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# Sound Echoes in the Wilderness: "The Bear" and the Environmental Crisis of the South[1]

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## Introduction

William Faulkner's "The Bear" (1941) is considered as one of his masterpieces (Brooks 244; Priddy 197). "The Bear" is the fifth story in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), consisting of seven stories.[2] Faulkner set the event occurring in the story in the 1880s (Aiken 164). He describes the existence of untouchable nature in the big woods, inhabited by wild animals and Old Ben, a bear "[representing] the wilderness itself, nature, against which man must pit his strength" (Brooks 269-70), as well as characters from the story, Issac (Ike) McCaslin, Sam Fathers, and Boon Hogganbeck, who pursue the bear in the wilderness that is diminishing with time, and finally, lumber companies cutting down the woods after Old Ben's death. Considering this plot line, the relationship between nature and human beings should be at the center of "The Bear" (Priddy 197, 211; Wittenberg 49). Regarding lumber companies, when Faulkner finished writing "The Bear," the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company launched the nation's first "tree farm" project and began cutting down woods near Elma, Washington (Myers 646). In the essay titled "Mississippi" (1954), Faulkner notes the landscape of Mississippi at first and then, its wild creatures (*ESPL* 11-12). He also mentions that cotton cultivation and timber production are popular in the Delta (20). Perhaps Faulkner had some interest in the natural landscape of the South, although "the environment was a secondary concern at best" for him (Low 53).

Focusing on the soundscape in "The Bear," this paper aims to consider the environmental effect of losing the wilderness, in other words, nature in the South, and to reveal a new side of Faulkner, for whom the environment was not a primary concern.

Faulkner, who is more interested in the various landscapes of Mississippi, is less interested in the environmental effect of losing the wilderness; however, he indeed has some interest in sound and music. He was once occupied with recording jazz music from the radio (Murphet 144); thus, it cannot be said that he has no interest in the sound around him. First, focusing on the representation of sound in "The Bear," I prove that the soundscape is comfortable for Ike and other people in the woods or nature. Then, the sound of trains and metal is described as loud compared to the soundscape in nature, which shows that the comfortable environment in nature is lost as American industrialization devours the woods. Finally, I consider the influence of industrialization on the southern people with the soundproof effect that the forests provide, comparing the soundscape before and after Old Ben's death. For Faulkner, environmental issues might be secondary; however, the soundscape he describes in "the Bear" highlights the effect of industrialization on the life of the southern people in the 1940s.

## Soundscape in the Wilderness: Echo and Comfortable Residential Space

The soundscape in "The Bear" differs before and after Old Ben's death. The lumber companies did not start cultivating the woods when the bear was alive and the wilderness was indigenous. Ike is accompanied by various sounds in the woods. For example, he hears the running dogs during his hunt (188-9, 191), "Sam breathing at his shoulder" (189), "the hunt sweep" (191), "the drumming of the woodpecker" (194), the woods in the rain-heavy air clamoring and ringing (230), and so on. Conversely, when Old Ben emerges, everything quietens and it is soundless around Ike: "He [Ike] heard no dogs at all. He never did certainly hear them. He only heard the drumming of the woodpecker stop short off, and knew that the bear was looking at him" (194). As the bear emerges, even the woodpecker stops hammering the wood as if it senses a divine presence. The bear is "soundless" when it "appears" in front of Ike after he has left his compass and watch (200). Old Ben is representing nature here whose

presence also impresses the dangerously quiet environment in the woods on the readers.

There is an interesting word used to represent the quiet environment: "echo." When Ike witnesses Old Ben for the first time, Sam tells him to listen for him:

> The boy [Ike] listened, to no ringing chorus strong and fast on a free scent but a moiling yapping an octave too high and with something more than indecision and even abjectness in it which he could not yet recognize, reluctant, not even moving very fast, taking a long time to pass out of hearing, leaving even then in the air that *echo* of thin and almost human hysteria, abject, almost humanly grieving, with this time nothing ahead of it, no sense of a fleeing unseen smoke-colored shape. (189, emphasis added)

Ike listens to nothing but dogs "moiling yapping an octave too high and with more than indecision and even abjectness." Unlike Ike, the dogs have sensed Old Ben. Here, I focus on the word "echo," which is a repetition of sound, filling and flowing everywhere, representing the woods as the residential space where Old Ben and other wild creatures such as woodpeckers live. For another example, during the battle between Old Ben, Boon, and Lion, the rain-heavy air "echo[es] and br[eaks] against the bank behind them and reform[s] and clamor[s] and [rings] until it seem[s] to the boy that all the hounds which had ever bayed game in this land were welling down at him" (230). Various sounds echo in the woods around Ike as he pursues Old Ben, which indicates the residential space of any free creature, such as the divine bear in the wilderness.

