of course, the loss of a system built, fortified, and sustained by that trade. By invoking the persisting influence of the triangle trade, Faulkner connects the U.S. South to its larger global network. Racial difference was the linchpin upon which the Confederacy rose to economic and political power, and upon which the affluence of the Sutpen and Compson families were also built. Hence the transatlantic trade indirectly informs any literature about the South’s plantation economy, its institutionalized slavery, or its racial dynamics, just as it informs racial politics throughout the twentieth century (and continues to inform them today). Faulknerian characters mourn the South’s former prosperity and prestige as they awkwardly acclimate to a twentieth century that economically and politically leaves them “behind.” When Faulkner’s constructions of conflated time manage the loss of the “Old South,” they reference, too, the slave trade upon which it was built.

SHIPS AS ORIGINS, REGIONS AS FICTIONS

Faulkner’s interrogations of history, lineage, and ancestry complicate modern conceptions of temporal relations and spatial networks. Comparing him to Édouard Glissant, a Martiniquais writer and critic who wrote the influential Faulkner, Mississippi (1999),17 J. Michael Dash argues that “both Glissant and Faulkner are calling into question, in the Caribbean and the South respectively, a nostalgia for pure origins or sacred filiation and suggesting that the obsessive quest for such origins can lead only to unstable narratives that ultimately make identitarian insularity impossible” (“Martinique” 97). Dash points out that both writers undermine fixed notions of place as well as static ideas of origin, an investment that Glissant also observes when he praises Absalom, Absalom!. Glissant notes that in Faulkner’s writings “linearity gets lost. The longed-for history and its nonfulfillment are knotted up in an inextricable tangle of relationships, alliances and progeny” (Caribbean Discourse 80). Indeed, the self-destruction of Faulknerian protagonists like Thomas Sutpen, Quentin Compson, Joe Christmas, and Gail Hightower all depict the calamitous nature of such obsessions with a “longed-for history.” Yet though Glissant praises Faulkner’s manipulations of linearity, time, and filiation, he also predictably critiques Faulkner’s geographic insularity, arguing that his texts turn a blind eye to the rest
of the Americas (Dash, “Martinique” 96). As we have seen, this critique is not entirely accurate, as Faulkner’s works certainly make gestures beyond Jefferson, including elaborate references to the Haitian slave trade in the very novel that Glissant praises.

In fact, Glissant’s spatial models of the Caribbean require him to eschew time, a deliberate move that helps him to position the Caribbean as part of the Americas without clear ties to either Europe or Africa. Denying those ties has proved controversial in debates surrounding Caribbean identity, but in his defense Glissant asserts:

If it is ridiculous to claim that a people “has no history,” one can argue that, in certain contemporary situations, while one of the results of global expansion is the presence (and the weight) of an increasingly global historical consciousness, a people can have to confront the problem posed by this consciousness . . . because the lived circumstances of this daily reality do not form part of a continuum, which means that its relation with its surroundings (what we would call its nature) is in a discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call its culture . . .) (Discourse 61)

Glissant addresses this discontinuation of daily reality through spatialization; he argues for archipelagic and rhizomatic understandings of Caribbean identity. In “Le retour et le détour” (1981), he supports this distinction by specifically differentiating “transplanted” peoples from those who are “transferred”: “There is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities . . . We abandon the idea of fixed being” (Caribbean Discourse 14). Glissant rejects Césaire’s Négritude for producing such a “fixed being” dependent upon a common origin for blackness. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Glissant critiques notions of pure origins and insists on a conception of identity that is, rather, fragmented, complex, and heterogeneous. Dash points out that Glissant’s thought is “predicated on a dislocation or deconstruction of the notion of individual agency in a post-Cartesian, post-Sartrean sense” (which, according to Femi Ojo-Ade serves to highlight Glissant’s own Eurocentric bias) (Introduction xii). Though Glissant’s rhizomatic and archipe-
logic metaphors undeniably open new and productive discourses on Caribbean identity, they also shut down the explicit confrontation of time’s concrete effects and fall prey to, as Harry Harootunian puts it, “substituting spatial self-referentiality for the changes unleashed by temporal disruptions” (“Modernity” 381). In short, despite an emphasis on space, Glissant misses Haiti, and even Martinique, in Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!

