The Theme of the Ancestral Crime in the Novels of Faulkner, Glissant and Condé

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William Faulkner, Édouard Glissant and Maryse Condé all come from that part of the world that we can define as the American Tropics, and therefore share a common history of plantation slavery. Within that history, however, they occupy very different positions – Faulkner as the descendant of slave-owners, Glissant and Condé as the descendants of slaves. In addition, the American South and the Caribbean have very different attitudes towards the question of racial mixing, pejoratively known as miscegenation in the United States and positively as métissage or creolization in the Caribbean. The South’s fear of miscegenation leads to an obsession with what Glissant calls ‘filiation’, that is, maintaining clear continuous lines of descent, especially male descent, which he sees as the opposite of creolization; these two antagonistic principles are a prominent theme in many of his essays (see, e.g., Glissant, 1996b).

Glissant has also written on Faulkner throughout his career, culminating in 1996 with Faulkner, Mississippi (Glissant, 1996a; henceforth FM), and the opposition and interplay of filiation and creolization are central to his account of Faulkner. He sees Faulkner’s novels as showing the inevitable perversion of filiation, and the impossibility of founding a ‘pure’ lineage. Thus, Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom is a particularly important text for Glissant, because of its hero Thomas Sutpen’s desperate desire to found a lineage, and the tragic consequences of this (FM, 151). In other words, he reads Faulkner’s work as dominated by the issue of the origin of Southern society; Faulkner’s sense of the damnation of the South, he argues, stems from the impossibility of founding a legitimate filiation – and this in turn
is impossible because the whole society has been brought into existence by a crime: an ‘original sin’.

What this crime is, however, is never entirely clear. Looking at Faulkner’s work as a whole, Glissant shows how it sometimes appears to be simply miscegenation: ‘Dans la métaphysique délirante du Sud, il est une logique indéniable: que c’est impossible de fonder lignée à partir du mélange’ (FM, 122–23) [In the surreal metaphysics of the South, miscegenation truncates the family line (Glissant, 2000: 87)]. Elsewhere, however, the ‘curse’ might be something the settlers brought with them to America (FM, 163); or it might stem from the way in which they acquired land (FM, 163–64); but this – stealing the land from the native Americans – is in turn juxtaposed with another original sin: the institution of slavery. Thus, after evoking the first question of how Faulkner is to represent the crime of stealing the land, Glissant adds: ‘S’ajoute une autre béance [...] comment comprendre ou au moins envisager cette “damnation” du Sud? Est-elle liée à l’obscur enchevêtrement de l’esclavage, de ses racines, de sa tourmentée histoire?’ [To all this, a gaping wound is added [...] How can one understand, or at least envision, the South’s “damnation”? Is it connected to the South’s dark entanglement with slavery, inextricable from its roots and its tormented history? (Glissant, 2000: 22)] – and concludes that Faulkner never gives an answer to these ‘questions primordiales’ (FM, 37) [primordial questions (Glissant, 2000: 22)].

So there are three possible candidates for the status of the original sin: miscegenation, the theft of the land, and slavery. Throughout Faulkner, Mississippi, they reappear in varying combinations: miscegenation is the result of slavery – ‘la damnation, le métissage, né du viol de l’esclavage’ (FM, 124) [the damnation and miscegenation born of the rape of slavery (Glissant, 2000: 88)] – but is that the only reason why slavery is a crime? In fact, slavery is more often seen as a parallel crime to the appropriation of the land, a ‘perversion’, which undermines the attempt to found a legitimate community, but one which is ‘liée (sourdement, obscurément), à une injustice, une oppression, en l’occurrence, l’esclavage’ (FM, 169) [tied (secretly and nebulously) to injustice and oppression – namely, slavery (Glissant, 2000: 122)]. The two crimes are brought together in Go Down, Moses, where the Indian chief sells to the white settlers both the land which is not his to sell, and slaves (FM, 165). But in general terms there is no necessary link between them.

