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The University of Southern Mississippi

BITTER-SWEET HOME: THE PASTORAL IDEAL IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
LITERATURE, FROM DOUGLASS TO WRIGHT

by

Robyn Merideth Preston-McGee

Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2011

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BITTER-SWEET HOME: THE PASTORAL IDEAL IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
LITERATURE, FROM DOUGLASS TO WRIGHT

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Discussions of the pastoral mode in American literary history frequently omit the complicated relationship between African Americans and the natural world, particularly as it relates to the South. The pastoral, as a sensibility, has long been an important part of the southern identity, for the mythos of the South long depended upon its association with a new “Garden of the World” image, a paradise dependent upon slave labor and a racial hierarchy to sustain it. For African Americans, the rural South has been both a home and a place of violence and oppression, particularly during the period of slavery through the 1930s. During this time, African Americans were either conflated with nature, as slaves, or murdered in the midst of it, as evidenced by the frequency of lynchings during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Clearly, then, the troubled and often violent treatment of African Americans in the rural, often pastoralized South vexes the pastoral ideal for black writers. Rather than take an entirely anti-pastoral stance, however, black writers frequently reworked and embraced the pastoral mode often as a way to expose their casting out from it. Writers such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Angelina Welde Grimké, Richard Wright, and Jean Toomer all attempted to reconcile the pastoral sensibility of the South, a sensibility which they, too, sought to experience, with the oppressive treatment of African Americans in it.

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The University of Southern Mississippi

BITTER-SWEET HOME: THE PASTORAL IDEAL IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
LITERATURE, FROM DOUGLASS TO WRIGHT

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Robyn Merideth Preston-McGee

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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CHAPTER I  
THE SOUTHERN PASTORAL IDEAL AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
DILEMMA

*“As with the eagle, so with man. He loves to look upon the bright day and the stormy night; to gaze upon the broad, free ocean, its eternal surging tides, its mountain billows, and its foam-crested waves; to tread the steep mountain side; to sail upon the placid river; to wander along the gurgling stream; to race the sunny slope, the beautiful landscape, the majestic forest, the flowery meadows; to listen to the howling winds and the music of the birds. These are the aspiration of man, without regard to country, clime, or color.”*  
(William Wells Brown, *The Black Man; His Antecedents, His Genesis; and His Achievements* 1863)

*“Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.”*  
(Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit”)<sup>1</sup>

In Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*, Sethe, the main character, finds herself recollecting her days at Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation from which she had escaped. It was a brutal, yet beautiful place, and Sethe struggles to reconcile the loveliness of the landscape with the torture she endured there. She pictures Sweet Home “rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty” (6). The natural beauty of the plantation is both tempting and horrifying, for she is forced to admire it but punishes herself when she does so because of the trauma associated with it. She continues, “It never looked terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy

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<sup>1</sup> “Strange Fruit” was written by Abe Meeropol under the pseudonym Lewis Allan in 1936.



groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wondering soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamore trees beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that” (6). Here, Morrison uses pastoral images of lacy groves and beautiful sycamore trees to point out the ways in which the landscape imposes itself on Sethe. As horrible as her life was at Sweet Home, Sethe cannot bring herself to forget the beauty of the landscape, for it “beats out” the other images she attempts to remember.

Sethe’s inability to reconcile the beauty and the trauma of Sweet Home speaks to a long-running effort in African-American literature to come to terms with a natural environment, in particular the South, that is typically pastoralized. While numerous studies have taken up the issue of race and environmental or ecological concerns, few have discussed the role of the pastoral mode in African-American literary history, particularly as it relates to arguably the most dangerous and rapidly-changing period in America for African Americans—the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. During this time, violence against blacks in the South was at its most intense, lasting from slavery, through Reconstruction, and well into the twentieth century during the height of Jim Crow. This violence, combined with the migration of millions of black men, women, and children to urban areas, makes for an interesting examination of how writers of those decades came to terms with a landscape that had been both a home and a place of violence and oppression. Specifically, my project addresses how African American writers repudiated, reworked, and even embraced the southern pastoral ideal in their works. Given the troubled history between African Americans and the southern landscape, I’m interested in the many ways these writers attempted to reconcile the pastoral ideal of the South, in particular, with the treatment of blacks in that often-

idealized landscape. Clearly, black writers were working against any traditional view of the pastoral—a mode that had historically excluded them from pastoral landscapes except as a necessary part of maintaining the pastoral qualities of the landscape itself. They were, indeed, challenging the southern pastoral and pointing out its complexities for African Americans.