Like Glissant and Faulkner, Paul Gilroy interrogates preoccupations with origin, most notably in The Black Atlantic (1993). He views an investment in origin as containing a traditionalist impulse and denounces it both for maintaining a model of linear progress and for its implicit desire to minimize or even erase the memory of slavery (by reducing it to simply an obstacle to progress). He explains:

When the emphasis shifts towards the elements of invariant tradition that heroically survive slavery, any desire to remember slavery itself becomes something of an obstacle. It seems as if the complexity of slavery and its location within modernity has to be actively forgotten if a clear orientation to tradition and thus to the present circumstances of blacks is to be acquired. (189)

He positions Pan-Africanist movements like Négritude as indicative of this quest for tradition and origin. I, instead, argue that renditions of Pan-Africanism that temporally conflate are neither linear nor forgetful. For example, like Gilroy, Césaire emphasizes the influence of the slave trade on the circulation of modernity, and acknowledges what Gilroy, in the tradition of W.E.B. DuBois, terms the double-consciousness of the modern black subject. Temporal conflation is the formal means through which Césaire is able to articulate both a modern, fragmented black subject and a vision of that subject’s (Pan-African) Négritude. Césaire’s preoccupation with origin in “Ferraments” functions as a preoccupation with the slave ship as origin and depicts its inherently diasporic nature. Césaire complicates Gilroy’s critiques by depicting a temporally conflated, and so nonlinear, version of Négritude that recognizes “origin” as circulation, emphasizing that modernity’s fragmentation in no way cuts it off from history.

Both Glissant and Gilroy speak to the importance (and uncer-
tainty) of locality, just as Clifford reminds us that locations are not fixed. In “Traveling Cultures” Clifford poses what more recent scholarship has since upheld: that no region exists as unique or exceptional; each is a series of social and political circuits, continually in cultural and economic exchange with other locations. Clifford, Glissant, and Gilroy all urge us to think of texts such as Faulkner’s and Césaire’s as sites of travel and assure us that when we make assertions about locality, what we actually refer to is “the wider global world of intercultural import-export in which the ethnographic encounter is always already enmeshed” (Clifford 23). As emerging work in cross-Atlantic and new American studies demonstrates, thinking beyond the romanticization of pure origin and national identity helps us to envision a dynamic, circulating modernity that resists notions of exceptionalism. But for Faulkner and Césaire, this intercultural network necessarily includes trade ships and slaves located in time that underpin the modern cultural identity and politics of a Global South.

Though modernity is often perceived as a “rupture” with the past that launches the Western world into the future, modernist writers such as Faulkner and Césaire challenge this notion by using temporal conflation—a method that forces us to reconsider the origins of modernity itself. Those origins include not only the Great War and industrialization, but also the triangle trade, meaning that modernists cannot render the “shock” of modernity without addressing the slave trade that linked, and in many ways produced, the modern world. Referencing the triangle trade produces a different spatial-temporal logic, which emphasizes dependencies and interconnections rather than breaks and boundaries. Yet this recognition in transnational scholarship too often enriches spatiality at the expense of the equally crucial component of time. The circuits of the Black Atlantic join that trade not only spatially and transnationally but also temporally and historically. Authors like Césaire and Faulkner recognize the origins of modernization along the axis of the African diaspora and formally render both its impact and its non-linearity through their use of temporal conflation. Employing neither linear nor cyclical time, they conflate in order to depict the complexities of a modern subject position produced by the legacy of the Black Atlantic—one in which going forward and moving back coincide.

University of California, Davis
NOTES

1. Gilroy argues that the Black Atlantic’s reliance on circulation and exchange undermines notions of national and ethnic particularity. Perhaps most famously, he offers the chronotope of the sailing ship as a means to understand the “Middle Passage” in relation to transatlantic modernity.

2. See Mao and Walkowicz, as well as Friedman.

3. Pease historicizes the term “transnational” with respect to its nineteenth-century origins in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. For Pease, the term is problematic since it may even “produce the referents that it purports to represent” and so bear “the traces of the violent sociohistorical processes to which it alludes” (4).