Moreover, none of these entangled possible causes is ever stated explicitly. They combine to create a pervasive sense of damnation and rottenness, as in Hamlet’s Denmark (FM, 181); but ‘Faulkner ne le dit jamais (le criant si souvent, obscurément), parce qu’il souffre dans sa chair (dans son Sud) de le penser vraiment’ (ibid.) [Faulkner never says this (he shouts it out indistinctly
every so often) because he suffers in his flesh (his South) from thinking in this way (Glissant, 2000: 132)]. Here, Glissant raises the question of how Faulkner’s own position affects his representation of Southern society, and argues that because of his implication in and intense emotional attachment to the South his novels cannot confront the question openly. As a citizen, Faulkner shared the conventionally loyal and racist views of the Southern plantocracy in general. In his writing, however, the conflict between his moral principles – in particular, his hatred of injustice – and his social position produces a fundamental ambiguity of which he does not seem to be fully conscious (FM, 308–09). Thus, Faulkner is not in control of his writing (FM, 137), which as a result both reveals and conceals the original crime(s), constantly gesturing towards a truth whose revelation is constantly deferred: ‘ce que l’écrivain William Faulkner s’est attaché, avec une si sauvage ténacité, à occulter tout en le révélant: le différé de la damnation du Sud’ (FM, 28) [what led the writer William Faulkner, with such savage tenacity, to hide even while revealing it: the deferral of the South’s damnation (Glissant, 2000: 15)].

This ‘différé’ is, according to Glissant, a major structural principle of Faulkner’s work. It underlies various prominent features of his writing, such as the curious indeterminacy of his characters (FM, 37–38) and the inconclusive nature of his narratives (FM, 53). But its central dynamic is the concealment–revelation of the secret crime: ‘Indiquer et dérober un secret ou une connaissance, c’est-a-dire en différer le relèvement [...] ce sera le motif, pour l’essentiel, des modes techniques autour desquels s’organisera son écriture’ (FM, 14) [To point out and to hide a secret or a bit of knowledge (that is, to postpone its discovery): this is [...] the motif around which his writing is organised (Glissant, 2000: 6)]. Thus the crime is figured in the novels by a secret truth buried in the past and only revealed towards the end of the novel, after a long and convoluted process of partial disclosures, hints and clues; but, even then, the revelation of this particular secret, for example Sutpen’s first marriage to the not-wholly-white Eulalia Bon in Absalom, Absalom – is only implicitly and ambiguously connected to the basic crime which causes the damnation of the South. This kind of compulsive ambiguity and deferment is reminiscent of the theory of the Marxist critic Pierre Macherey, with his emphasis on the determining force of the ‘silences’ in the work; in the chapter of his Pour une théorie de la production littéraire entitled ‘Dire et ne pas dire’ (Macherey, 1966: 105–10), he argues that what is overtly present in the literary work emerges from a ‘fond de silence’ [background of silence], which is ‘ce qui donne un sens au sens’ [what gives a meaning to the meaning] (ibid.: 106).1

1 Macherey’s theory has been adapted to a specifically postcolonial context by Gayatri Spivak (Spivak 1988: 286).
The work says what it does because of what it cannot say, and this structure is produced by a contradiction between the author’s ideology, determined by his or her class position, and the ability of literary form to distance and put into question that ideology.

As Macherey would, Glissant explains Faulkner’s work as determined by his social position as a member of the Southern white landowning classes in the lengthy aftermath of their defeat in the Civil War. Had Faulkner not been so loyal to traditional white Southern society and so troubled by its decline, he would not have needed to repress or ‘différer’ the truths of its original sins. Therefore, despite the fact that Faulkner and Glissant are both formed by their history of plantation slavery in the American Tropics, one would not expect to find any similarities between their novels, because their social positions within this geographical-historical complex are so different: as a black descendant of slaves, Glissant has no reason to feel implicated in the crimes of the white plantation owners.

In fact, however, critics such as J. Michael Dash and Chris Bongie, while also stressing the differences between the two writers, have argued that Glissant’s early fiction is heavily influenced by Faulkner (Dash, 1995: 74–79; Bongie, 1998: 167–69, 189–93). The clearest example of this is the novel which Bongie describes as ‘Glissant’s resolutely Faulknerian Quatrième Siècle’ (Bongie, 1998: 167). In their discussion of Le Quatrième Siècle, both critics point to the overwhelming influence of the past on the present – a past, however, that cannot be represented straightforwardly or with any certainty (Dash, 1995: 74–75; Bongie, 1998: 189). Dash adds to this the concern with filiation and legitimacy, and conversely with interracial contact (Dash, 1995: 75); Bongie notes ‘the importance of family genealogies’ to both Le Quatrième Siècle and Absalom, Absalom (Bongie, 1998: 167–68), and mentions Glissant’s analysis of the secret and its revelation in Faulkner’s novels (ibid.: 167).

