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BUT WHAT HAS HELGA CRANE TO DO WITH THE WEST INDIES?
PLANTATION AFTERLIVES IN THE BLACK ATLANTIC

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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and Dr. Nazera Wright, Professor of English

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

BUT WHAT HAS HELGA CRANE TO DO WITH THE WEST INDIES? PLANTATION AFTERLIVES IN THE BLACK ATLANTIC

“But What Has Helga Crane to Do with the West Indies? Plantation Afterlives in the Black Atlantic” situates the emergence of the southern gothic in modernist American and Caribbean works as a response to the shifting cultural narrative of the plantation in the twentieth century. In this project, I argue that the plantation seeps out of its place and time to haunt landscapes it may never have touched and times in which slavery is long over. While the plantation system is broadly recognized as a literary, political, and cultural force in nineteenth century literary studies, I conceive it is also a driving force of southern literature even after the physical plantations begin to fade.

In this project, I examine how literary portrayals of plantations flourish in the 1920s and 30s, from the writings of the Nashville Agrarians to the popularity of *Gone with the Wind*, arguing that this period represents a literary re-mythologizing of the plantation’s legacy as a benevolent and positive model for the south. A significant contribution of this dissertation is then in demonstrating how plantations are present in works that are not traditionally understood as plantation fiction, and that these works offer a resistance to this re-mythologizing through turning to the gothic: the transatlantic plantation gothic in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Jean Rhys’ *Voyage in the Dark*, the impact of environmental labor on the plantation gothic in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and Eric Walrond’s *Tropic Death*, and finally, how plantation modernity affects portrayals of natural disasters in plantation territories in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*. Ultimately, this project contributes to the discussion of plantation modernity currently occurring in Southern Studies beyond the nineteenth century and into the modernist period, while also demonstrating how movements often construed as disparate in American literary studies, like the Harlem Renaissance and the Nashville Agrarians, were actually in close conversation.

KEYWORDS: African American Literature, Caribbean Literature, Plantation Modernity, Modernism

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12/13/2019

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the family who supported me through it. First, to Natalie Vickous, who spent a summer of her life in coffee shops with me. Second, to Christa Kirilenko and her daughter, Sophia Kirilenko-Schneider, who always knew what I needed, whether it was a hug, a concert, or an afternoon in an inflatable pool shaped like a cheeseburger. Finally, to Steve and Tammy Carr, the two people I admire most, whose love amazes me every day. So much of my life has been lucky. But perhaps the luckiest thing was to be your daughter. This dissertation is for you.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

When we think about plantations, we think about secrets.

We think about regal homes with manicured grounds, waving fields of cotton and cane, Oak Trees marred by lash marks embedded on their trunks, blood spatters underneath creaking rocking chairs on stately porches, wedding venues with vows exchanged over unmarked graves, the burned ruins of once elegant columns and Southern heritage sites, and modern tourists peering into a room marked as a closet where Sally Hemings was forced to make her bed at Thomas Jefferson's feet. Plantation estates are still considered as some of the most beautiful sites of the South and account for a significant amount of Southern tourism and Southern identity. Yet, the tension inherent in these places is undeniable. The beauty and peace of these grounds hide the unnatural order of the plantation world, an order which scarred the land by stripping its fertility in the pursuit of imported, monocrop agriculture, decimated a social order and propagated slavery across the Atlantic, and left the South more vulnerable to natural disaster. These hidden practices which fueled plantations still haunt the Southern landscape, from the American South to the islands dotting the Atlantic sea. Édouard Glissant wrote of these plantation scars as the great Southern unifier. Plantations may have been individual estates with individual evils, yet they still remade the South in their image, all the way down from the roots of the crops of the Tropics to the social order of the Dutch plantations that founded Harlem. Glissant wrote that the "configuration of the Plantation was the same everywhere, from northeastern Brazil to the Caribbean to the southern United States: *casa grande e senzala*, the big House and the slave hut, masters and

slaves” (Glissant 10). This configuration left its mark on the South: as the big Houses rotted, as slave huts were left out of tours and pushed out of sight in wedding photos, as the masters and slaves became guards and prisoners and then voters and felons, the plantation’s secrets festered on into the twentieth century.

Some of these plantation legacies are more obvious than others. The rotting estates looming on the edges of winding country roads, or the proliferation of cheerful neighborhoods named after the former grounds they occupy (Tanner Plantation, Schieveling Plantation, Whitehouse Plantation, and Poplar Grove Plantation in one subsection of Charleston, South Carolina alone, for example) do not point to a past that is very secret or hidden at all. However, these past plantations seep into modern narratives in more nefarious ways. Every time the wind whistling through a willow tree causes goosebumps, or a fat, full moon shining on the Georgia dirt evokes a wave of anxiety about what lurks in the dark rather than joy at the light, the ghost of the plantation breathes.

The American South has a reputation for being both haunted and haunting. The Southern narrative is portrayed as the dark underbelly of the bright American past, and the South remains a permanent “landscape of fear” in the words of Li-Fu Tuan (Tuan 9). The most popular literature of the American South is the Southern Gothic, a genre most recognized by its portrayal of the landscape as dark, hostile, and ravaged. The South is a natural world that is unknown and unknowable, a land watered in blood by the Klan with trees which bear strange fruit, as lush as it is deadly. Reading literature of this land is to read the weight of plantation sins, often more overtly than metaphorically: as Jeremy Wells notes, as the physical plantations faded, fictional plantations flourished across

Southern literature. According to Wells, “visions of the old plantation became so prevalent in U.S. print culture during the decades following the Reconstruction that, in 1888--two decades, almost, before Eggleston would imagine ‘the whole world’ an extension of the plantation South--[...] it seemed to [...] become a ‘flood’” (Wells 2). At the long end of the nineteenth century, the Southern imaginary boomed with a flood of plantation romances, and their inverse, the plantation settings of the slave narrative.¹

Even thirty years later, the tide of plantation literature was still rising. The narrative gap of the Southern imaginary, so simplified by the binary of the plantation romance and the plantation slave narrative, was growing wider. Margaret Mitchell would publish the most famous work of the plantation romance and as of 2008, America’s second-favorite book, *Gone with the Wind*, in 1936.² Scarlett O’Hara’s struggle to save her family’s plantation, Tara, was beloved by the American public, but loathed by a group of Southern writers known as the Nashville Fugitives, who banded together as the Agrarians to publish *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930. A collection of essays written by (mostly) Vanderbilt scholars envisioning the way forward for the South, the collection was a manifesto to return the South to plantation-style agriculture and to rehabilitate the Southern Agrarianism of the Old South. In it, Robert Penn Warren writes that the way to achieve racial harmony in the South is to reinstate the belief that “the Southern negro has always been a creature of the small town and farm. That is where he still chiefly belongs, by temperament and capacity” (260). Another depiction of plantation life in twentieth century literature is, of course, the work of William Faulkner. As the most ubiquitous

¹ Lucinda MacKethan writes that the plantation romance and the slave narrative are two sides of the same coin in “Plantation Romances and Slave Narratives: Symbiotic Genres.”

² See *The Harris Poll* #37.

Southern writer of the early twentieth century, and the winner of both the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Pulitzer Prize in Literature, his work accounts for a significant amount of plantation-literary output and manipulation of the Southern imaginary.

After all, as Glissant notes in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, Faulkner settled his plantations into a liminal space between the real and the imaginary. According to Glissant, it is impossible to understand the construction of the Southern imaginary without understanding how Faulkner constructed the South in his writing. Glissant writes that “the whole ensemble of his work stands before you as though erected by an architect who constructed a monument around a secret to be known, pointing it out and hiding it all at the same time” (Glissant 5). Faulkner’s literary success and wide-reaching prevalence established him as the dominant Southern writer of the early twentieth century, and by extension, the definitive creator of the Southern imaginary.

As Southern scholars, it is likely this legacy, and this imaginary, which we think of when we think about plantations. Faulkner even made maps of his own work: at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* he offers of a map of the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, where the majority of his novels and short stories take place. Yoknapatawpha may be fictional, but Faulkner’s fictional South quickly bled into the American conscious about what the real South was like.³ Glissant notes how the racial trouble in Faulkner’s imaginary Yoknapatawpha even influenced his own beliefs about race relations of the American South, writing that in Yoknapatawpha County, “it is worth noting that there is not a single Black (who counts) on the horizon of this ‘pastoral’ epic”

³ Yoknapatawpha County is modeled off of Lafayette County, Mississippi.

(Glissant 44).⁴ Glissant's own personal narrative of the American South was so overtaken by Faulkner's world that he struggled to see a South outside of Faulkner's Mississippi, writing that Faulkner "reduced Mississippi to the limits of an imaginary country so as to exalt it, enlarging it to universal dimensions. Blacks lived there and, at the time, were more numerous in rural areas" (56). Yet, they were often distant actors in Faulkner's work. As Glissant continues, "As a character type, he [the Black man] is the most meaningful witness to the former order of things" (61). On Faulkner's plantations, black characters are reduced to scenery.⁵

Just as Faulkner's Mississippi quickly became the dominant narrative of the South, his fictional plantations quickly became the dominant plantation imaginary, too. And Faulkner's plantations were certainly about secrets.⁶ Take, for example, *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel in which a plantation owner's secret, West Indian, mixed race son from a previous marriage falls in love with his daughter, and the revelation of this history drives his family to ruin. Sutpen's Hundred, the plantation setting of the text, is inseparable from the Southern landscape. To the townspeople, the plantation seemingly emerges from the surrounding swamp, and they gather to "watch his mansion rise, carried plank by plank and brick by brick out of the swamp where the clay timber waited" (Faulkner 28). Faulkner's South is a land waiting to be molded by a firm hand. It is a land

⁴ Glissant is referring to *As I Lay Dying* in this reading.

⁵ Alia Pan seconds reading Black characters of Faulkner as witnesses. She writes of *Absalom, Absalom!* that "In the novel, slaves are phrased as passive observers, who, rather than build the plantation, merely witness its birth or serve as sources of sport" for Thomas Sutpen (Pan 420).

⁶ Part of Glissant's fascination with Faulkner was not only how his view of the South overtook the global narrative of the South, but also how Faulkner was willing to expose the dark side of Southern history, and plantations in particular. He writes that "When Faulkner was writing, what he put at risk was the supreme institution of this Southern community. He questioned its very legitimacy, its original establishment, its Genesis, its irrefutable source" (Glissant 21).

and a people ripe with resources which needs the stern rule of the plantation to order it. As in all of Faulkner's works, Sutpen's Hundred and the swamp around it is an eerie, ominous place, as haunted by the secret evils of the plantation as the Sutpen family themselves. Even those outside of the South who hear the Sutpen story, like college students Quentin and Shreve, are touched by this plantation horror. Faulkner's work entangles plantation horrors inextricably with the Southern landscape. As his literary legacy grew, his Southern imaginary became the pervasive Southern imaginary. In this way, Faulkner authored the dominant narrative of the gothic South.

And so, when we think about plantations and their secrets, we are usually thinking about the gothic South of William Faulkner. Glissant certainly did, turning to Faulkner as he wrote to comprehend the world around him which the plantation had made. In his chronicles of his journey through the American South, Glissant struggled to separate what he saw of the natural world around him from the world he had read in Faulkner. Was the moon really ominous, was the wind whispering threats, was the ground really haunted; or was the South haunted by Faulkner's conceptualization of it? Of this struggle, Glissant reflected that "We were thus controlled by Faulkner's thinking. We felt an indefinable, engulfing menace" (7). The menace of the plantation zone became the menace of the South through Faulkner's work.

Faulkner's work is a model for how the plantation is present in twentieth and twenty-first century works through the gothic. He may be the defining Southern writer of the 1920s and 30s, but his powerful legacy has obscured the contributions of other writers of the time—such as Nella Larsen, Jean Rhys, Eric Walrond, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and later, M. NourbeSe Philip—to the rise of the plantation gothic. This project

seeks to understand how these six writers were equally engaged in determining the narrative of the plantation South through the gothic and places their work in conversation with Faulkner's Southern imaginary, ultimately exploring how black and anti-colonial writers conceptualize the plantation afterlives of the twentieth century South. By situating the voices who are most commonly witnesses in Faulkner's work, we see how the plantation gothic of this era was far more extensive than just the plantation lands of the South. The works of other writers reveal a plantation gothic which is in motion, extending the reach of the plantation beyond the recognized borders of the Southern US and Caribbean.

One example of this sweeping plantation gothic is in Toni Morrison's portrayal of Sweet Home Plantation in her 1987 novel, *Beloved*. Morrison's novel is an example of the plantation gothic which moves beyond its boundaries, another model for representing the plantation gothic in Southern literature apart from Faulkner's confined gothic. In situating the surge of plantation fiction at the end of the nineteenth century, Wells writes that "for some writers," writers like Faulkner, "rehabilitating the old plantation had become more than a metaphorical affair" (Wells 2). Wells refers to both Southern writers whose financial futures were entangled with their family estates and those writers who made their fortunes and fame off the "old plantation" narrative of the South. However, the inverse of this is true, too. By carrying this trend into the twentieth century, we see that in recognizing the remythologizing of the plantation that was occurring around them, black and anti-colonial Southern and Caribbean writers used the gothic as a form of resistance to the remythologization of the plantation. As an example of this argument, I

turn to Morrison's portrayal of the way Sweet Home Plantation seeps out of its space and time.

1.2 The Afterlife of Sweet Home

Morrison's *Beloved* offers one case study of a plantation afterlife. The novel is inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, a formerly enslaved woman who escaped into Ohio from a Kentucky plantation, but who was recaptured in Ohio under the Fugitive Slave Law in 1856. Surrounded by slavecatchers, Garner killed her daughter and was trying to kill her sons rather than allow them to be returned to slavery.⁷ *Beloved* opens with Sethe, her daughter, Denver, and a malevolent ghost living in an isolated house in Ohio. Sethe is a formally enslaved woman who fled from Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky across the Ohio border. The owners of Sweet Home, the Garners, practiced a kinder type of slavery than many other plantation owners, but when Mr. Garner dies, his wife's sadistic brother-in-law, Schoolteacher, takes over. The novel unfolds on two planes: one is the story of Sweet Home, where Sethe is bought by the Garners to be the only slave girl on the small plantation, and the other is the story of 124, the Ohio house, and its haunting by Beloved, the daughter Sethe killed rather than let be taken by the slavecatchers back to Kentucky.

In Sweet Home, Sethe lives a relatively safe life working for Mrs. Garner until Schoolteacher's arrival. Schoolteacher is a violent overseer who beats the enslaved men of Sweet Home, follows and records their movements as though they are animals, whips

⁷ See Francesca Gamber's account of Margaret Garner's capture and trial in *The Encyclopedia of African American History*. Garner's trial lasted for nearly four weeks and was media sensation.

Sethe while she is pregnant, and reduces their food rations until they are starving. Sensing that Sethe and the others are planning to run, he kills two of the men, and forces one, Paul D, to wear a bit and metal collar. Schoolteacher's nephews assault Sethe in a barn and steal her breastmilk. Unbeknown to her, Sethe's husband sees the attack, and goes mad. During the night of their planned escape, when no one else is at the meeting point, Sethe sends her children along to her mother-in-law in Ohio and runs alone, giving birth in a swamp on the way. Schoolteacher chases her to Ohio, and at the sight of him, she murders her second-youngest daughter but is stopped before she can kill her other three children. The community shuns her. In the present at 124, Paul D arrives and he and Sethe begin to share and heal from their memories of Sweet Home. He thinks he has exorcised 124, but one day, a beautiful and strange young woman appears. Denver and Sethe realize that it is Beloved, Sethe's murdered daughter, in a body the age she would be if she had lived. Beloved overturns the newfound order of the house. She seduces Paul D and chases him from 124, slowly absorbs all of Sethe's time and attention until Denver is forced to leave the house, and in just under a year, has Sethe nearly dead. Finally, the community comes to the home and chases Beloved away, and Sethe and Paul D begin again.

Beloved's ghost represents the very real presence of the plantation seeping from the past and violently affecting the present. Sweet Home may have started out as a relatively tolerable place as far as plantations went, but Morrison emphasizes the volatile and gothic nature of the institution. Morrison writes in her introduction that "It was important to name this house, but not the way 'Sweet Home' or other plantations were named. There would be no adjectives suggesting coziness or grandeur or the laying claim

to an instant, aristocratic past” (XVIII). Wells established the very real interest in rehabilitating the plantation for many Southern, white writers. Morrison situates herself against this rehabilitation, linguistically disconnecting Sweet Home from a past where plantations were seen as stable, noble institutions. “Sweet Home” is not grand. It is a modest estate where Sethe works alongside Mrs. Garner and is allowed to choose her husband, though the Garners laugh at her when she asks for a wedding. Amused, the Garners offer her a pair of earrings.

Because of these small acts of kindness, the malevolence of Sweet Home is, at first, unnoticed by Sethe. Mr. Garner brags to other slave owners that his slaves are “men,” allows them to have guns, and unlimited access to the stores of food and kitchens. But even before the torture of Schoolteacher’s reign, the benign plantation begins to mold. David Punter writes that the fear which marks the gothic comes not just from stormy nights and ghosts, but rather when a human body is forced into a liminal space.⁸ The gothic is about a human existence which is denied humanity, the space of the ghost which is both alive and dead, a person torn between the past and present. Or, in the case of the gothic of Sweet Home, human lives forced to hover in the space “of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilized and primitive” (Punter 21). The gothic of the plantation is in the power to define what is human, and the enslaved men quickly realize the intrinsic horror of only being human by Mr. Garner’s benevolence at Sweet Home, even before Schoolteacher’s arrival.

⁸ As I go discuss in Chapter Two, Punter writes that “the integrity of the human identity [...] is threatened; these are liminal bodies, occupying the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilized and primitive” (Punter 21).

When Mr. Garner dies and Mrs. Garner sends for her brother-in-law, the other slaves quickly find their existence forced out of the category of man and into that liminal space. It drives the men mad: Sixo stops speaking English, Paul A is hanged, Halle goes mad after Sethe's assault and is last seen sitting by a churn with butter all over his face. When Schoolteacher begins to lock away food and the men steal to eat, Sixo argues that what they did was in Schoolteacher's best interest as they need food to work. It is "Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers--not the defined" (225). Sethe does not fully comprehend the meaning of Schoolteacher's warning until a few days later, when she overhears him instructing his nephews. Sethe describes how

"I heard him say, 'No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal characteristics on the right. And don't forget to line them up.' I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly. One of the dogs was licking out of a pan in the yard. I got to the grape arbor fast enough, but didn't have the muslin. Flies settled all over your face, rubbing their hands. My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp. (228).

The scene is aesthetically frightening: Sethe stumbling backward in the woods in blind horror until she collides with a tree, realizing that under Schoolteacher's ownership she is now no different from the ragged dog foraging for scraps beside her. She cannot articulate to Halle the full trauma of this moment, and instead goes to Mrs. Garner to try and clarify Schoolteacher's words. Instead, Mrs. Garner tells her to take care of her lice.

When Mrs. Garner tells her not to scratch like an animal, Sethe is retaken by the horror of what she has heard. After all, what differentiates her from the yard dog if she belongs to Schoolteacher? Sethe is repulsed by the realization that she has only been allowed to have any control over her life by the thin line of Mrs. Garners's lukewarm goodwill.

In this moment, Sethe sees that the supposed kindness of the Garners was really no different from that of Schoolteacher. Bitterly, Sethe's husband tells her that all slaveowners are the same even if they seem kind, because "'What they say is the same. Loud or soft.' [...] He turned over and went back to sleep and I thought I wouldn't but I did too for a while. Something he said, maybe, or something he didn't say woke me. I sat up like somebody hit me. [...] That's when we should have begun to plan" (231-232). They are too late. Sethe is cornered like an animal by Schoolteacher's nephews in the barn, who restrain and assault her while she is pregnant. Worsening the horror of the assault is Sethe's knowledge that the men attacking her see her as partly animal property.

Back at 124, when Paul D tells Sethe that Halle saw the assault, Sethe is drug back to Sweet Home. Suddenly, on her front porch in Cincinnati, "There is also my husband squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face [...] her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (83). In this moment, the plantation gothic moves from Sweet Home and overtakes 124. As the conversation continues, Paul D tells Sethe about how Schoolteacher forced him to wear a bit in his mouth as punishment for planning to escape. Sethe asks how he overcame the "wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back," the madness that

haunted the men she saw forced to wear it (85). Paul D responds that the horror was not in the pain of the bit, but

‘The roosters,’ [...] ‘Walking past the roosters looking at them look at me’ [...] ‘Mister [the rooster] was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.’ (84-85).

The trauma of the plantation seeps from the land and time of Sweet Home, slowly bringing 124 into its gothic grasp. Paul D and Sethe are haunted by the way Schoolteacher changed them, from human to property, human to animal, human to creature. Paul D’s description of looking at the roosters and knowing Sweet Home has changed him forever encapsulates the plantation gothic that haunts twentieth century literature and demonstrates a plantation legacy embodied in Southern literature beyond the Mississippi-bound terror of Faulkner’s gothic. Sethe and Paul D are still in the gothic world of Sweet Home, but even Denver, who has never been to the South, is haunted by the plantation.

Not to be overlooked, there is also the literal ghost, the staple of the gothic genre, haunting 124. At first, the house is just plagued by banging noises and the sound of a toddler crawling up and down the stairs, but as the ghost escalates to knocking over tables and nearly killing the dog, Sethe’s sons flee. When Beloved corporeally appears under the tree after Paul D thinks he has chased the spirit off, she is the embodiment of the benign malevolence of the plantation. At first, her desires for cotton, cane, and water are

just hassles that Sethe indulges. Beloved demands cotton sheets, lusts for sugar and sweets, and drinks cup after cup of water under her sister's watchful eye (66). Beloved's arrival to 124 is marked by her association with these symbols of plantation crops, but as she grows stronger, Sethe finally realizes that Beloved is her daughter from Sweet Home. Beloved shatters the illusion that Sethe has left Sweet Home for a better life: "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one. The fact that Paul D had come out of 'that other one' into her bed was better too [...] As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (51). At first, Denver is thrilled that Beloved is at 124, asking to share a room with her, tending to her after her arrival, and helping Beloved push Paul D out. Denver changes her mind when Beloved nearly chokes Sethe to death and then takes all of her time, food, and energy until Sethe is left a slight husk of the woman she was.

Plantation zones of Southern literature are often written in the shadow of evil, and Morrison does not shy away from the evils of Sweet Home. In Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death*, a work I discuss in Chapter Four, a plantation owner, Bellon Prout, thinks about the whispered legends of plantation workers who kill or abandon their children in the cane as a curse on the land. Unlike these writers, Morrison does not side step around the horror of plantation matricide; Sethe's attempt to save her children from the terror of the plantation which opens the door to Sweet Home's infestation of 124. Empowered by the Fugitive Slave Law, Schoolteacher comes to Cincinnati to bring Sethe and her children back to Kentucky. To save her children from Sweet Home, she chooses to kill them, recalling the desperate itching she felt to get her children away when she overheard

Schoolteacher listing her animal characteristics on the plantation. When the slavecatchers arrive at the shed where Sethe has taken her children, they find “two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a [...] woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time” (175). Sethe has already slit the throat of her second oldest daughter.

In this moment, Sethe is described like an animal. She grabs her children “like a hawk on the wing,” “face beaked,” with hands “like claws” (185). Later, Paul D confronts Sethe about her actions and she defends her choice to kill her children to keep them from Sweet Home. Repulsed, he hisses that “‘You got two feet, Sethe, not four,’ he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet” (194). Sethe cannot escape the horror of Sweet Home and how, as Paul D phrases it, Schoolteacher “changed” her. The liminal space he forced her body to occupy, between human and animal and property, haunts her out of the plantation’s space and time.

These moments of the plantation gothic surging into 124, weaving around Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, illustrate the way plantation afterlives seep into black and anti-colonial, post-nineteenth century, Southern literature that I explore in this dissertation. The gothic moments that happen in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*, M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Eric Walrond’s *Tropic Death*, and Jean Toomer’s *Cane* may not be in the form of a literal ghost, but the plantation seeps out of time and place to touch their pages nonetheless, just as Sweet Home haunts 124 in far more ways than through Beloved’s

ghost. The gothic emerges as these works refuse to let the plantation be rehabilitated, as Morrison refused to let Sweet Home be a legacy of grandeur.

Near the end of Morrison's novel, one of Sethe's neighbors sees Beloved's ghost standing in 124 when he tries to visit. He is overcome with horror and flees, and as he runs, thinks about the evil that Beloved represents and how the entire small Black township is more haunted than they are willing to admit. He reflects that

The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (liveable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. [...] the secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks' jungle was hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumbling in places like 124. (235).

The plantation is a chronotope, holding Sethe and Paul D in its grip, collapsing the time and space of the novel to free Sweet Home from its geographical and temporal bounds. Sethe's neighbor's terror in this passage stems from the spreading "jungle" which transforms the black body into a liminal resource. In Morrison's work, this moment of the plantation gothic that Beloved manifests into 124 is spreading off of plantation estates, out of the South, and out of the nineteenth century. How the secret jungle of the

plantation gothic is present, spreading, and haunting the works of the Harlem Renaissance-era (and later) writers is the subject of this dissertation.

1.3 Methods

In the conclusion of Morrison's novel, the community rallies around Sethe, collectively gathering and banishing Beloved from 124. When Beloved emerges on the porch, she is preternaturally perfect and unmarked except for the scar where Sethe slit her throat as an infant, but the townspeople find her form grotesque in its unnatural beauty. Beloved disappears, but Sethe is still shriveled and weak, lying in her mother-in-law's bed waiting to die when Paul D returns to 124 to nurse her back to life. Sethe's story ends on a hopeful note with Beloved's final banishment, but Sethe is still grim with the knowledge that there is no land where Sweet Home cannot touch her. *Beloved* illustrates how the plantation gothic creeps forward into twentieth century literature, and how this representational model of plantation literature, as opposed to Faulkner's static plantation gothic, situates plantation afterlives as an important theme of Southern, modernist literature.

In conceptualizing what this means for Southern literature, Patricia Yaeger calls for literary critics to consider Southern settings as imbued with Southern history, as carefully crafted in fictional worlds as a main character.⁹ "Say," she suggests in *Dirt and Desire*, "that place is never simply 'place' in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape, or that bodies of water—the great

⁹ Lawrence Buell argues in his introduction to *The Environmental Imagination* that literary settings should be read like literary characters.

Mississippi, Lake Okeechobee, the Pearl River, Moon Lake, Silver Lake, Lake Okatukla-
-are never simply sites for leisure or hauling cotton or crossing over but sites for
recycling sadness” (Yaeger 13). And so, this is where this project starts, with saying that
we can read the secrets of the plantation in the gothic places of these six texts:
Quicksand, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Zong!*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Tropic Death*,
and *Cane*.

The word plantation is difficult to define. It can represent a specific place, a
proper noun plantation, like the eerie Coulibri Estate in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*
or the wooded McCaslin plantation in Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*.¹⁰ Using the term
“plantation” to refer to a unit of a global agricultural system tied to colonization first
occurred in 1626, symbolizing “an estate or large farm, esp. in a former British colony,
on which crops such as cotton, sugar, and tobacco are grown (formerly with the aid of
slave labour)” (OED). But this is a project about plantation afterlives, about the literary
legacy of the plantation zone. For this project, the plantation is a moveable space, an
institutional legacy present in multiple spaces and times at once, and something that can
haunt a landscape that it may never have touched. Plantations move out of time in the
way Sweet Home comes to 124, as past institutions that can suddenly dip into the present
through gothic moments.

The gothic persists, Janus-headed throughout literature, morphing in place and
era, because its flexibility reveals the “anomalies in our modern conditions” (Hogle 6).¹¹

¹⁰ See the definition of “plantation” in the Oxford English Dictionary, entry 5a.

¹¹ Hogle argues that “the Gothic also serves to symbolize our struggles and ambivalences over how
dominant categorizations of people, things, and events can be blurred together and so threaten our
convenient, but repressive thought patterns” (Hogle 19).

Franco Moretti identifies it as a genre fixed very specifically in time and place, even mapping it to a specific Germanic forest.¹² Certainly, horror marks the gothic, and often, but not always, through paranormal encounters. The gothic is defined through a set of aesthetic traits that induce “fear and wonder”: a woman alone on a foggy moor, a mad wife burning down an attic, or a raven warning of death (Hogle 17). Because of its origins, the gothic is often framed as temporally and geographically located, and so discussions of the American gothic, and subsequently the plantation gothic, are often tied to those plantations with a capital P as fixed points of gothic encounters. For example, the gothic encounters that span Faulkner’s works set in Yoknapatawpha County. Yet, the plantation gothic of *Beloved*, and I argue many other Southern works, is not spatially bound. If, as Moretti says, “[e]ach genre possesses its own space, then - *and each space its own genre*: defined by a spatial distribution - by a map,” then for later works the map of the plantation gothic must be updated to reflect it as a spreading, infectious jungle (35).

In thinking through the American gothic, Eric Savoy argues that it is a genre which emerges “to resituate “history” in a pathologized return of the repressed whereby the present witnesses the unfolding and fulfillment of terrible destinies incipient in the American past” (Savoy 174).¹³ Like Theresa Goddu, Savoy theorizes the American gothic as a mode of writing which bridges literature and history. However, these analyses often end in the nineteenth century, passing the torch to the Southern gothic dominated

¹² See Franco Moretti’s map of the gothic on page 16 of his work.

¹³ Savoy writes of the strangeness for a genre about darkness to take hold in the founding of a national literature. He argues that the gothic is more than an expression of America’s dark past, but that it does provide a mode for authors to engage with questions of the underbelly of American history.

by William Faulkner. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert pushes into the twentieth century, framing the Caribbean gothic as a long response to the horrors of colonialism. She writes that “The Caribbean, it turns out, is a space that learned to “read” itself in literature through Gothic fiction. At first it appeared as the backdrop to terror, whether in travelogues, where it was depicted as the site of the mysterious and uncanny, or in histories that underscored the violent process that led to its colonization” (233).

Iterations of the gothic are seemingly limitless on both sides of the Atlantic. As such, trying to understand the plantation gothic through a solely national corpus limits understanding the global power of the plantation system. After all, much of this project emphasizes setting and nature, and the natural world, particularly in the case of natural disasters, does not adhere to national borders. This is why I consider the framework of the plantation afterlife. Each of the three chapters that follow are a case study of some of the ways in which plantations are a driving force of twentieth and twenty-first century literature.

As Savoy and Goddu establish, the gothic genre thrives in nineteenth century American literary production as a means of reckoning with the struggles of early American history. The gothic worlds of the twentieth century (and in *Zong!*) reckon with the aftermath of the plantation and resist remythologizing the horrors of the plantation system. As Wells notes, the plantation, “for an institution whose allure was connected to its supposed pastness--[...] figured conspicuously;’ in visions of the nation’s future too” in the nineteenth century (Wells 4).¹⁴ Ultimately, this project argues that the views of the

¹⁴ See Jeremy Wells’s *Romances of the White Man’s Burden*.

plantation inheritance and agricultural labor in the twentieth century can reveal modern political alliances in the twentieth century and beyond. Plantations seep out of space and time to haunt places they never touched and times in which they are only known by their rotting husks. To expand understandings of the gothic, I conceptualize the plantation first as an environmental institution, and in doing so, center my study on its effect on the way writers represent natural landscapes after the plantation is no longer an institution in its prime.

In “Plantation Modernity,” Amy Clukey notes that “modernist plantation fiction underscores the plantation’s global socio-economic reach by tracing the flow of capital and people to the metropole from plantation cultures” (Clukey 1). Calling her framework “plantation modernity,” she argues that plantation fiction is central to understanding both modernity and modernist fiction. While Clukey’s work emerges from her reading of the Irish influence on the construction of the American South, I extend her framework of centering the plantation within modernism through ecocritical readings of the six key texts of my project. As much as modernist plantation fiction underscores the plantation’s global reach through the ways Clukey describes, the depictions of nature in modernist fiction of the plantation zone also reveal the plantation’s global destruction.

The presence of the plantation gothic in depictions of the natural world is an important and underexamined theme of some modernist fiction. To see how the modernist authors of this study engage with the plantation gothic, I combine close readings of their work with a historicist approach. By reading fiction in the context of its period and occasionally the author’s political leanings on the future of Southern industrialism, I argue that works which have not been traditionally understood as engaging with the

plantation gothic can be read as invested in the future of the South. The gothic is a genre that connects not only literature and history, but literature and place. Using a historicist framework to situate the Southern experiences of modernist authors brings forth otherwise overlooked connections to the plantation, like Nella Larsen's proximity to the Nashville Agrarians, or how Walrond wrote his great-grandfather's plantations into *Tropic Death*.

Analyzing how these works move the plantation gothic outside of the South, as in Morrison's works, in contrast to the bounded gothic of Faulkner's Mississippi situates the plantation gothic as a significant trope of Southern modernism. In making this claim, it is important to clarify my geographic terms. I define the "South" as the American South and Caribbean and see this geographic area as a discrete literary unit. This definition is indebted to Paul Gilroy's theorization of "the Black Atlantic" as a hybrid, modern space in *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy wrote that the "African-American exceptionalism" of American literary scholarship limited understandings of how black American writers were contributing to an Atlantic modernity (Gilroy 28). Ecocriticism also calls for reading works in conversation beyond national borders. Certainly, the severity of a natural disaster is determined by national resources, but the plantation system created sustained, similar environmental damage throughout the plantation zone, and how modernist writers use the plantation gothic to call attention to this plantation legacy is a conversation that goes beyond national allegiances. Because of Gilroy's work and my ecocritical interests, each chapter pairs one US writer with the work of one Caribbean writer to best conceptualize iterations of the plantation gothic.

1.4 Chapter Summaries

Ultimately, this project argues that *Quicksand*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Zong!*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Tropic Death*, and *Cane* are all works which demonstrate how the plantation gothic moves outside of the South. As Wells notes in *Romances of the White Man's Burden*, the rising tide of works about plantations showed no signs of stopping after 1870. He argues that the political portrayals of plantations, far from dying at the end of the century, “seemed actually to increase as the nineteenth century came to an end” (Wells 3). This rise in works set in motion what Wells labels as a rehabilitation of the plantation system, but what we can also think of as a broader remythologization of the plantation narrative in the twentieth century. Wells notes that

what is most noteworthy about the proliferation of plantation images underway during these decades is how it coincided with the emergence of a new interpretation of the old plantation, a new explanation of how and why it mattered to the ever larger, more geographically dispersed audiences that, with the passage of each decade, were less and less likely to have any real ties to the plantation South. (Wells 3).

Several writers of the Harlem Renaissance may not have had direct ties to plantation land, but the framework of the plantation gothic reveals that many of the writers were invested in the narrative contestations happening in Southern literature.