The term “pastoral” has a long history with a wide range of meanings.<sup>2</sup> Most important to the chapters that follow is the notion that nature is not inherently pastoral: it requires a human subject to view it through a pastoral lens. Pastoral, then, as it is used in this project, is a state of mind, a sensibility, an attitude towards the natural world in which the participant is able or unable to idealize a natural setting for a particular purpose—most often comfort and pleasure. In particular, the pastoral sensibility in the American South has long been an important part of the southern identity, for the physical landscape of the South has historically been described as a paradise, a new “Garden of Eden.” The images of the southern plantation, filled with towering oak trees, hanging moss, singing birds, and a bountiful harvest, were important in the mythos of the South, and much of southern literature from the seventeenth century forward focuses on the landscape as something to which southerners must cling: an idealized landscape circumscribed by an ominous, industrialized, outside world that threatens to destroy the idyllic imagery of the beautifully cultivated farms, complete with planters and their families happily enjoying their land and the lifestyle it afforded them.

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<sup>2</sup> These meanings range from the traditional use of the term as a genre of writing, based mostly on the *Idylls* of Theocritus, to more a more broad interpretation of it as idealized nature or the celebration of a rural setting over an urban one. For further discussions of the variety of ways in which the term pastoral might be applied, see Lawrence Buell’s “American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised” (1989) and Paul Alpers’ *What is Pastoral?* (1996).

However, the southern pastoral as a sensibility is vexed because of the history of slavery and the treatment of blacks in the rural South. Slavery complicated the southern pastoral ideal from the early seventeenth century on. If part of the pastoralization of the South was to romanticize and idealize the landscape, to improve upon or recreate a “new Eden” in America, then slavery had to be romanticized as and considered a necessary part of the idyllic scenery. To confront the reality of slavery would have been to destroy or at least threaten the idyllic image of a pastoral South, for romanticizing the landscape would have been impossible had landowners taken time to internalize the physical and emotional effects of slavery on those men and women planting and plowing their fields. Paul Outka argues that slavery “made the white racial identification with the pastoral landscape dangerously unstable” (37). And Lewis P. Simpson further argues, “there was an awareness of an ultimate irreconcilability of the Southern slavery system to the pastoral mode. . . . [this awareness] would reveal that the African chattel had come into the Southern garden of paradise as an intruder, dispossessing the garden of the Western pastoral imagination, transforming it into a garden of the chattel” (61). In other words, to recognize the paradox of slaves in a pastoral garden potentially destroys the image of the garden itself. This awareness reveals a frustration on the part of landowners who both needed slavery to cultivate their garden and maintain the “natural” order of things and, yet, blamed slavery for threatening the pastoral qualities of it.

The pastoralized plantations described by southern landowners depended upon slave labor for their creation and survival, and, in order to justify their pastoral leanings in the face of slavery, landowners often chose to view slaves as either necessary tools integral to sustaining their wealthy lifestyles or, in some cases, as romanticized “gardeners” in the fields. Many landowners, in an attempt to reconcile the slave’s place in the pastoral

ideal, simply equated slaves as “sheep,” and the landowners their shepherds, both living in harmony in the landscape. For example, Robert Beverly’s *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1705), William Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line* (1728) and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782) all position the South as a rural paradise, with the plantation owner a new kind of Virgilian “shepherd.”