There is, however, another Faulknerian echo in Le Quatrième Siècle, which relates more directly to Glissant’s analysis in Faulkner, Mississippi: the motif of the ancestral crime or the ‘original sin’. One of the more surprising features of Le Quatrième Siècle is that in it Glissant chooses to appropriate and rework Faulkner’s obsession with the crime that lies buried at the source of a community’s evolution over time; the crime, in other words, that is ‘original’ in the sense that it has to do with the foundation of a lineage – in fact, in Le Quatrième Siècle, of two lineages. The novel tells the stories of two families who are descended from two African captives brought to Martinique on the same slave ship; the fact that we never learn their original African names is in itself a sign that transportation breaks the chain of filiation and so necessitates the founding of new lineages, named as the Longoués and the Béluses. The first Longoué and the first Béluse are enemies because of
something that happened in Africa before they were captured, but for most of the narrative we do not know what that was. Only the narrator, Papa Longoué, knows; and he does not disclose it to his listener, Mathieu Béluse, until three-quarters of the way through the novel (Glissant, 1964: 245–46), when we and Mathieu learn that the two African ancestors were once close friends, but that after ‘Longoué’ was chosen to be the new chief of the tribe ‘Béluse’, out of envious rage, sold his friend to the slave raiders – but then was also taken himself, and they ended up on the same ship. The whole Béluse family, in other words, is descended from the man who betrayed his friend by selling him into slavery. This, then, is the ancestral crime that haunts Le Quatrième Siècle. The similarities with Faulkner are clear: the narrative of founding a new lineage, not here as a result of colonization but of the trauma of transportation (hence the novel’s repeated emphasis on the theme of ‘enracinement’ [rootedness]); and, particularly, the fact that the Béluse lineage is based on an original crime that is secret, unknown to the descendants and revealed only belatedly and briefly.

It does not follow, however, that Glissant’s novels are also driven by the principle of the ‘différé’, the compulsive, constrained need to ‘say without saying’ that drives Faulkner’s tortuous scenarios of gradual revelation; Glissant himself is not caught up in the moral and social contradictions that in his reading of Faulkner’s work underlie the dynamic of the ‘différé’. One indication of this is the contrast between Faulkner’s lack of clarity concerning the nature of the original crime – hesitating, as I have shown, between slavery, miscegenation and the theft of the land – and the way in which in Glissant’s novel it is quite unambiguously defined as African complicity in slavery, with a lucidity which suggests a much freer, less constrained authorial position.

At several points in Faulkner, Mississippi, however, Glissant emphasizes his view that the ‘différé’ is the most positive feature of Faulkner’s writing, because the fracture that it introduces into the novels opens them up to the possibility of future change, including an intuition of creolization (FM, 225–26, 304–05). This may explain why, in addition to his reworking of the story of the original crime, Glissant also adopts the ‘différé’ as a structural principle. The revelation of Béluse’s treachery in Le Quatrième Siècle is deferred until almost the end of the novel, just as the revelation of Charles Bon’s mixed blood is in Absalom, Absalom. In Glissant’s novel, however, the deferral strikes the reader less as an obscure impulse to delay or play down the truth than as a calculated mise en scène of repression: no longer the author’s repression, in other words, but that of the characters. As in Glissant’s reading of Faulkner, the repression is to do with slavery; unlike in Faulkner’s case, however, it is not the result of guilt: there is no reason why
Ancestral Crime in the Novels of Faulkner, Glissant and Condé

the descendants of slaves (apart from individuals such as Béluse who raise the sensitive issue of African complicity in it)² should feel guilty about slavery. But Glissant has elsewhere written a great deal about their repression of the shame of slavery and the importance of overcoming it, most recently in Mémoires des esclavages. In this text he makes a direct connection between Faulkner’s ‘différé’, now described as ‘une nouvelle technique de l’écriture et un style nouveau, qui sont bien de dire sans dire tout en disant’ [a new writing technique and a new style, which are to say without saying while still saying] (Glissant, 2007: 61; italics in original), and slavery, not just in Faulkner’s work but in a far more general manner: no one who has been in any way implicated, however distantly, in any system of slavery, he argues, is capable of having a normal, ‘neutre ou sereine’ [neutral or serene], memory of it (ibid.: 63). Rather, he continues in a long italicized sentence,