For example, in Chapter Two, I place Nella Larsen as writing against the Nashville Agrarians's remythologization of the plantation legacy. “‘Gay, Grotesque, and a Little Weird:’ The Plantation Gothic of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*” looks at the decade of the 1920s as a narrative battleground of the plantation's legacy. As the Nashville Fugitives banded together as the Agrarians to

publish *I'll Take My Stand*, Larsen was working on her own Southern writings down the road at Fisk. I argue that *Quicksand* is born out of the same cultural moment as the Agrarian debates about the future of the South, and that Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* is as well. In both works, the protagonist leaves the plantation zone only to be haunted by the liminal space of the plantation gothic. Faulkner may have created a haunted South, but Larsen and Rhys create a South that haunts, placing moments of the plantation gothic far outside of the Southern US and Caribbean. Both Helga Crane and Anna Morgan cannot escape the plantation zone no matter where they are in the Atlantic, just as Sethe cannot escape Sweet Home, the first example of how plantations seep out of space and time in their twentieth century afterlives.

Furthering this point is the second case study of this project, which turns to M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, along with some of Hurston's ethnographic writings, to examine the lingering patterns of ecological waste and natural disaster as another instance of plantation afterlives. "Real Gods Require Blood: Plantation Afterlives and Environmental Disaster in the Work of M. NourbeSe Philip and Zora Neale Hurston" engages further with the work of Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells to situate ecological fallout within their framework of plantation modernity. Looking at *Zong!* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as two sides of plantation modernity through the motif of water, I read *Zong!* as an example of how literature reveals the way the plantation system dually damages the black body and the ocean early in the slave trade. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Hurston's writings about Florida workers in Turpentine Camps examine the later effects of this dual exploitation in the lives of sharecroppers. Locating the work of Zora Neale Hurston in the

context of Susan Scott Parrish's research on twentieth century floods, I look at the gothic moments of disaster in both *Zong!* and Hurston's writings to argue the second afterlife of the plantation is using the black body to damage the environment and then placing those same black bodies on the frontline of environmental fallout that the plantation system caused. Unlike the work of Larsen and Rhys, the plantation gothic of Philip and Hurston is bounded like Faulkner's. Philip dredges the ocean floor for her ghosts, whereas Hurston's writings reveal a Southland that is unable to escape from the malpractices of plantation agriculture.

Finally, I expand on the lingering dangers of the environment caused by the plantation system in Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death*. "'Give Me an Ugly World:' The Plantation Afterlives of *Tropic Death* and *Cane*" argues that Walrond establishes the environmental hazards of the construction of the Panama Canal as the direct inheritance of the plantation system. *Tropic Death* is often read in the context of *Cane*, and so by placing *Tropic Death* first I contribute to their dialogue by arguing that Toomer also saw the South as the original modern wasteland, and that *Cane* is symbolic of the South's unchanged status in the plantation zone, and not a Southern elegy. The final example of twentieth century plantation afterlives are the gothic moments of both texts in which characters are overwhelmed by the beauty of the South before being unable to reconcile the beauty of the land with the horrors that created the landscape. I end with *Cane* as the most recognized modernist work of this project, one which weaves together the questions of all the texts of this project over what it means for the South to be permanently part of the plantation zone. The emphasis on migration in both of these texts exemplifies the major contribution of this project: that once we read the plantation gothic as something

that can be unbounded by the South, as the manifestation of how plantations haunt those who pass through the plantation zone, we can read the plantation gothic as a significant trope of some Southern modernist literatures.

CHAPTER 2. "GAY, GROTESQUE, AND A LITTLE WEIRD:" THE PLANTATION GOTHIC OF NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND* AND JEAN RHYS'S *VOYAGE IN THE DARK*

2.1 Introduction: Harlem Plantations

The New York City of 1929 is remembered for its bleakness: the cold autumn that emphasized the cruelty of the Wall Street crash, the end of the parties, the death of the excitement of the city, the inevitable collapse of the feeling of limitless freedom that lends New York its particular brand of urban enchantment. The financial failures of October 1929 balloon in history to represent the whole year as a monumental depression, but in the summer before the downturn, the city was sweltering, humid, and swinging; still thrumming with possibilities of wealth and luxury brought on by the roaring 20s. In the midst of this revelry was Nella Larsen, celebrating the success of her second novel of *Passing* after W. E. B. Du Bois had propelled her to fame with his glowing review of her work in *The Crisis*.

Established, popular, and beautiful: this year of Nella Larsen's life was filled with invitations to long luncheons and exclusive parties. If she was upset about the continued breakdown of her marriage to Elmer Imes at this point, she hid it well: she wrote happily of Elmer's travels abroad to friends while spending her time dancing with a handsome

Englishman fully fourteen years her junior.¹⁵ However, as the first ominous rumblings of the economic downturn hit the city at the end of summer, Larsen began to consider possible escapes. One potential option was an offer from *Forbes* magazine, which promised her an all-expenses paid trip to the South plus salary to write about plantation life. To Larsen, who was perpetually worried about money with the lack of Imes's support, the offer should have been beyond tempting.

Yet, it was immediately dismissed. Larsen wrote openly of her disdain at being asked to go “south in the summer on Negro Plantations (whatever they are) and in Jim Crow cars” too (332).¹⁶ It was not the first time that Larsen had expressed bitterness at being considered a Southern or plantation authority—in another letter she mocks some new white acquaintances for falling for her “quaint stories of my childhood in the bush, and my reaction to the tom-tom undertones in jazz. It was a *swell* lunch” (332).¹⁷ Larsen may affect a dry and dismissive wit when she describes these encounters, but she cannot fully stifle her resentment that her hosts “would have been keenly disappointed had they discovered I was not born in the jungle of the Virgin Isles” (332).¹⁸ These excerpts of Larsen's letters, coupled with her rejection of the desperately needed *Forbes* job, show a woman who deeply begrudged an association with the rural South and was especially leery of tying herself professionally to “plantations, whatever they are.”

However, despite (or perhaps, because of) Larsen's personal bitterness toward the American South, I argue that her work was deeply invested in its legacy. Larsen herself

¹⁵ The biographical details of Larsen's life all come from George Hutchinson's incredible biography, “In Search of Nella Larsen.” For her relationships and time in New York, see pg 332.

¹⁶ See Larsen's letters which Hutchinson published, pg 332.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

might have flippantly dismissed touring and writing about former plantations as work that was beneath her, but in her fiction, representations of plantation landscapes as gothic, haunted spaces resist the positive narratives of plantation life that were springing up around her in the 1920s and 30s. This remythologizing of plantation narratives through the gothic is not limited to Larsen alone.

In this chapter, I explore the reworking of the plantation legacy that was occurring in the early 20th century, a battle between groups as disparate as the Nashville Agrarians, the Daughters of the Confederacy, and writers of the plantation romance. Next, I place Nella Larsen and Jean Rhys squarely within this battleground, arguing that these authors revitalize aspects of the gothic in order to resist the cultural reworking of the plantation narrative as a benevolent and positive institution.

Focusing my attention first on Larsen's *Quicksand*, I show that Larsen crafts a particular plantation gothic that moves with Helga Crane beyond the realm of physical Southern plantations to demonstrate how the plantation itself seeps beyond its time and place. I first explore Larsen's close relationship to the Nashville Agrarian movement, then define the plantation gothic of her work in terms of the era's scramble to define the legacy of the Southern landscape, and end with a close reading of *Quicksand's* plantation gothic in the American South, Harlem, and ultimately Copenhagen. In the second half of the chapter, I extend this analysis to Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*, arguing that Rhys uses the plantation gothic to cast modern London as the plantation territory most corrupted by the evils of the plantation system.

2.2 Plantation Memories: Nella Larsen and the Agrarian Vision

When I ask my students to picture a plantation, I usually receive a myriad of images in response: pristine mansion homes and breezy porches, waving fields of sugar and cotton, majestic Oak trees with lash marks embedded deeply in their trunks, slave quarters, blood stains, rape, and pain all in one twisted estate. Plantations in the popular cultural imaginary are tied to images of gentility, Southern belles, anti-industrialism, and an unhurried Southern life of sweet tea and hoop skirts. The overwhelming remembrance of plantations is peaceful and pastoral, but it is important to note where and when this vision, so pervasive even in the twenty-first century, originates.

The narrative of plantation life as peaceful and contented is interwoven into the narrative of the Old South, which becomes a focus of American national discourse in the 1920s-30s. As the Civil War grew more and more distant, groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy became concerned with the legacy of the Old South and began erecting monuments in public spaces which venerated the Confederacy. For example, the first distinct wave of Confederate Monuments construction is in the decade of 1908-1918, with the most monuments built in 1911. The trend trickles down throughout 1930 before restarting with a vengeance after *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954.¹⁹ While correlation is not always causation, the Southern Poverty Law Center draws a sound conclusion that both major spikes are tied to times of racial tension in the United States (particularly with the first wave and the rise of Jim Crow). Further, Margaret Mitchell's novel of plantation life, *Gone with the Wind*, is released in 1936 and

¹⁹ See "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy" by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Particularly, their timeline of Confederate Monument construction.

the film version premieres in 1939. This cultural nostalgia for ways of the Old South is not limited to the Confederacy, but of course extends to the institutions that enabled it. This period of American history sees a broad rewriting of Southern history, moving the legacy of the plantation system away from violence, exploitation, and financial failure and toward a positive remembrance of racial harmony and agricultural success, despite the fact that most physical plantations were already crumbling.

Curiously, while these physical relics of plantations fade, literary portrayals flourish, from the fiction of Frank Yerby and William Faulkner to the non-fiction travel writings that so embittered Nella Larsen. The first few decades of the twentieth century offer multiple visions of plantation life: the stately manor and tender mammies of Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, the prosperous and happily subservient black subsistence farmers of the Agrarian imagination, and even the twisted and incestuous Sutpen's Hundred plantation of William Faulkner. What the boom of these images tells us is that the cultural legacy of the plantation in the literary sphere was to be decided in this era. This legacy, however, is significantly more contested than it may seem. To start, I turn to the role the agricultural institution plays in inspiring the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, in which the plantation becomes the model black agrarian workforce envisioned by the Nashville Collective.

In terms of Southern legacies, the Harlem Renaissance and the Nashville Agrarians are movements rarely placed in conversation. However, Larsen was teaching in Nashville at Fisk University during the rise of the Nashville Agrarians at Vanderbilt and the publication of their manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*. Written by twelve poets and scholars under the unofficial leadership of John Crowe Ransom, the work was published

in 1930 as a half manifesto and half call to arms about the evils of industrialization to the South. Lamenting the loss of Southern values, like small family farms and individual responsibility, *I'll Take My Stand* places the future survival of the South firmly in its past, arguing that “the South changing must be the South still” (Young 359). As this quote from Stark Young hints, the authors were unable to separate their requiem for old Southern life from old Southern politics, and so *I'll Take My Stand* utterly enmeshes a pastoral, happy South with racial oppression. For the Nashville Agrarians, the liberation of the Southern landscape from the evils of modernization was inherently bound to the belief, articulated by Robert Penn Warren in “The Briar Patch,” that “the Southern negro has always been a creature of the small town and farm. That is where he still chiefly belongs, by temperament and capacity” (260). Warren continues that “agricultural and domestic pursuits [suit] the happiness that his good nature and easy ways incline him to as an ordinary function of his being” (261). This argument that small farms manned by black labor is the way forward for the South hinges on the way the Agrarians rewrite the history of plantations in *I'll Take My Stand*.²⁰

While this demonstrates that the Agrarians were staking one claim on the legacy of plantations the South, the question of how the Agrarians affect readings of the work of Nella Larsen, dual darling and shame of the Harlem Renaissance, remains. The answer is through William Mabry: a young, attractive scholar with whom Larsen has a multi-decade friendship and love affair. Little is written on Mabry, who is mainly remembered

²⁰ The Nashville Fugitives, founded by John Crowe Ransom shortly after World War I, was a writing and publishing group between Ransom, Allen Tate (who edited their bimonthly magazine), Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren, along with twelve others. This group began writing early about the loss of the southern way of life and eventually formed the Agrarians. This was the group that enticed Mabry to Nashville, and that began the Southern renaissance that Larsen quietly resists in *Quicksand*.

for his connection to Larsen. A young white Southerner earnestly interested in the “race problem,” Mabry moved to Nashville to work under Vanderbilt scholars and James Weldon Johnson.²¹ In fact, he and Larsen drove from New York to Tennessee together at Johnson’s suggestion. Determined to work with Johnson and put his passion for the Southern landscapes of his youth into writing, he began his graduate studies at Vanderbilt, enthralled with the ideas of the Nashville Fugitives.

However, Mabry found his concurrent interests unwelcome at Vanderbilt, especially at the time when the Fugitives expressly tied their racial politics to their agricultural ones as the Agrarians. Perhaps naively, his solution was to try and merge ideologies and society at a party. Inviting literary giants like Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson (and likely Larsen herself, though she was relatively unknown as a writer and disliked as a person at Fisk), the gathering was the proverbial nail in his Vanderbilt coffin. Few of the scholars from Vanderbilt he had invited attended, and Allen Tate went so far as to write Mabry a letter denouncing the entire venture, writing that “there should be no social intercourse between the races unless we are willing for that to lead to marriage” (410).²² Soon after, Mabry left Vanderbilt and was welcomed at Fisk, becoming one of Larsen’s few close friends there. Their personal relationship is well documented: Mabry was the only person she told of her official divorce from Elmer Imes and that they stayed in extremely close contact when Larsen left Nashville. George Hutchinson, author of Larsen’s most extensive biography, goes as far as to speculate that she and Mabry were lovers in Nashville, pre-divorce: on their drive to Fisk, Larsen

²¹ Much of what is known about Mabry comes from Hutchinson’s research into Larsen’s life.

²² See Hutchinson, page 410, for more details of Tate’s letter.

passed in white hotels with Mabry, and they likely knew each other at least casually from moving in the same literary circles in New York.²³ The did-they-or-didn't-they of Larsen's love life is less important here than the evidence of their close relationship. Mabry and Larsen shared an intimacy that guarantees her awareness of his falling-out with Tate and the Nashville Fugitives/Agrarians. Larsen's connection to the Agrarians makes her limited engagement with the Southern landscape in her body of work all the more significant, as it shows that Larsen was certainly aware of the rising tide of early twentieth century works to cast plantations as benevolent institutions, from the Agrarian Collective themselves to the earlier *Gone with the Wind*.

Larsen's choice to portray the South as both a place haunted and a place that haunts is distinctly anti-Agrarian and emerges from the same historical moment. The early twentieth century was a battleground for the legacy of the plantation, and so far, Larsen's contributions to this fight, particularly in *Quicksand*, have been under-examined. Her South may be free of lynchings or other obvious Southern horrors, yet Helga ends up trapped, near death, in a horrible environment anyway. Technically, Helga's time in the South should be an Agrarian dream. *Quicksand* opens with Helga Crane teaching at a Southern boarding school, engaged to James Vayle, an upper-class fellow teacher. Helga, whose West Indian black father and Danish white mother are both deceased, spends the novel searching for a place of belonging which she never finds. Leaving both her fiancé and the school after a heated fight with the principal, Dr. Anderson, Helga moves to Chicago to try and live with her maternal uncle. Shunned by

²³ Hutchinson notes that Mabry worked for Alfred and Blanche Knopf in the mid 1920s and was close to Carl Van Vechten, Muriel Draper, and Walter White, which places him and Larsen in close proximity in New York (409).

her white relatives, she moves to Harlem to work under a middle class “race woman,” making friends with Anne Grey, a Harlem socialite against mixed race romances. Frustrated at the Harlem politics, she moves to Copenhagen to live with her mother’s social climbing sister and brother-in-law. After turning down a marriage proposal from a famous painter, Axel Olsen, because of his racist and objectifying behavior, Helga returns to Harlem to have her heart broken by Dr. Anderson, who is now married to Anne Grey. In turmoil, Helga has a transformative experience in a church and marries the pastor, Pleasant Green, moving to his small Southern parish. At the end of the novel, Helga is trapped and near death after bearing children one after the other.

In her experience at the labor-oriented Naxos, and in her marriage to Pleasant Green, Helga experiences a family-oriented, church-centered, racially segregated life of agricultural labor for the black community. Yet, Larsen skillfully transforms this Southern Agrarian dream into a nightmare. For example, both Larsen and Robert Penn Warren offer visions of a vocational education, Larsen through the school Naxos, and Warren in his essay “The Briar Patch.” Helga describes Naxos, where the novel opens, as a cruel machine, “a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms” (Larsen 4). Wearing color is discouraged, students who run late are denied food, and the matron of the girls dormitory loathes the implication of sexuality with the same vehemence as Anne Grey, refusing to marry to avoid “things in the matrimonial state that were of necessity entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to” (12). Naxos is a regimented academy dedicated to uplifting the backwoods students of the South, and

Helga deeply resents the pressure to conform to its social mores and work ethic, not to mention the bleak life it offers its graduates.

On the other hand, the Agrarians champion vocational education as the way forward. “Let the negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree,” says Warren, for a vocational education is the only way to ensure “there will be no new crowded and clamoring slave auction ready for exploitation by the first bidder” (262-264). Warren explicitly may never use the word plantation (he leaves redeeming this word to John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson) in his call for a resurgence of black farming, but the plantation system is certainly the forefather of the Agrarian plan. Consider the way Ransom presents plantations in “Reconstructed but Unregenerate.” Discussing the failure of “small farms” that the plantations were split into, he argues that the failure is due to how “those units [farms] will be industrial units, controlled by a board of directors [...] rather than a squire, worked with machinery, and manned not by farmers living at home, but by ‘labor.’” (Ransom 18). Of course, a squire here is really a slave master, and the slaves, in Ransom’s recasting, are not laborers, but devoted farmers who lived at home on the plantation land. Ransom’s rhetoric, like Warren’s, minimizes both the social and *natural* evils of the plantation. By writing a life of plantation slavery, or its descendant sharecropping, as a natural joy (Warren’s fig tree and easy temperament) and stable, logical system (Ransom’s squire overseeing protected farmers) they write the legacy of the plantation as one of pastoral benevolence.²⁴

²⁴ It is important to note that Warren would eventually become involved in the Civil Rights Movement and recant this position. The division over desegregation eventually ended the Nashville Agrarian Collective for good.

Just as the Agrarians felt the urgency of the end of the 1920s to fight for the South to preserve its grand “agrarian economy” and to continue the Southern fight “to the death for principles now clearly defined [...] as representing fundamentally the cause of agrarianism against industrialism,” Larsen too sought to establish the legacy of the South, particularly as its reputation as a land of “leisureliness, devotion to family and neighborhood, local self-sufficiency and self-government, and a capacity [...] for developing leaders” began to grow (Davidson 54). As the Agrarians write the South as a landscape of agricultural harmony, and the memory of the plantation as a leisurely home for farmers, Larsen writes a gothic space that directly contradicts this portrayal in the times *Quicksand* turns South.

2.3 Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and the Plantation Gothic

So far, I have established that at the end of the 1920s, the fight for the legacy of the South becomes particularly fraught, as first the Nashville Fugitives and later the Agrarians attempt to rewrite the legacy of plantations landscapes as benevolent models that the South should aspire to return to in the form of small farms, and that this argument overlooks how *unnatural* both the social and agricultural structures of plantations were. The rest of this section will find Nella Larsen writing in the same moment and mission as the Agrarians. I show how *Quicksand* engages with a plantation gothic to counter the representation of the South as a pastoral haven. Below, I define what Larsen’s particular brand of the plantation gothic is and how this gothic aesthetic contradicts the Agrarian vision of the South.

Traditionally, when a text is labeled as gothic, the gothic experiences all occur in one place. Consider, for example, the ghostly apparitions in a Yorkshire moor in

Wuthering Heights or the blood-red room in *Jane Eyre*. We recognize the gothic in remote manor houses, dark family histories, and foggy nights; but defining what makes a text gothic beyond a set of aesthetic markers is a difficult feat even in British literature, where it at least has a clear time period.²⁵ Even Franco Moretti's definitive map of the gothic in *Atlas of the European Novel* shows texts so temporally and spatially bound they can be clustered together in a neat, geographic region.²⁶ Yet, American authors clearly engage in a gothic tradition too, far removed from the moors that Moretti maps. Teresa Goddu argues in *Gothic America* that beyond the traditional "haunted houses, evil villains, ghosts, gloomy landscapes, madness, terror, suspense, horror [...] the gothic's parameters and 'essence' remain unclear" (5).²⁷ A concrete definition of a plantation gothic raises further problems: as the word plantation encompasses both the physical places and the "plantation imaginary" that Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells reference in the introduction of *Plantation Modernity*, defining a gothic that covers the scope of both is challenging.

If we understand the gothic as a genre fundamentally about dark secrets and histories coming to light, the American South is as close as one can come to a map like

²⁵ Teresa Goddu argues in *Gothic America* that while "classification seems to imply a definitional stability, the gothic genre is extremely mutable. Cobbled together of many different forms and obsessed with transgressing boundaries, it represents itself not as stable but as generically impure" (5). For example, Goddu notes that writing within the gothic became a way for some women writers, such as the Brontë sisters, to criticize oppressive practices of domesticity. I argue that Larsen's inclusion of gothic elements within *Quicksand* functions similarly: it allows her to critique the South without committing herself to being a regional author, an idea that would have greatly offended her literary ambitions.

²⁶ See Franco Moretti's map of British Gothic Tales 1770-1840, page 16.

²⁷ To theorize the future of the American gothic, Goddu turns to the past, arguing that the gothic emerges because of historical horrors. Thus, in the American gothic, anxieties of blackness abound. For Goddu, the gothic can be a mode rather than a genre, and thus located throughout American literary movements. This gothic mode in American writing draws from the *darkness* and *blackness* in American history (Goddu, *Introduction*).

Moretti's. This view of the South is distinctly anti-Agrarian, as the view of the South in *I'll Take My Stand* relied on overwriting the evils of slavery that occurred on the land, while the gothic creates a space fundamentally haunted by this legacy. David Punter's *The Gothic* allows us to consider how, in addition to the usual aesthetic markers of crumbling castles and whispering moors, a large part of the gothic genre is the anxiety of the undefined, the in-between. One of the key markers of the gothic is in how, "the integrity of the human identity [...] is threatened; these are liminal bodies, occupying the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilized and primitive" (Punter 21). Gothic texts play on the fear of what lives in between binaries: human vs animal, civilized vs primitive, agent vs object. This understanding of the gothic is particularly helpful when considering a plantation gothic beyond the physical space of the plantation: the plantation imaginary lends itself to this gothic blurring. At the plantation, black bodies were not just made into property, but became essentially animal property: the plantation restricted legal human identity and this legacy lasted well beyond the plantation's reign.²⁸ Thus, the plantation gothic is manifested through this threat to the human identity.

Patricia Yaeger offers several "anatomies" of the grotesque in literature, but "first and foremost, the grotesque can be understood as a prose technique for moving background information into the foreground of a novel or story" (Yaeger 25). For Larsen,

²⁸ Paul Outka underscores the significance in considering slaves as animal property, not just as non-human property, in *Race and Nature*. He argues that this has had a lasting impact on both environmental studies and the African American literary canon, considering that "sublimity and trauma represent two racially disjunct resolutions of a similar moment when a given subject's identity merges with the nonhuman natural, and that the racial and environmental schism marked by that disjunction is central to the tangled ways nature and racial subjectivity have been constructed in America" (2).

the grotesque moments of *Quicksand* are a narrative strategy to demonstrate how the legacy of past plantations affect Helga's present. Yeager further argues that women writers of the South share a preoccupation with the grotesque, which she finds in "texts that deploy a series of strategies—the explosion of monstrosity or violence, the flickery image of injustice (which remains conceptualized, unacknowledged but also well known), [...] or *hybrid bodies* [emphasis mine] that try to move the reader toward unregistered precincts of knowledge" (3). Here, again, hybridity is key to understanding the gothic as a whole, and the plantation gothic in particular: for Punter and Yeager, there is something discomfiting about a body that is not so easily categorized or experiences that defy clean definitional lines. Certainly, Helga's own anxious perceptions about her racial heritage can be slotted here, but *Quicksand* pushes beyond a perceived racial binary. No matter where Helga goes and with what race she surrounds herself, she experiences gothic landscapes: from the "gay, grotesque, and a little weird" clubs in Harlem, being paraded through the streets as a "queer creature" in Denmark, and the unsettling, eerie nights with Pleasant Green, Helga moves within in a gothic environment. This gothic ecology evokes the plantation in every landscape she experiences, such that her experiences move the historical horror of the plantation into the present, placing Helga into a gothic matrix that moves with her to the South, Harlem, and Copenhagen. *Quicksand* plays with gothic elements to emphasize the perversity that lingers in plantation territories.²⁹

²⁹ Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport also place Larsen's work within the context of the global slave trade. They examine how Larsen critiques Denmark's colonial legacy in "Helga Crane's Copenhagen," noting that "Helga's phantasmagoria of an all-white, ethnically homogenous stability far from a conflicted heterogeneous America contradicts not only Denmark's history as a colonial power [...] but also the documented presence of Afro-Caribbeans in early twentieth-century Copenhagen" (Lunde and

2.4 The Vineyard of the Lord: Larsen's Southern Places

The first, and most obvious plantation territory, is the American South. *Quicksand* opens with Helga Crane working at Naxos, a thinly-veiled replica of Tuskegee University, where the school administration welcomes a white preacher who reads like an excerpt from *I'll Take My Stand*, praising the school for producing industrious students who “knew enough to stay in their places” (Larsen 2). As Helga stewes in her rooms bitterly reflecting on her hate for the preacher, for Naxos, and for the South, Larsen toys with the set of aesthetic traits that traditionally define the gothic: when Helga is first introduced, she is a young woman alone in a strange place, having filled her rooms with deep, rich, reds, and is sitting motionless in a great chair in the drawing darkness. Around her, “outside, a whippoorwill wailed. Evening died. A sweet smell of early Southern flowers rushed in on a newly-risen breeze which suddenly parted the thin silk curtains at the opened windows. A slender, frail vase fell from the sill with a tingling crash, but Helga Crane did not shift her position. And the night grew cooler, and older” (4). From the first pages of the novel, Naxos is an eerie and ominous environment. This feeling is intensified through the way Helga's colleagues treat her with the familiar fear and longing that meets Helga in Copenhagen and Harlem.

The seeds of Helga as a grotesque figure are planted here: from Margaret, Helga's only Naxos friend, who is “afraid of Helga [as] Nearly everyone was” to her own fiancé, James Vayle, who is attracted to and repulsed by Helga in equal measure (16). Her body is a grotesque anomaly here just as it is in the rest of her travels. The women judge Helga

Stenport 231). Lunde and Westerstahl also argue that *Quicksand* is as much a work of Scandinavian modernism as it is of black modernism, noting that Larsen clearly saw herself worthy of this global prestige (230).

for her taste in “queer [clothing]; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks. And the trimmings—when Helga used them at all—seemed to them odd” (18). And when she first meets Dr. Anderson, her sense of belonging is further threatened through his claim that she must come “from good stock” (21). In a rage, she uses her mixed-race heritage to counter his claim, answering that her “father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don’t belong here” (21). Helga’s heritage, beyond discomfiting James Vayle whenever she acknowledges it, both isolates her and makes her notorious. Leaving for Chicago, Helga is haunted by her angry outburst to Dr. Anderson, asking herself why “she had lost her temper and given way to angry half-truths—Angry half-truths—Angry half—” (26). This passage initiates the precedent for Helga’s being made to exist between human and object in Denmark, human and animal impulses in Harlem, for her gothic struggles to claim her own hybrid identity.

Despite Helga’s protestations when she leaves Naxos that she hates the South and will never return, by the end of the novel she has married Pleasant Green and moved to his small, rural town. As in all her moves, Helga is enamored with the South when she first moves with her preacher husband and delighted to make herself a permanent home. For the first time in the novel, we see Helga interacting with a typical pastoral scene, rather than in a more urban space, and “for a time she loved everything and everyone. Or thought she did. Even the weather. And it was truly lovely. By day a glittering gold sun was set in an unbelievably bright sky. In the evening silver buds sprouted in a Chinese blue sky, and the warm day was softly soothed by a slight, cool breeze” (120). At first,

Helga finds comfort in this beauty, working in her garden, being domestic in her home, and devoting herself to her husband and her spirituality.

Of course, soon Helga realizes the gravity of her mistake, and as her joy dims so does the beauty around her. At first, Helga's fears only affect her at night, "when a languid moon peeped through the wide-opened windows of her little house, a little mockingly, it may be. Always at night's approach Helga was bewildered by a disturbing medley of feelings. Challenge. Anticipation. And a small fear" (120). Helga throws herself into growing a garden, trying to assuage her nighttime anxieties, and "when she worked there, she felt that life was utterly filled with the glory and marvel of God" (121). For a time, the garden distracts Helga from the flaws of her husband, but the pastoral is soon overtaken by a gothic landscape. For "night came at the end of every day. Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason" (122). This line is much more visceral and staccato than Larsen's usual style. This sentence reinforces the panic that Helga experiences at night, particularly comparing her feelings to "rank weeds" that overtake her mind.

There is no doubt that this South is a haunted landscape. Helga, who has spent the novel fighting against the assumptions placed onto her body by forces as disparate as Axel Olsen, Anne Grey, and Dr. Anderson, has lost control of her own physicality. She, who had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly to think of it. It had persistently to be pampered to secure from it even a little service. Always, she felt extraordinarily and annoyingly ill, having forever to be sinking into chairs. Or, if she was out, to be

pausing by the roadside, clinging desperately to some convenient fence or tree, waiting for the horrible nausea and hateful faintness to pass. The light, care-free days of the past, when she had not felt heavy and reluctant or weak and spent, receded more and more and with increasing vagueness, like a dream passing from faulty memory. The children used her up. (123).

Helga even refers to her body as an “it” in this passage, an entirely separate being from herself. She has been in the South for about two months at this point and cannot remember a time when she was not in service to a body she does not recognize and feels powerless over. This is one of the clearest moments of the grotesque in the novel. Helga’s body has become weak, rank, and used. Like the other moments of the text when Helga’s body shifts into the grotesque, this description of Helga underlines how Alabama’s plantation past affects Helga’s present.

In *Quicksand*, the Southern landscape is a corrupting force where nothing can flourish: Helga’s body is sickened and completely transformed from her time in the South, the communities that try to survive there face financial and social woes, and eventually even Helga’s garden dies, likely because of how the soil has been stripped dry of nutrients from single-crop (i.e., plantation) farming. After the birth of her fourth child in three years, Helga recognizes the Southern horror in which she has been trapped. Seething, rank, and confined to her sick bed, “her mind was hot and cold, beating and swirling about. Within her emaciated body raged disillusion. Chaotic turmoil. With the obscuring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself” (130). Helga awakens from her ill-fated labor to a ruined garden and a dead infant, who “born of such futile torture and lingering

torment, had died after a short week of slight living. Just closed his eyes and died. No vitality” (131). Nothing can flourish in the South. Helga bears strange, sickly children who she cannot bear to leave “in this vicious, this hypocritical land” as she plots her escape (130). Larsen’s characterizations of the South as a vicious, perverse, corrosive land run antithetical to the Agrarian vision of small, local, agricultural communities envisioned at the end of the 1920s to counter the supposed evils of industrialism. Yet for Larsen, the Southern landscape holds no salvation.

Helga even feels relief that her last child does not survive, as “she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or—she would have to die. She couldn’t endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great” (134). She feels her only chance to survive is not only to get away from the toxic environment in the “vineyard of the Lord” and the people there. If Naxos was the model of Agrarian education, Pleasant Green’s small township is Robert Penn Warren’s model black farming settlement. Little is mentioned about the small Alabama town—it is not even named—yet, the small descriptions Larsen provides hint that it is a black settlement that, if not located on a former plantation, is at least surviving on farms. When a white doctor is called from downtown it is “a red-letter event,” there is no time for womanly leisure between tending to the “garden, and chickens, and a pig,” and the town is enveloped in a “bleak air of poverty which, in some curious way, regards itself as virtuous” (128, 120, 119). To admit her white heritage would be a scandal here, even more than her Northern ways and lavish tastes. Pleasant Green’s flock (a name that sounds more like a cemetery than a pastor) is trapped in the quicksand of the South just like Helga.

2.5 “Gay, Grotesque, and a Little Weird:” The Urban Plantation Gothic

If we consider the gothic to be a manifestation as a fear of the in-between, the gray and anxious space between human and animal, civilized and barbaric, person and object, or in more succinct terms: the grotesque body; then Helga’s gothic experience can be best illustrated in Denmark through Axel Olsen’s portrait of her. *Quicksand* allows us to map spaces like Denmark and Harlem as part of the plantation gothic. At this point in the novel, Helga has begun to resent Denmark’s overwhelming whiteness: she is frustrated by her aunt’s not-so-subtle hints that she marry and has begun to feel like an outcast among her friends. Her outsider status is cemented when she and her friends visit the circus and witness two black American performers giving a minstrel-like show, to which she returns over and over, watching “how the singers danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease!” (83). These performances leave Helga filled with a bitter hatred for the performers for showing “something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget” (83). Her secret trips to the circus also leave Helga astounded that her Danish family and friends see her merely as an exotic bauble who improves their social status, while they claim to be above matters of race. Helga is appalled at how Olsen is enthralled with the show. For Helga, being adored for her dark skin in Denmark is no better than being reviled for it in America.

On the heels of this revelation comes Olsen’s charming marriage proposal, begrudgingly made after Helga rejects his earlier offer of casual sex during one of their many portrait sessions. Wooing Helga by telling her that “you have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute,” Olsen is shocked at her flat refusal which he can only understand as “some strange talk of

race and shame” (87-88). Worse than Olsen’s proposal is the portrait. Helga bitterly muses that “it wasn’t [...] herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. Herr and Fru Dahl had not exactly liked it either, although collectors, artists, and critics had been unanimous in their praise and it had been hung on the line at an annual exhibition” (Larsen 89). The painted Helga is lewd, wearing bright clothing and little of it, leering from the frame at her potential conquest.