4. For more on diaspora space, see Avtar Brah’s Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities.

5. Though Césaire’s formulation of Négritude was the foundation for a revolutionary and pivotal movement throughout the early twentieth century, later criticism has viewed it as increasingly fraught: Franz Fanon has derided Césaire for racializing complex problems of class and nation (150), while Lucian Tayler argues that “the disenchanted, uprooted Antilles may not be reenchanted by way of some African rooting” (qtd. in Ojo-Ade 6).

6. Though Césaire’s dramatic works address similar themes, their explicit political content lends them to other discussions less concerned with form.

7. For more on the effects of poetic syntax, see Deleuze’s notion of “convulsive syntax” in “Whitman.”

8. Césaire is most celebrated for his conception of Négritude, coined in his first published essay, “Nègreries” (1935), as an affirmation of the African diaspora. He sought to reappropriate the derogatory French term nègre as one of empowerment for all people of African descent. According to Césaire, he invented the concept with Léopold Sédar Senghor (who later became president of Senegal) and Léon Damas (from French Guiana) while the three lived in Paris, and he later defined “Négritude” loosely as “a form of humanism” and “the discovery of Africa by Africans” (interviews).

9. From the early 1940s onward, Césaire’s publications become increasingly involved with the surrealist movement, stemming from his budding friendship with André Breton. Césaire would later explain, “I was a Surrealist without realizing it!” (interviews).

10. Césaire spent 1931–39 studying in Paris, though in Martinique, poverty and segregation fed racial and class tensions (as evidenced in the 1934 murder of communist journalist André Aliker). From 1940 to 1943 Martinique was a colonial regime under Vichy France until a U.S. naval blockade forced the island to switch its allegiance to Free France. In 1946 it became a department of France.

11. Tropiques, a cultural and literary review, was edited by Césaire and René
Ménil. It ran from 1941 to 1945, closing in the year that Césaire was elected mayor of Fort-de-France (a position he held for fifty-six years).

12. *Laminaria* is a genus of brown algae; its sticks can be used to dilate the cervix (for inducing labor or performing an abortion). This gives the poem additional connotations of birth and death.

13. Critics cite this mistake as either accidental or counterrevolutionary. For more on this debate, see Godden.

14. Césaire also views Haiti as symbolic: in “Notebook” he refers to it as the island “where Négritude stood up for the first time” (66).

15. The model also illustrates the structure of Faulkner’s sentences, which here juxtapose the present, perfect, and past tenses (“feeds, has fed, did feed”). The ineradicable rhythm Faulkner describes is mimicked by his own lines, whose cadences struggle against linear progression or “flow.” This quote interrupts itself with repetitions of “maybe” and abrupt revisions of verb tense; it further decelerates forward momentum by denying the sentence an end: deliberate use of punctuation slows the lines down with excessive commas and a colon (and elsewhere semicolons and parentheses), extending and expanding it (ripple style). Faulkner’s sentences deliberately interrupt themselves and switch tense whenever they reach the brink of progression.

16. Critical scholarship often argues that Faulkner structures time cyclically, a move aligned with models of natural or “women’s” time (Clarke 25). These assertions address Faulkner’s resistance to linear narrative, but it seems that a notion of cyclical time, one in which events repeat or loop endlessly, is too simplistic to capture Faulkner’s aims. I argue that Faulknerian characters often resist natural cycles as clearly as they resist linear progression; these characters instead attempt to bridge or cross over linear barriers by depicting past and present simultaneously.

17. Glissant, Césaire’s contemporary, came to critical prominence in the late twentieth century for his essays and criticism (though he is also known as a poet and novelist and was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992). Glissant has ties to both the Créolité and Antillanité movements and a documented intellectual and political rivalry with Césaire.

18. Both Fabian and Harootunian warn us against the dangers of privileging spatial categories over temporal ones. Fabian argues that the discipline of anthropology often distorts time by favoring metaphors that subordinate it to the visual or spatial; specifically, he cites nineteenth-century anthropologists who describe physical travel as a way to “go back in time.” Fabian illustrates how these spatial renderings deny coevality and enforce a false model of linear “progress” from primitive to civilized societies. Furthermore, Harootunian asserts that privileging space at the expense of time also risks overlooking time’s concrete effects; one result of this is an implicit assumption of “timelessness,” or the illusion of static time, sans turbulence, that undermines the impacts of economic systems. Spatializing holds an implicit temporality; when we ignore that and privilege timelessness, we falsely hold space as independent of temporal constructs and effects.
works cited