Nous avons à nous dire tout esclavage, parce que nous essayons d’être lucides et d’être participants, sans nous le dire pourtant, parce que dans tous les cas nous en avons honte […], et le disant quand même, parce que nous tenons au sens du temps et à la signification des histoires des peuples.³

(Glissant, 2007: 63–64)

In this sense the deliberate appropriation of Faulkner’s ‘différé’ allows Glissant to stage the different drama of the slaves’ descendants’ repression of the trauma of slavery. But he also makes another use of it, one that is far more ironic. In Le Quatrième Siècle the deferred revelation of the original Beluse’s crime is strangely anti-climactic: on the one hand the reader finally finds out the reason for the enmity between Longoué and Béluse, but the impact of the revelation is immediately followed by the realization that it is simply not relevant to the present-day characters’ lives: referring to the slave ship which brought the two ancestors to Martinique, Papa Longoué finishes his

² It is worth noting, however, that in a brief chapter in La Case du commandeur Glissant returns to this theme, tracing another genealogy, that of the Celat family, back to the same crime: their ancestor Odono is one of two friends who give themselves the same name, but then fall in love with the same woman; out of jealousy, one of them sells the other into slavery (Glissant, 1981: 138–42). As in the earlier novel, both end up in Martinique. But here no one knows which one was the victim and which the betrayer; the guilt of complicity in slavery is in this case not limited to one particular individual, but hangs ambiguously over the community as a whole.

³ ‘We have to speak to each other about all slavery, because we try to be lucid and engaged, yet without speaking about it, because in every case we are ashamed of it […], and yet still speaking about it, because we care about the sense of time passing and the significance of the peoples’ histories.’
story by saying ‘Mais lequel ici se souvient du bateau?’ (Glissant, 1964: 247) [But who here remembers the boat? (Glissant, 2001: 250)]. This ironic, empty anticlimax is the sign of a conception of history which is very different from Faulkner’s. On the one hand, Glissant accuses Faulkner of depriving black people of their history, criticizing ‘cette manière de “chosification” qui “sort” une communauté de son histoire’ (FM, 84) [We know how reductive objectification “removes” a community from its context (Glissant, 2000: 58)]; and his own novels very consciously reinstate black people as agents of history.4 But while Le Quatrième Siècle does indeed emphasize the need to retrieve a lost history, it accords equal importance to the ability to leave it behind: as Mycéa says, ‘le fait est qu’il faut apprendre ce que nous avions oublié, mais que, l’apprenant, il faut l’oublier encore’ (Glissant, 1964: 285) [the fact is we have to learn what we have forgotten, but that, learning it, we have to forget it again (Glissant, 2001: 291)]. Thus, whereas the South for Faulkner is trapped in a static historical impasse, Glissant’s characters have the ‘resilience and creativity’, in Dash’s words, to instigate change.5

Moreover, the way in which Le Quatrième Siècle demonstrates that time moves on is centrally to do with the original crime of the first Béluse. There is no indication that Mathieu feels responsible for, or shocked by, the betrayal perpetrated by his ancestor. The enmity between the families dies out and Papa Longoué ‘adopts’ Mathieu, because his own son has been killed fighting in the First World War. Thus, while his situation as the last of his line could be seen as an eminently Faulknerian example of failed filiation, here the failure is repaired by the adoption of the descendant of the original traitor Béluse; and this in turn means that where Glissant differs most strikingly from Faulkner is in the complete absence of the idea of damnation. Indeed, the Béluse family, far from being cursed, develop and thrive, adapting to new

4 As Bongie notes, Le Quatrième Siècle ‘critically supplements [Absalom, Absalom], in its revisionist emphasis on the centrality of a black experience that remains for the most part on the silent or inarticulate margins of the Southern writer’s oeuvre’ (Bongie, 1998: 189) and ‘offers us the hope of a solution that, as Glissant points out, is apparently absent from Faulkner’s novels ([L’Intention poétique], p. 178) [...] in which the past becomes the redemptive ground out of which a different set of relations – and a revolutionized future – might be thought to emerge’ (ibid.: 191).

