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## Race, Family, and the Plantation Legacy in United States and Caribbean Writers

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Valérie Loichot, *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), ix + 244 pp.

When Édouard Glissant wrote about seeing significant similarities between the Caribbean and the United States South in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, he was affirming what many scholars of Faulkner and Southern literature had begun to realize. In the last decade particularly there has been a large movement to explore the idea that the United States South occupies a position in between the global South and the global North, creating a somewhat schizophrenic identity, history, and system of values themselves directly related to the legacy of plantation culture. Valérie Loichot's *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* carries on this investigation by exploring how plantation culture and its powerful reverberations stretch from the Caribbean through the United States South to the Midwest. Reading elements of what she calls the "postplantation" as hemispherically widespread, she presents a methodology of approaching this topic that could have a significant impact on framing Caribbean-United States critical discourse.

In chronicling the reach of plantation culture, Loichot pays attention to the ways it configures family relations and how those configurations find deep articulation in language. In an argument that depends heavily on psychoanalysis and post-structural linguistics, Loichot undertakes a hemispherical investigation of plantation legacies and their origins by examining texts by four writers whose lives and heritage are imbricated in plantation history. By reading the interconnections among William Faulkner, Édouard Glissant, Toni Morrison, and Saint-John Perse, *Orphan Narratives* ferrets out the ways plantation culture ultimately and somewhat paradoxically renders a family of orphans.

Although the groundwork of Loichot's argument is predictable, the directions she takes and the results she reaches are not. Foundational to her thinking is a notion of spatiality dictated by Caribbean space: she builds on Glissant's theorization of the archipelago and a poetics of relation as well as Delueze and Guattari's thinking about rhizomic interconnection. This spatiality and interconnectedness corresponds to the plantation family, with its intricate mixing of race, language, and culture. Loichot departs from the standard discussion about the historical interconnectedness of plantation culture, however, by turning to textual constructions/reconstructions of family. She deploys a number of terms to work through her combined historical and textual project—

terms that can be useful for other scholars looking to further this discussion. One of these terms is “postplantation,” which she means to reference a more specific situation than the much broader “postcolonial.” Aware of the temporal misnomer of “postcoloniality,” given its focus on colonialism itself and the extension of its forms after the official moment of colonialism’s termination, Loichot likewise sees “postplantation” as a strategic term to define a plantation culture that creates the conditions that begat all four writers she discusses, the four writers themselves being representative of types of individuals produced by this commonly-shared plantation system and its aftermath. As she writes, “‘Postplantation’ is the best fitted, albeit imperfect term because, by its reference to the plantation and consequently to slavery, it links the texts via the legacy of violence the four authors set [out] to overcome, and therefore maintains them in relation to this negativity” (7). The imperfection of the term lies not only in its own temporal inaccuracy but also in the historical and linguistic differences between various forms of Caribbean slavery and the Peculiar Institution of the United States South—differences she repeatedly turns to as the book progresses. At the same time that Loichot acknowledges and explores these differences, she nevertheless sees the postplantation as something widespread, hemispherically speaking, its tendrils and roots clutching all the way from the Caribbean islands up through Mississippi to Ohio.

The other major term she deploys is “orphan narrative,” and this one accesses what may be the most acute tension of the book. “Under slavery,” Loichot writes, “the family underwent two murder attempts” (2). One of these attempts is historical, with slaveowners giving birth to children and then severing family ties by selling them, thus creating orphans from the black-white plantation family. The other attempt is a textual one, the most powerful and pernicious example being the plantation ledgers that often failed to record full or even partial family connections. The reason this concept of the orphan narrative expresses the most acute tension in the book is because Loichot’s argument often runs counter to what the concept of the orphan would seem to suggest. In Loichot’s view, the historical-textual orphans of the postplantation run the gamut of degrees of racial difference. Interestingly enough, though, where this orphan status would seem a disruption representative of a general severing of family ties that would produce a negative, crippling identity, in Loichot’s eyes it is positive. “The trope of the orphan does not aim to maintain plantation or postplantation subjects in a perennial position of victims,” she writes. “On the contrary, orphans are active performers in family reconstruction” (3). It is here that the textual aspect of Loichot’s argument becomes so important, because she sees the orphan as empowered in being able to write “fictive kinships” in which biological parents can be substituted with imaginative ones and literal family connections can be textually reimagined in ways that realign power relations. Writing—whether

fiction, nonfiction, or poetry—is the mode by which the family can be imagined in the kinds of nonlinear and broadly empowering ways that allow white and black writers such as Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse to be brought into intimate dialogue, since these writers are all themselves orphans within the realm of the postplantation. As Loichot writes, “An ‘orphan narrative’ is thus not only a narrative without a parent but, more important, a narrative initiated by an orphan” (3).