Robert Beverley’s *History* was long considered by many to be the most authoritative record of Virginia’s social, political, economic, and agricultural affairs. More than a mere history of the colony, the book gives a rather poetic rendering of life on a Virginia plantation. Beverley’s accounts of the beauty of the Virginian landscape and its plantations, however, either ignore the issue of slavery altogether or minimize the work of slaves on the plantations. In Book IV of the work, titled “Of the Present State of Virginia,” Beverley writes,

For, by the most impartial Observation I can make, if People will be perswaded [sic] to be Temperate, and take due care of themselves, I believe it is as healthy a Country, as any under Heaven. . . .The clearness and brightness of the Sky, add new vigour to [people’s] spirits, and perfectly remove all Splenetick and sullen Thoughts. Here they enjoy all the benefits of a warm Sun, and by their shady Groves, are protected from its Inconvenience. Here all their Senses are entertain'd with an endless Succession of Native Pleasures. Their Eyes are ravished with the Beauties of naked Nature. Their Ears are Serenaded with the perpetual murmur of Brooks, and the thorrow-base which the Wind plays, when it wantons through the Trees; the merry Birds too, join their pleasing Notes to this rural Consort, especially the Mock-birds, who love Society so well, that whenever they see Mankind, they will perch upon a Twigg very near them, and sing the sweetest wild

Airs in the World. (298)

In this highly idealized passage, Beverley showcases Virginia as the epitome of what had become by then a dominant image in the making of America: the new garden of the world.<sup>3</sup> His references to “shady groves,” the “beauties of naked nature,” and the “murmur of brooks,” all of which “remove sullen thoughts,” make use of traditional pastoral images. However, throughout his *History*, Beverley’s pastoral descriptions consistently minimize the slave labor that made those descriptions possible, at least as they relate to his own plantations. For example, in his chapter “On the Servants and Slaves of Virginia,” Beverley writes that “The male-servants, and slaves of both sexes, are employed together in tilling and manuring the ground, in sowing and planting tobacco, corn. . . . Some distinction indeed is made between them in their clothes and food, but the work of both is no other than what the overseers, the freemen, and the planters themselves do” (38-39). Beverley here argues that slave men and women do no more on the plantation than the landowners themselves. However, as Leo Marx aptly points out in his groundbreaking study on American pastoralism, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), there are really two gardens at work in Beverley’s book, both of which must either ignore or minimize the role of slavery in them. The first is a mythical garden. When Beverley calls Virginia one of the “Gardens of the World,” he is speaking metaphorically, with Virginia as an “Edenic land of primitive splendor inhabited by noble savages” (Marx 85). The second type of garden is literal. In describing the land of Virginia, he is “speaking about actual, man-made, cultivated pieces of ground” (Marx 85). The distinction between the two gardens is important, for the latter speaks to a

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<sup>3</sup> According to Jan Bakker in *Pastoral in Antebellum Southern Romance* (1989), Londoner and royal chaplain Reverend Daniel Price coined the phrase “Garden of the World” in 1609 to describe the South as a new Eden.

notion held by many settlers that the garden of the world image could, indeed, be made a reality in the colonies, particularly in the South. Annette Kolodny argues that the myth of America as a new Eden, as a new garden of the world, wasn't entirely mythical in the minds of the settlers. She writes, "If the initial impulse to experience the New World landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a maternal 'garden,' receiving and nurturing human children, was a reactivation of what we now recognize as universal mythic wishes, it had one radically different facet: *this* paradise really existed" (4). Writings about the New World, particularly in the South, were filled with images of ideally beautiful and bountiful terrain that

might be lifted forever out of the canon of pastoral convention and invested with the reality of daily experience. . . . Eden, Paradise, the Golden Age, and the idyllic garden, in short, all the backdrops for European literary pastoral, were subsumed in the image of an America promising material ease without labor or hardship, as opposed to the grinding poverty of previous European existence. (Kolodny 6)

"Without labor or hardship" are the operative words here, for to complete the scene in Beverley's book "we have only to add the plantation mansion and the planter, who has in hand a well-worn copy of Virgil, and within a supervisory distance a group of Negro slaves amiably at work in a tobacco field" (Simpson 17). Imagining this scene, we begin to see the contradictions inherent in the Garden of the World view and in the new form of the pastoralized plantation. Clearly, from the planter's perspective, life in the plantation garden might certainly be as close to the Edenic garden in America as one could get: a removal from the trials of life to a beautiful landscape, full of rich soil, blooming flowers, twittering hummingbirds, and sweet honeysuckle (Beverley 298). Gone are the singing, lute-playing shepherds of the European pastoral who seek to escape the complexities of

city life, and, in their place, appear the plantation owners, reinventing the pastoral by way of re-creating the Garden of the World image in their own backyards, so long as they could continue to ignore the fact that human chattel made the garden possible for them.<sup>4</sup>