5 ‘There is generally a resilience and creativity in Glissant’s characters that make them very different from Faulkner’s doomed protagonists’ (Dash, 1995: 74). Dash also contrasts Glissant’s ‘open-ended universe’ (ibid.: 77) with Faulkner’s atmosphere of doom.
Ancestral Crime in the Novels of Faulkner, Glissant and Condé

historical circumstances: it is the Longoués, descended from the original innocent victim, who die out as a distinct lineage.

But this – the end of the Longoué filiation – does not matter: because, as we read on the last page of *Le Quatrième Siècle*, they are somehow diffused into the lives of everyone else: ‘Taris, les Longoué reposaient en tous …’. It is also extremely significant that the two examples which the text goes on to give of this process of diffusion concern, first, the descendants of the original enemy, Béluse, and secondly of the mixed-race Targin family: ‘Dans un Béluse, dont le vertige et l’impatience portaient la connaissance jusqu’au bord du chemin où elle était bientôt partagée entre tous. Dans un Targin, corps impavide, créé pour l’acte’ (Glissant, 1964: 287) [The Longoués who had run dry were buried in everyone. [...] In a Béluse whose exhilaration and impatience took knowledge right to the edge of the road where soon it was shared with everyone. In a Targin, an impasive body created for action (Glissant, 2001: 293)]. Filiation, in other words, has given way to the creolization that is so antipathetic to Faulkner (*FM*, 117). Creolization has ‘mixed up’ the original African lines of filiation and given them new sources of strength, as Mycéa reflects: ‘Puisque la mer avait brassé les hommes venus de si loin et que la terre d’arrivage les avait fortifiés d’une autre sève’ (Glissant, 1964: 285; my italics) [Because the sea had intermingled the men who had come from so far away, and the land to which they were delivered had strengthened them with different sap (Glissant, 2001: 292)]. Faulkner’s sense of damnation, in other words, is dependent upon the supremacy of filiation, which in Glissant’s fiction, as in his essays, gives way to the reality of creolization in which the notion of an ancestral curse affecting subsequent generations of one particular family can no longer be sustained.

Maryse Condé’s allusions to Faulknerian themes in her novels are equally ironic, but differ from Glissant’s in that she is not at all interested in the idea of founding a lineage: the hidden crimes, in her case, are not original – but they are ancestral. Also, unlike Glissant, Condée has not written extensively on Faulkner, but in interviews has spoken of his influence on her novels. Critics such as Michael Lucey (1992), and indeed Condée herself (Pfaff, 1996: 74), have linked her *Traversée de la mangrove* to Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* because of their structural similarity: multiple interior monologues organized around a death.6 But elsewhere Condé emphasizes that her interest in Faulkner centres

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6 In fact the similarities are fairly limited: the interior monologues in *Traversée* take place simultaneously during the ‘veillée’ of Sancher, while those of *As I Lay Dying* follow each other over a period of time and are more concerned with present events than memories of the past; also the character of Addie Bundren is not a source of mystery in the way that Sancher is.
on the notion of a transgression and guilt that affect people who have not committed the transgression themselves, but in some sense inherited it.\(^7\) This is a theme which is far more prominent in *Absalom, Absalom* than in *As I Lay Dying*; and there are in fact close links between *Traversée de la mangrove* and *Absalom, Absalom*. *Traversée* alludes to Faulkner's novel in the name of Mira's son: Quentin, like Quentin Compson, one of the narrators of *Absalom, Absalom*, but also a child who will never be able to get to know his father Sancher, just as Charles Bon (for different reasons) never gets to know Thomas Sutpen. More generally, a comparison of *Absalom, Absalom* with Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* allows us to see that the latter constitutes another reworking, parallel to Glissant’s, of the theme of the ancestral crime.