These four writers participate in this situation of orphanage in a multiplicity of ways. Loichot takes care to keep the perspective on this participation very broad, accounting for both its conscious and unconscious as well as its empowering and crippling aspects, as she writes that the four authors “are linked not by a unifying desire but by a shared experience of the abyss” (19). An especially interesting thing she points out is that all the authors played with their names: each author was given one name at birth and was either given a different one later or deliberately changed his or her name (in some cases more than once) for various reasons that Loichot sees as driven by postplantation dynamics. In the very manipulations and changes of their names these authors exemplify the kinds of orphan poetics Loichot writes about, so that it is not only their fictional characters but themselves as writing entities or even as fictionalized authors/narrators who may be analyzed.

In keeping with the relational model she works with, Loichot approaches the order of her discussion of the four authors in ways that avoid expected hierarchies. It is important to her not to present the white writers Faulkner and Saint-John Perse as the “father” figures, or the bearers of the standard narrative later deconstructed by Glissant and Morrison. At the same time she avoids presenting the authors chronologically. Her effort, instead, is to do what she calls a “simultaneous investigation” (15) that seeks out points of intersection within the thematic framework of the postplantation world. Interestingly, though, instead of dividing the chapters by theme and working with all four writers simultaneously, Loichot addresses each author individually. The result of this ordering actually creates an unexpected hierarchy because she begins with Glissant. Given the fact that Glissant’s theoretical work plays such an important role in setting up her overall argument, the volume effectively becomes something of a Glissant book, with Morrison, Saint-John Perse, and Faulkner all situated within the poetics of relation devised by Glissant in the first place. Added to this is the fact that the Glissant chapter contains significant treatment of three of his works where the other chapters focus primarily on single works of the other authors. This matter is not so much a problem as it is a curious and unacknowledged fact of her argument’s framing.

The psychoanalytic and linguistic bedrock of the book is made up of the chapters that deal with the individual authors. These chapters are full of Freudian

father-murders and examinations of the various contexts and slippages of words in Creole, French, and English. The Glissant chapter not only dovetails with the general Glissantian poetics of relation and spatiality, but Loichot also shows how “Glissant’s fiction invents a genealogical grammar in which familial roles are redistributed: fathers and masters are deauthorized, daughters name or create their own parents, women escape forced maternity conflated with economic breeding and violent sexuality by claiming narrative agency” (37). The term “grammar” Loichot posits as representing the Kristevan notion of the symbolic order in all its grotesque distortions: “Glissant’s fictional families adopt an inherent, humanized logic, not the lawless, bestialized chaos to which colonialist discourse attempted to assign them” (37). Loichot pursues these matters in an intense examination primarily of *La case du commandeur*, with treatments too of *La quatrième siècle* and *Tout-monde*. In so doing, she hits her stride in breaking the language apart and offering observations on what she finds, an example being her three-page exploration of Mycéa in *La case du commandeur* as “une vrai fille”: Mycéa, Loichot argues, may be seen either as a gender ambiguous “real girl” or as a “real daughter” whose questionable paternity highlights the problems of plantation lineage. As the chapter progresses, Loichot shows how many women characters find empowering ways to rewrite family relations, a most vivid instance being Hermancia’s telling the story of the master-narrative-defying super-sexual and fertile Anatolie Celat while she is raped by a white master also in *La case du commandeur*.

Loichot stays within the Caribbean context by turning her attention next to the poetic work *Éloges* by the Guadeloupe-born Saint-John Perse. A member of the slave-owning class, Saint-John Perse more than any of the other writers (even more than Faulkner) represents the white plantation father for Loichot, and as a Nobel prize winner, his writing stands as a major shaping influence on Caribbean writers. Just as the poet himself cuts such a figure, so “an omnipotent patriarchal father-planter equally dominates the poems of *Éloges*” (79). But Loichot asserts that “the idealization, magnifying, and excess of authority granted to both time and the father by Saint-John Perse accomplish, in fact, the failure of both” (79). Loichot proceeds to prod the poetry, showing how the entire notion of the father figure is a corrupted one that challenges the imagined lines of pure and linear lineage as having any validity at all while allowing space for understanding family to be the much broader thing, racially speaking, that it in reality is. Thus, “there emerges a poetics of fragments and self-referentiality resembling the functioning of a Freudian dream of childhood memory” (79).