The first entrance of Ike to the wilderness implies that the residential space in nature is comfortable to be there. Ike walks into the woods with Sam "while the wilderness closed behind his entrance as it had opened momentarily to accept him, opening before his advancement as it closed behind his progress." His journey progresses with the wagon "not by its own volition but by attrition of their intact yet fluid circumambience, drowsing, earless, almost lightless" (187). Ike and the wilderness are like water flowing in a river; there is no resistance between them. Ike feels as if he has witnessed his own birth at the age of ten as the "fluid circumambience,

drowsing, earless, almost lightless" triggers the subconscious memory inside the womb, which is connected to Ike's second birth, connoting his initiation. This "earless, almost lightless" fluid circumambience refers to the comfort of a baby secured inside the mother's womb.

The wilderness is compared to a womb, revealing an environment where people enclosed by nature are comfortable. Generally speaking, nature and the southern people are connected closely through agricultural experience. The landscape of the continent enables America to be an agrarian country. Compared to the geography of Canada or Russia, which contains the tundra area, American landscape allows for residence and cultivation almost everywhere (Saito 3). In the early eighteenth century, agriculture and commerce businesses were developed by yeomen in the North, whereas the plantation economy using slaves from Africa was popular in the South (Yamada 1).

The agrarian economy connects the South with nature. Mart Stewart points out, "[the] history of humans and nature in the South, however, has more often assumed a different measure of the 'natural' … that is more informed by an agricultural experience than a wilderness one" (197). To consider agriculture in the South, it is important to refer to *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, a manifesto by twelve southerners. They were called Southern Agrarians who began emerging in the late 1920s with "the center of their activity at Vanderbilt University in Nashville" and claiming "the fundamental, if sometimes only subterranean, will of the South to hold to the old way" (Cash 380). Regarding the relationship between nature and the southern people, John Crowe Ransom mentions that the South modeled their culture after that of England and thus, theirs is not indigenous (3). He continues to note the nature of English life:

> The human life of English provinces long ago came to terms with nature, fixed its roots somewhere in the spaces between the rocks and in the shade of the trees, founded its comfortable institutions, secured its modest prosperity – and then willed the whole in perpetuity to the generations which should come after, in the ingenuous confidence that it would afford them all the essential human

satisfactions. (5)

The southern culture derived from England is somewhat provincial, which is perhaps suitable for the agrarian economy in the South. The line "fixed its roots somewhere in the spaces between the rocks and in the shade of the trees" reminds readers of the plantation life of Thomas Sutpen lying in a hammock under the scuppernong arbor in "Wash" (*CS* 538). The southerners modeled the developing agrarian economy using slaves and the English culture as their own, which connect their life to nature in the history of the South.

The relationship between the southern people and nature is also seen in "The Bear." After the death of Old Ben, Ike returns once more to the camp before the lumber company begins to cut down the woods. He checks his watch to know what time it is, although Uncle Ash does not look at it:

> "In an hour?" he [Ike] said. "It aint nine oclock yet." He drew out his watch and extended it faced-toward Ash. "Look." Ash didn't even look at the watch.
>
> "That's town time. You aint in town now. You in the woods."
>
> "Look at the sun then." (*GDM* 308)

Ike knows the time from his watch, but Uncle Ash rejects it, declaring it is "town time" as if the time he perceives in the woods is different from that in towns. Then, Ike suggests looking at the sun, which means people know the time from nature. The town time is measured by a watch, which is a machine, whereas the time in the woods is measured by the sun, in other words, nature. The time measured by the sun connotes the relationship between nature and people in the South.