Yet, the disgusting sensual creature that Helga sees reproduced in oils so glamorously before her *is* Helga: at least, it is her as she is seen in Copenhagen. Helga, so afraid of sexual intimacy that she flees an entire continent to get away from the fear of being “a jungle creature” who gives into sexual desire, ends up in a place where she is made into sex personified. At first, she is flattered by the way her Aunt Katrina and uncle, Herr Dahl, buy her new clothes and tailor her old ones, until she realizes she is the only person in the city dressed so revealingly. When Herr Dahl declares that Helga needs to be wearing jewelry and buys her long, dangling earrings, Helga feels relieved that at least “she escaped the bracelets,” a phrase which Lunde and Stenport argue is reminiscent of avoiding slave shackles (99).³⁰ Helga is made to perform a primitive blackness designed for the gaze of the Danish elite: the ostentatious jewelry makes her feel like “a veritable savage,” a “queer dark creature,” and “new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” in Denmark (69-70). Between her new clothing, her inability to communicate at her Aunt and Uncle’s parties because of her limited Danish and her racial isolation, Helga begins to feel less than human. She is even treated as such by the people

³⁰ See page 233 of “Helga Crane’s Copenhagen.”

she meets: Aunt Katrina's friends feel no jealousy over Helga, as she "was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (70). Long before Helga is a painted object, she has the experience of feeling like artwork: a gothic experience of having her human identity threatened, the grasping tendrils of plantation culture reaching across the sea.

The portrait, Helga's oily double, goes beyond being merely lascivious and crosses into the grotesque, thrusting Copenhagen's colonial past into the spotlight.³¹ The idea that there is something deeply wrong with the artwork, that it presents something (not a *someone*) fundamentally corrupted is reinforced when Helga asks Marie, the kindly old maid, for her opinion of the portrait. Marie, who has been made to be Helga's personal tailor, cutting her expensive clothes to be nearly backless and slit up the sides, answers that "I know Herr Olsen is a great artist, but no, I don't like that picture. It looks bad, wicked" (89). Helga, Marie, and even Frau and Herr Dahl see a grotesque person reflected in the painting. According to Yaeger, the "grotesque as a figure of speech, state of mind, and as hyperspatialized body becomes a somatic tool or 'wedge' that points to the dangers of everyday domesticity" (Yaeger 225). Helga's body, already magnified visually in neon colors, skimpy outfits, and dangling, clanging jewelry, is also

³¹ Yaeger provides a succinct example of this technique in a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on page 26. When two white slave traders mock a young black child, Yaeger argues that the "sudden grotesquing of the child's body skewers the 'background' features of slavery and shoves them into the foreground; the child's body maps for the reader the slaveholders' predations" (26). Helga's portrait, and to a lesser extent, the minstrel show, function similarly here.

grotesquely enlarged by the giant, looming portrait. Helga is doubly hyperspatialized: hyper-visible in both her daily life and in her portrait, too.³²

Certainly, Larsen takes aim at the ideals of domesticity and marriage in these chapters with Olsen's odious offer of marriage and her family's insistence that she was foolish to let such a good catch go. But Helga's painting and this eerie, gothic moment in which it looms before her also shifts the background plantation past into the novel's present, which becomes particularly clear when coupled with Helga's rejection of Olsen and, by extension, his art. Helga declares "lightly, but firmly: 'But you see Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you'" (Larsen 87). The Dahls attempts to refashion her body have made Helga a grotesque cartoon of herself, which she finally sees in viewing her portrait. Seeing the painting, Helga is confronted with all of the ways the Dahls attempt to style Helga as an object to increase their social status, essentially crafting her into a living work of art: bringing her to teas and parties to be seen and not heard, walking her up and down crowded streets at rush hour, and of course, giving Olsen the permission to paint her without Helga's knowledge or consent. In losing her sense of bodily autonomy through her dress and her sense of human identity through her lurid, sexual portrait, Helga experiences the keen anxiety of being between human and object. These incidents build until Helga is compelled to assert her non-thingness, snapping when her Aunt Katrina and

³² The moment in which Helga is confronted by her portrait and views herself as her greatest fear recalls Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This allusion both provides a way for Larsen to place her writing among that of the great modernists, like Wilde, and offers another framework for critics to understand modernist horror. In Wilde's work, Dorian Gray's portrait is a reflection of all the evil he has committed, of his darkest desires reflected on canvas, a grim reminder that he cannot escape what he has done. In Larsen's work, Helga's reflection is a reminder that she cannot escape the plantation matrix.

friends try to gossip about Olsen's marriage proposal. As her aunt demands to know when Helga thinks Olsen will propose, Helga bitterly responds that "'I can't tell a thing about him,' and fell into a little silence. 'Not a thing,' she repeated. But the phrase, though audible, was addressed to no one. To herself" (79). The image of Helga, who takes such great pride in her appearance and fashion, dressed in clothes that she has not chosen, muttering "not a thing" in a language that only she speaks, frightened of her family's attempts to marry her to a faceless, rich, white man while sitting zombie-like at a high tea epitomizes the plantation gothic Helga finds in Copenhagen.

Ironically, Helga's attempt to flee Denmark and the grotesque portraits of blackness that haunt her there land her back in Harlem, facing the same gothic experiences that drove her to Copenhagen. Helga longs to blend in, but quickly finds herself just as conspicuous in the streets of New York. The grotesque body is the female "body that entices one's hearing and speaking because of its anomalousness," and despite her beauty and youth, Helga is again anomalous in New York (Yaeger 10). Helga's body is still treated with sexual suspicion back across the Atlantic. When Helga reunites with Anne and Dr. Anderson, Anne reflects with pride that her marriage is one of sterile intellectualism and quickly identifies Helga as a threat to "his ascetic protest against the sensuous" (Larsen 94).³³ To Anne, Helga's body represents a "lawless place [...] a vagrant, primitive groping toward something shocking and frightening" within Dr. Anderson (95). Helga is as strange in Harlem as she was in Copenhagen and Naxos.

³³ Anne recognizes that it was the "voice of Robert Anderson's inexorable conscience that had been the chief factor in bringing about her second marriage" (94). Anne, who had no physical affection for her first husband, has no intention of debasing herself for her second. Despite her and Helga's close friendship, Anne has suspicions that Helga is mixed race (which Helga hides from her) and that Helga's sexual restraint cannot be trusted, despite her knowledge of Helga's virginity.

Trying to impress her ex-fiancé James Vayle with her time abroad, Helga realizes that he thinks she could live in Denmark only because she is of mixed race, and “A suspicion of a frown drew Helga’s brows. She threw out rather tartly: ‘I’m a Negro too, you know’” (102). Helga has always been an outlier, and her worst fears of unbelonging are confirmed when he shrugs that ““Well, Helga, you’ve always been a little different”” (102). Even here in a Harlem club, where white women dance with black men and Audrey Denney brings her white partners to parties, Helga is still peculiar.

The grotesque functions in Harlem as it did in Copenhagen, uncomfortably jutting the past of the plantation into the present, where Larsen sets an aesthetically gothic scene. Walking to the club in Harlem, Helga sees “black figures, white figures, little forms, big forms, small groups, large groups, sauntered, or hurried by. It was gay, grotesque, and a little weird. Helga felt singularly apart from it all” (58). The foggy night distorts her vision as the familiar streets become strange as the group begins their evening. Resentful of being dragged along to a jazz club, Helga is surprised to find herself “drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra” (59). For once, Helga gives in to physical pleasure and the wild hedonism of the jazz age. And then, just as suddenly as these feelings appeared, they end: “when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature” (59). The darkness of the club, and distorted figures though the haze, and of course, the sultry, smoky street filled with staggering masses epitomize the plantation gothic Helga experiences in New York. In disgustedly labelling

herself as a “jungle creature,” Helga casts herself as a grotesque figure, a judgement that quickly expands to the other patrons who give into the “savage strains of music” (59).

As she did in Copenhagen, Helga struggles with the image of her body curated by those around her. From Anne, who fears and resents Helga’s mixed-race parentage and Helga’s physical beauty, to James Vayle, who finds Helga odd and off putting, yet still desires to marry her, Helga is found strange. Even when she looks no different from her peers, her body is still a spectacle. In both of Helga’s experiences in Harlem, her gothic encounters can be traced back to the plantation’s legacy. Helga’s gothic environments provide Larsen with a means of critiquing the lingering perversions of the plantation system. In Harlem, this critique is made through Helga’s anxiety in the club, the above scene from her first move North, and then through Helga’s church conversion. In Copenhagen, Helga fights the lingering cultural colonization of the plantation system that casts her body as a grotesquely lewd figure. In the Harlem scenes, Larsen plays with the same cultural legacy while Helga’s self-induced geographical boundaries reflect Harlem’s geographic history as a plantation.³⁴

Harlem’s plantation legacy is far removed from that of the South. Harlem remains synonymous with the capital of urban, black America, while Larsen casts the South as its antithesis. Yet, Harlem’s roots as a Dutch plantation are still present in the novel. Larsen pays a curious amount of attention to geography in *Quicksand*: Helga’s “existence was bounded by Central Park, Fifth Avenue, St. Nicholas Park, and One Hundred and Forty-

³⁴ Jonathan Gill’s sweeping *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to the Capital of Black America* tracks the development of a two-hundred-acre plot granted to Hendrick de Forest as a Dutch settler from a plantation to the urban center of black life it became (Gill 16). The history of Dutch Harlem in this section comes from this work.

fifth street. Not at all a narrow life, as Negroes live it, as Helga Crane knew it” (46). This boundary, Helga’s invisible fence, curiously reflects the original Dutch plantation settlement. This can be mapped thanks to the work of Jonathan Gill, who explores the geographic history of the small Dutch colony which would become New York in *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to the Capital of Black America*. The original New York colony was a loose conglomerate of agricultural settlers in constant peril from being sandwiched between the English and French, vulnerable to disease, and routinely attacked by Native Americans. Harlem became recognizable as a plantation system when the small collective of farms faced extinction and the settlers decided to establish a tighter, walled village on the newly abandoned farmland rather than letting inhabitants spread out on the land. The village, a collection of farms and farmers, “was to occupy fifty acres between the Otterspoor and Zegendael, with plots of farmland nearby, between what are now Fifth and Eighth avenues and between what are now West 125th and West 148th streets” (Gill 30).³⁵ This village was called Nieuw Haarlem, and the boundaries mirror Helga’s own geographical fencing almost exactly.

Harlem as a settlement has a brutal history. Gill’s claim that the “Dutch planted seeds of racial, ethnic, and religious tolerance on Manhattan, but the social tensions that have always haunted American society flourished in the same soil” is certainly true (25). He recounts how the Dutch attacked Indian tribes during peace, deliberating murdering women and children with excessive brutality, often ripping children from their mother’s

³⁵ At this point, the five plantations had set empty for years due to the Indian attacks and poor Dutch leadership. Though Gill does not state so explicitly, this acreage would have included the original Hendrick de Forest plot (though it had changed hands many times after his untimely death, labeled by Gill as the first Harlemiter). The peg-legged Peter Stuyvesant, the leader of the colony, intended to lure “lovers of agriculture” as new settlers (30).

arms, hacking them into pieces and burning their corpses in fire pits or throwing them into the ocean. As a result, the various tribal warfare was halted and a large Indian alliance formed, uniting in an attack against the settlement. Young Harlem is burned to the ground, the plantations are sold or abandoned, and “more than a hundred Dutch and sixteen hundred Indians dead” (Gill 26). Even though they suffered the least losses, the Dutch settlement, already precariously low in numbers, never recovers.³⁶ There are, of course, far more atrocities that occur in the establishment of New York, but I note this example to emphasize how Helga’s geography, and the locations of the gothic spaces she encounters, work as reminders of how the past leaves traces in the present, traces that are teased out through the placement of Larsen’s gothic scenes. Keeping in mind Yaeger’s argument that place is never simply background in literature, but rather a representation of the accumulation of trauma into the land, any understanding of Helga’s gothic encounters in Harlem must include its bloody colonial violence. That the streets Helga walks are nearly identical to the Harlem plantation’s border reflect this accumulated trauma.

Further, one of the most striking moments of *Quicksand* is Helga’s frightening conversation in the church where she meets her future husband, Pleasant Green. At this point in the novel, Helga has just parted from Dr. Anderson, with whom she had been planning to have a sexual affair and is left reeling from his apology for their kiss rather than reciprocating her feelings. Devastated, and feeling trapped in her hotel room, Helga sets out without heed to the weather or cold, unknowingly walking the borders of the

³⁶ See Gill, pages 22-26, for details of the attack and its impact on the settlement.

plantation that haunts Harlem's streets. Outside "was evening and still raining. In the streets, unusually deserted, the electric lights cast dull glow" (110). In the dark, alone at night, Helga roams until she is thrown into a gutter and has to flee into the church for shelter, the only open door on the "open corner of One Hundred and Thirty-eighth Street," which places her a few streets away from where the Dutch first touched down, touching the mouth of the river that brought the settlers there (110).

Both the traditional aesthetic markers of the gothic and the grotesque, the marker of the plantation gothic, are present in the description of the church conversion. First, through the figure of a woman alone in the fog on an empty street that should be bustling with people, and second, through the frightening church itself. Helga enters into what appears to be a traditional scene of hymns, but quickly ends up in a crushing mob of bodies shrieking for her conversion. Watching the scene around her, "there crept upon her an indistinct horror of an unknown world. She felt herself in the presence of a nameless people, observing rites of a remote origin. The faces of the men and women took on the aspect of a dim vision. 'This,' she whispered to herself, 'is terrible. I must get out of here.' But the horror held her" (113). The fundamental strangeness and disorientation of what should be a perfectly normal event push this scene into gothic territory. As Helga makes an effort to escape, she feels faint and collapses onto the altar, and is engulfed in the mob of worshippers.

The bodily horror that characterizes the grotesque is vivid. The women of the church become like animals, and, in an effort to get to Helga, "dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles" (114). When one of the women grabs her, Helga has to pull out of her coat to get away, and "the sight of bare arms and neck

growing out of the clinging red dress” throws the congregation into a frenzy (112). Helga’s body is always out of place, even more so here where the worshippers declare her a scarlet omen and Jezebel. The description of her body here emphasizes its strangeness, a head and shoulders growing out of a red dress, rather than a whole woman. Unable to escape, Helga is overcome. She “felt an echo of that weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed [...] Maddened, she grasped at the railing, and with no previous intention began to yell like one insane, drowning every other clamor, while torrents of tears streamed down her face. She was unconscious of the words she had uttered, or their meaning” (113-114).

Helga’s body has again become a grotesque caricature of herself. Her red dress, with her skin exposed by the clawing women, becomes a site of animalization and sexualization for the churchgoers, just as her body did for Axel Olsen and Dr. Anderson. The Helga Crane who stumbles through the doors of the church resembles her Danish portrait more than a human woman. Her moment of conversion becomes the moment of near sexual release that she has so long denied herself, joining the other screaming, crying, shaking, and sweating women at the altar. Here, the grotesque emphasizes the plantation not only through the location of the church, but also the plantation’s cultural legacy. Helga's body is a sexual threat to the women through her revealing clothing and the mixed-race heritage they read on her skin. At the end of the scene, Helga repents and decides to move to Alabama with Pleasant Green.

2.6 The Plantation Afterlives of *Quicksand*

With the grotesque characterizations of Helga’s body at Naxos and with Pleasant Green, Larsen rejects the Agrarian vision of small, black, thriving, agricultural

communities and schools that funnel into these communities by recentering the plantation past in the South's present. However, the question still remains of why Larsen's gothic moments reflect the plantation system specifically rather than a more general legacy of racial violence. While many of Helga's identity crises can be attributed to the broader legacy of slavery (her sexual anxiety, her resentment of the Naxos education model, her objectification in Denmark), attributing the grotesque moments to slavery alone does not take into account the cultural moment surrounding both Larsen and the Agrarian philosophy. Of course, pitting the legacy of slavery against the legacy of the plantation system will always lead to unsatisfying results as these institutions can never be unwoven from each other. Nowhere in the definition of a plantation that I noted in my introduction does it specify slavery. For an agricultural operation to be considered a plantation there must be a "sizeable labor force," but enslaved labor is nowhere in the definition. As Alfred Crosby notes, the earliest plantations did not resort to slave labor until an inconvenient plague killed off their paid (or occasionally indentured servitude) labor.³⁷ But once slave labor was introduced, it became the dominant labor force used on plantations. When we consider the plantation system in the United States, it is inextricable from the system of slavery that comes with, or perhaps, is brought by a plantation economy.

If, as Yaeger notes, "place is never simply 'place' in Southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape," Larsen extends the trauma of Southern places beyond the boundary of the South (Yaeger 13). The grotesque moments in *Quicksand* demonstrate that the legacy of the plantation system spreads far beyond this

³⁷ See Alfred Crosby's "Introduction" to *Ecological Imperialism*.

geographic and temporal boundary: Helga's grotesque portrait in Copenhagen moves the backgrounded history of colonial expansion into the space and time of twentieth century Denmark, the aesthetically gothic streets of Harlem hint to the city's early roots as a Dutch plantation, and her grotesque experience of motherhood in Alabama all refuse to let the plantation legacy fade away from the Southern landscape. Thus, Larsen was affected by the same desire to codify the legacy of the South in the early twentieth century as were the Agrarians and *Quicksand* clearly contributes to the way the legacy of the South will be remembered. Finally, *Quicksand* exemplifies plantation modernity, demonstrating how the plantation seeps beyond its temporal and physical borders.

2.7 Jean Rhys, the Tropics, and the Plantation Gothic

Like Larsen, the work of Jean Rhys is haunted by plantations. However, Rhys's writings draw more overtly upon the plantation system than the gothic scenes of *Quicksand*. Anna Morgan experiences the plantation gothic across the Atlantic just as keenly as Helga Crane does, but while Larsen crafted speculative Souths from urban centers she called home, Rhys wrote from the memory of one plantation: Geneva, a Dominican sugar plantation that was home to her family for generations.³⁸ Rhys only spent a few years of her childhood there, as the estate belonged to distant relatives rather than her parents, but even after a family drama sent her to London at sixteen, Rhys felt bound to the estate. Carole Angier, the author of Rhys's most extensive biography, argues that Rhys is an intensely autobiographical writer whose literary works represent her own

³⁸ Also called Genever, Rhys visited often in childhood. By the end of Rhys's childhood, the estate was financially failing. See *Smile Please*, page 27.

reckonings with her sexual and personal traumas. Like most readers familiar with Rhys's life, Angier reads Rhys's West Indian childhood into *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys's childhood experiences of being one of the few white children on the island, her feelings of isolation and fear, and later relationship with an older, married friend of her father's (which Rhys alludes to in her own autobiography, *Smile Please*) play out dramatically in Coulibri, Geneva's fictional plantation counterpart.

As *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates, the most persistent image of the plantation for Rhys is of it burning. Angier again finds Coulibri's incineration to be a result of Rhys's obsession with the plantations of her childhood. As a young girl, Rhys was traumatized by the flippant way her parents watched black workers burn down a neighbor's estate, and Geneva was burned twice, once before Rhys was born and once after she left the island. When Rhys finally returned to Geneva in the 1930s, the sight of the overgrown ruins, polluted and dirty streams, and charred foundations tortured her throughout the rest of her life. The scorched estate was a tauntingly apt metaphor for Rhys's life.³⁹ Throughout *Smile, Please* and the excerpts of letters Angier publishes, Rhys reflects on her childhood as a low-level member of the plantocracy with critical nostalgia. One can imagine that the image of the flames enveloping the big manor house

³⁹ Rhys is taken aback when she visits her former home and is treated as an inept stranger: "I thought, 'A guide to Geneva for me? How ridiculous! However, there was a guide, we went quickly by car and he seemed to know exactly where to take me. Where the house had been was an empty space; the Geneva house was burnt down two, or was it three, times. I stared at it trying to remember the house, the garden, the honey-suckle and the jasmine and the tall fern trees. But there was nothing, nothing. Nothing to look at. Nothing to say. Even the mounting stone had gone. When we got to the river I bent down and sipped from it. I was very thirsty and perhaps had some vague, superstitious idea that if I drank the water I'd come back. The guide caught my arm and said, 'Don't drink that. It's very dirty now. You'd be ill if you drank it.' How many times had I drunk from that river when I was thirsty? There are supposed to be three hundred and sixty-gibe rivers in the island, one for every day of the year. Were they all dirty? Yes, he seemed to think they were all very dirty indeed. 'Very dirty, not like you remember it.' No, it wasn't as I remembered it" (Angier 28-29).

as the owner's flee must have felt like an almost too-perfect symbol for the way her family's way of life went up in flames as the plantation system became unsustainable. An unusually sensitive child, Rhys felt constantly aware of the palpable rage of the underpaid, overworked black workers around her, especially when she visited Geneva. She was torn between anger at the oppression around her and her desire to *belong* to the place she was born. The horrors of colonization which Rhys both loathed and profited from as a daughter of the plantocracy inform the creation of the gothic world of her work.

While Angier may not label Rhys a gothic writer until *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Voyage in the Dark* is as much a novel of the plantation gothic as Rhys's other works. In *Voyage in the Dark*, plantations are plentiful. They are present when Anna walks down a street in London and finds herself on the island coast, takes a lover to bed in an English hotel and envisions a list of enslaved women of the Constance Plantation, or even when Anna tries to acknowledge the feeble European sun and can only remember the fierce Caribbean one. *Voyage in the Dark* works within the same plantation gothic that we find in the grotesque scenes of *Quicksand*. Rhys locates most grotesque scenes in England in order to mark it as the homeland of the plantation gothic, the root and responsibility of the perversity that the plantation system spawned.⁴⁰ Helga Crane and Anna Morgan are both women haunted by plantations in places and times which are ostensibly plantation-free. By exploring the plantation aftershocks that Helga and Anna experience across the Atlantic, we can see how Larsen and Rhys engage the gothic as a tool of resistance to the remythologizing of the plantation system occurring in the early twentieth century.

⁴⁰ Construing Rhys as a broadly southern writer, I again draw from Yaeger's theory of the grotesque in southern women's writing along with Monique Allewaert's analysis of the British conception of plantation territories in *Ariel's Ecology*.

To argue that Rhys uses the gothic to create London as a plantation space, just as Larsen casts Copenhagen as a plantation space through Helga's gothic scenes, we first have to understand how Rhys characterizes plantation spaces as gothic spaces. Like Larsen, and other Southern women writers Yaeger identifies, Rhys turns to the grotesque through the form of hybrid bodies to create gothic scenes and tie this gothic back to the plantation system. Following Yaeger's conception of the grotesque as a prose technique for moving background information into the foreground of a novel, we can see how the aesthetic markers of the plantation gothic are the same in each text, but to different ends: Rhys, as a distant descendant of the British plantocracy, engages the plantation gothic to challenge the way the spaces of the Tropics were constructed by the British settler class, much the way Larsen's work writes against the Agrarian vision. *Voyage in the Dark* is a work of black and white: the West Indies are black and England is white, Anna is a good girl until she is a fallen woman, and to be black is to be happy and to be white is to be miserable. Lines do not blur easily for Anna, who wants to be a West Indian, which she can only understand as black, but she feels she can only live in London, which she sees as the home of whiteness. Anna's inability to recognize or engage with a Creole identity returns later in this chapter in "A Real West Indian," but first, I turn to how Rhys creates a gothic London through the grotesque, animalized bodies of *Voyage in the Dark*, reversing the perception of the Tropics as the unnatural, perverting landscape.

2.8 But What Has This to Do with False Teeth? Jean Rhys and the Para Plantation

Paranormal. Paranoid. Parachronism. With the power of one prefix, we express perversion. The strange status plantation slaves were made to occupy in the nineteenth century is well documented: Paul Outka, among others, writes of the way slaves were

made into living property as human bodies denied the personifying power of definition⁴¹. In *Ariel's Ecology*, Monique Allewaert suggests the parahuman to represent this phenomenon, which she defines as a “category opened up by colonials attempting to manage black persons, particularly their capacity for collective resistance” (85). The parahuman represents the way the plantocracy viewed black bodies and encompasses the narratives of blackness that white settlers formed to justify their rule. Specific to the Caribbean plantocracy, “the *parahuman* is distinguishable from other bodies produced in emerging biopolitical regimes because her body was broken in parts: an ear amputated for petit marronage, a hand for theft, an arm pulled from the body by the sugar mill, and sometimes a head cut from the body for resistance so total as to warrant death” (85). Breaking the black body into parts as punishment, through back-breaking labor or in artistic representation, serves to limit the capacity for human agency and create an image of the black body as animalistic, resilient, and replaceable. After all, for the eighteenth century colonizers that Allewaert centers her book around, a body that can keep going lacking an ear, hand, or even foot is hardier than the fragile white one that succumbs to fever or heat, a narrative that has a lasting impact into the twentieth century about race in the Caribbean. By the time Rhys was born to a struggling plantocrat, these views were entrenched into English narratives of Caribbean life and empire.

41 Paul Outka examines this conflict in *Race and Nature*. He argues that “That the intersection of nature and race—perhaps the two most perniciously reified constructions in American culture—has yet to be thoroughly examined underscores the longstanding, often normative, whiteness of ecocriticism. It also suggests a much harder fought anthropocentrism in critical race studies that inverted the terrible historical legacy of making people of color signify the natural, as a prelude to exploiting both. This legacy—in which whites viewed black people as part of the natural world, and then proceeded to treat them with the same mixture of contempt, false reverence, and real exploitation that also marks American environmental history—inevitably makes the possibility of an uncomplicated union with the natural world less readily available to African Americans than it has been to whites” (Outka 3).

Rhys wrestled with the characterizations of her birth place during her whole life, particularly against the English prejudice that people born in the colonies, even whites, were tainted in some way compared to those born in Europe. Not only because of the constant and outnumbered proximity to black bodies, but also because of the suspicion that the climate was so hostile a true English gentleman could not survive there. The imaginary Tropics were hot, hazy, sexy, and godless. Always something of a playground for the white plantocracy, the colonies with climates like Dominica's were considered a danger to one's morals. In Allewaert's words, the English view was that "plantation spaces possessed those who traversed them. The heat that changed the orientation and movements of bodies, the diseases that the atmosphere was thought to carry, and the bites that the region's insects and venomous snakes inflicted, all compromised bodily and metaphysical integrity" (33).⁴² Rhys, born in the colony and formed in the metropole, was confronted with the question of what happened to the British settler class as their lineages were born and bred in these lawless, dirty, and wild spaces.

Anna embodies these questions about the Tropics and plantation spaces. Despite fading in presence and significance after abolition, plantations left physical marks on the landscape, from the overgrown ruins of Rhys's own Geneva, slowly crumbling into (and subsequently poisoning) a once-picturesque stream, to the big houses that managed to continue into the twentieth century on the backs of sharecropping and servitude. Just as the physical crops marked the landscape, the plantation order marked the cultural one,

⁴² Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert also discusses the how the Caribbean Tropics became a gothic space through European conceptions of a Tropical environment in "Colonial and postcolonial gothic: the Caribbean." See page 253.

and *Voyage in the Dark* is cluttered with these metaphorical ruins. Anna's is not the only body to be contaminated by contact with plantation space. One way to see the lingering touches of the plantation world within the novel is in the way Anna casts everyone (from Francine, her Uncle, and even the English landlady) as grotesquely animal creatures. Anna's social interactions in England are filled with teeth which mutate into tusks, ears that twitch into feelers, or nostrils that flare like a rabbit's. Most interestingly, Anna experiences these grotesque moments, in which plantation spaces possess and threaten English bodily integrity, across the Atlantic. Rhys uses the grotesquely gothic imagery that marked plantation territories as wicked, corrupted places in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to cast London as the plantation territory haunted by the evils perpetrated in the colonies.

It is Hester, Anna's quintessentially evil English stepmother, who introduces this view of plantation territories as spaces which corrode the spiritual and physical integrity of the white body to Anna. Anna and Hester, despite loving and hating Francine, respectively, both break Francine into her body parts per the racialized view of black bodies that Allewaert identifies. For her part, Anna enjoys watching Francine eat mangoes the way a visitor enjoys watching animals in a zoo. Anna fondly reminisces about how Francine's "teeth would bite into the mango and her lips fasten on either side of it, and while she sucked you saw that she was perfectly happy" (67). Both Anna and Hester marvel that Francine "never wore shoes and the soles of her feet were hard as leather. She could carry anything on her head - a bottleful of water, or a huge weight. Hester used to say, 'What are those people's heads made of? A white man couldn't carry a weight like that. Their heads must be like blocks of wood or something.'" (67-68). The

way Anna imagines Francine's penultimate joy at eating a mango and living in the tiny kitchen of a large house imagines Francine in animalistic terms, a being with only primitive wants and emotions. Hester's snip that Francine's head is like a "block of wood" parrots Allewaert's analysis that these narratives emerge to justify white supremacy, but more than that, Anna and Hester's remarks reflect the English view that the Tropics were an inhospitable, corrupting place where only hearty animals could survive. Hester defines herself as physically incapable to affirm her foreignness to the tropical climate, and thereby affirms her whiteness and outsider status. If plantation spaces possess the bodies that spent time there, clinging to the morals like humidity to skin, Hester is determined to remain untainted.

Hester's judgement of Francine, and later even of Anna, reinforce this image of the island spaces as dangerous and corrupting, a place where only wild creatures can survive. However, Anna reverses this view, so the white settler class is the one that has become tainted as an invasive species that can barely survive their new climate, like Hester, who positions herself as not only too delicate to the labor that Francine performs, but also as barely surviving the island itself. For example, when night flowers bloom, Anna writes how "Hester couldn't bear the scent, it made her faint," or how Hester complains that she is physically weak in the heat of the day and feels like she will be driven mad by the "rocks and stones and heat and those awful doves cooing all the time. And never seeing a white face" (90 and 62). Despite their opposite preferences, Anna and Hester both share the reductive ideology that London equals civilization and whiteness, and Dominica equals savageness and blackness. Hester laments Dominica as an undomesticated place where baser "unfortunate propensities" take over otherwise

respectable men (65). Through Hester's eyes, the taint of savagery colors everyone she meets in the West Indies, especially Anna, whose mother will never be white enough for Hester because of the place of her birth. The presence of racial codes and biases implemented under the height of the plantation system, along with the plantation homes that now run on servitude instead of slavery like Morgan's Rest ("Morgan's Folly" according to Hester), illustrate how the plantation is still a force in the early twentieth century (63). Rhys extends this plantation reach to London by locating nearly every gothic scene there.

Considering Goddu's understanding of the gothic as a mode tied to dark secrets coming to light, one would expect the dark secrets of *Voyage in the Dark* to be much more sinister in the shadow of the plantation system than they are. We could expect a typical fiction of the plantation gothic to exist in the fear of family sins coming to light, like the sticky sibling desire of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* or Margaret Mitchell's "Ropa Carmagin," the incest-implied novella that preceded *Gone with the Wind*.⁴³ It is easy to imagine *A Voyage in the Dark* where Anna learns of her half black sibling only by chance on the day she was intended to marry him, or finds herself trapped in a love triangle of white and black siblings in a love triangle worthy of Pauline Hopkins. Yet, *Voyage in the Dark* sees no such dark, secret histories come out in Dominica. Uncle Bo is proud of his children, who Anna recognizes as her cousins, and they proudly share the family name. To Anna's professed disappointment, her mother was white, but if her family tree was harboring strange fruit, Anna's father likely would have married her

⁴³ See Lawrence Buell's analysis of how Mitchell's "Ropa Carmagin" fits in with Faulkner's Southern imaginary in *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, page 307.

anyway. He seems to care little for status, telling a black man who comes to fix their piano that ““You are a real musician”” to Hester’s chagrin, and when accused of supporting ““that damned French monkey”” over an Englishman in an election, only replies that ““I’ve known plenty of Englishmen who were monkeys too”” (95). Anna’s father loves the island and loathes the restriction of the continent, and so Anna’s island life is idyllic and unhaunted by secret ghosts. Only when she moves to England does Anna become a woman haunted by plantations.

The darkest places of the text where the plantation slips in space and time to create perverse, aesthetically gothic scenes do not happen in beatific Morgan’s Rest, but rather, in London. Consider the most abruptly grotesque moments of the novel, the recurring scenes where Anna suddenly sees people as animals. And not just in mannerisms or movement, but as actual, frighteningly grotesque monsters. One of the first times it happens, Anna is in her rented rooms and has just learned that Walter is leaving her. Unbidden, Anna remembers a moment with her Uncle Bo:

I got up to the table where the magazine was and Uncle Bo moved and sighed and long yellow tusks like fangs came out of his mouth and protruded down to his chin - you don’t scream when you frightened because you can’t and you don’t move either because you can’t - after a long time he sighed and opened his eyes and clicked his teeth back into place and said what on earth do you want child -. (92).

This memory is out of place in the text, interrupting the movement of Anna in her rooms, the flow of Anna’s thoughts as she receives the letter, and completely removing the reader from the space of the London apartment where Anna has just come inside. Anna

herself seems just as confused by the jarring intrusion, coming back to herself to ask ““But what’s the matter with me? That was years and years ago, ages and ages ago. Twelve years ago or something like that. What’s this letter got to do with false teeth?”” (92). The letter itself, while creating financial and emotional difficulties for Anna, seems innocuous enough: Walter is leaving for America and Vincent is writing to separate them. Yet, this moment fractures into a scene of the plantation gothic as a family member mutates into a monster before Anna’s eyes. Undoubtedly, some part of this memory is tied to Anna’s realization that Walter is not the man Anna thought he was (as Angier says, “cruel fangs lurk beneath the surface of the best-loved faces”) and so Anna seeing one of the few men she thought she could rely on with new eyes in this letter parallels when her Uncle Bo seemed to her a strange, tusked creature in her childhood (Angier 301).

However, this moment also represents the formation of Anna’s view of the Caribbean and Europe, and blackness and whiteness, as diametrically opposed. In her childhood, Anna saw her uncle as the opposite of Hester’s cruel whiteness. Uncle Bo is joyful, loud, openly prefers his West Indian home to London, and proudly recognizes his mixed-race children. But this letter jars Anna’s memories of Uncle Bo’s proud identification with the plantocracy with his false teeth. Anna realizes that Uncle Bo espouses Hester’s same concerns about finances, lineage, and position. In short, Uncle Bo embodies the negative whiteness that Anna had heretofore only assigned whites from England, ruining her ability to exempt her West Indian born family from the toxic whiteness she resents in Hester. Walter’s letter is tied to Uncle Bo’s, in which he writes to Hester that “there is not the remotest chance of her [Anna] ever being able to earn any

money for herself out here [...] Tell her to from me to be a sensible girl and try to settle down” (60). After Anna finishes reading the letter from Walter, she tries to tell herself to snap out of it, but “went on thinking about false teeth.” From Uncle Bo, she remembers her father, particularly the memory of her father finding her crying and how he “hugged me up and then he said, [...] ‘you’re going to be like me, you poor little devil.’” (95). Anna is, indeed, like her father, inheriting both her father’s moody temperament and his dislike of England and preference for the West Indies, making them both outcasts in the social cast to which their family belongs. Like her father, Anna loathes London and longs for Dominica, and this grotesque and gothic vision portrays white Englishmen as hypocritical, cold, and vile. Worst of all, Anna knows these are her people.