In the next chapter, Loichot takes up Faulkner, giving almost exclusive attention to *Light in August*. That novel seems, at first glance, an odd one to examine, or at least to be the one of primary focus. It would seem that *Go Down, Moses* would fit her purposes much better, since it presents an extended, racially

complex family within a postplantation context, complete with a plantation ledger; yet except in brief mention in discursive notes *Go Down*, *Moses* receives no treatment. Loichot chooses instead to discuss the orphan Joe Christmas as a figure working to negotiate a position within a postplantation United States South. Probably the most interesting move Loichot makes in this chapter is to read Christmas as a *métis*: she imports this concept from Glissant because it allows an opening up of the United States South's narrow racial binary as encoded in and expressed by the term "miscegenation." *Métissage*, on the other hand, "can describe situations other than racial—for example, cultural, artistic, and musical mixings [. . .] Since Joe Christmas is at a crossroad where not only racial, but also social, economic, and sexual differences are crucial, *métissage*, which includes but is not exclusive of miscegenation, fits him the best" (124-25). As a wanderer Christmas (like Lena Grove) explodes the atavistic notion of time and family the slaveowner's culture so champions, representing instead a composite family arrangement that includes all of its members, biological or textual, acknowledged or erased. With his parchment-colored skin, Joe represents a paper upon which is written a text about postplantation society and its policing of borders. The reader might think that Christmas stands as a failure of a male-coded atavistic linearity while Lena carries the kind of empowering hope of escaping oppression, yet Loichot argues otherwise: Christmas instead "announces the nascent collective body of a composite culture formed on the plantation by the clash between the descendents of Americans and Europeans. It is not by his skin pigmentation but by his structural behavior that Christmas launches a transamerican plantation history" (150).

The final author/work Loichot explores in-depth is Toni Morrison and *Song of Solomon*. In this chapter again Loichot carries on her brilliant prodding of language and naming, discerning a woman-coded empowering disruption. Morrison is particularly useful for Loichot's thinking about the postplantation because she sets her work in the Midwest instead of the South. In essence, "the deliberate distancing from the South and slavery helps to delineate repeating patterns of economic and racial oppression of the Plantation system. This continued oppression subordinates human relations—family, love, and memory—to the overruling law of mathematics inherited from the Plantation" (157). The effect of "the Ledger"—its logic of reducing human beings to numbers—is something Morrison's novel implicitly addresses as she breathes life into otherwise objectified people. Above all, in keeping with the general Kristevan movement of her argument, Loichot seeks to show that "Morrison explicitly inscribes the female flesh as the primary narrative of beginning and ancestry" (158).

In a brief conclusion, Loichot considers Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* and Gisèle Pineau's *Chair piment*, focusing on the ways

they promote “communities of difference” that function “as the only constructive escape from narrow family, plantation, and national units” (195). Again, Loichot sees not just possibilities but realizations of empowerment, as she observes in these two works elements of television, which exists “no more as a tool of epistemic colonization but as an object of pity and derision” which “under Pineau’s and Condé’s critical scrutiny and ironical distance, puts the Caribbean subjects in the seat of spectators of the globalizing world, and removes the Caribbean from its position of perverse curiosity and novelty” (201). This final recuperation of what would seem a negative thing seals this strikingly positive book.

Loichot thus brings to a close her discussion of an approach to plantation culture that presents a number of provocative concepts and designations that can be very useful in the continuing effort to find terms and mappings for plantation culture, the postplantation, and its large impact and significance in the Caribbean and beyond. The book’s empowering optimism, concerning the socially-culturally affirming capabilities of orphanism as she defines it, stands as its most broadly useful aspect. The concept of postplantation, on the other hand, may prove more valuable for the purposes of scholars looking to show how the United States is its own South writ large, which is in turn a part of the larger albeit multivariiegated phenomenon of plantation culture. Insofar as the term “postplantation” strives for precision, it may attain a lasting presence; at the very least, *Orphan Narratives* represents an important addition to scholarly understanding and a reminder of just how widely and deeply plantation connections spread.