For instance, Condé’s presentation of miscegenation bears a distinctly ironic relation to Faulkner: it used to be a crime – the white ancestor of the Lameaulnes family had to flee Martinique for Guadeloupe because he married a black woman in 1904 (Condé, 1989: 20) – but is no longer; the mulatto Lameaulnes family are now the richest and most socially powerful in the whole village, and we are told that ‘dans la Guadeloupe d’aujourd’hui, ce qui comptait, ce n’était plus la couleur de la peau […] Non, ce qui comptait, c’était l’argent’ (Condé, 1989: 135) [For what matters in today’s Guadeloupe is no longer the colour of your skin […] No, what matters is money (Condé, 1995: 108)]. Conversely, the elderly Man Sonson is angry with her son for marrying a white woman, but he laughs at her and she reflects that ‘peut-être que ces mots-là, noirs, blancs, ne signifient plus grand-chose!’ (Condé, 1989: 82) [Perhaps those words, black and white, no longer mean anything! (Condé, 1995: 61)].

In *Absalom, Absalom*, filiation is undermined not only by miscegenation, but also by incest. Sutpen’s repudiation of his first wife and son – Eulalia and Charles Bon – has tragic consequences not only for Charles but also for Judith and Henry, Sutpen’s son and daughter by a second marriage, because the secret of Charles’s parentage makes possible his engagement to his half-sister Judith, in other words raising the possibility of incest, and leading ultimately to his murder by Henry. In fact, throughout most of the novel, incest is the central issue regarding guilt; only near the end do we

\(^7\) ‘Transgression and guilt constitute one of the profound and essential themes of any literature. If you consider Faulkner, whom I have read quite a bit, you notice that he depicts many characters affected by a fault that is not within, but rather outside them, in the community to which they belong […]. What interests me is the anguish of human beings who […] wonder whether they are here for a reason that escapes their understanding, such as a transgression committed at some previous time’ (Pfaff, 1996: 51).
Ancestral Crime in the Novels of Faulkner, Glissant and Condé

learn, in a typical example of ‘le différé’, why Sutpen repudiated Eulalia: that is, he discovered that she, and therefore also Charles, was of mixed race. So, in gradually uncovering its layers of secrets, the novel intertwines miscegenation and incest as parallel sexual crimes, both threatening the ideal goal of legitimate filiation. While miscegenation in this instance is ultimately seen as ‘worse’, incest has an ominously pervasive quality that makes it equally sinister: in *Absalom, Absalom*, the Charles–Judith relationship is echoed by strong suggestions of incestuous feelings between Judith and Henry.8

*Traversée de la mangrove*, on the other hand, features a prominent incestuous relationship between Mira and her half-brother Aristide. Here incest is not a horrifying possibility, but an actual relationship which has been going on for some time; nor is it the unknowing consequence of a secret or a misunderstanding; and it is itself not a secret but is generally known throughout the village (Condé, 1989: 180). One can see it as a metaphor for the closed community of Rivière au Sel – Mira prefers Sancher to Aristide because ‘il venait d’Ailleurs’ (Condé, 1989: 63) [he came from Elsewhere (Condé, 1995: 43)] – just as for Faulkner it serves as a metaphor for the inbreeding of the white South. But Condé’s closed community is a threat not to filiation but to individual self-determination: Aristide’s reaction to the end of his ‘guilty love’ for Mira is to decide to leave: ‘Ne prenait-il pas le départ de sa vraie vie?’ (Condé, 1989: 80) [Wasn’t he off to begin his real life? (Condé, 1995: 59)]. Above all, the presentation of this incestuous relationship is extremely undramatic – it attracts disapproval (‘son amour peu ordinaire’ (Condé, 1989: 73) [his rather particular brand of love (Condé, 1995: 52)]), but nothing like the kind of horror that attaches to it in *Absalom, Absalom*. Loulou, the authoritarian father of Aristide and Mira, does not try to stop it, for example (Aristide even thinks his father is jealous; Condé, 1989: 80) and Dinah merely prays that God will forgive Mira (ibid.: 107). Incest is seen as embarrassing and rather unhealthy, but not as a terrible crime which must be prevented at all costs.