Just over twenty years after Beverley wrote his account of the Virginia plantation as a new and improved garden, a “paradise improved,” William Byrd of Westover wrote a letter to an acquaintance describing the benefits of life on his own plantation. Byrd’s accounts of plantation life and the pastoral qualities he associates with it confront the issue of slavery by way of semantics. For example, describing his plantation and the slaves who work it he writes,

Besides the advantage of a pure air, we abound in all kinds of provisions without expense (I mean we who have plantations). . . . Like one of the patriarchs, I have my flock and herds, my bondmen and bondwomen, and every sort of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on everyone but Providence. However, though this sort of life is without expense, yet it is attended with a great deal of trouble. I must take care to keep all my people to their duty, to set all the springs in motion, and to make everyone draw his equal share to carry the machine forward. . . . Another thing, My Lord, that recommends this country very much: we sit securely under our vines and our fig trees without any danger to our property. . . . Thus, My Lord, we are very happy in our Canaans if we could but forget the onions and fleshpots of Egypt. (Byrd qtd. in Simpson 17-18).

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<sup>4</sup> In the traditional bucolic poems of the European pastoral tradition, characteristics include wandering herdsmen playing lutes and engaging in dialogue with one another, the simplicity and innocence of a rural setting contrasted with the corruption and chaos of city life, and an idealized natural setting.

Here, we note that Byrd sees the errand into the wilderness realized exclusively in terms of a plantation society, complete with slaves, or, as he chooses to call them, “his flock.” Like many Virginians, Byrd hungered for land and owned vast tracts of fertile soil--so fertile, in fact, that he frequently referred to his property as the “Land of Eden.” However, Byrd also realized that, unlike a traditional pastoral, his imagining of the plantation pastoral was somewhat tarnished by the image of slaves working it. Thus, he converts them from “slaves,” to “gardeners” and “his flock.” In 1736, Byrd wrote a letter to Peter Beckford of Jamaica expressing that “Our negroes are not so numerous or so enterprising as to give us any apprehension or uneasiness nor indeed is their Labour any other than Gardening & less by far than what the poor People undergo in other Countrys” (Byrd qtd. in Bassett lxxxvi). Clearly, Byrd prefers to view his slaves as nothing more than part of the beautiful landscape, seeing their role as “gardeners” tending to the soil—not hard laborers working the land to support his comfortable lifestyle. Thus, Robert Beverley’s account of the Virginia landscape establishes a distinctly southern pastoral image, and Byrd’s account completes the image—illustrating the role of chattel slavery in the southern plantation pastoral and setting up the plantation itself as a metaphor of a pastoral social order, with the slave functioning as “gardener” (Simpson 23). “Gardeners” tilling the soil is certainly a more palatable image than “slaves toiling in the earth.” As Simpson observes, Byrd himself “became conscious of the difficulty of assuming the assimilation of slavery to the pastoral ideal,” and his use of “gardener” for “slave” hints that he was not entirely comfortable with a pastoral ideal dependent upon slave labor (23).

For Thomas Jefferson, the way to reconcile the paradox of slaves in the garden was to find justification for their enslavement. While Beverley chose to minimize the role of



slaves on his plantations, and Byrd chose to simply call them “gardeners” and “his flock,” Jefferson finds that arguing for white intellectual superiority was a way to justify their lowly place in the garden. Jefferson perhaps best illustrates the contradiction of slavery in the Edenic garden of the South in his *Notes*, for, unlike Beverley and Byrd, he clearly had trouble with the paradox of slavery in a pastoral setting. A slaveholder himself, Jefferson argued that blacks were, in almost every way, inferior to whites, thereby justifying their enslavement. He writes, “In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. . . . Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous” (177). However, Jefferson also recognized the inherent immorality of slaveholding and saw it as something that tarnished the country and, presumably, the way he perceived his plantation. Concerned about the effects of slavery on slave owners and on the South in general, he says, “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever” (195). As Jefferson’s “trembling” illustrates, whites became increasingly uncomfortable as the social, moral, and political realities of slavery increasingly pushed their way to the front of American discourse. Thus, southern planters had to refigure their pastoral ideal in order to accommodate the institution that sustained it: slavery.