The propensity Anna inherits from her father to loathe and distrust the English but identify with them nonetheless establishes Anna’s dualistic perception of white Londoners as unnatural and grotesque and black islanders as natural and good. This Atlantic divide leads Anna to locate the grotesque squarely in London. Like the memory of Uncle Bo growing tusks only intruding into Anna’s thoughts in England, Anna’s most frightening visions happen on the continent. Throughout the corpus of Rhys’s work, Angier notes that “people as insects is one of Jean’s most frightening visions,” and human faces as animals is an image Rhys relies on to create eerie and unnerving landscapes in *Voyage in the Dark* (306). For example, Anna describes the matron of the chorus hostel as “like a rabbit, she was, like a blind rabbit” in prayer, a couple kissing in Brunswick Square are “like beetles clinging to the railings” as Anna passes them on her way to meet Walter, and a second landlady with “bulging eyes [...] like a prawn” as she

brings Anna vermouth. (21, 34, 103). The deluge of these descriptions that litter Anna's London creates an uneasy tension about a world that does not seem quite right.

London is crawling with these visions, but the woman described in the most animalesque and grotesque terms is Ethel. Anna notes how "her eyes were cleverer than the rest of her. When she half-shut them, you saw that she knew she had her own cunning, which would always save her, which was sufficient to her. Feelers grow when feelers are needed and claws when claws are needed and cunning when cunning is needed..." (107).⁴⁴ These insect traits manifest in relation to Ethel's hatred of foreigners: after seeing a movie, Ethel rants to Anna about how she hates that a foreign actress was hired in a movie, telling Anna that she can recognize non-Englishness by "this soft, dirty way that foreign girls have," especially that the foreign actress has black hair (109). Anna remains silent. Back in her room, Ethel continues that "when I say I'm a masseuse I don't mean like some of those dirty foreigners. Don't you hate foreigners?" (110). To Anna, the question is absurd. Anna is a foreigner: she was born on an island with a completely different climate, resents England and most of the English, and longs to be black while fending off assumptions from Hester that she is mixed race. However, she is a foreigner who cannot claim her foreign status as her English friends (Laudie, Walter, Vincent, and Ethel) mark her as a fellow Englander.

Further, these moments of sudden eeriness that Anna experiences in London—her landlady growing feelers or a young couple creeping like beetles rather than enjoying a

⁴⁴ As Helga Crane's portrait allows Nella Larsen to allude to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Ethel's insect-transformation allows Jean Rhys to engage with Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The moments of inhuman horror throughout both *Voyage in the Dark* and *Quicksand* deliberately situate Rhys and Larsen's work in conversation with recognized modernist writers like Kafka and Wilde. In doing so, Rhys and Larsen elevate their engagement with the plantation gothic to a significant trope of modernist literature.

romantic walk—casts London as the dark, unsettling place where people behave like animals, unlike the West Indies, where the physical plantations which created these ideologies are located. These descriptions create a gothic atmosphere that marks London as a plantation territory. As a place where people are so disgusted by foreigners that they appear as cockroaches like Ethel or so fear blackness that they scuttle and jerk like Hester from one cold and miserable place to the next, Rhys's London is the city haunted by the plantation system, not the joyful West Indies. In Rhys's geographic imaginary, people born and raised in England have their humanity under siege. She flips the British view of the Tropics as wild, corrupting spaces as London becomes the environment which makes people half-animal. Jed Esty notes that Rhys and other young women authors of early twentieth century "wrote with an acute awareness of a fallen, ex-British world of the settler plantation class in the West Indies and in Ireland. Their experimental fictions register not just the post-Victorian vogue for achronological plotting, but a profound, sometimes tragic, sense of dispossession, one that cannot and should not be reduced to special pleading for a politically disgraced settler class" (162).⁴⁵ Rhys wrote in reductionist terms because she felt displaced in a reductionist world, and her heritage uniquely positioned her to see the snide attitude with which English-born Britishers looked down at those bred in empire. Anna does not want to be black. Rather, Anna wants to feel like a "real West Indian," which she cannot be with her dualistic conception of race, England, and the islands.

⁴⁵ See Jed Esty's *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*.

2.9 A Real West Indian

Despite being unable to feel like a “real West Indian,” Anna cannot fully avoid the prejudices against being island-born. Her childhood is spent listening to Hester’s bitter remarks that the “Costeruses [Anna’s family] seem to have populated half the island in their time [...] and you being told they were your cousins and giving them presents every Christmas and your father had got so slack that he said he didn’t see any harm in it” (64). Hester blames the island climate for making Anna’s father so “slack” and eventually goes so far as to call him unsalvageable because of his life spent in the climate, telling Anna that she knew her father had been permanently damaged when he argued that he was tired of visiting England and saw no value in ever returning to London. The English fear that plantation spaces were lawless lands that would permanently pollute any Englishman who dared spend time there has become the fate of both the Morgan and Costeruses men. The Caribbean is a space that lacks clear categories: British but West Indian, white but not the same as a white born Londoner, a technically British landscape where no English plant could survive. The lack of clear lines in the Caribbean drives the grotesque experiences that define the plantation gothic. Hester represents this discomfort with categorization in the Caribbean. Suspicious and resentful of the island, she turns her attention to Anna, snapping at her in London that “I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn’t do it. Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked - and still do. Exactly like that dreadful girl Francine” (65). Hester loathes Uncle Bo for openly flaunting his racial intermixing, resents her husband for seeing no harm in it, and most of all, frets that Anna may ruin her neat categorical worldview. In their heated London argument, Anna accuses Hester that she is

“‘trying to make out that my mother was colored.’ I said. ‘You always did try to make that out. And she wasn’t.’” (65). Hester wants Anna to belong firmly in England in looks, temperament, and racial heritage. Hester’s greatest fear is Anna’s greatest wish: that Anna is, in fact, a West Indian.

Anna often expresses her wish to be black, particularly black like island-born Francine. Many scholars have already noted that, of course, Anna does not truly want the oppression, and life of servitude, and precarity that being black would bring her.⁴⁶ However, the significance of Anna’s expressed racial desire for this project is not that she wants to be black, but rather in how she constructs whiteness as foreign to the islands. Anna wants to be black because she wants to feel like she belongs in the place of her birth. Anna attempts to disassociate from whiteness (and thereby England) and associate with blackness (and Dominica) by attempting to write whiteness as grotesque, parahuman, and unnatural; like the insect people she encounters in London. The odd charade of separating from whiteness by trying to align with blackness is one Allewaert examines, arguing that white women repeat or engage with black experiences in order to gain autonomy

while insisting that their own racial distinction separates them from Afro-Americans. This form of surrogation attempts to convert Caribbean relations, admixtures, and cross-pollinations into a field of discrete and fixed identities that even, as they come into contact remain fundamentally distinct and (insofar as they are in relations of mimicry and not of cross-pollination) uncreolized. (148-149).

⁴⁶ Jed Esty notes this on page 162.

Anna's reduction of the world to black Dominica and white England leaves her without a category to slot into, a homeland in which she is racially ostracized and a white community in a land where she can never feel at home, to the extent that Anna experiences all of England as a terrifying and perverse gothic world. This is a particularly bizarre outlook as Anna could easily label herself as Creole and claim herself status as a West Indian-born woman in the original sense of the word.⁴⁷ Instead, Anna tries to be a "real West Indian" and distance herself from the white England she resents by comparing herself to Maillotte Boyd while in bed with Walter.

Anna's reminiscences of plantation life always jut into the narrative of her time in England in choppy sentences and awkward times, both disrupting the plot of English life and the reader's sense of spacetime. The scene with Maillotte Boyd and the old plantation slave list is especially jarring in the moment preceding Anna and Walter going to bed. It is a dialogue heavy encounter, with Anna's thoughts only appearing in between lines of conversation to note that she finished her glass of whiskey or hears it begin to rain. The page is even sparse visually, for example, when Walter mentions an old fling, Anna responds

"My predecessor?" I said. 'Oh! my predecessor.'

'She was certainly born knowing her way about. It doesn't matter, though. Don't worry.

Do believe me, you haven't got to worry.'

⁴⁷ Often, Creole is used to refer to mixed race people in the Caribbean, but the original use of the word designated a "native born" or colony-born European. Of course, it is important to note that "no true Creole ever had colored blood," but light-skinned, rich black families in New Orleans adopted the term for themselves (Tallant et al 137).

‘Yes, of course,’ I said.

‘Well, look happy then. Be happy. I want you to be happy.’

‘All right, I’ll have a whiskey” (51).

Nearly the whole chapter continues in these short bursts until the text suddenly skips to a plantation space. For example, just a few lines after the above conversation:

‘That’s all very fine and large,’ Walter said, ‘but don’t start too early.’

...Here’s the punch Uncle Bo said welcome Hebe - this child certainly can mix a good punch Father said something to warm the cockles of your heart - the blinds on the verandah were flapping - like a sip Father said whoa he said that’ll do we don’t want to have you staring too early...

‘Yes, Uncle Bo can drink if you like,’ I said.” (51).

The memory of Morgan’s Rest is not only disruptive to the plot, but visually disruptive on an otherwise sparse page. The ellipses create a sense of anticipation that is unfulfilled as the reader sifts through Anna’s memory without the help of traditional punctuation or sentence structure. Without acknowledge the shift, suddenly we are back in England with Walter, and the rest of the encounter continues with these strange plantation intrusions. As in Larsen’s work, the plantation is not contained on its original grounds.

When Anna’s insistence that she is a “real West Indian” and thereby not an English woman is met with disdain from Walter, Anna finds a different path to tie herself to the plantation. She repeats to Walter that ““When I was a kid I wanted to be black, and they used to say. ‘Your poor grandfather would turn in his grave if he heard you talking like that.’ [...] ‘I’m the fifth generation born out there, on my mother’s side.’” (52). When Walter responds disinterestedly, Anna invokes the figure of Maillotte:

‘I saw an old slave-list at Constance once,’ I said. ‘It was hand-written on that paper that rolls up. Parchment, d’you call it? It was in columns - the names and the ages and what they did and then General Remarks.’ ... Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant. The sins of the fathers Hester said are visited upon the children until the third and fourth generation - don’t talk such nonsense to the child Father said - a myth don’t get tangled up in myths, he said to me...’ (53).

Partly at root of this sudden threesome between Walter, Anna, and Maillotte is the uncomfortably paternal relationship between Anna and Walter, and Anna’s less than enthusiastic response to essentially prostituting herself for Walter’s economic support. It is easy to see how Anna’s mind could wander from feeling choiceless in bedding Walter to the experiences of a slave woman on her family’s estate and the sexual violence inflicted there. However, this sudden intrusion of plantation life into an English bedsit nearly one hundred years removed reveals more about Anna’s desire to relate to Dominica than the state of her relationship with Walter. Kinship with Maillotte Boyd, the mulatto house servant who was quite possibly a distant relative of Anna’s, gives Anna the connection to her homeland for which she so desperately longs. Presenting herself as like Maillotte allows Anna to position herself as an authentic West Indian, especially when Walter tells Anna that the “Tropics would be altogether too lush for me” and Anna can assert that the English climate is terrible for her (54).

Anna’s insistence that Walter recognize her as “a real West Indian” while pushing the reader to see her experiences as parallel to Maillotte’s gives Anna a claim to her West Indian heritage that is not tied to the plantocracy she resents (55). Play acting a black experience while insisting on her whiteness to Hester a few pages later reinforces Anna’s

inability to recognize a Creole identity and place herself, even temporarily, on the West Indian and black side of the line, just like when she insists England will never be temperate enough for her to emphasize her unbelonging in the city. Esty labels Anna a nationless character, and as “a figure of nonfuturity, Anna symbolizes the inability of the Creole plantation class to reproduce itself in a post-emancipation, post-plantation, postcolonial world” (Esty 177). While Anna is an embodiment of plantocratic failure, it is not because the world she moves in is post-plantation. For Anna, the plantation is ever present and always out of reach, but through Maillotte, Anna finally becomes a permanent subject of the plantation.

2.10 Plantation Subjects

Rhys’s vision of the Real West Indian as a figure like Maillotte Boyd is the biggest contradiction between the way she and Larsen conceive of plantation spaces.⁴⁸ Rhys sees these territories as the site of black authenticity, whereas Larsen sees plantation spaces as the place where black authenticity is strangled. Hazel Carby argues that Larsen is an outlier of the Harlem Renaissance for her refusal to “revitalize” folk culture in rural places as the locus of an authentic blackness in her work (Carby 166). As Carby states, Helga’s time with the folk “was the moment of her greatest oppression and degradation [...] It is important that Larsen returned her readership to the urban landscape and refused a romantic evocation of the folk” (175). This situates her against a writer like Hurston, a more typical representation of the celebration of folk culture in the South. Despite being

⁴⁸ I am very grateful to Keith Leonard from American University for the conversations at the American Literature Association Conference in 2018 about the south, Nella Larsen, and authenticity that helped shape this section.

neither a Harlem Renaissance nor black writer, Jean Rhys's view of the folk is much more typical of the era. Francine best personifies how Rhys turns an eye both saccharine and bitter toward folk characters: to Rhys, the folk culture of plantation spaces is joyful, simple, and wholly out of her reach as a white woman. Rhys is not interested in revitalization so much as an idealization. The gothic spaces of *Quicksand* show us how plantations fundamentally corrupt the places they touch, even beyond the realm of physical plantation territories. Their creeping power traverses time and space, haunting Helga Crane across the world. Rhys's gothic scenes, unlike Larsen's, are tied to whiteness and England. By placing the plantation gothic primarily in England, Rhys ties the evils of the West Indian plantation system to their intellectual origins. Larsen writes off the folk, Rhys writes them as victims.⁴⁹

As a white woman perpetually aware of her place in the plantocracy, Rhys could never truly feel at home in the folk cultures that emerged in plantation territories. But neither could Larsen, ostracized as she was for her mixed heritage. In both *Voyage in the Dark* and *Quicksand*, race and place are conflated in the folk spaces in which Helga Crane and Anna Morgan try and fail to make a home. Their inability to belong manifests

⁴⁹ I do not define or debate the definition of racial authenticity, but rather question how both Larsen and Rhys conceptualize it, as both *Quicksand* and *Voyage in the Dark* feature protagonist who feel racially alienated in the places they want to call home. For both Larsen and Rhys, authenticity refers to southern black folk culture. Starting with Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, the "folk" is usually a reference to the black lower classes, particularly ex-slaves. Du Bois's folk are those outside of his defined talented tenth: the working black families he meets in his travels. One of the clearest example of Du Bois's interaction with what he would consider the folk is found in Chapter 4 of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Of the Meaning of Progress." He describes his interactions with a young girl named Josie and her family, who have an ambition to live "'like folks' [...]" I [Du Bois] grew to love them for their honest efforts to be decent and comfortable, and for their knowledge of their own ignorance" (Du Bois 64). Later in the chapter he describes another folk friend as "a magnificent amazon, with saffron face and shining hair, with [...] children strong and beautiful" (67). Even Du Bois uses strong ethnic markers such as "amazon" and "saffron" when describing the simple, honest people that he marks as the folk.

through their gothic encounters. Helga, whose body is a notorious misfit wherever she goes, and Anna, who is haunted by the plantation of her ancestors everywhere from her lover's bed to her landlord's sitting room.

In the next chapter, I explore the environmental imagination of gothic portrayals of plantation territories in terms of ecological disaster through the work of Zora Neale Hurston and M. NourbeSe Philip. While the gothic encounters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Zong!* also represent how the plantation creeps out of bounds, Hurston and Philip celebrate these haunted spaces and the folk culture that springs from them, unlike Larsen and Rhys. For the second time in this chapter, I want to emphasize Patricia Yaeger's insight that "place is never simply place in Southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape" (Yaeger 13). These works reverberate with the traumas of plantation spaces through their gothic encounters, and like Rhys and Larsen, represent the impact of the plantation system after the height of the plantation's political power.

CHAPTER 3. "REAL GODS REQUIRE BLOOD:" PLANTATION AFTERLIVES AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER IN THE WORK OF M. NOURBESE PHILIP AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON

3.1 Introduction: The Plantation Castoffs of the Sea

Anyone who reads Caribbean literature has been struck by Derek Walcott's poignant 1978 line "the sea is History." Walcott's work is a referendum on the ways colonialism has permanently erased so many lives, voices, and stories. "Where are your monuments, battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory?" asks Walcott. And he answers: "Sirs, / in that grey vault. The sea. The sea / has locked them up. The sea is

History” (Walcott 1-4). The entire poem is as potent as the first four lines. Even forty years later the line continues to ripple across literary scholarship. As Maxwell Uphaus points out, the line has dominated titles of literary articles since 2010.⁵⁰ Uphaus further credits this one line from Walcott with the formation of an entire subfield of modernist studies, Oceanic Studies, and as having significant impact on the direction of post-colonial, modernist, black, and Global South scholarship. In six short syllables, “The sea is History” expresses the staggering amount of life and culture lost in the water in a way literary scholarship still works to comprehend. The sea is the tomb of so much human history and life.

However, the sea is also the tomb of our garbage. The sea is quickly becoming a less metaphorical sort of human history: our trash heap. There may not be new land to discover on the Earth, but Oceanographers consistently discover new islands made entirely of garbage, from rubber ducks to supposedly flushable wipes. Using the ocean as a receptacle for our garbage is far from a new phenomenon. Since the first ships started trading across the Atlantic, they started dumping in it. Leftover food, sewage, empty barrels, damaged cloth, bullet casings, and even corpses. And if Oceanic Studies has become a thriving subfield of literary scholarship in the threat of climate catastrophe, it only makes sense that a subfield devoted to the study of trash was not far behind. Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini point out in *Histories of the Dustheap* that garbage is a bizarrely potent lens for literary critics with an ecocritical or historical bend. After all, there is no consensus on how garbage is defined, no easy object lesson. Instead, “Garbage might best be understood not as an object but rather as a category, and it comes

⁵⁰ The exact numbers were in Maxwell Uphaus’s 2019 MLA presentation.

into being only at the moment when it is thrown away” (Foote and Mazzolini 6). If we think of garbage as the end life of resources, as what happens when a resource is no longer desired and is thrown out, then the object potential of garbage is infinite. It also offers a new and horrifying way to think about the waste of the Atlantic slave trade.

Take, for example, the Zong Massacre, notoriously gruesome even among the routine horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. The slave ship Zong had trouble from the start.⁵¹ Originally a Dutch slave ship, the British captured it and manned the vessel with a seventeen-person crew of desperate Englanders and the remains of the Dutch crew, which combined was still entirely too small to run the overloaded ship when Luke Collingwood took captaincy. As a former slave ship surgeon, Collingwood’s job would have been to examine African captives and determine their market value. Jeremy Krikler argues that Collingwood’s transition from surgeon to captaincy is significant in accounting for the resulting onboard massacre. If, as the ship surgeon, Collingwood ruled captive Africans unfit for the journey or estimated that they would not be sold for much profit, the traders usually killed them immediately in front of him (often by beheading) or chose to starve them to death. As such, a “man such as Captain Collingwood of the *Zong*, who in his professional life had been routinely involved in the selection and rejection of slaves and must have known that some suffered brutally through their failure to pass his tests, might well later take the step to select ill slaves for murder” (Krikler 31). Further, as a surgeon, Collingwood was poorly prepared for the navigational responsibilities of captaincy.

⁵¹ Historian Jeremy Krikler offers an extensive account of the Zong, along with the slave ship Brookes, in “The Zong and the Lord Chief Justice.” All facts of the massacre come from his account, the historian who Philip best trusted for an accurate history. I also consulted James Walvin’s book about the Zong but stuck with Krikler for these facts.

By the time the *Zong* was travelling to Jamaica in 1781 with over twice the number of enslaved peoples the ship could safely carry, Collingwood was gravely ill, and it is unknown who was in command of the ship, though it was still likely Collingwood. An unknown disease, likely dysentery, was ravaging the captives and crew. The ship needed to stop and restock supplies in Jamaica but overshot. By the time the error was realized, several captured persons and crew had already died of dehydration.⁵² Jamaica was nearly two weeks away and only four days of water remained. Whether Collingwood's proposal or that of another sailor, the crew threw fifty-four women and children to their deaths in the water on November 29. On December 1, the crew began to murder the men in this way. By the end of the Massacre, 142 men, women, and children were thrown overboard. Ten captives jumped in protest.⁵³ Krikler's reading of the *Zong* Massacre stands out from that of other historians because he argues that, while undeniably appalling, this kind of death because of resource scarcity was fairly routine on the sea in service to the plantation economy. Krikler argues that the sailor culture that emerged from trading slaves was a brutal one, in which the response to running out of food was to draw lots and eat the unlucky puller of the short straw. He writes that "The choice on the high seas of people to be thrown overboard while alive because they were deemed commercially valueless, or a burden on an enterprise, clearly had kinship with that other selection [of cannibalism]: the difference was that in one case, the murder was directly organized by the captain; in the other, it was left to another agent" (Krikler 31).

⁵² See Chapter Five of James Walvin's *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law, and the End of Slavery*, pp. 97-100 for his account of the *Zong* Massacre.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

According to Krikler, the Zong Massacre is unique not for its disregard of human life, but rather for its targeted victims.

The economy of the plantation system usually refers to the capitalistic trade that arose around it. However, economy can also be defined as careful resource management. This type of economy of plantations required recognizing the human body as a resource and discarding it when no longer useful. It makes sense that this mindset then spread off the plantations and to the people trading the labor and transporting the cargo in service to the plantation market. As a sailor, Collingwood was accustomed to death as a natural outcome of resource scarcity. As a surgeon, he had the market value of his cargo foremost in his mind. The Zong Massacre is indicative of the global resources which were necessary to fuel the plantation system, including the transformation of the human body into a disposable good.

Further, Collingwood (or whoever was in charge of the ship) hoped that drowning the enslaved peoples on board would allow the company to file an insurance claim. If the captives died of dehydration, it was a natural death, and not covered. If the ship stopped on another island and the captives died onshore, it was not covered. However, if the captive men, women, and children died because of an environmental danger or in order to save the rest of the cargo, there was precedent for insurers to pay out. The ruling claim states that “There is no instance in which the mortality of slaves falls upon the underwriters, except in the cases of perils of the sea and of enemies” (“Gregson v Gilbert” 211). This insurance claim and resulting court battle between the slave company

and the insurers is the only reason we know about the Massacre at all.⁵⁴ The court transcript of “Gregson v. Gilbert” notes the amount of enslaved people thrown overboard and the money demanded for their deaths, but nothing more.

The Zong Massacre encapsulates the capitalistic waste required to feed the spreading plantation system. Because there is barely any record of the Zong, and what does exist only lists the human property lost for insurance notes, several authors have tried to untomb this history that was thrown away in the sea.⁵⁵ The most popular is M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, a long narrative poem with six chapters, nearly thirty languages, and a notanda where Philip provides scholarship over her own work. The poems recreate the Zong Massacre by recreating the voices of the murdered men, women, and children, interspaced with direct quotes from the text of “Gilbert v. Gregson.”

In *Zong!*, Philip recreates the history of the Massacre with an emphasis on the massacred, both through voice and through style. The nontraditional form of her poems visually recalls bodies of the enslaved thrown overboard and splashing into the text, the movement of ocean waves, and a cacophony of ghostly voices haunting the text of “Gilbert v. Gregson.” The plantation system hovers just outside of the pages of *Zong!*, bookending the ship’s journey across the Atlantic. *Zong!*’s gothic scenes are about the transformation of the human body into liminal resources, resources which will be forced to do labor which is environmentally damaging, and then placed on the frontlines of the environmental fallout caused by the plantation system. Philip locates this gothic

⁵⁴ The only remaining record is the transcript of the second insurance trial, technically the second “Gregson v Gilbert.” The Captain’s Log was lost, though many historians like Krikler speculate that it was deliberately destroyed.

⁵⁵ See Fred D’Aguiar’s 1997 novel *Feeding the Ghosts* and Margaret Busby’s play *An African Cargo*, which both recreate the Zong Massacre.

transformation in the exposure to environmental hazards. The *Zong*'s insurers tried to blame both the drought and the ocean itself as a natural risk which caused the deaths of the enslaved men, women, and children being transported on board. Philip's text exposes how forced proximity to environmental risk is the plantation forelife that forces the enslaved body into a gothic space, revealed through recurrent use of the motif of transformation, particularly through the figure of Circe (most famous for turning men into pigs). *Zong!* is a work of plantation forelives, establishing how the plantation system seeps out of bounds to create a gothic Atlantic.

On the other side of the waste of the plantation system is the work of Zora Neale Hurston. Like Philip, Hurston's body of work is deeply historical. She covered political happenings in her career as a journalist, traveled throughout the Southern United States to uncover what happened during Klan attacks or labor uprisings, went undercover to be initiated into a voodoo sect and record the proceedings, collected folklore throughout Florida and the Caribbean, and ended her life writing a biography of Harold the Great. Her fiction often crosspollinated with her work as an ethnographer. For example, she would publish folklore stories as both literary fiction and as travel accounts, or snippets of interviews she collected during her trips would later appear in her novels. Whereas Philip dredged the ocean floor for her literary bones, Hurston's came to her: she found remnants of the plantation system in the waste and fallout of the Turpentine Camps, in sharecropping communities, and especially in the aftermath of the 1928 flood of Lake Okeechobe. Hurston's work is not haunted in the same way as Philip's. She did not need to search for the environmental disasters that haunt her South, as she saw the aftermath of the plantation on the environment as obvious in the environmental damage she witnessed

during her travels. As such, Hurston's gothic world is revealed through her personification of the environment as a "monstropolous" beast out for revenge on those who have tried to sublimate it. Her work in the Turpentine camps similarly frames nature as hostile and vengeful to those who work it. Hurston's conception of environmental disaster as revenge against those who ordered the landscape places the plantation as the original cause of this order and the cause of modern environmental fallout.

By placing Philip and Hurston in conversation, a more complete case study of how plantations affect later understandings of environmental disaster in Southern literature is possible. Both Hurston and Philip locate the trauma of the plantation, and its presence, in a long-lasting pattern of dual exploitation of black communities and the environment. In Philip's work, the plantation is the unseen force driving the text forward and casting the ocean as a plantation zone through the gothic scenes of men and women transformed into resources and thrown to their deaths. In Hurston's work, the water surges forward onto the former plantation on which Janie and Teacake work as sharecroppers in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the symbolic rage of Lake Okechobe implicating the long-damaging processes established by the practices of plantation agriculture.

3.2 *Zong!'s* Plantation Odyssey: Bones, Ships, Salt

Zong!'s! aesthetic reproduction of the Zong Massacre emphasizes the environmental hazards and dangers of the Atlantic slave trade.⁵⁶ In Philip's work, there

⁵⁶ In *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman constructs modernity as an illusion of order. The modern world suggests that a global economic system and rule of law will ensure safety, when in actuality, the logical conclusion of the modern world is violence, disarray, and pain. For Bauman, it was the Holocaust, in its

are six sections of poems before a “Glossary,” “Manifest,” and “Notanda.” The first, “Os,” is experimental, but still readable. The poems run from *Zong!* #1 to #26. In this section, the Massacre occurs. These poems are angry and question how this could possibly happen. The shock of the event is reverberating throughout the poems. Many of the words drift around the pages as if in lazy water, as though a body had just dropped onto a poem and scattered the structure, as in *Zong!* #5, shown in “Figure 3-1.” This section also explores the uncertainty of history.

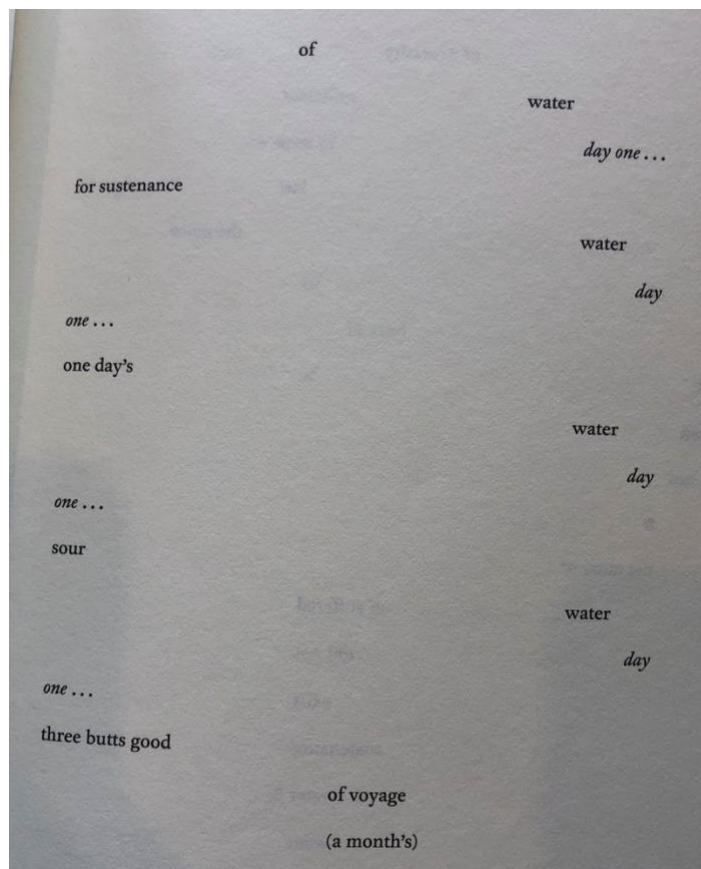


Figure 3-1: This image shows the poetic structure of "Zong! #5" in "Os."

ordered and systemic cruelty and humans reduced to violent cogs of a machine, that most exemplified modernity. Philip’s work offers a similar look at slavery.

For example, *Zong! #9* is in two columns like a ledger, and the brusque tone mimics that of the log of captives. The poem reads “slaves / to the order in / destroyed / the circumstance in / fact / the property in / subject / the subject in / creature/ the loss in / underwriter / to the fellow in / negro / the sustenance / in want / the arrived / in vessel / the weight / in provisions / the suffered in / die / the me in / become” (17-18). The rigorous structure of the poem stands out among the others, and the order of the clipped left column and longer phrases in the right belies the trauma and disorder of the Massacre. This poem is built, literally, on the known facts of the Zong: the underwriter, the property, the loss, the vessel, the provisions. Philip is pointing out the real history is in the gaps of these facts, the vast emptiness of the page between “the subject in creature” and “the weight in provisions” in which human life was transformed into a disposable resource. The tone of “Os” shifts with the ending, “Dicta.” Here, none of the poems have numbers to distinguish them, instead becoming all “*Zong! #.*” The ending of “Os” is the potential world without the plantation economy, a section of what ifs. The first poem offers a vision of “seas without / insurers / owners / perils / islands / africa / owners without / africa / seas / insurers / islands / perils/ africa without / perils / seas / insurers / islands / owners” (49). In short, a world without the Atlantic slave trade, without island plantations waiting for African bodies, or a world without insurers willing to make the imaginative leap which transformed human life to capital.

The structure of the poems collapses even further as this speculative world fades away into the next section and what might be considered the second chapter, “Sal.” African voices appear as any semblance of structure becomes completely liquified. Significantly, the word “circe” appears for the first time before becoming often repeated

in the later chapters. Here, Philip speculates about the events on the ship. Voices cut across one another to cry out on the page, sometimes distinguished by font and space, sometimes colliding into each other so the reader must decipher the meaning. One recurring voice is Collingwood's, who thinks about his left behind love, Ruth, and writes to her. For example, he writes "ruth might you and i" and is interrupted by the ship log of "perils /notwithstanding we / seek the *ratio* in africa negros / too" which is then interceded by a captive recounting how "*de men de came for mi*" (66). Philip forces the reader to slow down and hunt across the page for narrative threads, which may or may not continue. The poems move from languid drifting to fierce waves (the pattern visible by turning the book sideways and flipping quickly in this chapter) as the water jumbles the voices. The act of reading and deciphering requires significant physical work. Unlike the earlier sections, in the end of "Sal," each of the voices is sharing a memory. Philip reflects on this in her Notanda, stating that

Our entrance to the past is through memory - either oral or written. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water. And, as the ocean appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movements, so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always. Repetition drives the event and the memory simultaneously, becoming a haunting, becoming spectral in nature. Haunted by 'generations of skulls and spirits,' I want the bones. (Philip 201).

Here she begins to get them. Each textual fragment relates clearly to the Zong but one: the line "of sky circe the seer" which appears without context but will again continue to be present throughout the rest of the work.

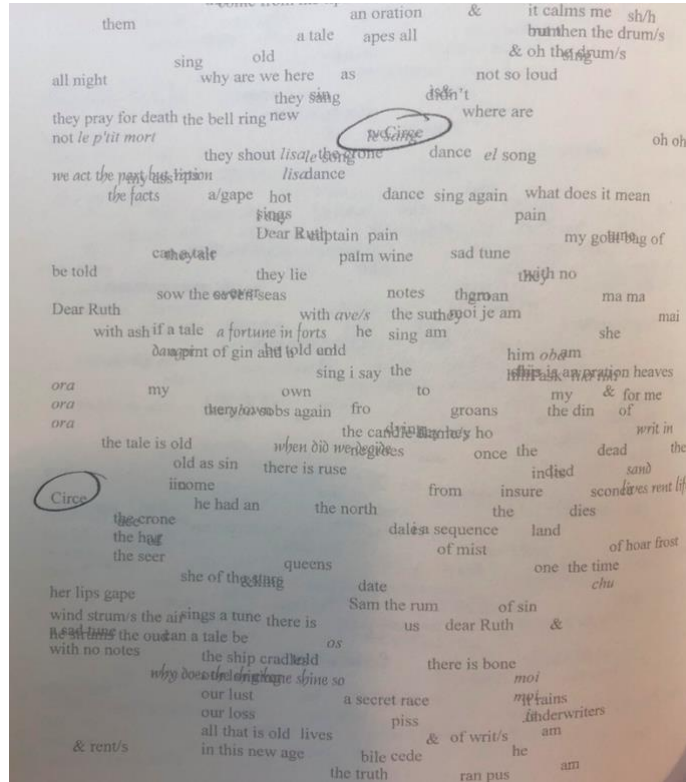


Figure 3-2: This image shows the complicated development of voices in Philip's narrative, along with the appearance of the word "circe."

“Ventus,” the third section, sees the same voices as before, several new languages, and again, the presence of Circe. Circe the goddess, best remembered from *The Odyssey* for her ability to turn men into pigs, continues the motif of the transformation of human into property, and also of Philip herself. Circe is a figure of the great Greek voyages. Her inclusion is a sly self-insertion of Philip as a prophet and witch communing with the ancestors, the transformation of human to capital, but most importantly, of the great founding voyages of Western society. By calling on Circe and continuously referencing her name, Philip is elevating the Zong and the voyages of the

Atlantic slave trade as a foundational myth of Western culture, and by extension, as a foundational myth of modernity.