In light of the history of the agrarian country and nature compared to a womb in "the Bear," it is proven that the southern people have coexisted with nature as it provides them with a comfortable residential space. The comfortable residential space, juxtaposed with nature compared to a womb, is "earless, almost lightless" (187), reminding the readers of the emergence of Old Ben; the bear is "soundless" when it "appears" in front of Ike after he leaves his compass and watch (200). The divine bear representing the supreme nature creates a quiet environment, that is, the comfortable residential space for Ike, or else, the southern people.

## Noise in the Unechoing Wilderness: Passing Train and Loud Metal

Once the lumber company begins to cut down the trees after Old Ben's death, the condition for comfort is lost. The wilderness, which used to echo sound, changes into "the unechoing wilderness" as the train passes by with "the engine's exhaust slating in mounting tempo" (307). The word "unechoing" vividly indicates that the lumber company has eliminated the space represented by "echo." The train is an important factor in the industrial development of the South and the ensuing environmental effect. Joseph R. Millichap notes:

> Railroads shape Yoknapatawpha's landscape as much as any single historical factor, and these technological constructions have also determined much of the region's cultural geography. A dark record of environmental degradation and human exploitation is revealed by the network of real and recreated railroads Faulkner weaves into the complicated narrative patterns of *Go Down, Moses*. (49)

The train at Hoke's represents "[a] dark record of environmental degradation and human exploitation." At first, the train is described as harmless. The locomotive, or a moving caboose, "resembled a small dingy harmless snake vanishing into weeds . . . it ran once more at its maximum clattering speed between the twin walls of unaxed wilderness as of old" (*GDM* 304). It is again described as "harmless" in a story about a bear that Boon and Ash watch overnight near the railroads, which shows a harmonious relationship among wild animals, human beings, and the machine. Once a half-grown bear witnessing the first train coming at Hoke's climbed up an ash sapling near the railroads and clung to it, "its head ducked between its arms as a man . . . might have done" (304). The bear, scared by the train, tries to climb down, but it climbs up and clings there again as the train passes. Then, Boon and Ash sit under the tree all night to keep people from shooting the bear until it comes down after almost thirty-six hours (304-05). The scene of the two men protecting the bear scared by the train is peaceful. In addition, the train is described as "harmless then" repeatedly when people "hear the passing log-train sometimes from the camp." The train goes into the wilderness, "running light and fast, the light clatter of the trucks,

the exhaust of the diminutive locomotive . . . and absorbed by the brooding and inattentive wilderness without even an echo,” and “nobody bothered to listen to it or not” (305).

On the other hand, the train is different after the lumber company begins to cut down trees. It is no longer harmless:

> It was the same train . . . running with the same illusion of frantic rapidity between the same twin walls of impenetrable and impervious woods, passing the old landmarks . . . anything but wounded, bolt out of the woods and up and across the embankment which bore the rails and ties then down and into the woods again as the earth-bound supposedly move but crossing as arrows travel, groundless, elongated, three times its actual length and even paler, different in color, as if there were a point between immobility and absolute motion where even mass chemically altered, changing without pain or agony not only in bulk and shape but in color too, approaching the color of wind, yet this time it was as though the train . . . had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid . . . . (306)

The train is the same, but the wilderness it is passing by is “wounded.” It connotes the cultivated woods, that is, the damage to the indigenous wilderness. The wilderness is reformed with “bolt out of woods” and “rails and ties” borne by the embankment. These industrial products such as “bolt” and “rails” emphasize the loss of the indigenous wilderness, which tells Ike why “Major de Spain had not come back” to the camp and he too would never return (306-07). Ike is aware of the approaching train without hearing the warning whistled by the engine driver. He listens to the sound of the running train, supposedly thinking about the passengers riding on it and the loss of the wilderness that has occurred after Old Ben’s death. It juxtaposes with the time when people did not bother to listen to the passing train and when the train was considered harmless (305). However, it is no longer harmless; perhaps, people have begun to care for the sound of the passing train as they find it to be noisy. The wilderness has been torn open by cutting down trees during industrialization, in which

"the engine's exhaust was already slating in mounting tempo against the unechoing wilderness" (307). "The unechoing wilderness" is critical for showing the loss of the soundscape, which is comfortable for the southern people in the indigenous wilderness where sound echoes.