While plantation owners like Beverley, Byrd, and Jefferson used euphemisms and intellectual comparisons to justify the role of slavery in the southern pastoral perspective, other writers attempted to either exclude them as “Americans,” or demonize them from a religious perspective. When St. John de Crevecoeur defined “the American,” it was as

“either a European, or the descendent of a European” (54). Furthermore, in order to justify their enslavement of Africans and African Americans and secure their exclusion from the Edenic pastoral, whites used biblical support, aligning them with the serpent, or Satan, in the Garden of Eden. J. Lee Greene argues that

southern whites gleaned from the Bible justification for the slaveocracy’s attitude toward and treatment of blacks. The assertion that blacks were not descendents of the original parents and that their presence in the biblical Garden of Eden stemmed from the intruding evil (the snake) had popular support during and well past the colonial period. Southern whites concluded that because blacks were excluded from the original Eden, they did not merit a place in the South’s Eden that compared to that of whites (supposedly the true descendents of Adam and Eve).

(Greene 14-15)

Religion, specifically Judeo-Christian religion, became the “evidence” whites could use to embrace so-called black inferiority, starting with the story of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, and exclude blacks from the American “garden.” Clearly, then, African Americans’ relationship to Eden and its subsequent role in the making of the American South were compromised early on. Not only was the justification for white supremacy and slavery found in biblical interpretations, but so was African Americans’ exclusion from the New World paradise. Having to work the land was, in some ways, their punishment for transgressions in the biblical Garden of Eden.

Just as antebellum pastorals sought to reconcile the place of slaves in the southern garden, post-Civil War pastorals also attempted to situate African Americans in the garden in such a way as to promote a racist agenda that distorted history and ignored the implications that slavery had in the southern pastoral. Reconstruction writers Thomas

Nelson Paige and Joel Chandler Harris, for example, employed narrative strategies that depicted African Americans as “shepherds” in a new kind of pastoral form. This type of modern-day shepherd was, as Anissa J. Wardi points out, a “seemingly simple man who sang the praises of the institution of slavery” and was employed by white writers as a way to eulogize the Old South as a pastoral landscape of order and grace (45). Mourning the loss of their way of life, writers of this type of postbellum plantation pastoral sought to create a landscape where all members of society lived peacefully together, so long as the black shepherds knew their place in the post-slavery South.

Missing, of course, from these eighteenth and nineteenth century pastoral descriptions of the South is the African American perspective, which was likely to be much different from, say, Beverley’s and Byrd’s accounts, for sentimental musings are clearly more difficult when the soil you work and, most importantly, the body with which you work it are often not your own property. What the settlers and planters in America gained as they set out to recreate America as a New Eden or a pastoral paradise, those who worked in the garden lost—for the pleasures the garden offered white planters was unattainable and out of reach to slaves. In terms of the African American perspective on the pastoralized land of the South, the relationship between slaves and the landscape was one born out of alienation, physical hardship, and trauma. If the southern landscape offered comfort and redemption to white settlers and planters, it offered only oppression for those blacks brought to the New World and forced to work the land.

An initial impulse to associate African American writers with an anti-pastoral perspective is certainly within reason, given what we know about African Americans’ complicated relationship to an idealized South. For slaves, the southern landscape, especially the plantation fields, resisted idealization. Eldridge Cleaver argues that,

“During slavery. . . black people learned to hate the land. From sunup to sundown, the slaves worked the land: plowing, sowing, and reaping crops for somebody else, for profit they themselves would never see or taste” (59-59). The harsh realities of life on a plantation exist in juxtaposition to the idyllic images of plantation life set forth by whites throughout the South, from Robert Beverley’s *History*, to the twentieth century nostalgia manifested in books such as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, and on to the plantation home tours given annually throughout the Deep South today.