“Ratio” is one of the last readable chapters, and even then, only phrases are discernable. We see references to the rape of one of the captive women, likely by Collingwood because of the font and tone, with lines like “she the one i desire who arouses / me an agent of satan of / lust is no more i exit,” memories of “ruth” and intercessions of Circe, and mentions of water (115). This chapter is more like voices crying out, a cacophony of anguish of all involved in the Massacre, fragments of the pain on board. “Ferrum” is much the same, with the notable exception that the captain’s log appears in a cramped, tiny font interrupted by strange spacing. “*no res cue to / day seas c alm*” drifts among the other lost voices (116). Most English phrases begin to break down to unreadable spacing or even more fragmented cries. Death is clear in the end of this chapter. Some of the last lines (arranged by narrative instead of placement in the text) read “he falls to the weight & wait in water i call his name & fall to oto my once my nonce queen of the nine” (172). This tragic love story references how some of the enslaved chose to jump overboard. This is the final time we hear from an African queen who Philip introduced in the second chapter, one of the few narrative threads that cinches the whole text together.

“Ebora,” the final chapter, is nearly unreadable beyond individual words, and many of those are indiscernible. “Circe” still has a strong presence, but on this page, words haunt themselves. The font is tantalizingly light, like whispers of smoke, and sometimes words obscure or nudge each other out of sight, as seen in “Figure 3-3.” Whose voice is shielded? What is obscured or lost or among these faint whispers?

“Ebora” taunts the reader with the lost stories of the Zong. This textual, physical haunting brings ghosts, the traditional marker of the gothic tale, onto *Zong!*’s page. Through recreating the tomb of the sea, taunting ghostly voices, and the frustrating sensation of haunting physically on the page, the plantation system again seeps out of time, just as its unseen destruction haunts plantation territories. *Zong!*’s narrative construction expands the afterlives of plantation spaces to places far beyond actual, physical plantations: the Atlantic Ocean, the coasts of Africa, the European court rooms where the insurance claim of the Zong was decided.

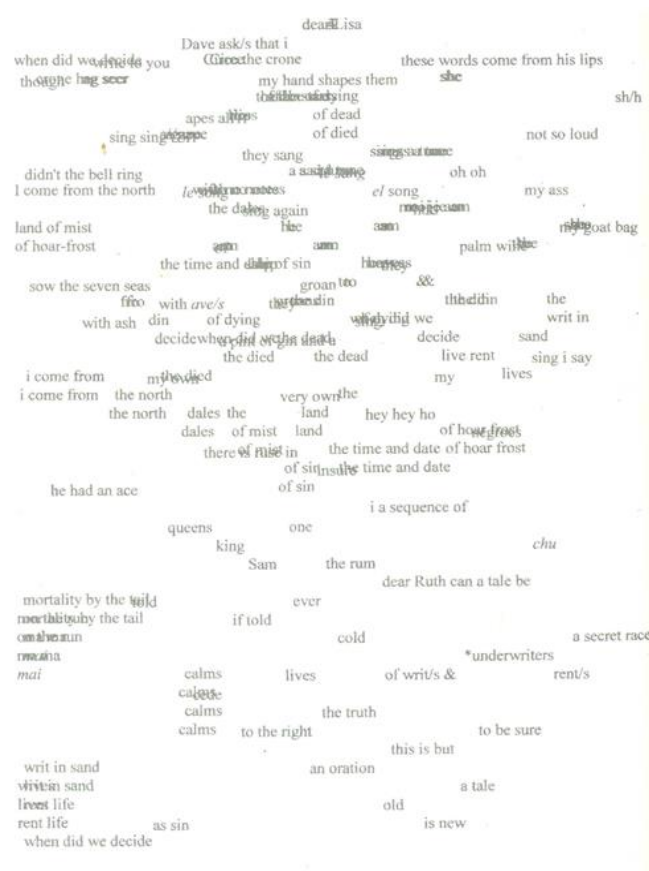


Figure 3-3: This image shows a page of "Ebora."

Reading *Zong!* in this context, as a work haunted by the plantation economy and driven to center the Atlantic voyages of the plantation system as a foundational odyssey of modernity, places *Zong!* within the matrix of plantation modernity. Coined by Amy

Clukey, the “framework of plantation modernity reveals historical connections and ongoing cultural exchanges among various locations within the plantation complex. Bounded, yet global, the plantation’s wide-ranging instantiations reiterate startling commonalities across the circum-Atlantic world” (Clukey 506). Plantations are the black holes of the poem; unseen, vast, and sucking a universe of resources toward their gaping maw of destruction. However, like *Quicksand*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Cane*, and *Tropic Death*, *Zong!* is a work haunted by plantations and trying to reckon with their terrible legacy.

All of Philip’s gothic moments stem from the plantation economy. The textual interplay of the work produces a physical haunting for the reader as the pages themselves are disrupted by ghosts. The voices of the dead appear in lighter font colors and swarm up over the page, making the poems undecipherable and obstructing any attempt at linear reading, as “Figure 3-3” shows. Philip describes her work as “excising the ghosts” of the Zong Massacre. Philip describes this as recreating the voices of the victims and naming them, even though there is no record of the names or nationalities of the lives lost in the Zong. However, the inherent contradiction of her work is that there can be no witness of an act lost to history. She notes that the “disorder, illogic and irrationality of the *Zong!* poems can no more tell the story than the legal reports of *Gregson v Gilbert* [...] in their very disorder and illogic is the not-telling of the story that must be told” (Philip 197). After all, how can there be a written history of bodies lost? How can the lost dead be untoned from the water? Instead, the gothic character of her work foregrounds the plantation system that caused the creation of human capital.

Philip's descriptions of her research and writing as "bringing back bodies from water" positions her more like an archaeologist digging for the disposed-of artifacts of an ancient culture to resurrect a long-lost way of life than like a poet (201). This writing style encapsulates the problem of trying to write a historical fiction of lost history. Elizabeth DeLoughrey captures this challenge of Middle Passage writing when she states that "Atlantic inscriptions rupture the naturalizing flow of history, foregrounding a now-time that registers violence against the wasted lives of modernity in the past and the present" (DeLoughrey 704).⁵⁷ The wasted lives of the plantation—in this case, the murdered African men, women, and children thrown off the *Zong!*—lurk in the margins of Philip's text. Sometimes literally, as she lists the names she has given the murdered along the very bottom of the page, like ants grimly marching along the ocean floor. This type of textual haunting moves the violence of Atlantic waste out of the past and into the "now-time" of the present. In the act of tossing these the enslaved overboard, the crew of the *Zong* transformed their bodies into literal Atlantic waste, a transfiguration that, as DeLoughrey notes, is still a part of present ocean cycle. Philip describes the "transubstantiation [...] of human into chattel" that the slavers of the *Zong* enacted on African land, but her work demonstrates how the crew enacted another obscene transformation from chattel to garbage by deciding to throw their African cargo overboard.

The running eulogy of the dead that sink to the bottom of the pages of *Zong!*, like bodies sinking to the bottom of the ocean, are spectral figures that haunt the text below the body of the poems. With this textual maneuver, Philip moves the past violence into

⁵⁷ See DeLoughrey's "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity," pages 704-705.

the present. Philip's desire to "ex-aqua" the corpses that haunt the narrative of the Zong massacre, to grotesquely display the African bodies that would fuel the powerful machine of early Caribbean and American plantations for witnessing, unbounds the plantation from its physical and temporal limits. Philip argues in her "Notanda" that at its core, "*Zong!* is hauntological; it is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present" (Philip 201). However, as much as the ghosts of the murdered Africans haunt the pages of *Zong!*, the plantation does, too. Every gothic moment that Philip creates for the dead to speak: collapsing barriers of language (merging languages, breaking grammar rules, ignoring traditional Western reading from left to right and textual layouts), exploring the horror of human life turned to animal chattel, and the final transformation of that chattel into waste, recalls the liminal spaces of the plantation.

3.3 Liminal Bodies

The most haunting part of *Zong!* is that, even though Philip wrote her work to free the narrative of the Zong from the transcript of "Gilbert v. Gregson," symbolically freeing the murdered Africans from the system that enabled their murder, *Zong!* cannot escape the plantation. Philip cannot free the murdered to speak without also resurrecting the murderer—unbinding the dead unbinds the plantation system from its time and place, and it haunts *Zong!* as the voices of the murdered haunt the final sections of her text. After all, Philip's work is about the waste of the plantation system which became the foundation of the modern world. DeLoughrey argues that "modernity is constituted by

the boundaries erected between the normative and the disposable” (DeLoughrey 704).⁵⁸ Modernity is about what capitalism deems a disposable resource, and in the case of the *Zong*, it was the enslaved bodies on their way across the Atlantic to labor on plantations. In emphasizing the transformation of the body into capital, Philip also emphasizes the transformation of that capital into waste.

Understanding both the metaphorical waste of the slave trade and the transformation of human bodies into physical waste as central to *Zong!* codifies the connection between garbage, the damage to the environment garbage causes, and modernity. The slave trade and the global plantation system caused extensive environmental damage by remaking natural landscapes to maximize monocrop agriculture, damaging water systems with environmental runoff in crop processing, and using resources to build ships and cross oceans. While throwing human bodies overboard was far from the most damaging environmental trauma in the height of the plantation system, this moment of the Zong Massacre (and certainly of other forgotten slave ships) is paramount to understanding the connection between wasted life and environmental destruction caused by modernity. Foote and Mazzolini argue that “in the process of historicizing and examining the categories of garbage and waste, [scholars have] transformed them into both objects of inquiry and the grounds from which to illuminate how other key historical and social categories—place, personhood, class, agency, and gender, to take only a few—are shaped by them” (Foote and Mazzolini 253). Philip emphasizes the waste of the massacre to cast *Zong!* as emblematic of plantation

⁵⁸ In *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the hallmark of modernity is “a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal” (97). Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity reflects the uneven development that defines the Atlantic world.

modernity. Between lines like the often-repeated phrase “negroes exist / for the throwing” and “slaves / to the order in / destroyed” in *Zong* #9, Philip uses the body as waste to shine a spotlight on the plantation economy that transmuted human bodies into disposable resources (Philip 34 and 17).

This acknowledgement of the capitalist plantation system through waste further labels *Zong!* as a work of plantation modernity. Neither *Zong!*'s eighteenth century setting, nor its 2008 publication make it a temporally modern work, but Philip's emphasis on waste allows her to engage with plantation modernity at large. In *Combined and Uneven Development*, the Warwick Research Collective offers an understanding of what makes literature modern in order to consider modernist writings in a more global light. The book offers that works are modern when they note, or “register,” the capitalist world system. The Collective states that

As we understand it, the literary ‘registration’ of the world-system does not (necessarily) involve criticality or dissent. Our assumption is rather that the effectivity of the world system will *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world-system exists unforably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being. Obviously, this ‘registration’ of the world-system will be more self-evidently marked, more transparently at issue, in some works than in others. (Warwick Research Collective 20).

Zong! certainly registers this world system. One of the clearest ways to see Philip's reckoning with the fuel the enslaved became for plantation economy is in her use of the only legal record, “Gregson v. Gilbert.”

Lines from the case drift throughout *Zong!*, often slicing into poems or hovering on the periphery of her lines. For example, recreating *Zong! # 16* as linearly as possible reads “should they have / found being / sufficient / a necessity / (portion that question) / should they have / found the justify / for exist / a rule for new / the policy within loss / [...] the insurance of water / the within loss / the terms of exist / a negro of wit” (Philip 28). Philip’s work implicates the colonial power and capitalist economic system that could not find “being sufficient” to not only recognize murder, but even rule that something living was destroyed (28). Meanwhile, “*Gregson v. Gilbert*” is filled with statements like “In an indictment for murder it is not necessary to prove each particular circumstance. Here it sufficiently appears that the loss was primarily caused by the perils of the seas” (“*Gregson*”). Notions of loss, justification, and the peril of the sea continually cycle through the poems in *Zong!*.

Zong! # 16 also plays with “*Gregson v. Gilbert*’s” allusions to the right to destroy one’s own property without acknowledging the subtext that this property is human life. In *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom examines the creation of human capital and how this ushered in an era of global capitalism. He describes what Philip labels a transubstantiation as “the act of crediting one another’s imagination” which “brought that value into legal existence” (Baucom 15).⁵⁹ Philip uses this idea of speculative capital in *Zong!*. In her work, the idea of insuring human life as a disposable resource is parallel with the act of murder. Her line “the policy within loss” hinges on “the insurance of water” that comes later in the poem (Philip 28). Both lines are only slightly rearranged from “*Gregson v. Gilbert*.” Philip states that “My intent is to use the text of the legal

⁵⁹ See Ian Baucom’s “Introduction” to *Specters of the Atlantic*.

decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text” (Philip 191). Ultimately, Philip’s work reveals that the story of the Zong is locked not just in “Gilbert v. Gregson,” but also in the system that needed to turn the world into a limitless resource to fuel it—the plantation.

3.4 *Zong!* and Plantation Forelives

Zong!’s emphasis on the use of the ocean in “Gilbert v. Gregson” foregrounds how the plantation system ushered in an era of environmental risk. The repeated stress on the way the human body merged with the ocean system throughout the text exemplifies how the new close contact between humans and the environment on the plantations themselves and in establishing the global trade of the slave market began environmental alteration. The kidnapped Africans of the Zong, and the larger body of victims of the slave trade, were forced to do the labor that altered the environment, placing them as the primary victims of this unstable and changed environment. After the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, German sociologist Ulrich Beck claimed that to live in a modern society is to live in a society of risk. His work, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, argues that every technological advancement ushered in by modernity came at an environmental cost.⁶⁰ Beck distinguished two types of environmental traumas that humans experience: “external” risks and “manufactured” risks. Beck argued that humans have always been

⁶⁰ See Ulrich Beck’s introduction to *Risk Society*. A consummate communist, Beck believed that exposure to environmental risk would be the great class equalizer. As the targeted eco-risk of the plantation system and its afterlives demonstrates, environmental risk instead demarcates class and race.

vulnerable to external and unpredictable risks of natural disasters, the hurricanes, typhoons, and earthquakes that have always threatened human life. For Beck, modernity is a society of manufactured risks, in which some type of environmental fallout occurs as a direct result of human life or technological creation, like the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

However, *Zong!*'s "eco-literate modernity" demonstrates how environmental disasters in the wake of the plantation system and slave trade blur the line between external and manufactured risk, complicating Beck's careful categories. The natural resources that were required to fuel the plantation system and the environmental alteration its agricultural practices caused enabled "external" risks or increased their severity. While being sold and thrown overboard to drown in the Atlantic or becoming injured or ill harvesting sugar cane in the Tropics is a manufactured risk, the types of technological advancement that fueled monocrop agricultural work affected the external, "random" natural risk events.⁶¹ As cultural historian Susan Scott Parrish notes, vulnerability to these disasters enabled by the plantation system became a method of enforcing white supremacy. Parrish states that

A different biopolitical history pertained in the American plantation zone [...] plantation powers had invented race in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to make a buffer zone between itself and this biological uncertainty. Bodies marked as 'black' and physical labor became fused categories, while 'whiteness' established distance from a host of biological perils through this labor

⁶¹ Beck expands on this on page 33. He argues that "the generalized other - the system - acts within and through oneself: this is the slave morality of civilization, in which people act personally and socially as if they were subject to a natural fate, the 'law of gravitation' of the system. This is the way the 'hot potato' is passed in the face of the threatening ecological disaster" (Beck 33).

tool. Whites protected themselves, their property, and the category of whiteness itself by positioning black bodies to absorb various manifestations of biological chance: pest infestations, unpredictable weather, infertile soil, tropical earthquakes, fluctuating crop yields, contagious disease, unexpected fires in sugar manufacture, and risky oceanic transit [...] in the American plantation zone, where for centuries the laborer's body and bodily reproduction were owned, and where that body's 'nature' was concocted by its owner, people of African descent came to assume an unusually absolute function of being that nature which protected another class of people from nature's unpredictability. (Parrish 8-9).

Without complicating Beck's framework, it seems like non-white or impoverished communities in the plantation zone are just unluckily more vulnerable to natural disasters, or external risks. However, what works like *Zong!* show is that exposure to environmental risk is never unbiased. As Parrish demonstrates, white's control over the natural world through the plantation system enabled their ability to be more protected from so called external or random events of environmental fallout, even when that fallout was an inheritance of the plantation system itself.⁶²

⁶² As a teacher-scholar teaching in the face of threatening climate catastrophe, teaching *Zong!* and guiding students through the connection that the current culture of using the ocean as a garbage dump for the waste of modern life is an inheritance of the economy of plantations (which marked human life as garbage to be tossed overboard) allows students to conceptualize how plantation afterlives affect our lives today, too. Further, by seeing the current rise of supposed "external" eco-catastrophes, like for example Hurricane Katrina or water crises, as really "manufactured" by the plantation system empowers students to further articulate the need for environmental justice.

3.5 Zora Neale Hurston's Plantation Zones

Like *Zong!*, the work of Zora Neale Hurston also engages with the plantation gothic to emphasize how environmental risk is never neutral. Hurston's work is temporally far removed from Philip's, but in writing about the South, their work converges in reckoning with the environmental legacy of the plantation system. In the early half of the twentieth century, Hurston was one of the few black Southern voices writing about the black South. Further, unlike other Harlem Renaissance writers, and unlike Philip, in Hurston's South, the black folk culture she portrays happily stays South. In contrast to Nella Larsen's work, the South is not a transient space or a sticky fly trap holding its unwieldy victims hostage against its sweaty breast, and unlike *Zong!* the South is not a speculative, resource-hungry black hole powerful enough to cross oceans to feed its never ending appetite for fresh blood. Rather, Hurston wrote the South she knew, a South she spent much of her life infiltrating as an ethnographer or living in as an author. Hurston's South is certainly harsh: people struggle and fight, fall in love and die of rabies, but throughout all of the struggle, people are joyful. Tragedies are balanced with everyday happiness and the support of local communities. Particularly, Hurston's work is an outlier in representing Southern agricultural workers as fulfilled and contented through their relationships with the land.

Many of Hurston's writings deal with agricultural work. Hurston produced fictionalized accounts of migrant workers in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, wrote opinionated editorials of Southern newspapers about the value of the migrant worker to Florida's culture, and spent time in migrant worker staffed Turpentine Camps for her job with the Florida division of the Works Progress Administration. She wrote about the lives she lived and witnessed. In Hurston's writings, like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,

“Folklore” or “Go Down Gator and Muddy the Water,” and her WPA writings and recordings, people who work the land perceive it as joyful work and characterize their lives on former plantation territories as sites of fruitful genesis. This view of Southern agricultural work and her fierce writings in defense of Southern independence curiously align her with some of the Agrarian principles I discussed in Chapter Two.

Yet, her work falls squarely within the plantation gothic, even as she crafted an Agrarian vision. To write in the plantation zone is still to write about the trauma that has been absorbed into the landscape because of the plantation system, as Patricia Yeager notes about Southern writing. Hurston’s work is about learning to live with, if not overcome, the ghosts of Southern history. Like in *Zong!*, Hurston’s South is haunted by the plantation afterlives of environmental risk. In both her fiction and her ethnographic writings, the “natural-cultural contact zones” that agricultural labor entails are haunted by disaster.⁶³ Parrish tells us that disasters are generally perceived as glitches of “human-environmental relations when, in reality, they are crises brought on by and within everyday practices. They show not what is abnormal or accidental but rather what has *become* the norm coming invariably undone. Disasters, therefore, show us the unsustainable in the everyday” (4). Disasters become a litmus test of race relations, and as Parrish demonstrates in her cultural history of the flood of 1927, floods particularly tease out racial tensions and failure of reconstruction in the South. Examining the environmental fallout of Hurston’s fiction and ethnographic works in the context of her own Southern experiences reveals the plantation afterlives that surround her work.

⁶³ See Donna Haraway’s “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.”

Zora Neale Hurston's family history was intimately connected with plantations. One of her biographers, Virginia Lynn Moylan, traces Hurston's roots back to Alabama, despite all of Hurston's Florida pride. Her parents,

John Cornelius Hurston and Lucy Ann Potts were native Alabamians. John came from a family of poor sharecroppers, and Lucy's parents were prosperous landowners who bitterly opposed their union. After their marriage in 1882, the couple moved into a small cabin on a cotton plantation, owned by a white man believed to have been John's biological father, where John made his living as a plantation foreman and carpenter. (Moylan 8).

Moylan argues that Hurston was actually born here, contradicting the year Hurston declared her birth year in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Dirt Road*, and that her family moved to Eatonville when she was one or two years old. Eatonville was one of the first black incorporated communities in the United States and its residents formed a tight-knit community. While not exempt from colorism, Hurston grew up relatively free from white supremacy, but was still subject to her parents' tumultuous relationship and her own embittered relationship with her father.⁶⁴ She fled out of state as a teenager after her mother's death rather than be subject to her father's rages. Harlem, where she eventually landed, was a very different black space than that of Eatonville. Hurston never grew up seeing agricultural labor as oppressive: for example, all of the large farming operations which Hurston saw as a child were black-owned.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See Moylan's account of Hurston's childhood, pp. 8-12.

⁶⁵ Part of Hurston's archival collection in the Gainesville library included photos of the black-owned orange groves that made some of her family's neighbors extremely wealthy. See Marcel Sternberger's "Photograph Series" in the George A. Smathers Library "Zora Neale Hurston Papers."

The racism and fierce class battles that she encountered in Harlem she faced with her usual aplomb, but she still expressed her frustrations with the way Northerners wrote the South. In a letter to her friend Stanley Poole, Hurston offers a tongue in cheek account of being the token Southerner at Harlem parties. She writes that

I am glad in a way to see my beloved southland coming into so much prominence in literature. I wish some of it was more considered. I observe that some writers are playing to the gallery. That is, certain notions have gotten in circulation about conditions in the south and so these writers take this formula and work out so-called true stories. For instance, one Russian lady got hot under the collar and walked out of a party because I wouldnt [sic] say I had suffered terribly down home. It seems that she had helped arrange the party for me to expose my sufferings and the real conditions in the south and when I said I lived pretty much the same in New York and Florida, she used that back-house word and walked out. Being poor myself I am heartily in favor of poor people getting hold of money but I fail to see the difference between an under-paid cotton-picker and an under paid factory hand [sic]. So why stress Alabama? The under dog catches heck everywhere. Nobody would love to see ideal living conditions for everyone more than I, but I sense insincerity [sic] when only one section of the country is held up for example. But I do feel that the south is taking a new high place in American literature. (Hurston).⁶⁶

This tone of wry humor covering real vexation at becoming a Southern token is the same one that Nella Larsen uses in her letters. The vexation in Hurston's letter is as palpable as

⁶⁶ See Hurston's letter to Williams Stanley Hoole.

in Nella Larsen's when she wrote of being asked about "her childhood in the bush" by white acquaintances. The demands of the New Yorkers for stories of the "real" South, ones full of trauma and suffering, frustrated Nella Larsen, Jean Rhys, and Hurston alike.⁶⁷ Hurston's refusal to invent tales of woe for cultural capital among the literary elite or for white grant money foreshadows the way she writes the South in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and how this portrayal of plantation territories brought the ire of other writers like Richard Wright down upon her.

Despite her protective writings about the South, Hurston's works are still subject to the environmental hazards brought on by the plantation system. Parrish argues that the plantation system left a lasting scar in the form of "production of cash crops for a world market in which poor, racially marked laborers are rendered vulnerable by their being caught in a degraded environment that their labor has helped to alter" (Parrish 8). The extreme reach of the plantation system created a "second nature," a fundamentally altered and artificial environment, which persisted long after the physical plantations.⁶⁸ We can read the presence of this second nature, this plantation environment, in Hurston's engagement with the plantation gothic in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

3.6 Second Nature and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Janie Crawford. Janie is returning to Eatonville, Florida after spending several years away. The townspeople are suspicious and hostile of her return. Her closest friend Pheoby volunteers to find out Janie's story,

⁶⁷ Ben Wilson labels this phenomenon "Southern alterity." Southern alterity encapsulates how the South was viewed as almost as another country or written as an impoverished third world separate from the rest of the United States, in the twentieth century.

⁶⁸ The term "second nature" is originally from Cecelia Tichi.

and the majority of the novel is framed as their conversation with the occasional third person, narrative interjection. In his “Afterward,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a “lyrical novel that correlates the need of her first two husbands for ownership of progressively larger physical space (and the gaudy accoutrements of upward mobility) with the suppression of self-awareness in their wife. Only with her third and last lover [...] does Janie at last bloom” (Gates, Jr. 197). The plot of Janie’s life is intimately connected with the Southern landscape. Janie is raised by her grandmother, Nanny, who survived slavery only to see her daughter raped by her teacher, and eventually run away and leave her with the resulting baby. Nanny longs for Janie to be secure and independent after her death and sees marriage as the way to secure this in the oppressive South. Nanny’s solution is the older, stodgy farmer Logan Killicks. Janie, on the cusp of womanhood, spends her days under a pear tree waiting for it to bloom. The tree “stirred her tremendously [...] This singing she heard had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh” (Hurston 11). Janie’s body is blooming like the Southern land.

The first inkling of metaphorical natural damage is here, of the inevitable risks that imposing human will on nature will bring. After Nanny sees a boy “lacerating Janie with a kiss,” Nanny uproots Janie and sends her to Logan Killicks rather than letting Janie bloom. In Hurston’s symbolism, Nanny is a plant that was never allowed to grow. Her “head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by the storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered. The cooling

palma christi leaves that Janie had bound about her grandma's head with a white rag had wilted down and become part and parcel of the woman" (12). Hurston ties Southern bodies to the Southern land in a way unique to most modern writers. Unlike Helga Crane, Janie is not trapped in quicksand, and unlike Philip's victims, Janie's hinging to Southern agriculture is freedom, beauty, and eventually, power. Nanny tells Janie that "us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes thing come round in queer ways" (16). After all, Nanny spent most of her life "on de big plantation close to Savannah" where her work in the fields hurt both her and the land. Janie's grandfather was the plantation owner who would come to Nanny's cabin in the field to rape her. When he leaves to fight for the Confederacy, the Mistress of the plantation finds that Nanny's baby looks white and threatens to kill her. Nanny flees, trying to seek shelter in the surrounding swamp, but struggles in terror of the "noise uh de owls [...] de limbs of dem cypress trees" and even "panthers prowlin' round" (18). Janie, however, sees the natural world which so terrorized her grandmother as refuge. Not just her pear tree, but in her miserable marriage she stands outside and "knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said 'Ah hope you fall on soft ground,' because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed. She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether" (25). Janie, like Hurston herself, can love the South in a way her grandmother was never given the chance to love it. Nanny is a crumbling tree never allowed to bloom who feels terror in the Florida wilderness, while Janie is a budding tree ripe to spend time in a beautiful landscape.

Miserable as Logan Killicks' wife, Janie flirts with Joe Starks, an ambitious future

businessman who passes the Killicks' farm on his way to Eatonville. Unromantic and demanding, Killicks finally orders her around too cruelly and Janie leaves to elope with Starks. Walking from her marital home, Janie determines that "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (32). She marries Starks that night and moves with him to Eatonville, where he becomes mayor among a host of other titles and opens a store. Janie longs to join in the vibrant social life of the town, but Starks wants Janie elevated above the common folk as his wife. After being humiliated and denied a community for years, Janie snaps, and eviscerates him after he publicly insults her. It withers him. Janie finally visits him on his deathbed, pointing out that he could have lived if he had ever listened to her but instead went to root doctors when he fell ill and now is beyond saving. As a widow, Janie relishes her independence, turning down suitors, running the store, and fishing with Pheoby, until one day Tea Cake comes to buy tobacco.

Tea Cake is twelve years her junior, beautiful, and a little wild. They begin a relationship much to the horror of the Eatonville residents, who know Janie only as the mayor's wife and as above common interests and common people. Tea Cake teaches her how to play checkers, they hunt and go dancing, and she even allows him to fix up the former Starks' house. Because their relationship will never be accepted, Janie goes with Tea Cake to Jacksonville, where in a moment of weakness he steals her money and goes to party on the streets. Upon his return, they agree to do everything together. From Jacksonville they move to the Everglades to work the "muck" of Lake Okeechobe. This is where Janie finally forms her roots: working with migrant farmers on a former plantation in the Everglades. At first Tea Cake refuses to let Janie work, but jealous of the

women who chase him in the fields of bean and sugarcane and lonely, Janie soon joins him, and to everyone's surprise, loves it. She and Tea Cake quickly become the social center of camp. Janie's innate friendliness and her curiosity lead her to befriend the Bahaman and Native American migrant workers and she and Tea Cake host wild dances at their home until dawn. Home alone one afternoon, Janie begins to see bands of Indians leaving the camp to head North and East. They warn her of an impending hurricane, but the crop yield is so high that no other groups leave, until the natural world goes haywire around them.

After the Indians, the Bahaman workers flee, and ask Janie and Tea Cake to leave with them. Parrish notes that "for African American rural laborers, existing in this strange zone - having had their own 'second nature' defined by others while being forced into an intimacy with an unpredictable plantation nature mostly of their own physical creation - also allowed these laborers to know their environment with great empirical acumen" (Parrish 9). The migrant Native American and Caribbean workers see the warning signs and flee, and at the first signs of the storm some of the black workers do, but most, like Janie and Tea Cake, stay. Tea Cake and the others argue that if it were really dangerous the white owners would be leaving, and they would see white townsfolk passing through on their way to evacuate. It's a subtle moment which highlights the absurdity of how non-white workers have their environmental expertise devalued because it was acquired through manual, agricultural labor. By the time Janie and Tea Cake realize they need to flee, the water is waist-deep and all the cars are gone.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Parrish argues that this is a critique by Hurston, of "the black 'folk,' who, as disaster neared, abdicated their long-ingrained knowledge of risk, trusting instead the assurances of nature's stability and manageability offered by white authority figures.

Outside, the illusion of harmony between human life and the natural world that the working camps provided has collapsed. This new world is a terrifying, gothic landscape. Trying to find an escape route, “As soon as Tea Cake went out pushing wind in front of him, he saw that the wind and water had given life to lots of things that folks think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living things. Water everywhere.” (Hurston 160). The world is topsy-turvy around them. In Chapter One, I defined the gothic as a genre fundamentally about dark histories coming to light, or in this case, the long history of cultural and environmental damage caused by the plantation system erupting into the world in the form of disaster. Patricia Yeager argues that the gothic is a site where trauma has seeped into the landscape, but in Hurston’s work, the gothic is about the trauma that has been violently enacted onto the Southern landscape for centuries. The grotesque world around them, where the dead are unburied and human and animal lives collide, represents this long history interjecting itself into the present.⁷⁰

Hurston, like other Southern black writers, introduces the aesthetic gothic to signal that this dark Southern history cannot be forgotten or overlooked. When Janie and Tea Cake try and flee, they enter into a gothic South. Fighting through water, “water full of things living and dead” and “Things that didn’t belong in water,” it becomes apparent the first illusion of order to fall is the boundary between the dead and the living (165). Exhausted,

They passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, entirely surrounded

⁷⁰ As I referenced in Chapter Two, Yeager defines the grotesque as a prose technique common in Southern writing that moves background information into the foreground of a novel. I argue that the grotesque functions in the plantation gothic by moving the often-hidden history of plantation territories forward into the novel, in this case, through environmental catastrophe.

by wild animals and snakes. Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other. Another man clung to a cypress tree on a tiny island. A tin roof of a building hung from the branches by electric wires and the wind swung it back and forth like a mighty ax. The man dared not move a step to his right lest this crushing blade split him open. He dared not step left for a large rattlesnake was stretched full length with his head in the wind. There was a strip of water between the island and the fill, and the man clung to the tree and cried for help. (210).

This is one of the most aesthetically gothic scenes in the novel. A dead man staring out of a hammock suspended above a writhing, rushing mass of snakes represents the collapse of nature as a malleable, controllable force. Further, the helpless man cornered between the swinging blade and the snake again returns to the image of second nature. The hurricane is unpredictable, but the worst damage arises because of the damage left behind by the plantation system.

Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a work of eco-literate modernity through her portrayal of plantation zone disaster demonstrates that Janie is haunted by plantations: her descendancy from the rape of her enslaved grandmother by the plantation owner, the fraught relationships with nature the system impressed onto her grandmother, and the flood caused by the years of environmental damage that the plantation system caused. Hurston deliberately reproduced Lake Okeechobee's 1928 flood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to note the conditions that caused this flood to kill more African

Americans than any other natural disaster.⁷¹ Even in her novel, the hurricane is not the worst danger, but rather the resulting flood. Behind Janie and Tea Cake, the “lake was coming on. Slower and wider, but coming. It had trampled on most of its supporting wall and lowered its front by spreading. But it came muttering and grumbling onward like a tired mammoth just the same” (163). This type of flooding is directly tied to the human attempts to control the land, first, by making the land produce the same crop over and over until the soil is stripped and unable to absorb water, which Tea Cake notices when he comments on how low and over-saturated the muck already is, and second, by attempting to change the flow of the Mississippi and its tributaries with levees and dams.⁷² This is the second nature that modernity created, the vengeful Earth breaking the futile confines modernity tried to impose. By attempting to make order out of wildness, the plantation system only encouraged future disaster.

This idea is further reinforced through Hurston’s personification of the lake. Janie and Tea Cake think they have found high ground, but Janie wakes up to the sound of the floodwaters rising. Half swimming and half running, Janie tries to take in the chaos around her,

⁷¹ See Eliot Kleinberg’s *Black Cloud: The Great Hurricane of 1928*. He argues that around 2,500 people died the night of the hurricane. Parrish notes that Jim Crow laws make this number difficult to determine. After all, most of the victims died “forty miles inland” days after the hurricane made landfall, when the floodwaters hit the black agricultural laborers (365).

⁷² The flood was so slow moving, and thereby so damaging, that William Faulkner named it “The Flood Year of 1927.” Part of the reason the flood waters did not recede was that, on top of the environmental alterations of the plantation system, “designers of the flood protection system elected *not* to mimic an alluvial basin’s own mechanisms for slowing water’s movement [...] They decided instead to straighten and impound the river within a towering levee system” (Parrish 11). The origins of this levee system, erected in the early twentieth century, of course is the history of why Hurricane Katrina was so catastrophic in the twenty-first. The levee system was essentially a “science experiment” between the US government and large agricultural companies to not enact a flooding system that would damage their financial gains. The result was a river that flooded in wildly unpredictable ways with significantly more power when the levees inevitably burst, a history that lives on today.

But above all the drive of the wind and the water. And the lake. Under its multiplied roar could be heard a mighty sound of grinding rock and timber and a wail. They looked back. Saw people trying to run in raging waters and screaming when they found they couldn't. A huge barrier of the makings of the dike to which the cabins had been added was rolling and tumbling forward. Ten feet higher and as far as they could see the muttering wall advanced before the braced-up waters like a road crusher on a cosmic scale. The monstropolous beast had left his bed. The two hundred miles an hour wind had loosed his chains. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel. (161).