However, there are ancestral crimes in *Traversée de la mangrove*, and they have more indirect but nevertheless intriguing connections with other aspects of *Absalom, Absalom*. The tragedy in Faulkner’s novel is in actual fact precipitated not by Eulalia’s racial status per se but its consequence, that is, Sutpen’s decision (although he does not see it as a choice) to repudiate both her and their child; and this finds an echo in *Traversée de la mangrove*’s theme of parents who reject or mistreat their children, or whose children suffer because of their misdeeds. Dodose believes that her son’s cerebral haemorrhage,

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8 The temptation of incest also hovers over brother–sister relations in other novels by Faulkner, such as Quentin and Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*. 
which leaves him permanently brain damaged, is God’s punishment for her adultery (Condé, 1989: 211–12); when Mira becomes pregnant by Sancher, her stepmother Dinah interprets this as God’s punishment for her adultery with Sancher: ‘Les malheurs des enfants sont toujours causés par les fautes cachées des parents’ (Condé, 1989: 104) [The misfortunes of the children are always caused by the secret sins of the parents (Condé, 1995: 79)]; and Rosa, Vilma’s mother, echoes this comment when (just as Dodose does with Sonny; Condé, 1989: 214) she blames herself for not having loved Vilma enough: ‘C’est moi qui suis coupable, responsable de tout ce malheur. Car, il ne faut pas chercher, le malheur des enfants est toujours causé par les parents’ (Condé, 1989: 166) [I am guilty, I am the one to blame for all this unhappiness. For you don’t need to look very far: a child’s misfortunes can always be traced to the parents (Condé, 1995: 136)]. It is typical of Condé that the ancestral curse assumes the more twentieth-century, psychologistic form of the cycle of abuse: Rosa cannot love her children because she was not loved herself (Condé, 1989: 169, 171); Loulou treats his sons harshly because he himself was rejected by his mother (ibid.: 122–23), and so on.

However, *Traversée*’s central example of the Faulknerian ancestral curse is rather different. It concerns Sancher: all the men in his family die prematurely, supposedly because of a crime that one of his ancestors committed. We learn that this crime was committed in Guadeloupe, and that Sancher has come there in order to die, with no children to succeed him and thus to ‘terminer une race maudite’ (Condé, 1989: 87) [put an end to a race that’s cursed (Condé, 1995: 66)]; in other words, to break for ever the chain of filiation. Fragments of the ancestor’s story gradually emerge, and Sancher’s conviction that his death is imminent because of the curse put on the family is repeated several times. Also, Sancher is terrified of Xantippe, the mad outcast who lives in destitution outside the village and whom he sees as a figure of avenging death, saying to him: ‘Est-ce que tu ne connais pas le pardon? La faute est très ancienne. Et puis, je n’en suis pas l’auteur direct’ (Condé, 1989: 118) [Don’t you know the meaning of forgiveness? The fault is a very ancient one. I’m not the one to be blamed directly (Condé, 1995: 91)]. But the exact nature of the original crime remains a mystery to the reader and to the other characters for most of the novel: there is just one rumour, cited quite late on, that it concerns slavery: ‘A l’en croire, Francis Sancher se prendrait pour le descendant d’un béké maudit par ses esclaves et revenant errer sur les lieux de ses crimes passés’ (Condé, 1989: 224) [Going by what she said, Francis Sancher thought himself the descendant of a white Creole planter, cursed by his slaves, who had come back to haunt the scenes of his past crimes (Condé, 1995: 186)]. But it is only in the last of the main chapters of the novel, at the end of Xantippe’s interior monologue, that it acquires the status of a real
Ancestral Crime in the Novels of Faulkner, Glissant and Condé

event rather than a lurid rumour, and that it is revealed as the torture and massacre of the ancestor's slaves. Xantippe has found the evidence: 'Je sais où sont enterrés les corps des suppliciés. J'ai découvert leurs tombes sous la mousse et le lichen' and he knows (somehow) that Sancher is responsible for his ancestor's crime: 'A chaque fois que je le rencontre, le regard de mes yeux brûle les siens et il baisse la tête, car ce crime est le sien' (Condé, 1989: 245) [I know where the tortured bodies are buried. I discovered their graves under the moss and lichen [...] Every time I meet him my eyes burn into his, and he lowers his head, for this is his crime (Condé, 1995: 205)]. Thus a direct link is created between the crime of slavery and its punishment, the curse of the dying out of the Sancher lineage.