In addition to the train, Boon, hammering frantically on the fragments of his gun and shouting, "Get out of here! Dont touch them! Dont touch a one of them! They're mine!" (315), indicates a harmful soundscape. The sound of "that steady savage somehow queerly hysterical beating of metal on metal, emerging from the woods, into the old clearing" is loud. The sound grows "louder and louder" (315). It represents a technological noise that encloses Ike in the wilderness wounded by cutting down trees to industrialize the South or the United States.

## The Wilderness Protects from Noise: Soundproof Effect of Forests

The echoing wilderness represents a comfortable residential space akin to a womb, whereas the unechoing wilderness is filled with the technological noise of the train and metal hammered by a furious man disappointed in the changing condition of the wilderness, or the South.[3] Here, I argue that the soundscape of the wilderness in "The Bear" proves the soundproof effect of forests; it contributes to creating a comfortable residential space in the South. People have always considered that forests are effective in reducing noise (Kashiyama 1). A study group including Tokuharu Kashiyama examined how effectively woods reduce noise in various kinds of forests in Japan and other countries. He concluded that forests work effectively to reduce noise (37).[4] In "The Bear," Ike enters the woods to pursue Old Ben. Various kinds of sounds are flowing there, but they are not described as noisy. The sound is never loud. Compared to the soundscape after Old Ben's death, the indigenous wilderness is quiet before the lumber company starts to cut down the trees. This might also prove the soundproof effect of the woods. Moreover, it is "soundless" when Old Ben appears (*GDM* 200). The nature represented by Old Ben as the most divine creature might partly contribute to proving the soundproof effect of forests in the indigenous

wilderness.

The train is also effective in proving the soundproof effect of forests before and after Old Ben’s death. Considering the soundproof effect of the woods, the sound from the running train is not noisy as it is “absorbed . . . without even an echo” into the wilderness (305); thus, it is harmless for people hearing the train. However, the lumber company has removed the woods from the wilderness and thus, it will not absorb the sound of the train. The woods are no longer soundproof. As a result, people come to care for the passing train. The wilderness is interpreted as people’s protection against the technological noise of the train.

Noise is proven to be a harmful effect of industrialization on the life or the environment of the southern people. The sound of “steady savage somehow queerly hysterical beating of metal on metal” by Boon is growing “louder and louder” (315). Compared to the “earless, almost lightless” fluid circumambience in a womb that represents a comfortable space, the “louder and louder” sound is interpreted as noise. The unechoing wilderness no longer absorbs the noisy sound of the train or metal, which connotes the loss of Old Ben and the comfortable environment in the South.

## Conclusion

Faulkner may not have seriously considered environmental issues; however, he certainly depicts the effect of industrialization on the South through the soundscape. The diversity of the soundscape in “The Bear” indicates that the life of the southern people is affected by industrialization. The indigenous wilderness enclosing Old Ben, the supreme nature, is soundless. The soundproof woods create a comfortable residential space for people as well as wild creatures. The wilderness, the woods, and nature help the southern people to live in a comfortable environment. The south is losing their comfortable residential space due to the industrialization in the United States; however, it surely exists in Ike as the indigenous wilderness, remembering snowflakes burying “even the unformed echoes beneath their myriad and weightless falling” (309).

## Notes

[1] This is an expanded and revised version of the research paper for a class held in 2011-2012 at the Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies, Kyushu University. I gratefully acknowledge helpful discussions with Prof. Koji Kotani and the participants to the class on several points in the paper.

[2] It is controversial whether *Go Down, Moses* is "a collection of short stories, a 'composite' (Creighton), or a cohesive novel," but "recent judgements essentially concur that it is a novel" (Wittenberg 49).

[3] About Southern people, Ransom notes; "Unregenerate southerners were trying to live the good life on a shabby equipment, and they were grotesque in their effort to make an art out of living when they were not decently making the living" (16). Ransom's note represents the furious Boon well.

[4] Refer to *Jurin no Bouonkouka* by Tokuharu Kashiyama, Hiroo Matsuoka, and Eiji Kawai.

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