It is not surprising, then, that beginning with slave narratives, descriptions of the emotional and physical brutalities of working on the plantation stand in stark contrast to the pastoral images found in white southern pastorals. In his 1789 slave narrative, Olaudah Equiano writes of the alienation he felt on the plantation:

I was a few weeks weeding grass and gathering stones in a plantation; and at last all my companions were distributed different ways, and only myself was left. I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions, for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state, I was constantly grieving and pining, and wishing for death more than anything else. (64)

Here, Equiano details the misery he felt as a result of his isolation on the plantation.

While he may not deal here with any physical brutalities he suffered, his reflections on his loneliness, even wishing for death, are troubling. The physical brutalities of plantation life are even more troubling. Take, for example, Peter Randolph’s 1855 autobiography *Sketches of Slave Life*. In the introductory pages, Randolph proclaims his desire for sympathy for the “poor crushed and perishing slaves in this land—the untruly styled ‘the home of the free and the brave,’” as he describes his relationship to the natural

world on the plantation in a poem entitled “The Blood of the Slave.” Beginning each line with “The blood of the slave cries unto God from,” Randolph follows with a series of natural images commonly pastoralized in southern plantation pastorals: rice swamps, cotton plantations, tobacco farms, sugar fields, and corn fields. From a planter’s perspective, these fields are a source of pleasure and luxury. From the slave’s perspective, they are a source of agony. Frederick Douglass also likens the plantation fields to a source of misery and bloodshed. In his 1845 autobiography, Douglass describes numerous atrocities that occurred on the Lloyd plantation, his home for many years. Douglass describes working in the field and the treatment he receives from the overseer as such: “The field was the place to witness his cruelty and profanity. His presence made it both the field of blood and blasphemy. From the rising till the going down of the sun, he was cursing, raving, cutting, and slashing among the slaves of the field, in the most frightful manner” (261). For Douglass, Equiano, and other slave narrators, the type of idealized garden image we see in plantation pastorals is an impossibility. In fact, the portrayal illustrates just how mythical the image of the South as an idyllic garden actually was.

Thus, African Americans’ engagement with the pastoral ideal is clearly complicated by the long and violent history of African Americans in the Southern landscape. As Sandy Alexandre argues, “as a result of being thus alienated from the American pastoral ideal, it is not far from reasonable to think that blacks would voluntarily elect to dissociate themselves from this pastoral ballyhoo . . .” (15). However, not all African American writers disassociated themselves from the pastoral mode and it is with these writers that my project concerns itself. Where does this history leave those black writers who do want to engage the pastoral ideal? How do certain black writers reconcile the

idyllic pastoral vision so vital to the creation of and myth-making about the American South with African Americans' own experiences with that same pastoral impulse? My project looks at the ways these writers attempt to engage a pastoral sentiment as a way to expose their casting out from pastoralized landscapes. In some ways, the characters we read about often yearn for a pastoral experience, much like their white counterparts, but are prevented from that experience because of their race. I will attempt to show that, rather than abandon a pastoral tradition and its problematic legacy, black writers, instead, embraced that tradition and politicized it as a way to highlight their exclusion from it.

Moving from this first chapter on the development of the pastoral ideal in the American South and the role of African Americans in the southern pastoral, my second chapter, "Property Ownership and the Pastoral Ideal in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass," examines Douglass's engagement of pastoral descriptions as necessarily linked with issues of property. While Douglass's 1845 autobiography is frequently cited by critics as a representative anti-pastoral text, I argue that in that narrative Douglass begins to understand pastoral interpretations of a place as dependent upon ownership of it. Reading Douglass's later autobiographies, we see that he attempts to work through his anti-pastoral leanings in order to come to a more complicated, even accepting attitude toward the pastoral mode. Ultimately, he argues that a pastoral perspective can be achieved only when one ceases to be the property of another.