This revelation is by far the most dramatic moment in Condé's consciously undramatic novel. There is nothing here of the ironic playing down of incest and miscegenation. Instead, the novel puts in place something very similar to Glissant's mimicking of the structure of the 'différé' in order to say something about the original crime of slavery and its present-day repercussions; the 'différé', in other words, once again functions not in relation to the author but on the level of the characters. Thus, throughout Traversée, on the one hand, slavery is rarely mentioned (although there is a brief reference to one of the Lameaulnes ancestors amusing himself by shooting his slaves in the head (Condé, 1989: 124), prefiguring the crime of Sancher's ancestor); while on the other hand, Xantippe's sinister, silent appearances not only frighten Sancher but also make everyone else feel vaguely uneasy. Then in the last chapter, as we finally have access to his interior monologue, Xantippe assumes the more precise role of a reincarnation, a ghost of the slaves, come to Rivière au Sel to avenge their deaths. Thus, an earlier cryptic remark by Sancher about Xantippe – 'ce n'est pas moi qui ai fait couler son sang avant de le pendre à la tête du mapou lélé' (Condé, 1989: 118) [It wasn't me who shed his blood before hanging him from the manjack tree! (Condé, 1995: 91)] – turns out, in the final revelation, to be a reference to the ancestral crime, in which Xantippe also identifies himself with the victims: 'C'est sur les racines en béquilles de ses mapous lélé que la flaque de mon sang a séché. Car un crime s'est commis ici, ici même, dans les temps très anciens' (Condé, 1989: 244) [It was on the buttress roots of its manjack trees that the pool of my blood dried. For a crime was committed here, on this very spot, a long, long time ago (Condé, 1995: 205)]. In other words, the revelation of the ancestral crime of the slave massacre has been foreshadowed all along – we realize in retrospect – by the presence of Xantippe, lurking unacknowledged in the background: as though perhaps not just the massacre but the fact of slavery itself forms a Machereyan unsaid in the novel as a whole, until it finally bursts into the open with Xantippe's revelation.
Unlike in *Absalom, Absalom*, however, but as in *Le Quatrième Siècle*, the ancestral crime in *Traversée de la mangrove* is in some sense absolved by the end of the novel: Xantippe forgives Sancher on behalf of the slaves whose deaths he would have wanted to avenge: ‘Il peut dormir tranquille cependant […] je ne lui ferai rien. Le temps de la vengeance est passé’ (Condé, 1989: 245) [He can sleep peacefully though […] I won’t touch him. The time for revenge is over (Condé, 1995: 205)]. One could argue therefore that in Condé’s novel the atmosphere of damnation which in Faulkner attaches permanently to the ancestral crimes is either absent from the start – incest is a banal misdeed rather than a source of horror and miscegenation is not a crime at all – or in the case of slavery, the curse is lifted.

This would mean seeing Xantippe’s act of forgiveness as the equivalent of *Le Quatrième Siècle’s* coming to terms with the past but then moving on, diffusing the sins of filiation in the new historical reality of creolization. But there is, I think, in *Traversée de la mangrove* – despite Condé’s consistent stress on modernity and her refusal of nostalgia – significantly less confidence in the notion of collective historical change. At the end of *Le Quatrième Siècle* there is a strong sense that things have moved on for the whole community; but in *Traversée*, because Xantippe’s interior monologue is not shared with any of the other characters, both his revelation of the crime of slavery and his act of forgiveness remain purely private; it is impossible to conclude that the community’s repression of the collective memory of slavery has been affected – and Xantippe’s forgiveness does not, of course, prevent Sancher’s death.

Glissant’s novel therefore perhaps enacts a more upbeat reworking of its Faulknerian theme, while Condé remains more pessimistic. Both, however, share a focus on slavery as the only original sin that counts – a far more explicit and lucid focus than Faulkner allows himself to have. Both combine the kind of ironic reworking of Faulknerian themes that we have come to expect from postcolonial writers with a perhaps more striking, because less usual, transformation of Faulkner’s compulsive need to defer revelation, to ‘say without saying’, into a controlled representation of the repression of the trauma of slavery; and both, finally, replace the Faulknerian sense of permanent damnation and entrapment in the past with the idea that sins will eventually be absolved – or at least dissolved – and with characters who at least realize the desirability of being able to move on and leave the past behind.

**Works Cited**

Ancestral Crime in the Novels of Faulkner, Glissant and Condé