The flood waters of Lake Okeechobe are bursting out of the dam. As the levee fails, the lake surges forward and destroys the entire makeshift community of laborers meant to grow and harvest beans and sugarcane in its fertile muck. Armed with cabins and farming buildings, the Lake literally cleanses the land around it on the level of a biblical smiting. In labeling the lake a “monstropolous beast” it becomes an avenging god, an ancient and wronged creature. The hurricane is merely the cataclysm which enables him to break free from his confines. Hurston’s language in labeling the flood victims the lake’s “supposed to-be conquerors” implies both the futility of their escape and their forced complicity in participating in the plantation-inspired monocrop farming practices that enabled such a flood in the first place.

In trying to flee the vindictive reach of Lake Okeechobe, Janie and Tea Cake

finally reach high ground and think they might be safe. However, “White people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room. Miles further on, still no rest” (164). Tea Cake, exhausted from physically carrying Janie through the water, finally collapses. Janie thinks to grab a sheet of tin to protect him from the wind and ends up swept into the rushing water. In another instance of the order of the world upended, a cow with a “shivering, quaking” dog on its back floats toward Janie and Tea Cake has her swim to it for safety. Tea Cake reaches her just in time to stab the dog as it lunges for Janie but gets bitten in the process. After the hurricane, Tea Cake is allowed no rest. The legacy of the plantation system ensured that black bodies were on the frontlines to absorb the worst of the damage.

As the actual floods of the late 1920s and early 30s were the reapings of the damage sown by the plantation system, the flood which sweeps away Janie and Tea Cake is no exception.⁷³ Challenging Beck’s distinction between manufactured and external risk, Hurston’s hurricane puts black bodies on the front lines of the environmental fallout. Robert Hemenway, Hurston’s biographer, notes that “After the hurricane’s destruction, a natural disaster the races suffer together, the white authorities are quick to reimpose supremacy by conscripting black men to bury the victims in segregated graves” (Hemenway 240). However, not only did the races really not suffer together as the white people, responsible for engineering the types of agricultural system which permanently altered the environment, find high ground and leave the laborers in the direct path of the

⁷³ Parrish notes that the already “unpredictable, and temporarily destructive, features natural to any river had been severely exacerbated by industrial-scale alterations of the watershed taking place since the nineteenth century [...] deforestation, wetlands drainage, and monoculture farming seriously reduced the storage capacity of the watershed’s soil” (Parrish 11).

lake, they also avoid most of the post-flood hazards.

Tea Cake and other black men are conscripted by white men with guns to dig graves and fish corpses out of the stagnant waste water. Tea Cake barely makes it back to Janie by running for his life when one of the makeshift overseers turns his back. In the anxiety of digging graves, foraging for food, and hiding from the roving bands enforcing white martial law, Tea Cake misses the signs of his rapidly developing rabies until it is too late. Driven mad by the disease, he attacks Janie who is forced to kill him in self-defense. Put on trial for murder, the jury acquits her, and Janie returns to Eatonville and finishes telling Pheoby her story. Back in her home and alone, Janie thinks fondly of Tea Cake and feels peace. Tea Cake's descent into madness is the final gothic scene of the novel. Janie is forced to watch the man she loves become a "mad dog" intent to kill her (183). Coming toward her "with a queer loping gait, swinging his head from side to side and his jaws clenched in a funny way" is "too awful" and grotesque for Janie to bear. The gothic represents the strange and frightful of the uncategorized, of the collapse of binaries that order the modern world, and Tea Cake's tragic transformation into animal madness mirrors gothic transformations of the black body that haunt Philip's work.

Janie blames the water for Tea Cake's death. Tea Cake loved the Everglades best, but Janie buries him in Palm Beach, bitter that "the 'Glades and its water had killed him" (189). Of course, it wasn't the Glades, but rather damage from the system of agricultural labor that Janie and Tea Cake are part of that enables the flood which will kill Tea Cake. Janie may "fully bloom," to use Gate's term, by proving herself Tea Cake's equal in the muck, but she cannot escape the plantation's reach. Parrish notes that unlike William Faulkner's "1920s flood narratives, it is not the flood itself that is man-made but rather

the environment through which the flood moves” (275). Through the gothic scenes of the hurricane, plantations seep into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

3.7 Hurston, the Migrant Worker, and the Turpentine Camps

Hurston was familiar with former plantations turned into migrant farming communities beyond her fictional portrayals of them, these “naturalcultural contact zones” that she wrote about extensively with her work for the Florida division of the Works Progress Administration funded Federal Writers’ Project in Turpentine Camps. The stories she collected went into her ethnographic reports, her newspaper pieces, and often her own stories, blurring the line between truth and fiction. For instance, several of the stories she collected about Turpentine Camps or in her folk collections have the same names of characters as the migrant workers in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Characters like “Sop-De-Bottom,” “Stew Beef,” and “Nunkie” pop up in ethnographic works, her novel, and several of her other plays. This type of crosspollination between her folklore collecting trips and fictionalized accounts is typical of Hurston. This type of writing shows that Hurston was less concerned with honest reporting than with capturing what she saw as the feel of the South that she felt Northern writers missed, even when it meant challenging some of the most famous of the Harlem elite, including W. E. B. Du Bois himself.⁷⁴

Her literary accomplishments and Barnard anthropology degree made Hurston the perfect candidate for the WPA. By the late 1930s, Hurston was already an established

⁷⁴ Hurston was openly critical of W. E. B. Du Bois’s coverage of Ocoee incident in which black voters polls were suppressed and the Klan murdered an unknown amount of black people. Hurston argued that Du Bois sensationalized the event and far over estimated the number of deaths.

anthropologist and the first in the profession to recognize voodoo as a religion because of her extensive work in Haiti. Despite her already-extensive record, she was only hired as a minor fieldworker to collect folklore. Later, she was promoted to editor of the “Florida Negro” section, but still wildly underpaid for her level of experience.⁷⁵ Alongside her editing work, Hurston “undertook brief folklore recording expeditions in the far-flung turpentine camps of Florida” (Moylan 31). Specifically, Hurston infiltrated “the turpentine camps of Cross City, Florida, with photographer Bob Cook, state editor William Duncan, and musicologist Alan Lomax” (Moylan 32). Some of Hurston’s writings about the camp survive, though badly charred, and are housed along with her equally burned writings over migrant farm workers in the “Zora Neale Hurston papers” archive in the Special Collections George A. Smathers Library in the University of Florida, Gainesville.

A common theme in all of Hurston’s writings over the migrant workers is that the legacy of the plantation agricultural system is alive and well in Florida. The plantation system permanently altered the Florida environment. And once these types of agricultural patterns and second nature were established, “In the plantation and post-plantation South, once this racial and land-use design took hold in its early decades and was codified into law and naturalized over time, it became impossible to eradicate” (Parrish 275). Hurston both pities and loathes the migrant workers of the Turpentine Camps. She was one of the only writers to ever be granted access, and Hurston portrays the Camps in such a way as to emphasize how the work is an inheritance of the plantation system.

⁷⁵ See Moylan’s biographical introduction to Hurston, pages 30-31.

Robert Cook, the staff photographer who traveled with Hurston on the folklore trips, notes that the turpentine industry “employs over three hundred negroes, is the only income of more than fifteen hundred colored people and fifteen white families spread over three of the west Florida counties” (Cook 2). Turpentine could be used as glue or sometimes even dye made from (usually) pine trees. It was made was by harvesting sap or rosin from trees, putting the mixture into a boiling still of sorts until the “gum” is separated. The turpentine will float, and so a spigot at the bottom of the barrel allows the water to run out and the turpentine is either skimmed off or scraped out of the barrel.⁷⁶ The run off from the Turpentine was extremely toxic and was dumped directly into the local water supply. Cook states that the water was often referred to as “low wine and some of the more ignorant workers actually drank it” (Cook 3). Further, it left extreme deforestation in its wake. The process to make the turpentine was extremely similar to the one used to make sugar from sugarcane, and the work came with severe risks.

The Camps were so deep in the Florida swamps and the work so back-breaking that it was rare for people with other options to work in them. Cook wrote that the workers were extremely impoverished and that “The children haven’t even the remotest chance of obtaining any education. These are the negro children, the families of the ‘dippers’[...] These camps are nearly always located from twelve to twenty miles from the nearest highway, in an inaccessible [sic] spot to be reached by a company road that twists and winds through swamps and forest” (Cook 4-5). Turpentine Camps forced laborers into isolated, exploitative conditions which appalled both Cook and Hurston.

⁷⁶ Robert Cook recorded this process in great detail in a missive for the WPA called “Photographing the Turpentine Industry at Cross City, Fla.” This manuscript is housed at the Smathers Library in Gainesville, FL.

The companies owned the housing and the stores and so workers often ended up in debt to the companies just to have food and shelter. Not to mention that the roads to the camps were owned by the company, and so workers needed permission to travel them.

Hurston positions these camps as the direct inheritors of the plantation system, and her experiences in the camps shook her previous view of black agricultural labor she saw in Eatonville. Her writings about the Turpentine Camp and later pieces about migrant workers reflect the tenet of eco-literate modernity that “what appears to be natural in the South - ‘green growing things,’ embankments, tobacco, sugar, - are in fact human cultivars and products that entrench and perpetuate the labor and racial systems by which they are produced” (Parrish 275). Hurston visited two camps, the Aycock and Lindsay Turpentine Mills. It was unusual for writers to be granted access as the industries used their geographic isolation to perpetuate horrible abuses against their workers. Hurston’s interviews reveal the entrapment of the workers. While not enslaved, calling the workers free is a stretch. Between the debt which companies kept their workers in by making them rent homes on the camp and buy food from the camp stores, working so deep in the swamp that advance plans were needed to leave, not providing education to the children who would grow up to work in the camps, and working physically dangerous jobs, the Turpentine workers have more than a little resemblance to the life of a plantation slave in Hurston’s portrayal.

One woman who Hurston interviewed told her wistfully that “I voted once in Georgia. I just dis-remember who I voted for. The colored folks dont vote around here. After I got around here I found out the folks was just g wine and didnt study nothing like that so I just didnt keep up with it. Never did vote nomore. I did used to hear my father

talk about Republicans. It seemed like they used to do the people the most good, but look like they dont do that now. [missing end]” (1). Some workers tell Hurston that they are proud and unashamed to do what they view as honest work and feel that they have a valuable community around them. The manuscript has significant burn damage, but underneath these interviews Hurston has dashed off quick notes, as though away from the camp representative guiding her: “Road guarded etc. debt 129 dollars. Nobody allowed to leave. Women kicked and beaten. Social security not turned in. Pay women \$2.50-\$3 a week. I wouldn’t work for that. .. could beg that in the course of a week. I’d see many a hungry day before I’d work for that.” And most ominously further down the page, “Klan paraded last Saturday night over—” (1). The rest of this line becomes illegible in the burned edges. Hurston’s staccato notes continue between the more formal interviews. She notes that there is one elementary school which meets in a church but is extremely overcrowded and understaffed. Many of the women resort to prostitution and no black person occupies an employed position of power.⁷⁷ Hurston had already written *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Of Mules and Men*, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* by 1939 when she was allowed access to the camp. The black agricultural worker conditions horrified her. They resemble nothing like the folk joy and harmony (until impeded by the hurricane) that she wrote in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

One of the tangible ways her writing reflects this disillusionment is in her construction of folk tales around a figure she held a lifelong fascination with, “Big John De Conquer.” Big John De Conquer appears across Hurston’s work. His versatile tales

⁷⁷ See Hurston’s two-page typescript over the Cross City Turpentine Camp. They are personal notes that were not meant for publication. They also suffered severe burn damage and some of the quotes are my interpretation.

make him as relevant a figure for the migrant worker as he was for the plantation slave: the tales of Big John walk the line between that of a trickster figure or, to borrow a term from Gregory Pierrot, that of a “Black Avenger.”⁷⁸ In what remains of her first typescript of “Folklore,” which would eventually become “Go Gator and Muddy the Water,” Hurston recounts tongue-in-cheek myths about black agrarian life in South. For example, in “Folklore,” the hurricane of 1928 that ravaged the Florida coast becomes the result of a drunken stupor. Hurston writes that “So the storm met the hurricane in Palm Beach and they ate breakfast together. Then the hurricane said to the storm, “Lets [sic] go down to Miami and shake that thing!” (7). They do, and the coast is destroyed. The story of the hurricane is sandwiched with other stories about how the East Coast suffers because the devil owns it or stories about why the land is fertile for planting. However, the tone changes in her revision of “Folklore” into “Go Gator and Muddy the Water” and tales of Big John De Conquer appear.

Specifically, Hurston finds constantly circulating folktales of Big John De Conquer on plantations outwitting the owners or overseers among the black folk she interviews. From the space Hurston devotes to Big John and her revisions and refinements across the versions of “Folklore/Go Gator and Muddy the Water,” we can conclude that she saw this figure’s legacy as offering insights into the modern, black, folk South. Hurston writes that “Big John De Conquer is the culture hero of the American

⁷⁸ See Gregory Pierrot’s 2019 “The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture.” Pierrot argues that the figure of the black avenger has haunted Atlantic imaginations from slave uprisings to modern film (like “Django Unchained”). As a figure whose values include honor and justice, he is a product of Western culture and values, but in fighting for black rights his body reveals the limits of the color line. I argue that the stories of “Big John De Conquer,” with their progressive violence and power ascribed to the figure, move to occupy the space of an avenging figure in Hurston’s later works.

negro folk tales. He is the Jason, or Ulysses of the Greeks; Baldur of the Norse tales; Jack-the-giant-killer, of European mythology” (9). At first in her folklore work, Big John is a humorous figure who gets by on wit. Hurston shares a story in which Big John lies and claims that he is psychic to scam his fellow slaves and trick the plantation owner. His plan goes well until Ole Massa bets his plantation against all the others in the area that he has a slave who can tell fortunes.⁷⁹ The bet is that an unknown object is placed under a pot and John must guess what is inside. Realizing that he will be killed for causing Ole Massa to lose his plantation, John resignedly spreads his arms and announces ““Well, you got the old coon at last”” (12). As Ole Massa burst into cheers, John learns that a racoon was hidden under the pot. For winning, he gets his freedom, one-hundred dollars, and is placed in charge of the plantation while Ole Massa and his wife leave town to celebrate.

In the next tale, John immediately slaughters all of Ole Massa’s hogs and throws a wild party with his friends from neighboring plantations. He puts a rocking chair on the master’s bed and uses it as a throne to give orders. When a white couple passes by, he orders them to be fed scraps in the kitchen. Of course, the white couple is really Ole Massa and his wife checking on John. Furious, Ole Massa orders John to be put to death. John pays off his friend to strike a fire in a tree whenever John calls out asking if Ole Massa will be struck down for hanging him. The trick works, and Ole Massa is so frightened that he grants every slave on his plantation their freedom (13). Hurston’s tone in the early, trickster Big John De Conquer Tales is one of wry amusement. But as Big

⁷⁹ This characterization of John is almost exactly like Mark Twain’s characterization of Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

John moves from sly tricks to brute power, Hurston's analysis turns darker in the later edition of "Go Gator and Muddy the Water."

Big John the Avenger makes an appearance in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. When Janie, Tea Cake, and their friends who failed to evacuate distract themselves from the raging storm outside, the men tell stories of "Big John De Conquer and his works. How he had done everything big on earth, then went up tuh heben without dying atall [...] everybody but God and Old Peter flew off on a flying race to Jericho and back and John De Conquer won the race; went on down to hell, beat [up] the old devil and passed out ice water" (157). It makes sense that the men would turn to tales of a near-immortal, powerful fighter when wondering if they had made a fatal mistake. Hurston analyzes Big John in the final version of "Go Gator and Muddy the Water" as "the success story that all weak people create to compensate for their weakness. He is a projection of the poor and humble into the realms of the mighty" (9). It is an untypically uncharitable description of Southern black folk life from Hurston. Hurston's work is usually understood as a celebration of folk life, but she implies that those who buy into the folktale of Big John do so because of their own failings. Big John is a working-class hero, who "By cunning or by brute might he overcomes the ruling class and utterly confounds its strength. He is among men what Brer Rabbit is among the animals. In the Ole Massa tales he compensates the slave for his futility. He even outwits the Devil, who in negro mythology is smarter than God" (9). Hurston's folklore collecting trips shift her stance to frustration that the disadvantaged folk are not more willing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. In her fiction like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she offers a compassionate portrait of the agricultural work destroying the laborers forced to destroy the

environment. In her depictions of the camps and ethnographic work of the rural South, the same folk she fictionalizes as weak and foolish.

3.8 Hurston's Southern Identity

Hurston returned to writing about folklore and agricultural labor throughout her life and was working on at least one piece about migrant workers two years before her death. Her shifting attitude present in the evolutions of Big John De Conquer from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to "Go Gator and Muddy the Water" seeps into her other Southern writings as well. What began as minor criticisms of the way Northern writers portrayed Southern black folk as a large oppressed class (like sniping at W. E. B. Du Bois over the Ocoee incident, criticizing Harlem parties in her letters, or going toe-to-toe with Richard Wright over his communist politics) became a full blown break from many of her Harlem-Renaissance literary peers by the end of her life. Her later refusal to acknowledge the systemic disadvantages of plantation afterlives in her writings are tied to her fierce individualism and turn away from New York.

Both of Hurston's major biographers, Robert Hemenway and Virginia Moylan, cite 1948 as a turning point for Hurston personally and politically. Since Hurston often lied about her birth date it is impossible to know her true age, but Moylan thinks that when Hurston was 57, the son of one of her Harlem landlords (Mayme Allen) along with two other boys accused her of molesting them. The accusation was absurd from the start, primarily because accused incidents were for dates when Hurston was not even in the country. However, the charges were picked up by black newspapers which already had a bone to pick with Hurston's contentious politics, and she was distraught by what she saw

as her permanent ruin.⁸⁰ The boy admitted during an investigation that he was lying to cover up his homosexual behavior, but Hurston felt it was too late to save her public reputation and came close to ending her life. After the charges were dropped, Hurston fled the country to Honduras. She then settled in the South, and without money from her benefactors took jobs ranging from housemaid to school teacher. The writings that most trouble her scholars come from this period. For example, her bitter writings in “The South Was Had” that Eisenhower “sold Dixie under the Brooklyn Bridge” in desegregating the south, her fawning account of the governor of Florida, Spessard Holland, best known for signing a manifesto condemning “Brown v Board of Education” in “Take for Instance Spessard Holland,” or even her venomous 1955 letter to editor of the Orlando Sentinel criticizing government mandated desegregation all make for a complicated political history.

Between the fierce Southern pride nurtured since her childhood in all-black Eatonville, her research into the catastrophic floods that devastated both her beloved people and Southland, and irritation she felt in the migrant farm worker camps, firmly placing Hurston on any matter of debate about the South is difficult to do. She pitied the migrant workers while admiring the agrarian enterprise. The monocrop agricultural inherited from the plantation is a source of liberation for Janie and Teacake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but she resented the horrors it wrecked upon the place and the people in the Cross City Turpentine camp. The plantation afterlives present throughout her writings make black laborers suffer both as tools of destruction and victims of

⁸⁰ Moyan covers this incident extensively, and as the main biographer of Hurston’s final years, attributes more weight to the incident than Hemenway.

environmental hazards. Like Philip's eco-modern portrayal of the Zong Massacre, Hurston's work demonstrates that environmental death and hazards suffered by black agricultural workers in plantation zones were never about the disaster or natural object, but rather about the waste of the plantation system which both enabled eco-catastrophe and placed black bodies as the first victims.

CHAPTER 4. "GIVE ME AN UGLY WORLD:" THE SOUTHERN WASTELANDS OF ERIC WALROND'S *TROPIC DEATH* AND JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*

4.1 Introduction: A South Out of Bounds

I conclude this project with two major voices of the Harlem Renaissance: Jean Toomer and Eric Walrond. Toomer's 1923 work *Cane* and Walrond's 1926 *Tropic Death* are both fragmented, experimental, modernist works which explore migration, isolation, and desolation as the condition of the modernist subject. Walrond was enamored with Toomer's style and cited *Cane* as the largest influence on *Tropic Death*. Their works are as similar as their lives: as the wayward sons of formally wealthy families, each writer published one major book to considerable critical acclaim, and at the height of their success, disappeared from the black literary world of New York and never published to such acclaim again. Yet, Toomer is, perhaps, the most well-known fiction author of the Harlem Renaissance, and Walrond the least.⁸¹

Reflecting on Toomer's fame and Walrond's lack of it, Imani D. Owens notes that "The problem has not been one of total critical neglect, as Walrond is often featured in

⁸¹ The work of Arnold Rampersad, Michelle Ann Stephens, Imani Owens, and James Davis have reignited critical interest in Walrond.

major anthologies and literary histories of the Harlem Renaissance. Rather, *Tropic Death* has suffered from a lack of sustained critical engagement despite scholarly claims to the text's significance" (Owens 96).⁸² Walrond's emphasis on the lives of West Indian workers and his early focus on pan-Africanism left him an outcast in the American narrative of the Harlem Renaissance (97). Walrond wrote about colonialism, the American occupation of Panama and the construction of the Panama Canal, the plight of West Indian workers, Southern US agricultural workers, the conditions of Harlem, the Back-to-Africa movement, and white imperialism interchangeably. Walrond's broad, multi-national focus on the working-class folk through a series of short stories rather than a novel of an individual's interior life does not easily fit in with the style of other major Anglophone writers of the modernist period (like, for example, the work of Jean Rhys). Further, Walrond's complex life makes him a difficult figure to categorize. He is widely anthologized in African American collections, but was born in Guyana to Barbadian parents, and later self-identified as a spiritual native of Panama (Rampersad 17). He spent the early part of his writing life advocating for a global understanding of blackness and disavowing national-allegiance across the United States and Caribbean to support Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement, but chose to live the end of his life in a quiet English village. As literary criticism is largely still organized by nationality, placing Walrond can be an organizational challenge for literary critics.

Unlike Walrond's *Tropic Death*, Toomer's *Cane* found an easy home in the African American literary canon of the Harlem Renaissance. However, after *Cane*,

⁸² Another reason for the withering of Walrond's legacy is that his contributions of literary fiction to the Harlem Renaissance begin and end with his work *Tropic Death*, as many of Walrond's writings were in political journals and newspapers.

Toomer railed against his inclusion in African American anthologies and his association with black writing.⁸³ He wanted to be remembered not as black or white, but rather, only as an American. Ten years after the publication of *Cane*, Toomer wrote that “I am not a Negro” in a rejection letter to a request to submit to an African American anthology (Byrd and Gates, Jr.). Still, despite Toomer’s best efforts, *Cane*’s critical legacy is inseparable from the Harlem Renaissance and broader legacy of African American literature. As such, his contributions to the remythologization of the plantation system and the plantation gothic haunting the Black Atlantic have been underestimated.⁸⁴ Similarly, Walrond’s categorical difficulties have meant that his contributions to establishing the plantation’s legacy as a concern of modernist literature have also been overlooked, despite how often he and Toomer are placed in conversation.

Ultimately, contextualizing *Cane* and *Tropic Death* is fruitful not just because of their stylistic contributions to modernism or their aesthetic innovations in publishing works of collected vignettes rather than a single narrative thread, but because of how their texts similarly engage the plantation gothic. Both Toomer and Walrond portray a Southern landscape in the transition from agrarianism to large scale industry, and their books are often interpreted as elegies for the rural, folk South. However, the Southlands Toomer and Walrond create are far from weakening. Rather, these Souths are gothic spaces that haunt those who pass through them. In *Cane*, the Great Migration North fails to provide any progress or escape from the gothic world of the post-plantation South, and

⁸³ Toomer was enraged that Alain Locke republished excerpts of *Cane* in *The New Negro* in 1925 and later refused to contribute to Nancy Cunard’s *Negro Anthology*. See Rudolph Byrd and Gates, Jr.’s “Jean Toomer’s Conflicted Racial Identity.”

⁸⁴ See Gilroy’s “Introduction” to *The Black Atlantic*.

the text's cyclical structure reinforces how the plantation system simply reinscribes its hold on various iterations of Southern agriculture rather than fading away. In *Tropic Death*, the modern marvel of the Panama Canal is a continuation of plantation agrarianism for the rural folk who died by the hand of the plantation overseer and now die at the hand of a US soldier overseeing Canal Construction.⁸⁵ The South's unchanging menace is a haunting, creeping force which knows no bounds and influences the South's industrial modernity, rather than dying at its advent.

4.2 Walrond in the Plantation Zone

Like Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer, plantations were in Walrond's blood. Coming to Harlem as the "descendant of a Scottish planter and an African woman he freed from slavery, Walrond was a living testament to the convoluted history of the Caribbean and the age in which he was born" (Davis 9). In her analysis of how to place Walrond's fiction, Owens argues that Walrond is a Caribbean writer and must be read as such, stating that "Circum-Caribbean migration, *Tropic Death* argues, is as much a part of the modern black experience as the Northbound flight from 'cotton, cane, and rice fields' that looms so large in the African American artistic imagination" (101). But the modern movement of *Tropic Death* is larger than the Circum-Caribbean alone. Rather, *Tropic Death* centers agrarian labor as the defining modern black experience. By linking the construction of the Panama Canal and other conditions of black agricultural work as an inheritance of the plantation system, *Tropic Death* explores how black workers are left to reckon with the legacy of plantation imperialism in the South. As Walrond's work

⁸⁵ See Walrond's short story "Subjection" in *Tropic Death*.

complicates questions of temporal and geographical allegiances, I argue that Walrond's writing is best understood as a product of the plantation zone and best read through the lens of plantation modernity, rather than as a product of any one nation.⁸⁶

As cheery as the title implies, *Tropic Death* is a collection of short stories all set in the Caribbean and Central America: "Four stories are set in Barbados, one in British Guiana, one on a ship between Honduras and Jamaica, and four in Panama" (Davis 155). The work was highly acclaimed by the Harlem literary establishment, with W.E.B Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Alaine Locke as some of the standout endorsements.⁸⁷ *Tropic Death* won praise for its brutality and Walrond's Hurston-level commitment to reproducing folk dialect. Each story shows some facet of life in the colonies. The opening story, "Drought," follows Coggins, a quarry worker, whose family and island is suffering "the consequences of the sun's wretched fury" (Walrond 25). A drought "had robbed the land of its juice" and the Barbadian people struggle to eat and find clean water. Coggins's youngest daughter, six-year-old Beryl, has developed a habit of eating marl rocks and dust despite Coggins's warnings. At the end of the story, Coggins discovers her corpse with her stomach severely distended. Stunned and paralyzed with grief, he listens to the doctor perform an autopsy and remove the marl from his daughter's tiny body, comparing the sounds to those of mining the quarry.

The tone remains the same for the rest of the collection. Davis notes that "Walrond devised as many ways for his characters to perish as there were stories in the collection, each ending in a casualty. Three are murdered in cold blood, three fall prey to

⁸⁶ See my Introduction and Chapter Two for my discussion of Amy Clukey's plantation modernity.

⁸⁷ See Owens's introduction for a detailed explanation of *Tropic Death's* reception among the Harlem Renaissance literary elite.

supernatural phenomena, and four die of ostensibly natural causes: disease, fire, malnutrition, and shark attack” (Davis 159). Death is indiscriminate, taking children, fathers, new mothers, soldiers, workers, plantation owners, and kindly potential-husbands with equal indifference. Readers at the time reflected that “reading it was a bracing experience, even for those who had visited the region. One reviewer admitted, ‘To those of us who know the West Indies as a pleasant winter resort, [...] Eric Walrond’s picture is like a stunning blow. One asks oneself, can it be true?’” (155). Like Jean Rhys, Walrond was well aware of the ways mother England viewed Tropical climates and spaces as a perverting force on European/white constitutions.⁸⁸ Walrond may have wanted to shock his readers with Tropical brutality, but in all the ways the Tropics kill or maim, from sharks and snakes to voodoo poison and supernatural bats, the violence links back to conditions of agrarian labor. These instances of gothic horror show how the environment is haunted by plantation colonialism.

4.3 Walrond’s “The Vampire Bat”

Walrond’s work stood out among his contemporaries not only for his rigorous reproduction of plantation zone folk voices, but also for how he “respected the belief systems that sustained ordinary people” and how their lives existed in a state of the “Gothic supernatural,” as Arnold Rampersad states in his introduction to *Tropic Death* (Rampersad 15). Some of the situations of Caribbean life which Walrond creates in the collection are lurid and absurd, like Seenie realizing she has been breastfeeding milk snakes rather than her infant son all through the night in “The White Snake,” but the

⁸⁸ See Chapter Three for my reading on Jean Rhys and discussion of English views of Tropical climates.

stories never become ridiculous or caricature the folk lives they portray. Walrond's life spanned a range of nations and social classes, and again like Hurston, he made a study of people everywhere he lived. Even as a child, Walrond was influenced by his mother's stories of his ancestors.

One of Walrond's major influences was his great-grandfather, Joseph Benjamin Prout, with whom Walrond was close as a child.⁸⁹ Joseph, known as "Dodo," was the child of a slave and a Scottish planter, Benjamin Joseph Prout. While Benjamin Prout "did not grow extravagantly wealthy or ascend to the plantocracy, by the time of Dodo's [Walrond's great grandfather's] birth he managed two modest estates: Arise, a ten-acre estate in the parish of St. Thomas, and Mess House, a twelve-acre estate in the parish of St. George" (13). Walrond spent several of his formative years on these estates with Dodo after moving there in 1906.⁹⁰ So "Walrond found himself at age eight amid the vestiges of a bygone era, when sugar was king. Cane fields surrounded Mess House, and the ruins of an old windmill and an abandoned barracks that housed the estate's laborers lay nearby" (Davis 19). The estate ruins were the foundation of the gothic landscapes of *Tropic Death*, half of which is set in Barbados.

Beyond inspiring Walrond to view the natural world around him as filled with the waste of the plantation system, Walrond's childhood years spent at Mess House in St.

⁸⁹ After encountering financial troubles, Walrond and his parents moved to Dodo's estate and lived with him until his death. He and Walrond often walked the estate and Walrond remembered him fondly (Davis 20).

⁹⁰ Walrond's parents had moved to Guiana where they had Walrond before moving back to Barbados when he was eight years old. Guiana at the time was mostly sugar estates with small groups of elite whites surrounded by Afro-Caribbean and South Asian workers. When the price of sugar plummeted, riots broke out in the streets. Walrond's middle class parents were frightened for his safety and so returned to Barbados to move in with Dodo (Davis 18).

George before his family moved to Panama appear in a more specific way in the story “The Vampire Bat.” This story follows Bellon Prout, “one of the island’s few plantation owners and a solid pillar of the Crown” as he returns to Barbados after fighting in the Boer war. He returns to find his estate, Waterford, an abandoned “garden of lustrous desolation” (Walrond 144). The same storm that has destroyed the island and his plantation strands his boat and Bellon is forced to make the trip on horseback. He stops at Mother Cragwell’s shop, “a Ba’baja creole” woman who welcomes him home and warns him to avoid the Gully tonight as fire hags have set fire to the Cane fields. When he dismisses her, she shrugs that ““All yo’buckras t’ink unna know mo’ dan we neyghahs. Go ‘long down de gully ‘bout yo’ business, bo”” (150). When Bellon goes to leave, a woman runs into the shop and Bellon is repelled to realize that ““God, she’s black!”” (151). The woman is hysterical that a duppy, or evil spirit, had followed her through the gully and she has barely escaped with her life. Cutting across her tale with cold laughter, Bellon scoffs and leaves, despite Mother Cragwell’s pleading that he stay out of the Gully.

Despite himself, Bellon is afraid once he is outside. As he rides, “over the earth of gentle winds and sugar canes, balls of crimson fire plagued the sky! Fire hags at night—St. Lucia sluts, *obeah*-ridden, shedding their skins and waltzing forth at night as sheep and goats, on errands of fiery vengeance” (155). A farm worker passes and tries to warn him of ““de fire hag dem a prowl ‘bout yah, Massa”” but Bellon again presses on (155). Alone on the road, “His head went swirling—the temptation to relapse conquered—barbaric *obeah* images filled his buckra consciousness. Sugar canes burning—men in the canes—fire hags—nigger corpses—Perspiration salted Bellon’s brow [...] And a legend, rooted deep in the tropic earth” (156). Suddenly, his horse stops. When he dismounts to

find what has spooked her, he sees “a little Negro baby sleeping in the marl!” and talks himself into picking the child up. He forces his horse to carry him and the child, which he sees as “Another of the colony’s lurking evils, the desertion—often the murder of illegitimate Negro babies. O God—another of the island’s depraved nigger curses!” (158). On edge, he finally makes it home, deposits the baby on a cushion, but is unable to sleep. Restless, he remembers how

As a boy at Arise the old man’d tell of fresh-born Negro babes dropped in eely wells in remote parts of the plantation jungle or wrapped in crocus bags and left in the canes for some ferocious sow to gnaw or rout. Rapacious Negro ghosts—‘men in the canes’—ha! ha! preying upon the fears of uncivilized blacks. Fire hags! St. Lucia mulatto sluts—changing their skins—turning to goats—sheep—prowling—going forth— And weirdly interchangeable—Black Negro babes and vampire bats! (159).

The next morning, Bellon Prout lies dead in his hut with a puncture wound in his white and bloodless head. Outside, “the mulatto *obeah* girl” feels exuberant and knows a vampire bat has visited in the night. This is the only story in Walrond’s collection that explicitly mentions plantations, and like “Tropic Death,” the last story of the work, it draws from Walrond’s own life. As such, Walrond’s construction of the plantation setting as haunted and hostile reveals his resistance to the plantation system’s remythologization as a positive model for the Caribbean moving forward. His portrayal of the landscape here foregrounds later parallels to his stories of the Panama Canal.

Certainly, the gothic landscapes of his time on Dodo’s estate creep into all the stories set in Barbados, but in the case of “The Vampire Bat,” the connection is much

more explicit. Davis notes that Bellon Prout is a thinly veiled pseudonym for Dodo Prout.⁹¹ Beyond their shared names, both Bellon Prout's estate and Dodo's were set in Barbados. Both fought in the Boer war. Further, Walrond directly references estate names. As Bellon travels the lonely road home, he remembers how "Once, long before the storm, the blacks at Arise, one of the old man's estates—a stark, neurotic lot—had burned and pilfered the old sugar mill" (Walrond 146). Later, he references Arise again as he remembers stories of unwanted children left to die in the jungle surrounding the plantation. Arise was one of the estates Dodo managed, similar to Mess House where Walrond lived with Dodo as a child. Walrond always wrote of Dodo fondly, but Arise is always portrayed in haunted, frightening terms. Bellon seems to want to remember his family's history in the plantocracy and the work of his old man fondly, but every time Arise creeps into his mind it is because of terror and death: first, he remembers stories of the workers revolting and burning the cane, and the terror his family felt at the uprising, second he remembers finding the corpses of infants left to die and devoured by nature, and finally the legends of fire-hags or other supernatural anomalies he heard growing up there.