Chapter III examines the development of a pastoral ideal in the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, specifically in his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). Perhaps more than any other writer before him, Du Bois embraces the pastoral mode, but not before reworking it and re-envisioning African Americans' position in it. Most interesting to my argument is the evolution we see in Du Bois's thinking from one

text to the other. In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois recognizes the beauty of the South and describes it with decidedly pastoral images. The paradox apparent in *Souls*, however, is that lurking beneath the pastoral beauty of the South lies abject poverty and suffering for those blacks living in the “Black Belt,” particularly those who are uneducated and own no property. In *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, Du Bois’s thinking about the pastoral seems to have moved beyond the ambiguity we see in *Souls* to a much more conclusive piece of writing. By the end of *Quest*, we see the characters embrace the pastoral landscape, but only after acquiring education and ownership of land, and then shunning private ownership in favor of a cooperative property, to be worked and owned by the community for the benefit of all. Du Bois’s reworking of the pastoral mode hinges on this difference, for he sees a pastoral “paradise” as land owned by the entire community, as opposed to individual planters keen on acquiring wealth at the expense of others.

While Douglass and Du Bois both work toward a way to achieve a pastoral perspective, other writers assert that the violence with which African Americans were treated in natural settings render a pastoral sentiment impossible. In Chapter IV, “No Trespassin’: Violence and the Pastoral Ideal,” I examine the pastoral impulse in the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Angelina Welde Grimké, and Richard Wright; those writers deal with the tension created when violent acts occur in pastoral settings. The post-Reconstruction era to the early 1930s was a dangerous time in America for African Americans, particularly in the South as whites moved to protect their economic, political, and social interests following the demise of slavery. Lynchings became a tool of power for whites to wield over black citizens seeking land ownership, voting rights, and civil equality. Given that lynchings most often were carried out in rural settings—the same rural settings traditionally idealized in southern pastorals—it is not surprising to find

writers pointing out the glaring paradox of bloody violence against a backdrop of idealized nature. The works of Dunbar, Grimké, and Wright take up the lynching theme as a way to remark upon African Americans' casting out, often violently, from pastoralized places.

Chapter V, "Rural/Urban Dichotomies and the Pastoral Ideal in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," looks at Toomer's struggle to reconcile the new urban lives of African Americans following the Great Migration with a pastoral South that, in his view, was crucial to an understanding of and connection to a racial past and spiritual fulfillment. For many black families, rural life had given way to urban life following the Great Migration, and black Americans found themselves far removed from the southern landscapes that had long been an integral part of their family histories. In *Cane*, Toomer attempts to reconcile African Americans with their southern past—and the landscape of that past—in the face of what he perceived as urban spiritual emptiness. The structure and theme of *Cane* rely heavily on the tension between the pastoral beauty of the South and African Americans' mistreatment in it, along with the stark realities of urban life in the north. For displaced African Americans living in northern cities, they may have found a physical home, but their spiritual home, from Toomer's point of view, was in the southern pastoral landscape. It is this geographic duality and "placelessness" that drives the work.

In writing about the African American pastoral experience, I hope to accomplish a number of things. First, this project attempts to make clear the variety of ways African American voices have been excluded from pastoral and romanticized renderings of the American South. Second, it examines the uniqueness of the African American pastoral experience and moves beyond the assumption that black ties to nature and the pastoral experience have been severed. Finally, it investigates the role of land ownership in the



African American pastoral experience and examines how different writers treated issues of property in varied and unique ways. As a result, I hopefully can lend support to the idea that depictions of the often-romanticized rural South must give voice to the millions of black Americans and their unique connection to that landscape.