Each recollection of Arise is tied to the inability of Bellon Prout, and by extension the plantocrat class, to exert control over the Barbadian environment and the working-class folk who lived there and who colonial rule subjected. Walrond may have been fond of Dodo and his time on the estate, but Bellon Prout's "smug sense of mastery of history and nature" led him to a foolish death in Walrond's literary construction (Davis 20).

⁹¹ Davis writes that "The sympathetic portrait of the benevolent Creole planter is undercut by Walrond's ironic critique of the man's paternalism toward the island's black residents and his smug sense of mastery of history and nature" (20).

Bellon conflates the resistance of nature and the black body in his thoughts. For example, his jumbled, fearful thoughts parallel “Rapacious negro ghosts” with “men in the canes” who burn the fields in rebellion. The workers rebelling against their exploitation become entangled with the greedy, grasping ghosts left to drown in wells or haunt the plantation land. “Rapacious” is a curious choice to describe the ghost of an infant.⁹² To call a child thrown away because its parents were trapped in a cycle of exploitative agricultural labor full of avarice and vengeful desire also reveals Bellon’s characterizations of the rebelling workers as unfairly selfish.

The refusal of the workers to submit to the labor conditions of the estate, and their forcing the Prout family to acknowledge and confront the exploitative conditions through the visceral image of an infant’s corpse in the plantation, is tied to Bellon’s next association of “Fire hags! St. Lucia mulatto sluts—changing their skins—turning to goats—sheep—prowling—going forth— And weirdly interchangeable—Black Negro babes and vampire bats!” (Walrond 159). The fire hags, as much as Bellon scoffs at fearing them to Mother Cragwell, creep into Bellon’s anxious thoughts. After all, their ability to transform, to blur the line between nature and human or human and animal, also places them entirely outside of Bellon’s control.⁹³ The fire hags are a symbol of how neither nature nor the Barbadian workers will be fully under the thumb of colonial forces. The symbol of the firehag has a long history of emphasizing this point. Caribbean folk figures, like the soucouyants which Bellon labels fire-hags or diablesse folk stories, often

⁹² See Oxford English Dictionary entry for “rapacious.”

⁹³ The portrayal of nature in “The Vampire Bat” is very similar to the shapeshifting world of Charles Chesnut’s *The Conjure Woman*.

represent resistance to colonial rule.⁹⁴ The evolution of folk stories becomes a battleground of racial representation.⁹⁵ For black writers, folklore reframes power dynamics over the natural world.⁹⁶

The folk legends which become very real in “The Vampire Bat” reflect how Walrond’s Caribbean rejects “the sentimentality of the pastoral mode” (Owens 99). Walrond uses these folk legends to create a plantation gothic.⁹⁷ Tales of strange, phantasmic, brutal, blood-sucking creatures were popular Anglophone Caribbean exports. Local folklore became transcribed by colonial visitors and devoured back in mother England.⁹⁸ Exported stories and legends like soucouyants, the diablesse, and even vampire bats justified colonial occupation by creating an imagined Caribbean full of brutes and uncivilized creatures.⁹⁹ Walrond’s use of folklore creates an unruly space that

94 See Giselle Lisa Anatol’s readings of soucouyants and other folklore in “A feminist reading of soucouyants in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Skin Folk*.”

95 In Shirley Moody-Turner’s *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation*, she establishes that folktales often have important political purposes in terms of racial uplift in the 19th and 20th centuries (Moody-Turner 137).

96 In his analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also argues that the use of folklore gives the black folk rhetorical power over themselves and the natural world that was denied to them by slavery and the system of Jim Crow laws. He argues that Hurston’s outside engagement in sharing folklore and inside subservience to Joe Starks is an example of her “divided self” (207). The “free indirect discourse” that she can engage with outside gives her definitional power (207).

97 Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues that Caribbean legends like the soucouyant or diablesse are a gothic response to the horrors of colonialism (235).

98 See Anatol.

99 Giselle Liza Anatol argues that Caribbean folktales need to be understood through “the historical conceptualizations of vampires in Victorian England [...] since the Europeans of this era who travelled to the Caribbean and were the earliest recorders of the local folklore would have been shaped by this set of notions. They undoubtedly heard and interpreted unfamiliar stories through the lens of their own cultural beliefs. Joan Dayan notes that for Englishman James Anthony Froude, writing of Haiti in 1887, “beneath the tinsel cover of elegance, fashion, and good French, lay the dark and heady substratum of Africa, which for him meant a legacy of cannibalism, blood drinking, and lust” (13). She goes on to ask of US publications during the Marine occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, “What better way to justify the ‘civilizing’ presence of Marines in Haiti than to project the phantasm of barbarism? What might be dismissed as harmless but titillating tales of gore and spirits flapping in the night always have serious consequences” (14). In an 1889 document on West Indian obeah, loogaroos were defined as old women who must drink human blood every night in exchange for occult powers from the devil (Macfie 58). [...] a European reading public [...] eagerly awaited tales from the exotic foreign colonies.”

can never be fully subjugated by British (or later American) forces. All of Bellon's fears can be traced back to fears of Barbadian resistance which disrupts the labor cycle: the workers rebelling and burning the cane on his father's plantation, the soucouyants setting fire to the fields, and the vampire bats lying in wait for "buckras" like himself.

Bellon tries to construct Barbados in pastoral terms. He, like so many of Walrond's characters, wants a beautiful world. That world is not possible in the plantation zone. Instead, the world around him is gothic because of the plantation system's legacy. By rejecting the conventions of the Southern pastoral, Walrond both refutes white notions of the Tropics as a paradise and emphasizes the plantation system as the root of natural horror. From the beginning of the story, Bellon's attempts at feeling comfortable on the island are foiled. He longs for his home, only to find it ravaged by storms. Rather than seeing a beautiful coastline to welcome him back from war, his ship strands and he is forced to row in and travel on horseback, not on a sunny trail, but through fields of burning cane where grotesque legends lurk on the edges of the smoke. Walrond's work uses these grotesque folk legends to move the history of brutality and exploitation of the plantation world out of the past and into Bellon's present. As *Tropic Death* demonstrates, "multiple ironies accrue when the South's peculiar pastoral dream is placed [...] in the context of historical reality. The slave in the South's garden must compromise this version of Eden" (Flora 621).¹⁰⁰ Even as Bellon's family engaged in literal world building—cultivating monocrop agriculture, reordering the social structure

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Flora et. al write about the problem of finding nature beautiful when it has been cultivated by black exploitation and the genre of the Southern pastoral in *The Companion to Southern Literature*. See page 621.

and local economy to best meet their labor needs, influencing government—the gothic world that persists is a constant reminder that nature will not be so easily subdued.

The subjection of nature is tied to the subjection of blackness for Bellon. True ownership is his ability to live outside of a “landscape of fear,” but black resistance makes this impossible.¹⁰¹ Resistance of nature is tied to the more overt resistance of the black laborers through the literal conflation of the black body and the Tropical world. As I noted in Chapter Two, the gothic emerges in moments when the human identity is threatened. The gothic is about the in-between, the violation of binaries, and the uncategorizable.¹⁰² In *The Gothic*, David Punter further describes the Gothic as “a genre that re-emerges with particular force during times of cultural crisis and which serves to negotiate the anxieties of the age” (Punter 39). Certainly, the gothic world that haunts Bellon is tied to his anxieties about his family, and the larger plantocracy, losing status and security in a rapidly modernizing world. He remembers times when his father had multiple estates and how his family was much more powerful when he was a child. His fears—the fire hags or “St Lucia sluts,” or the “depraved negro curses” —all imply how he is losing his power to control the island. Even the land has overgrown and, to Bellon, gone feral the minute he turned his back on it.

Perhaps the eeriest moment of the story is its climax, when Bellon finds the vampire bat disguised as a baby that will kill him. Bellon is on edge after picking up the child, unable to think of anything but burning cane fields, rebellions, and the dark

¹⁰¹ See Tuan.

¹⁰² In Chapter Two, I noted how David Punter identifies one of the key markers of the gothic in how, “the integrity of the human identity [...] is threatened; these are liminal bodies, occupying the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilized and primitive” (Punter 21).

shadows of the West Indian night. Angry that his mare stays skittish in the presence of the child, he shoves it in the shed and goes to bed with the child on the floor. Bellon ignores clues throughout the story that could have saved him: the warnings of the women, his skittish mare, and even the rage of the workers burning the cane fields in protest. The next morning is beautiful, with gentle light cascading over the green hills. Walrond contrasts the image of the “utterly white and bloodless” body of Bellon with that of an exultant obeah girl in the morning sunshine, delighted to see the signs that a vampire bat had visited in the night. The gothic moments of “The Vampire Bat,” the plantation afterlife which haunts Bellon and the island, show how “slavery always threatened to intrude on white world-making” (Outka 44).¹⁰³

Bellon tries to construct a plantation zone in which nature, agrarian laborers, and overseers are in harmony. But the gothic moments of “The Vampire Bat” interrupt his world-making and break these myths. The burning cane fields, the woman in the shop warning of the creature that followed her home, and of course, the vampire bat itself all disrupt Bellon’s narrative of a peaceful plantation ground. Works like *Tropic Death* exemplify how, because of the grotesque world the plantation system created, white identification with the land becomes “dangerously unstable” (Outka 37). If, as Patricia Yaeger argues, Southern literature reveals how the “usual sites of American commerce—agriculture, factory work, [...] construction” are “inflected by race,” *Tropic Death* shows how the future of these sites in the South is affected by the plantation past. A landscape inseparable from the black body, as is shown in “The Vampire Bat,” is not a landscape

¹⁰³ See Paul Outka’s *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*, page 44.

that can be remade into the pastoral, peaceful landscape that Bellon wants. Nor is it one that can move forward in sites of agriculture and commerce without the order of the plantation system haunting every step. By reading “The Vampire Bat” and “The Palm Porch” side by side, we see how *Tropic Death* casts the Panama Canal as a plantation afterlife haunting the Caribbean.

4.4 “The Palm Porch” and the Panama Canal

“The Vampire Bat” may be the only story in Walrond’s work which explicitly engages with a plantation, but the dark, furtive, and wicked tone of the thick forests and burning sugar cane which lend the story its primitive and pre-industrial feel are actually products of the twentieth century, as the Boer War which brings Bellon home ended in 1902. The timeless quality of the island setting re-inscribes the hold of the plantation system over Barbados and draws a parallel between the plantation life of “The Vampire Bat” with the labor conditions of the Canal Zone. *Tropic Death* frames the Panama Canal as an inheritance of the plantation system. Walrond situates this connection as a vital part of Caribbean modernity. As Michelle Stephens notes, “For Caribbean modernists observing the Panama Canal project, the United States was building the bridge between the European imperialist past and a new, modern, imperialism of international trade and capitalist development for the future, a bridge between what had been the age of empire and would become the American Century” (Stephens 172). For Walrond, this bridge is the legacy of the plantation system being remythologized and re-inscribed in the labor conditions of the Panama Canal.

One of the ways in which Walrond connects the plantation system and the Canal project is how the political transformations of the age are deeply intertwined with the

transformations of natural spaces. Stephens argues that the “characters in Walrond’s stories clearly represent a peasantry undergoing proletarianisation, often mirrored symbolically in the simultaneous transformation of Caribbean space within ‘the Zone’ of the Panama Canal” (Stephens 170). The plantation system, as a “naturalcultural contact zone,” remade the natural landscape and altered human and nature relationships from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁴ By exploiting a mostly black labor force to do the dangerous work of reshaping the land to build the Canal, work which damaged the environment and made the area more vulnerable to disaster, the construction of the Panama Canal continued the unnatural relationships of the plantation system.

In recentering the plantation’s past legacy in the Caribbean’s present Canal construction, Walrond is also working to remythologize attitudes around the Tropics and plantation zones.¹⁰⁵ Plantation zones were seen as both beautiful landscapes or vacation retreats, places to go to escape the English damp or cure consumption, and as dangerous, perverting spaces if one spent too long in them. One early twentieth century European visitor to Panama described with distaste how ““The very ground on which one trod was pregnant with disease, and death was distilled in every breath of air. Glued furniture falls to pieces, leather molds, and iron oxidizes within twenty-four hours”” (Davis 27). The implication that any markers of civilization rot in the Tropics extends beyond the material. The feminized land, “pregnant with disease,” which decays and corrupts any import, was also viewed as morally corrupting as well. The Tropics were believed to be

¹⁰⁴ See Donna Haraway’s “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.”

¹⁰⁵ In *Romances of the White Man’s Burden*, Jeremy Wells establishes that the end of the nineteenth century became a time of “rehabilitating” the plantation in American literature of the South. As I discuss in my Introduction and in Chapter Two, I expand this argument to establish that the 1920s and 30s became times of narrative remythologization for the plantation system’s legacy.

dangerous, perverting spaces for Europeans who dared to stay too long, causing “compromised bodily and metaphysical integrity” (Allewaert 33).¹⁰⁶ In Chapter Two, I wrote about how Tropical labor became a method of justifying white supremacy, as the British saw the environment as so hostile that any body which could perform physical labor in the harsh Caribbean environment must not be fully human. Walrond’s work demonstrates how the American expansion into Panama, and the brutal Canal labor and service economy that came with construction, also contributed to a view of the Tropics and the people there as morally corrosive. With the construction of the Canal, “the people of the Isthmus were inseparable from the geography of putrefaction” (Davis 27).

The connection between the plantation system’s colonial history, environmental fallout, and the Panama Canal is most explicit in Walrond’s story “The Palm Porch,” which is about a “US officer ‘done in’ by the corrupting influences of an island brothel” (Stephens 170). Just as the collection opens with a quarry scooping out the island to provide materials for colonial construction, “The Palm Porch” also begins with men “crushing stone, shooting up rivers of steam and signaling the frontier’s rebirth” in front of Miss Buckner’s Panamanian brothel (Walrond 85). Miss Buckner and her beautiful daughters, all of “equally mystical heritage” and “creatures of a rich and shining beauty,” cater to foreign officers (90). Miss Buckner is obsessed with class status and the white appearance of her daughters, nearly losing her mind when one of them leaves behind prostitution to marry a local black man. Paradoxically, Miss Buckner would rather whore

¹⁰⁶ Monique Allewaert argues that “Plantation spaces possessed those who traversed them. The heat that changed the orientation and movements of bodies, the diseases that the atmosphere was thought to carry, and the bites that the region’s insects and venomous snakes inflicted, all compromised bodily and metaphysical integrity” (33).

her daughters out to white officers than allow them to marry another Panamanian. As the story opens, Miss Buckner looks out over the quarry and laments the transformation of the landscape from lush wilderness and “centuries [...] of pure, free rule” to “ashes and ghosts” as scrawny, white “Zone pests” invade and build the Canal (86). However, Miss Buckner welcomes them to “The Palm Porch,” where she makes a wealthy living, unbothered when men fight over her daughters and die, like the British Officer Tommy in the climax of the story. In the last scene, Miss Buckner watches coldly as Tommy’s body is removed, thinks about the Spanish Captain who has taken an interest in one of her daughters, and wonders what she should have for lunch.

“The Palm Porch” toys with conceptions of Tropical spaces as a perverting, wicked, and dangerous environment. By portraying pre-Canal and pre-plantation Panama as a paradise which only becomes gothic through colonial interference, Walrond is able to use the plantation gothic to critique American expansion into the Caribbean as no better than European plantation colonialism. For example, British Officer Tommy arrives to Panama supposedly pristine both morally and physically, but quickly finds his military regime unable to survive the Tropics. First, his “gleaming white suit” is now a rank and festering mess, as “ugly drink stains darkened it. Booze, perspiration, tobacco weeds moistened it” (94). Physically wilted, “six months in the tropics and the nights and the girls at the Palm Porch had overpowered him. Held him tight” (95). The image of Tommy slowly deteriorating from a genteel officer to a wine-soaked corpse in “the languor of the seacoast” seemingly reinforces the British view of Tropical spaces as festering, degenerate spaces (94). However, I argue that the setup of “The Palm Porch” actually reveals a critique of this ideology.

In Walrond's Caribbean, it is men like Tommy who have created a gothic world to serve their wants. After all, the Palm Porch brothel only exists to corrupt and destroy men like Tommy because of the market created by the Canal construction. Miss Buckner, though ruthlessly satisfied in running a thriving business, opens the story by fantasizing about a Panama untouched by "booted Zone pests" and other invaders. Her brothel is one of opportunity rather than desire, which is perhaps why she is able to dispose of her customer base so callously when they step out of hand. If the Officers were not occupying the island and remaking it as a world which catered to their needs, whether those needs were a quicker way to trade across the globe or sexual satisfaction while overseeing said Canal construction, in Walrond's Caribbean imaginary, spaces like the Palm Porch would not exist. While multiple scholars have pointed out Walrond's critique of American expansion, his imaginary, pure, untouched Panama reveals Walrond's anguished black politics.¹⁰⁷

Miss Buckner describes the untouched swamps as a paradise, but even the virginal lands are a hostile and cruel Earth. Walrond's fictional, past Caribbean, untouched, free of the stern hand of plantation cultivation, reveals more than his critique of colonialism. For example, Michelle Stephens notes that Walrond very deliberately wrote in the style of other modernist writers. She argues that part of this posturing was to craft a deliberately global ethos. As she notes in her essay,

If, for white modernists after World War I, modern Europe had become a wasteland ravaged by war and nationalism, we find in black Caribbean writers

¹⁰⁷ See Owen's "Hard Reading."

such as Walrond a parallel perspective that identifies colonialism as the historical force behind both modernism and the World War. One could say that black modernists, such as Walrond, transferred the site of the modern wasteland from Europe to the Americas, from the 'First World' to the 'Third World.' (170).

In Stephens's terms, the bleakness of *Tropic Death* is one way for Walrond to engage with the larger modernist movement. Further, she argues here that Walrond wanted to locate the new, modern wasteland not in England, but in her colonies. However, Walrond saw the Caribbean as a modernist wasteland long before World War I. In *Tropic Death*, the plantation system plundered the land of its resources, sent the benefits of those resources off the island, and created an exploited labor system in the process of exploiting the environment. Walrond certainly situates himself in the modernist tradition, but his work determinedly attests that the ruins of modernity were already well-established outside of England.

This is why Walrond's past, Panamanian imaginary, untouched by European boots or hands, is a paradise. By the time *Tropic Death* was written, Walrond had already turned against the idea of an isolated, segregated world, even though the global world emerged from the brutalities of the plantation system. Walrond started his journalism career in the throes of a passionate affair with Garveyism, slowly becoming more and more disillusioned with the Back-to-Africa movement until he turned against the leader altogether. Walrond had long denounced the hope of an all-black, African nation and was drawing inspiration from his own melting-pot of identities in America instead. So, his idyllic vision of Panama pre-colonization is bizarre. In the opening of "The Palm Porch," Miss Buckner shudders at "the sterile menace" of newly cleared landscape (85). To her

daughter's bafflement, Miss Buckner begins to reminisce about "the virgin past" of the land (86).

Dark dense thicket; water paving it. Deer, lions, tigers bounding through it. Centuries, perhaps, of such pure, free rule. Then some khaki-clad, red-faced and scrawny-necked whites deserted the Zone and brought saws to the roots of palmetto, spears to the bush cats and jaguars, lysol to the mosquitos and flies and tar to the burning timber-swamp. A wild racing to meet the Chagres and explore the high reaches of the Panama jungle. After the torch, ashes and ghosts - bare, black stalks, pegless stumps, flakes of charred leaves and half-burnt tree trunks. Down by a stream watering a village of black French colonials, dredges began to work. More of the Zone pests, rubber-booted ones, tugged out huge iron pipes and safely laid them on the gutty bosom of the swamp. Congeries of them. Then one windy night the dredges began a moaning noise. It was the sea groaning and vomiting. Through the throat of the pipes it rattled, and spat stones - gold and emerald and amethyst. All sorts of juice the sea upheaved. It dug deep down, too, far into the recesses of its sprawling cosmos. Back to a pre-geologic age it delved, and brought up things. (86).

The personification of the water here is less vicious and vengeful than the monstropolous personification of the Lake Okeechobee in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but still the land is resentful and sluggish to bow to human will, "vomiting" and "spitting" stones, jewels, and rock. The marl dust the mining leaves in its wake cakes the land, dirtying the water, or literally poisoning it in the case of Coggins's young daughter. The adjectives

Walrond uses throughout *Tropic Death* indicate a reluctant and hostile landscape, one that gives up its resources only under duress and turns to poison in turn.

Walrond's reading of the literal decomposition of the island at the hands of colonial forces, be they French, British, Spanish, or American, marks the New World as the modern wasteland, quite literally, long before T.S. Eliot coined the modernist rallying term. The plantation system turned the lush forests to the ghostly stumps that Miss Buckner describes, planted new and invasive crops to strip the land, performed the first minings to discover the jewels lurking in the deep, dark Earth. Creating the environment of *Tropic Death* as a wasteland goes far beyond positioning himself as a modernist writer for Walrond. Further, in this story, the environment only becomes ghostly, grotesque, and gothic with the entrance of the "Zone pests" who see the island and people there as a limitless Eden to be modeled to meet their desires rather than a thriving ecosystem on its own.

However, the Panama before colonization was certainly not "centuries of pure, free rule" where all the animals lived in harmony and the island was untouched by disaster. Walrond's blatant fictionalization of this Tropical paradise calls for further scrutiny. After all, "If *Tropic Death* identifies empire, migration, labor, and death as historical conditions of a black hemispheric modernity, such a vision is enabled not only by its themes but also by its aesthetic innovations" (Owens 97).¹⁰⁸ The thickets, covered in clean, jewel-like water, "pure and free" represent a tropical world that is as much a construction as the plague-ridden tropical world of European imagination. In *Tropic*

¹⁰⁸ See Owens's "Hard Reading."

Death, this spotless imaginary of the Caribbean past makes a point about the Caribbean future Walrond saw. The past places of *Tropic Death* are works of *waste*, works which point to a future that will be the exact same as this plantation past: wasted land, wasted peoples, and wasted colonial allegiances. The Panama Canal may have been one of the marvels of the modern world, but the first attempt was deadly, and early endeavors to industrialize the Caribbean through plantations brought nothing but pain. Efforts to build a Canal after so many failures seemed like an Ozymandian cycle to islands that had been reaped for a colonial power over and over again.

Davis, like Stephens, argues that Walrond is responding to the transition of the islands to industrial modernity. He sees *Tropic Death* as a work of transformation, a eulogy to the Caribbean and “the transition of its inhabitants from estate labor and small farming to proletarianization. Tillers of the soil have become industrial workers, provincial estates are abandoned for markets, and the serfs and squatters of the old order now collect wages at the pay car” (Davis 162). However, Walrond’s multi-island-encompassing temporal and geographic scope is meant to show that nothing truly changes even as islands change national hands, new technologies harvest the earth, and a new wave of bodies is delivered to work. The building of the Canal and the much larger moment of industrial modernity is no different for the Barbadian folk Bellon Prout encounters than Miss Buckner and her daughters. Since the plantation system touched the Caribbean and left merely the “ghosts” of the original forests behind, the Caribbean has been a wasteland. *Tropic Death* remains such hard reading of grim, repetitive deaths to cement the monotony of waste over the islands. In rendering the Canal as the next iteration of the plantation system, Walrond offers a bleak view of the Southern shift from

agrarianism to industrialism, an overlooked link to Toomer's view of the American South as the plantation zone.

4.5 *Cane*: Give me an Ugly World

Cane is, perhaps, the most recognized modernist work of this entire project. Several threads of this work over the plantation afterlives of Southern modernism helpfully coalesce in writing about Jean Toomer's life and only famous work. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the 1920s became an era of definition for the plantation system's legacy. Along with the writings of the Agrarians, the rise of Confederate Monuments to the life of the Old South, and the burst of Southern and plantation fiction, the works of Harlem Renaissance writers offered visions of a Southern, gothic landscape to ensure that the plantation system was not remythologized as a model for uplifting Southern life. Upon publication, literary giants like Allen Tate (one of the leaders of the Agrarians), Waldo Frank, James Weldon Johnson, Alaine Locke, and W. E. B. Du Bois all labeled *Cane* a definitive eulogy for the South in the face of the Great Migration. The careers of writers like Eric Walrond and Zora Neale Hurston were shaped by Toomer's writing. Contemporary critics like Arnold Rampersad and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. still hail *Cane* as the model of modernist American fiction which reckoned with the past traumas and future of the Southern landscape in the modern world.

Throughout this project, I have argued that the early twentieth century was a time of remythologization for the plantation system, and that Harlem Renaissance writers were invested in ensuring that the plantation's legacy was not remade in a positive light through a turn to the gothic. For example, Walrond engages with plantation afterlives by using plantation narratives to criticize the exploitation of the Panama Canal. Toomer's

plantation afterlives are visible in the way Toomer writes the South as haunted, cyclical, and gothic. *Cane* is often read as a work about the death of the South. However, emphasizing the ex-plantation setting of “Kabnis,” the parallels between the North and South in “Blood-Burning Moon” and “Bona and Paul,” and Toomer’s limited Southern exposure in reading *Cane* reveals a work not about the death of the agrarian South in the face of industrial modernity, but rather a South which the plantation system razed into the first modern wasteland. Further, this reading offers a new bridge beyond aesthetic modernism which connects *Tropic Death* and *Cane*.

Labeling *Cane* as definitive Southern fiction is especially curious because Jean Toomer only spent around a grand total of three and a half months in the South to write and publish *Cane*. Toomer first saw the South when he worked as an interim principal of the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute in Sparta, Georgia while its permanent headmaster raised funds up North from September to November 1921.¹⁰⁹ Later, he and Waldo Frank spent a week in Spartanburg, Georgia where Toomer acted as his Southern guide. The rest of the cumulative experience Toomer spent outside of urban cities in the North occurred looking out the train window on his journeys to and from the South. Yet, *Cane*’s status as one of the penultimate Southern works remains, even after Toomer railed against being seen as black, railed against his inclusion in black anthologies, and ended his life as a G.I. Gurdjieff lecturer and semi-kept husband of a wealthy white woman. These facts of Jean Toomer’s life make him a powerful figure to conclude this project. What does it mean to be a definitive Southern voice as a Southern tourist? How

¹⁰⁹ See Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s “Afterword” to *Cane*.

do we read the lingering touch of plantation life over the black experience in the modernist plantation zone? What is a plantation afterlife? *Cane*, with its fragmented form and circular journey from the North and South, its strange critical legacy in the wake of Toomer's disavowal of race, and semi-autobiographical concluding note of "Kabnis" with its ex-plantation setting, provides the text to explore these questions.

4.6 Who Was Jean Toomer?

To understand exactly how curious it is for Toomer to write a book considered one of the major Southern American works, we have to understand his complicated roots. Toomer was born and lived much of his life in Washington, DC. His later rejections of race (his refusal to identify as white or black and instead only as an American) were planted here with his grandfather, P.B.S Pinchback, a Civil War veteran and the first black lieutenant governor of Louisiana.¹¹⁰ Pinchback leaved his political clout in Louisiana to move to Washington, DC, where he established a successful career and became part of a rising class of the mulatto elite. His daughter married Toomer's father, a former slave and three-times widower nearly thirty years her senior, who abandoned the family when Toomer was an infant. On both sides of his family tree, Toomer, like Walrond, was descended from the unions of planters and the women they owned. His grandfather's political sway ensured Toomer a place at the most elite all-black schools, even though the family lived in a white neighborhood. Before his mother's (preventable) death from appendicitis, Toomer briefly lived with her in New York and attended an all-

¹¹⁰ Byrd and Gates Jr.'s "Afterword" notes that Toomer's grandfather even spent a brief amount of time as acting governor, which catapulted him to political stardom in the nineteenth century and further aided his Northward movement.

white school. Light skinned, charming, and handsome, Toomer proclaimed to see class as far more segregating than race.

After school, he attended six colleges in a few years, not graduating from any. His grandfather was displeased at Toomer's lack of direction and remained bitterly disappointed when Toomer declared he wanted to be a writer. Their relationship mended when Toomer moved into their small apartment to care for both his ailing grandfather and grandmother (to whom *Cane* is dedicated). Weary and exhausted from trying to be a full-time caretaker and writer, Toomer jumped at the opportunity to go South when a connection of his grandfather's offered him the chance to be an interim principal at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute. Not only was this a break from caretaking and cleaning, it was Toomer's chance to finally see the South.¹¹¹ Toomer fiercely identified with the Southern landscape as his primordial home, the place of origin for his grandfather and absent father. He wrote that he was seeking a "useable past" among the dense fields and bowing trees of Georgia (Gates 208).¹¹² Part of his job in his brief three month tenure as headmaster was to go out into the town and country, visiting the homes of students and establishing himself in the community. Experiencing black folk culture for the first time, Toomer wrote that "At times, I identified with my whole sense so intensely that I lost my own identity" (209).¹¹³

111 Ibid. These autobiographical details are all from Byrd and Gates, Jr. "Afterword."

112 Byrd and Gates, Jr. reproduce this line from *Natalie Mann* in *The Wayward and the Seeking*. They argue that "the landscape of Sparta, Georgia, with its history of slavery and an ancestral past that connected Toomer to his father, was precisely what the emerging writer needed at this vital juncture in his apprenticeship" (Gates 207).

113 This is also from *Natalie Mann* and printed by Byrd and Gates, Jr.

Toomer's fleeting but passionate fling with Georgia led him to start writing *Cane* on the train home. Then, once back in DC, he planned a trip back South with Waldo Frank, but this time heading for Spartanburg, South Carolina. Critics often frame these trips as formative homecomings for Toomer. Indeed, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Rudolph P. Byrd write in their "Afterword" to *Cane* that his time in Sparta was fundamental in giving Toomer "the materials, inspiration, and much of the setting" for *Cane*, along with reconciling Toomer's Northern home with his yearning for a "landscape [...] with its history of slavery and an ancestral past" (Byrd and Gates 207). However, Toomer's private letters tell a different story of his time in Southern spaces. Rather than a joyful merger with the folk, Toomer's loss of his "own identity" reads like a sublime horror story, much like the autobiographical "Kabnis."

Despite his claims of connection, the tone of Toomer's letters portray a man terrified of the South. Writing to Frank before their Southern trip, he seems haunted by his time there as a principal. Toomer recounts how he "barely avoided a serious time" and later told Frank that he might have "suggested [Georgia] in the first place were it not for the fact that certain conditions there (in Sparta, and which I shall tell you about when I see you) make it not the best place in the world at this time" (Foley 168).¹¹⁴ After all, despite periods of disavowing his family connections and his family's gradually diminishing status and wealth, Toomer was still part of the upper class in DC. As a burgeoning writer, he was used to (or claimed to be used to) seamlessly moving between white and black worlds of the literary elite in New York. This was not the case in the

¹¹⁴ Excerpts from these letters are reproduced by Foley in her work *Race, Repression, and Revolution*.

South in 1922, at the end of the Nadir, where lynchings were still relatively common and the Klan was a powerful political force. It might have been the original homeland of his grandfather and father, but it was also the land which they fled.

Toomer's terror of the South is not to be overlooked in understanding the portrait of the South he paints in *Cane*. In almost every critical analysis of *Tropic Death*, *Cane* is mentioned as its forefather in fragmentation, the death of black agrarian life in the face of industry, and even in elevating the South to a deservingly modernist setting. However, *Cane* should be acknowledged as *Tropic Death*'s forefather in creating the South as a gothic, haunted, and haunting landscape of fear. As I quoted from Patricia Yaeger in Chapter Two, Southern places in literature are "sites where trauma has absorbed into the landscape", and we can read moments of the grotesque as this trauma clawing its way out of the past and out of the dirt to manifest into the present.¹¹⁵ Both *Cane* and *Tropic Death* are about reckoning with this horror, and identifying that the South did not transform to be this way with the advent of modernity and the death of agrarianism. Rather, both works see the South as the original wreckage of modernity. In introducing *Tropic Death*, Arnold Rampersad argues that Walrond's gothic setting has nothing to do with "social injustice" and is not "proletarian or protest fiction," a reading I dispute in the first half of this chapter by arguing that Walrond sees the Caribbean as the modern wasteland (Rampersad 14).

In pairing *Tropic Death* and *Cane* together, similar claims that the natural world is gothic, but not because of Southern history, are also applied to readings of *Cane*. Allen

¹¹⁵ See Yaeger, page 13.

Tate, a poet from the Nashville Fugitives and Agrarian contributor to *I'll Take My Stand*, was one of these critics. Tate fumed at Toomer's exclusion from *An Anthology of Negro Poetry*, the work he was reviewing, and wrote that Toomer was the "finest Negro literary agent" in American literature, because he wrote about the "the interior of Negro life, not in the pressure of American culture on the Negro" (Tate).¹¹⁶ Tate's praise for Toomer is fitting, as of course Allen Tate loved a Southern elegy. Toomer's work is often read in this way, even by himself. He wrote that *Cane* was a plaintive lament for the folk culture he so claimed to love, what he described as a "folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death so tragic" (Toomer 210). Tate appreciated *Cane*'s vision of the death of the American agrarian way of life in the face of industrial modernity sweeping the South.

However, *Cane* is far more than a Southern elegy for Agrarianism. The grotesque moments of *Cane*, where the evils of Southern history surge forward and haunt its characters up and down the American state, show us that the plantation legacy is here to stay. In Toomer's writings, nothing about slavery or fieldwork is in the past. Rather, in *Cane*, the plantation history planted the seeds of the future, as the metaphorical South haunts the folk near and far (even those like Toomer could not escape its mythic pull). Toomer may have wanted to go South because he wanted a "usable past," but he never found it, and neither do the characters of *Cane*.¹¹⁷ Instead, they carry plantation germs Northward and march them steadily back South in a never ending cycle.¹¹⁸ Just as

¹¹⁶ Allen Tate wrote book reviews for the "Nashville Review."

¹¹⁷ See Byrd and Gates, Jr.'s "Afterword."

¹¹⁸ As I note in my discussion of *Beloved* in my introduction, just as Sweet Home Plantation goes with Sethe and Paul D, it also goes with Denver, who has never set foot on a plantation. Similarly, the migration stories of *Cane* move the plantation out of the South.

Rampersad introduces *Tropic Death*, Byrd and Gates, Jr. reflect on *Cane* as a text of transformation, arguing that Toomer saw the South “as a world in transition, and a world of transition for himself” (207). However, examining portrayals of the Southern landscape in *Cane*, the work’s cyclical structure, and Kabnis’s encounter with the old man, present a different vision of the South’s legacy. Nothing about *Cane* is linear or implies progress. If anything, much of the work reflects the Agrarian mantra that “the South changing must be the south still.”¹¹⁹

4.7 The Cyclical South

Cane, which moves between poems, short stories, and the longer, concluding story “Kabnis,” is divided not by chapters, but into sections demarcated by pieces of a circle. The first section of *Cane* is set in the rural South, opening with “Karíntha,” a story about a beautiful young girl who the local men try “to ripen [...] too soon,” lyrical poems about working the harvest fields and the threat of the boll-weevil, and ends with the longer “Blood-Burning Moon.” At the end of this section, there is a stark black line slightly less than the full top of a circle and the settings mostly shift to the North. The forms mingle here as in the first section, smoothly moving between the bustle of prohibition-era Seventh Street, the story of the narrator’s childhood friend working as a prostitute in “Avey,” the rage of failed love in “Box Seat,” the mournful work song in the poem “Harvest Song,” and finally, “Bona and Paul,” another story of anger and the morose failure of young love. Finally, the third section opens with a circle listing sideways with two pieces gouged out, and *Cane* ends with “Kabnis.” In the rest of this

¹¹⁹ See Stark Young’s “Not in Memoriam, but in Defense” from *I’ll Take My Stand*.

chapter, I discuss each section's Southern vision through the stagnation Toomer creates and how he locates the South as the first modern wasteland, eventually influencing *Tropic Death* to do the same, before concluding by reflecting on plantation afterlives.

4.8 A South Out of Bounds

One of the ways in which *Cane* stands out from *Tropic Death* is in Toomer's nuanced portrayal of women. Most of the stories in the first section, set exclusively in the South, focus on women's experiences. The opening story, "Karintha," compares the adolescence of a young woman to the ripening of the world around her. As a girl, men "counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them [...] This interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her" (Toomer 3). Indeed, it does not. As a teenager, older men pursue her as a "November cotton flower," and she grows into a woman "perfect as dusk when the sun goes down" (4). By twenty, she is a mother, with a child which "fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest [...] A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered" (5). The vivid image of Karintha as a young budding flower, evading the clawing grasp of men who want to harvest and devour her as a child, before being forced to squat in the forest to bear child like an animal, sharply contrasts with the industrial stink of the burning sawmill which spreads out over the valley with "smoke so heavy you tasted it in the water" (5). Toomer draws a parallel between the exploitation of Karintha and the environment and the men who threaten her and work in the sawmill which poisons the land around them. Karintha keeps the men at arm's length and loathes them for ripening her too soon even as she takes their money to survive, just as the men work at the sawmill which is slowly poisoning them. The process of exploiting the land

to the community's detriment, while having no other option to survive, is a system of life established under the plantation system.

In the North, women fare no better. In the next section of *Cane*, in "Avey," the nameless male narrator chases his crush, Avey, from their small hometown to New York. As teenagers, Avey is as silent as "a great tree" as the narrator fantasizes about taking her like "one can strip a tree" (60). Similar to Karíntha, Avey is compared to ripening flora, but she is rootless. The narrator finds her five years later working as a prostitute in New York. When she falls asleep on the narrator in a park, he reflects that she no longer has "the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn" (64). Immediately after "Avey" comes "Beehive," in which the speaker compares himself to "a drone" in the "waxen cell of the world comb" (65). Watching the bees buzz and work becomes a metaphor for the buzz of working in the modern city, and the speaker ends the poem longing to "curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower" (65). Despite being far away from the South, the women are still ripened and wounded by modern industry. Later in the section, the poem "Harvest Song" is sandwiched between two stories of city life. "I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown" says the speaker, "I am too chilled, and too fatigued [...] And I hunger" (93). The speaker longs to see the other harvesters, he starves, he longs to hear his brothers but knows he cannot reach them (94). This poem, mournful and rural, sticks out in a section of bustling streets and young love in the city. In the context of the rest of the section, it tells a story of workers lost in the face of industry. By portraying this modern isolation through the figure of a field worker, Toomer paints a picture of Northern work which is no different than Southern work, of women who are still suffering from the effects of the Southern system.

In Toomer's work, the South is more than just a place. It is an inescapable legacy. In the final story of the first section, "Blood Burning Moon," beautiful Louisa is torn between the rich son of the white family for whom she works, Bob Stone, or the strong black fieldworker, Tom Burwell, who loves her fiercely and possessively. When they both come for her on the same night, Tom kills Bob and the white townspeople lynch him in a rage. The story is eerie from its first lines: "Up from the skeleton stone walls, up from the rotting floor boards [...] of the pre-war cotton factory, dusk came. Up from the dusk the full moon came. [...] The full moon in the great door was an omen. Negro women improvised songs against its spell" (39). The women in the story ward themselves against the red moon and sing songs that warn of lynching. Louisa is "the color of oak leaves on young trees in fall. Her breasts, firm and up-pointed like ripe acorns. And her singing had the low murmur of winds in fig trees" (39). Like *Cane's* other women, Louisa appears so in tune with nature that she is nearly a part of the description of the landscape setting. Her characterization as part of the landscape, heightened by Toomer's descriptions of her body nestled among descriptions of the Georgia countryside, avow her to the folk wisdom of the women and she recognizes the danger of the night. Like Bellon Prout in the "The Vampire Bat," the men of the town, and her lovers, do not. Tom specifically scorns the folly of old women who warn him about the moon.

Because of his work far away in the fields, Tom has slipped from Louisa's mind. She does not realize that Bob Stone is ashamed of her and of his desire for her. Walking outside, Bob's mind "became consciously a white man's. He passed the house with its huge open hearth which, in the days of slavery, was the plantation cookery. He saw Louisa bent over that hearth. He went in as a master should and took her. Direct, honest,

bold. None of this sneaking that he had to go through now. The contrast was repulsive to him. His family had lost ground” (44).

Bob shudders at what his family or Northern friends would think, and then feels bitter that he has to consider their feelings at all, that to date Louisa now would mean he would have to acknowledge her in the public realm. Bob, determined to take Louisa, ends up challenging Tom to a fight and Tom kills him. The gothic setting of the Southern wilderness, the eerie moon, and the lynching mob all belie the supposed progress presented in the story. All of the elements of the supposed industrial transition are burning. The rotting husk of the pre-war cotton factory looms, crumbling, over the town. Bob complains about the supposed progress which stops him owning Louisa, but still tries to claim her anyway. When Tom meets Bob’s challenge and kills him, he is immediately burned without any pretense of justice. “Blood Burning Moon” could be just as easily set on a slave plantation as it is in the post-reconstruction South. Again, Toomer’s story is not about the industrial transition that would decimate the South—his South, like Walrond’s, is already decimated.

Supposedly, the next chapter’s “Bona and Paul” will show the progress of the North and interracial love. The story does not perfectly parallel “Blood Burning Moon,” but the two are very similar. Bona and Paul are white and black, young, and struggling with the weight of history pressing its foot down on the neck of their budding relationship. Watching Paul during gym class, Bona thinks that despite looking white, Paul “is a harvest moon. He is an autumn leaf” (95). As Bona and Paul try to go on a date, Paul thinks about his Southern birthplace: “the South. What does that mean, precisely, except that you’ll love or hate a nigger? Thats a lot. What does it mean except

that in Chicago you'll have the courage to neither love or hate" (103). Looking at Bona, he thinks of how "A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter" (104). Paul is angered by the smirk of a black doorman, and Bona is confused by his coldness to her in the aftermath. When they reconcile and go to leave the jazz club, Paul stops to talk to the doorman and assure him that he and Bona will have something beautiful, that "white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals. That I am going out and know her whom I brought here" (107). High and thrilling with love for Bona, Paul goes to the place where he left Bona on the street and finds she is gone. The metaphor he constructed for the doorman of racial and environmental harmony crumbles into dust. Even here, in a Chicago club, with teenagers too young to know firsthand the horrors of the South, the plantation creeps. "Blood Burning Moon" demonstrates that there is no linear, temporal progress for the South, that it will not be saved by the wave of industrial modernity or destroyed, and "Bona and Paul" shows that there is no geographic escape from the plantation's reach, either.

4.9 Kabnis's Ugly World

"Kabnis" is the last and longest story in the work. It is dedicated to Waldo Frank, with whom Toomer traveled back to the South for a week after his stint as an interim principal. The way Toomer described the South to Frank, and the way they planned an elaborate tour, set the South up as an otherworld. They wrote about it almost as another

country, similar to the Southern alterity present in Hurston's work.¹²⁰ The autobiographical elements of "Kabnis," as a Northern man who takes a job teaching in the South where he can never relax, also reflect Toomer's feeling of the South as a foreign place. Ultimately, *Cane* tries to be a eulogy for a life Toomer never knew, a vacation life, what he imagined of the South. Toomer wrote that "*Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end. And why no one has seen and felt that, why people have expected me to write a second and third and a fourth book like *Cane*, is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life" (210). Part of Toomer's chafing against demands for another work like *Cane* reflect his anger about race, but his reflective writings do show that he thought of the rural, folk South as a particular place and moment that ended. Toomer loved the folk culture that he toured, but the gothic terror that comes through in "Kabnis," and in his writings to Frank, show that he thought of it as a set, temporary state that should die to industrial progress.

Yet, however Toomer thought about *Cane*, "Kabnis" is not a swan song. Indeed, reading "Kabnis" shows how the South is not a land of transition. Kabnis's blindness to the conditions of the South reflect Toomer's. Kabnis is placed in opposition to the South from the opening. Just being in the South makes Kabnis anxious. Like Helga Crane at Naxos, the night steals in and takes Kabnis's security. Looking at the gaps in the shoddy windows, Kabnis thinks that "These cracks are the lips the night winds use for whispering. Night winds in Georgia are vagrant poets, whispering. Kabnis, against his will, lets his book slip down, and listens to them. The warm whiteness of his bed, the

¹²⁰ Ben Wilson writes that the South is often crafted as an alienated otherworld, a phenomenon which he terms as "southern alterity," as I note in Chapter Three.

lamp-light, do not protect him from the weird chill of their song” (111). Like *Quicksand*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Tropic Death* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Southern night avails itself to gothic scenes. Threatening and eerie, the night lends to fear of the racial terror that haunts the South. On the wind, Kabnis imagines hearing “White-man’s land. / Niggers, sing. / Burn, bear black children / Till poor rivers bring / Rest, and sweet glory / In Camp Ground.” (111).¹²¹ Kabnis reads hostility and violence into every breeze, creak, and insect song around him. Kabnis is deeply aware of the history of the land where he now resides. Kabnis’s life in the teacher dorms and trying to adjust to the Southern landscape loosely mirrors Toomer’s tenure at the Sparta Agricultural Institute. The Institute, where Toomer lived for three months in a teacher dorm like Kabnis, was founded by Linton Stephens Ingraham, a former slave, in “1910, on three acres of land on his former master’s plantation” (Byrd et al 206). Instead of the “useable past” he was searching for, Toomer found an unbroken bridge of terror from the past to the present. When Toomer journeyed South, he did so in “a year when more lynchings occurred throughout the South than in any previous year other than 1909” (Foley 158).¹²² Toomer went from a life where he moved supposedly freely between white and black worlds, a life of security, to one of the most dangerous places for black men in the United States.

Once down South, Kabnis not only loses his sense of security, but the humid strangeness begins to erode his belief in his own rational thinking. Hearing more noises, he tells himself to “pull yourself together. [...] Only the rustle of leaves I guess. You know, Ralph, old man, it wouldn’t surprise me at all to see a ghost. People dont think

¹²¹ See Imani Owen’s “Hard Reading.”

¹²² See Foley’s research into Georgia lynchings, pages 157-165.

there are such things. They rationalize their fear, and call their cowardice silence. [...] Damit, that was a noise.” (116). He fights with himself to remain calm, but the loud Southern night provokes his anxiety. Hearing a dragging noise outside, he mutters that ““Ha, ha. The ghosts down this way haven’t got any chains to rattle, so they drag trees along with them.”” (116). Hysterical, he goes to confront the intruder wielding a fire poker as a weapon and instead finds a cow. Angry with himself, he whispers that ““This godam place is sure getting the best of me. Come, Ralph, old man, pull yourself together. Nights cant last forever.”” (116). Kabnis is coming undone in the Georgia night. He is mired in history and terror that every errant breeze, chirp, or even stray cow is a vengeful ghost come for him.

Kabnis’s perceived madness, his belief that the South is getting the better of him, reflects fears of the Tropics as a corrupting, eroding space. Kabnis’s feelings mirror British Officer Tommy’s claim that the Tropics grip him and make him crazy in Walrond’s “The Palm Porch,” the assumptions Anna Morgan faces in *Voyage in the Dark* from her stepmother that the Tropics have infected and corrupted her bloodline and family, and even Helga Crane’s bitter thoughts that the South makes people fools in the end of *Quicksand*. Kabnis has an outsider’s view of the dangers of plantation zones. The grotesque moments that result from Kabnis’s visceral terror, whether brutally beheading a chicken or holding a poker and screaming to confront a lost calf, are less about the supernatural entities that haunt Kabnis at night and more about the very real dangers of lynching.¹²³ Continuing with Yaeger’s understanding of the grotesque in Southern

123 As Patricia Yaeger argues, grotesque moments in literature are about the past shoving forward into the present.

literature as a plot device which moves background information into the foreground of a text, Kabnis's ghosts and spirits represent the long unbroken line of racial terror enacted on the ground which Kabnis now calls home. Finally, in *Cane*, we see a Southern space which is perverting, corrupting, and haunting. However, the South is a gothic wasteland because of the constant bloodshed which waters it. Kabnis may start afraid of ghosts, but his fear quickly morphs into the very real terrors of white violence haunting Georgia in 1921.

The local characters of "Kabnis" exhibit a nonchalance about the violence of slavery and the current lynchings that seems utterly absurd to Kabnis, further cementing him as an outsider who seems more vulnerable to the environment than the locals. The frantic, all-encompassing anxiety that Kabnis feels at the threat of Southern violence is met with a cool dismissal from his friends who live with the threat of violence every day. Kabnis's reaction feels much more understandable considering the state of 1920s Georgia. Both of the lynchings mentioned by Layman and Halsey were based on real cases. The murder of Mame Lamkins and her unborn child was modeled off the similar murder of Mary Turner, who was lynched in her eighth month of pregnancy by an angry white mob.¹²⁴

The other significant murder recounted to Kabnis is that of Sam Raymon. Kabnis tries to argue that the South must be in a better state after recent "peonage cases," but Layman and Halsey are quick to tell him that nothing much has changed. Layman tells

¹²⁴ Foley offers more extensive details, including Walter White's full record which he wrote for the NAACP. Mary Turner and her child were murdered in 1918. See page 160-162 for more details. Foley argues that Toomer changed details of Turner's murder from a burning and hanging to what happens in *Cane* to parallel the violence of the World War and make the white mob seem even more villainous.

him the story of Sam Raymon, a man who was about to be lynched and chose to jump into a stream to drown himself instead of fall into the hands of the mob. Toomer arrived in Georgia in the middle of 1921, when Georgia was gripped by the finding of “a series of bodies of drowned black men—most of them chained together in pairs and weighted down with bags of rocks —were found” in rivers (Foley 159). During Toomer’s work as a principal, the “corpses were identified as those former workers on the Williams farm, where investigators from the office of Federal District Attorney Hooper Alexander [...] had recently been attempting to conduct an investigation into debt peonage” (Foley 162). At the Sparta Agricultural Institution, which was supposed to instruct students in the ways of productive agrarian industry and husbandry, the peonage cases and hush murders made Toomer realize that not much had changed since the institution was a functioning plantation. “Kabnis” reflects Toomer’s realization that the South was not transforming into a wasteland because of the rise in lynchings and Great Migration to the North, it had always been one.

The terror that Kabnis feels as a Northern implant, like Helga Crane and Anna Morgan, propels him to a moment of total gothic dissociation. When a brick is thrown into Kabnis’s window with an ominous threat that it is time for him to go back North, Kabnis runs into the wilderness. He loses his identity, just like Helga Crane when she moves South, and in this moment, he shifts from a man to an “it.” Toomer describes how

A splotchy figure drives forward along the cane- and corn-stalk hemmed-in road.

A scarecrow replica of Kabnis, awkwardly animate. Fantastically plastered with

red Georgia mud. It skirts the big house whose windows shine like mellow

lanterns in the dusk. Its shoulder jogs against a sweet-gum tree. The figure caroms

off against the cabin door, and lunges in. It slams the door as if to prevent some one entering after it. 'God Almighty, theyre [sic] here. After me. On me. All along the road I saw their eyes flaring from the cane. Hounds. Shouts. What in God's name did I run here for? A mud-hole trap. I stumbled on a rope. O God, a rope. Their clammy hands were like the love death playing up and down my spine. Trying to trip my legs. To trip my spine. (126).

Kabnis believes he is imminently about to be lynched. Like the way Helga Crane's body becomes an "it" after spending two months in the rural South, Kabnis too becomes a scarecrow version of himself. The language used in his moment of grotesque disassociation even harkens to that of a slave escaping into the swamp. The scarecrow version of Kabnis "skirts the big house" covered in Georgia mud, a furtive animal hiding from its predators. The cane fields are both his shelter and his torment, and he imagines that as they hide him, they also conceal the lynching mob.

For the conclusion of the circular movement of the book, Kabnis shows the downward swing of the failed escape of Northern migration. There is no place to escape the plantation's reach, and like Karíntha, or Bona and Paul, Kabnis will now be in the plantation matrix for the rest of his life. In *Cane*, we see that the plantation zone of the American South is an uncontained and unchanging wasteland. Further reinforcing this point is the figure of the old man who everyone just calls "Father John." Supposedly deaf and blind, and rumored mute, the old man lives beneath the blacksmith shop and is cared for by the local community. After a drunken night under the watchful gaze of Father John, Kabnis is shocked to realize that the old man was actually speaking, and it was not just a drunken hallucination. After repeating the word "sin" over and over, he eventually

manages to form a rusty-voiced sentence that “th sin th white folks ’mitted when they made th Bible lie” (Toomer 159). Kabnis is enraged that after waiting so long to speak, this is all Father John has to say. Father John, an ex-slave, silent and grim overseeing the proceedings, has no healing words or insights to offer. He remains a macabre reminder of the stasis state of the South.

4.10 Plantation Afterlives; Southern Futures

As much as Toomer admired black folk culture, he saw little detriment in its demise. Against the readings of Allen Tate, Arnold Rampersad, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., I argue that in *Cane*, the South, and the folk culture it contains, is a place choked by the plantation agrarianism it has failed to escape. The South was too much for Toomer, who fled after his tenure and never returned for long in life or writing, and the scope of Southern terror is too much for Kabnis. The other Northern outsider in “Kabnis,” Lewis, is also giving up after trying to make it as a teacher in Georgia. After Lewis explains to Kabnis that the threatening note was intended for him and thrown in Kabnis’s window by mistake, the two try and establish a rapport about the strangeness of Georgia. Instead, Kabnis ends up in a drunken disagreement with him. Trying to argue that he knows the South, Kabnis sputters out that he has Southern ancestors and roots to the place, and Lewis cuts him off: ““Can’t hold them, can you? Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you”” (Toomer 148). Even the structure of Lewis’s sentence is telling. Master to soil and dusk; slave to heaven and dawn. The Southern earth will never recover from the plantation system. Even in Toomer’s most pastoral scenes and poems, the crops struggle to grow in a ground stripped of nutrients

and threatened by modern plagues, boll-weevils and floods as damning as biblical locusts.

Cane makes the agony of the South inescapable, as haunting and far-reaching as it was for Toomer himself. Byrd and Gates write that Toomer wanted to write the experience of Northern migration as a transition, that as the folk “left the southern agrarian way of life for modernity in the cities, some also sought to distance themselves from their slave past” (Gates 210). *Cane*, from its circular construction to its constant gothic, argues that this distance is impossible. As in *Tropic Death*, the plantation system has a hold on the South and is not letting go: it is present both overtly, through the references in “Blood Burning Moon” and “Kabnis” to the plantation estates that once dotted the Georgia landscape, and in more subtle ways, such as the damaged land of “Karíntha” and the unbroken line lynchings in “Kabnis.” Byrd and Gates may argue that Toomer saw the South “as a world in transition, and a world of transition for himself” (Byrd et al. 207). However, like the transition in Walrond’s work from plantation agrarianism to the industrialism of the Canal, the changes are just an echo of the plantation system. Like the other six works of this project, the plantation gothic of *Cane* shows us that the plantation system is still haunting the South, that the South will not be saved by industrialism, and that the wasteland is here to stay.

Further re-inscribing this point is the moment of divine agony Kabnis experiences when he walks into the moonlight and sees the beautiful Georgian night. The beauty of the South is the cruelest irony of *Cane*. The leftover Big Houses with their beauty enforced through lynching mobs and damaging agricultural practices, along with the waving fields of cane sown through years of slave blood, make a world that Kabnis can

only find ugly. He and Lewis, as Northern transplants, are overwhelmed with intrinsic horror at the gothic landscapes around them. At the same time, Kabnis cannot deny that the rural South is beautiful. He is overwhelmed at the sight of the Georgian night:

‘Hell of a fine quarters, I’ve got. Five years ago; look at me now. Earth’s child. The earth my mother. God is a profligate red-nosed man about town. Bastardy, me. A bastard son has got a right to curse his maker. God...’ Kabnis is about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the night’s beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. Sharp stones cut through his thin pajamas. The shock sends a shiver over him. He quivers. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes. ‘God Almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, do not torture me with beauty. Take it away. Give me an ugly world. [...] Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and... tortures me. Ugh. Hell. Get up, you damn fool. Look around. Whats beautiful there? Hog pens and chicken yards. Dirty red mud. Stinking outhouse. Whats beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you?’ (114).

After all, how can a land watered in blood be beautiful to him? Kabnis’s agony is palpable. The folk-songs he loves, the moon over the cane fields, the red dirt reflecting in the stars are all the result of the plantation system’s artifice in creating a new world to best serve its needs. Kabnis’s anguish is a reckoning moment that threads together all of the texts of this project. Ultimately, the gothic scenes that link *Quicksand*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Zong!*, *Tropic Death*, and *Cane* all emerge as modernist writers confront the perverse beauty of the South.

CHAPTER 5. CODA: THE SOUTHERN TOURIST AND THE PLANTATION SOUTH

One of the central questions to emerge out of this dissertation is the figure of the Southern tourist in plantation modernism. Southern interlopers start and conclude this project: Nella Larsen, with her disdain for being asked to tour and write about “plantations, whatever they are,” and Jean Toomer, who was desperate to see and write about the rural South. Still, despite their opposite feelings, both authors recognized the power of the South as a site of narrative heritage. Larsen’s South is a quicksand that traps Helga Crane from the beginning to the end of her novel, while *Cane* shows plantation traces dispersed across people and places in Toomer’s vignettes. Despite their textual differences, Larsen and Toomer’s works both portray the South as a strange, backward space nearly foreign to the rest of the United States. Despite writing about the South as outsiders, the rural Southern settings of both *Cane* and *Quicksand* became the dominant narrative of what the black South was like: hostile, frightful, and terrorized. While both authors had at least vague history tying them back to the South, their portrayals of these post-plantation spaces as still irrevocably bound to plantation systems were motivated by their own personal and political agendas. As I reflect back on this project, one of the questions that remains for me is how to conceptualize constructions of the South in these works in light of the fact that the dominant narrative images of Southern places were produced by non-Southern writers.

Examining who has the authority to write about the South and manipulate its legacy asks that we consider if there is fundamental difference between writings about the South from Southerners and those by so-called “outsiders.” Zora Neale Hurston certainly thought so. (Toomer did, too, and he wanted in on it.) Hurston’s sentiments

about Southern portrayals are clear across her personal writings and fictional works. As I note in Chapter Four, Hurston openly disdained how the rise of fiction featuring Southern characters and places portrayed her homeland as poor and unhappy. Hurston's writings show the Southern tourist as a problem in producing Southern narratives. In a letter to William Stanley Hoole in 1936, Hurston grants that she is happy "in a way to see my beloved southland coming into so much prominence in literature," but "some writers are playing to the gallery" in showing the South as impoverished.¹²⁵ In a dialogue about the Ocoee Massacre, in which a white mob attacked black residents of Ocoee, Florida to suppress black voters, Hurston scoffs that black journalists who work with W.E.B. Du Bois have no idea of the real conditions of the South. Of their reports about the Ocoee Massacre, which Hurston doggedly refers to as "the Ocoee incident," she says "they are biased, instead of true; written by plain crackpots. Negro information in Washington is most inaccurate. Particularly on the Ocoee incident" (Kennedy).¹²⁶

Hurston's resentment of Southern interlopers is a theme across her works of fiction, journalism, and personal letters. By the end of her life, her writings show a loyalty to other Southerners at the expense of loyalty to her race (though she did not see it as such). Hurston actively campaigned for Florida Senator (and future Florida Governor) Spessard Holland in 1958, one of the Senators who signed the 1952 "Southern Manifesto" condemning "Brown V Board of Education" and vowing its unconstitutionality. Writing to Holland's wife, Hurston shares that she spoke "before

¹²⁵ See Hurston's letter to Williams Stanley Hoole on March 7, 1936. This is in her "Correspondence" in the Zora Neale Hurston Papers housed in the University of Florida George A. Smathers Library.

¹²⁶ See Stetson Kennedy's "Ocoee Incident," described as "notes taken on a dialogue between ZNH and Dr. Carita Doggett Corse, Director of the FWP." These parts of Kennedy's papers are housed in the University of Florida George A. Smathers Library.

small groups of Negroes reminding them that Senator Holland was the father of Negro education in Florida, and that it is always preferable to see a promise any day than to hear about one” (Hurstun).¹²⁷ She had wanted to publish an editorial in support of Holland, but did not want him to be seen as too-closely aligned with the interest of the black race in Florida. She concludes her letter with

as Mrs. Silver can tell you, I had gathered some stuff to knock him [Spessard’s opponent in the primary] cold at the last minute, his receiving inter-racial couples socially in New YORK, ans [sic] was heading for your local headquarters to turn it in when she stopped me, saying that it was unnecessary that you would not lose. All my best love to you and yours. (Hurstun).¹²⁸

By Hurstun’s definition, the Southern tourist is one who uses the racial disparities of the South to make the rest of the country look better, or the figure who sees the South as expendable to a larger political game. In Hurstun’s work, the place of the South is deeply intertwined with the people of the South, and so her refusal to separate race from place and to denigrate those who do is key in understanding her work.

For much of this project, answering the question of who writes about the South as a place and how they write about it has meant performing close readings of not only characters, but landscapes, in the way of Lawrence Buell.¹²⁹ For example, in Chapter Four, I argue that Hurstun’s defense of the South as a landscape suffering under corrupted practices, but not corrupted to the core, is tied to scenes of hostile nature in

¹²⁷ See Hurstun’s letter to Mrs. Holland. This letter is included in her “Correspondence” box in her papers in the University of Florida George A. Smathers Library.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ See Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*.

Their Eyes Were Watching God. After all, it is not the hurricane that leads Janie and Tea Cake to the rabid dog, but the “monstropolous beast” of shoddily constructed houses, shallowly-planted crops, and trees uprooted from stripped soil. The exploitative agricultural practices of plantation agriculture are the aggressors, not the South itself, and to Hurston, outsiders miss this key distinction.

The key definition of a Southern tourist as the figure unable to name exploitation in the Southern ground also codifies Anna Morgan’s anxiety around who is “a real West Indian” and who is not in Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*. Anna, born and raised in the West Indies, is unable to claim it as her homeland because of her family’s place in the plantocracy. More than any other novel in this project, *Voyage in the Dark* defines place as conceptually inextricable from race. Anna is subject to a strange sort of false dichotomy: she can be loyal to the place she loves or she can be loyal to her race, which she claims to despise, but not both. Anna’s anxiety about the homeland which is not her home parallels Rhys’s own conflicted feelings about her family’s estate. When returning to Geneva to visit the ruins of her family’s estate, Rhys calls it “ridiculous” that she would be assigned a guide. Unable to recognize the burned grounds and charred remains of the manor house, she has “some vague, superstitious idea that if I drank the water I’d come back” (Angier 28-29). Instead, she nearly poisons herself, and the guide warns her that there are no drinkable streams left on the island. Her autobiographical writings show that Rhys wanted a homecoming but is instead given a tour of place she does not remember. Both Rhys herself and semi-autobiographical Anna Morgan are West Indian-born women who feel like colonial tourists. In her portrayal of the Caribbean landscape through Anna’s memories, and in her own writings, it is clear that Rhys is an anti-

colonial writer. However, as much as she may acknowledge the legacy of the plantation system and its scars left on the landscape, her inability to name and critique how the exploitation of the landscape was tied to race-based exploitation leaves her walking the line of a West Indian writer and an English tourist.

The agony of national identification and feelings of unbelonging also extend to the work and life of Eric Walrond. As a child, his family never stayed in one place for long, and his adult life was much the same. Certainly, as a West Indian-born man, Walrond saw the entanglements of race and place mapped into nature. *Tropic Death* draws an unbroken line from the exploitative labor of plantations to the catastrophic death toll of the Panama Canal. But while Hurston sees her homeland as a place under siege from racist politics and outside oppression, Walrond's South is unsalvageable. His work opens with a story about a child who dies from eating dirt made toxic from a nearby mine and ends with his semi-autobiographical story of his own traumatized childhood.¹³⁰ The outsiders, the colonial tourists, who come to the West Indies to strip the land of its resources or to shape it into a colonial outpost have permanently corrupted it: sharks eat children, snakes nurse from breastfeeding mothers, and vampire bats entrap weary travelers.¹³¹ Racialized danger is encoded in the landscape. In Walrond's Caribbean, it has become part of natural order.

Similarly, in *Zong!*, M. NourbeSe Philip writes of a South created on the basis of dual exploitation. I have read the other texts of this project as works of reckoning with the plantation system's scars. However, *Zong!* is about an origin. The entwined

¹³⁰ See the opening story of *Tropic Death*, "Drought," and the concluding title story, "Tropic Death."

¹³¹ See "The Wharf Rats," "The White Snake," and "The Vampire Bat" in *Tropic Death*.

destruction of kidnapped Africans and the Southern world which became the foundation of the plantation and thereby the Southern economy began with incidents like the Zong Massacre. Both the enslavers and the enslaved began as outsiders, but in the Atlantic world, the enslaved body was made a part of the Southern landscape as their bodies were thrown into the coastal Atlantic waters. If we accept the definition of a Southern tourist that emerges in Hurston's work as the figure unable to see racial oppression as embedded in the Southern landscape, then we can recognize the roots of this division as beginning in *Zong!*.

The last two texts to discuss in this conclusion, *Quicksand* and *Cane*, both feature Southern outsiders trying to reckon with the entanglement of racial oppression and environmental degradation. Larsen's own ambivalence about the South is mirrored in that of Helga Crane, who loathes Naxos, the Southern school where she teaches, and spends the rest of the novel looking for a place to feel like she belongs. After marrying Pleasant Green and moving to an ex-plantation, she thinks she has found it, but soon realizes that she is trapped in a place she hates.¹³² Helga is not in terror of the South, but she is still driven nearly-mad by it. In the end of the novel, despite spending several months ardently trying to join the town community where Pleasant Green is a pastor, she remains an outsider and the town women refuse to accept her. The South is as foreign to Helga as Denmark.

Helga's near-madness and feelings of entrapment parallel those of Kabnis in the concluding story of *Cane*. He is another perpetual outsider, despite his efforts, and is unable to reconcile the state of constant terror he feels about his new home with the calm

¹³² See Chapter Two for my reading of the end of the novel as set on a former plantation.

demeanor of the townspeople around him. The landscape horrifies Kabnis, from the loud sounds of the Southern night and bright moon over the woods, to the more pressing threat of lynching rumors and white malevolence. While the cultural differences of both Helga and Kabnis make it hard for them to settle in the South, their inability to see that the Southern landscape is made hostile through years of plantation violence leaves them as tourist figures. Considering the role of the tourist in writing about the South ultimately adds nuance to the discussion of the plantation gothic in these six texts. Recognizing that the most hostile scenes of Southern nature come from writers who were Southern tourists or felt un-homed in the South even if born there further demonstrates the entanglement of constructions of race and constructions of nature. Sites of racial terror become sites of environmental terror, too. So, what does it mean that a Southern tourist wrote the dominant narrative of the South? I do not argue that there is something essentialist about being born in the South, but I do argue that regional alliances, or identification as a Southerner or a Southern outsider, motivated the narratives of Southern places in some modernist works.

Further, the figure of the Southern tourist meant that as writers came South to write about plantations, plantation narratives traveled with them outward. Jarvis McInnis asks us to consider the material conditions of plantations and how plantation narratives travel in his analysis of a corporate plantation newspaper called the *Cotton Farmer*. Noting that almost all copies were destroyed in the Mississippi Flood of 1927, one copy survives in the Marcus Garvey archives. The paper's far reach, with evidence in the issue from circulation to Jamaica and subscribers in Panama, both point to "a black corporate plantation reading public in the delta" and reveal "a dynamic, yet relatively

underexplored geography of black transnational mobility and diasporic affiliation among sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and migrant laborers during the interwar years” (McInnis 524). The significance of the Southern tourist is not only in crafting their own narratives of plantation territories, but also in disseminating tales of plantation places.

Susan Scott Parrish’s *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* also demands that scholars of the interwar South understand the material conditions of production about the Southern world. Both Parrish and McInnis write about the flood of 1927 as a pivotal shift for the consumption of narrative about plantation territories. Not only did the material conditions of the flood wash away the plantation archive—as McInnis’s work shows—but it also ushered in the age of disaster tourism and consumption, and as Parrish notes, the media narratives of the flood also crafted a narrative of the South which spills over to writers like Hurston and Wright. Environmental disasters codify the connection between exploitative racial practices and exploitative agricultural ones. The Southern tourist is the figure unable to lay bare this connection in the gothic world of the South. Ultimately, our understanding of the gothic, Southern plantation zone is defined by this figure. As we see in the works of these six authors, the twentieth century Southern tourist enables the plantation to seep out of place and time through gothic encounters.

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Participant at the Futures of American Studies Institute, Dartmouth College, 2018.

University of Kentucky College of Arts and Sciences Certificate of Outstanding Teaching, University of Kentucky, 2018.

University of Kentucky Woman's Club Graduate Fellowship, University of Kentucky, 2018.

Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies Excellence in Teaching Award, University of Kentucky, 2017.

Travel Grant, Appalachian College Association, 2014.

Joan Cralle Day Fellowship, University of Kentucky, 2013.