CHAPTER II  
PROPERTY AND THE PASTORAL IDEAL IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Published in 1832, John Pendleton Kennedy's first novel, *Swallow Barn; or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion*, quickly became known for its portrayal of plantation life in the antebellum South and remained a staple of the southern pastoral genre for years after. In it, Kennedy imagines a sunny, mellow, pastoral side of Virginia plantation life before the Civil War. The plot depicts life on two neighboring Virginia plantations—Swallow Barn and The Brakes. The narrator, Mark Littleton (a New Yorker who has been invited by his cousin, Ned, to experience life in the South) quickly grows to love the aristocratic nature of plantation life and the pastoral setting of Swallow Barn. At the time, many considered the work to be a highly effective rendition of the southern plantation pastoral, full of idealized natural settings, bountiful mealtimes, and an overall leisurely pace of plantation life, and it is still considered to be one of the most representative examples of the plantation pastoral in American literature. The novel garnered widespread popularity, including in Europe. It was published in England in 1832 and in Sweden in 1835. Contemporary readers and critics viewed the work as exceedingly pleasurable. "This is a work of great merit and promise," wrote Edward Everett (519). Later editions of the book received similar praise: It is "one of the most charming compositions in the literature of the present time. . . . It is a book to be read for relaxation" (Gwathmey 226). Southern readers gave the novel almost universal praise, and it quickly became one of the foremost examples of the southern plantation pastoral. However, Kennedy's partisan defense of slavery drew mixed reviews and even scorn from some northern readers and later critics.

In a chapter entitled “The Quarter,” Kennedy begins by describing the slave quarters from the point of view of Mark Littleton: “These hovels, with their appurtenances, formed an exceedingly picturesque landscape. They were scattered, without order, over the slope of a gentle hill; and many of them were embowered under old and majestic trees” (449). Continuing on to the slaves in “the Quarter,” Littleton not only describes them as content, but also turns them into animals, comparing them to turtles relishing the pastoral scene:

Nothing more attracted my observation than the swarms of little negroes that basked on the sunny sides of these cabins, and congregated to gaze at us as we surveyed their haunts. . . . Their predominant love of sunshine, and their lazy, listless postures, and apparent content to be silently looking abroad, might well afford a comparison to a set of terrapins luxuriating in the genial warmth of summer, on the logs of a mill-pond. (450-451)

Not only does the narrator view “the Quarters” through a pastoral lens, but also the slaves themselves, whose descriptions as barefoot, wide-eyed, happy-go-lucky “servants” dominate *Swallow Barn*, thus narrowly defining for many readers what life on a southern plantation must have been like for both master and slave. Significantly, the book would go on to become one of the most popular and influential representations of plantation life in American fiction. In a 1929 republication of the book, Jay B. Hubbell writes that *Swallow Barn* was the “first important fictional treatment of Virginia life; and its popularity helped to make Virginia a favorite background with later novelists” (iv).

*Swallow Barn* was situated fairly well within an established “Virginia novel” tradition, a tradition defined by Richard Beale Davis as one that romantically and

sentimentally described Virginia plantation life in idyllic terms.<sup>5</sup> Common to the tradition was the notion of the plantation as a pastoral haven, with the land, the slaves, and the plantation owners existing harmoniously together. Littleton, in fact, exclaims that complete happiness is “a thousand acres of good land, an old manor-house, on a pleasant site, a hundred negroes, a large library, a host of friends, and a reserve of a few thousands a year in the stocks” (311). Like other plantation novels that follow, *Swallow Barn* attempts to reconcile the institution of slavery with the pastoral image of the plantation. According to Simpson, authors like Kennedy achieve this reconciliation by depicting the chattel’s relationship to the land in pastoral terms. Slaves are characterized as gardeners or farmers who enjoy their relationship to the land—never as slaves who suffer. Karen Cole claims that “In *Swallow Barn* neither the slave garden nor the plantation itself requires much work; they are as much in harmony with one another as with their environment” (65). Other plantation pastorals of this period also sought to portray the southern plantation as a refuge, an agrarian haven from the bustling city. Caroline Gilman’s *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1838) depicts life on the southern plantation as offering an ideal agrarian existence starkly contrasted with the supposed corruption of the North. Kennedy’s and Gilman’s novels both drew from earlier versions of an idyllic South that writers sought to capture. Captain John Smith’s histories and William Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line* (1728) both depict the south and its plantations as agrarian havens—places of refuge from the city.

When Frederick Douglass wrote his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the writings of Jefferson, Kennedy, and Gilman would have been

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<sup>5</sup> Other novels in this tradition include John Davis’s *The First Settler’s of Virginia* (1806), George Tucker’s *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1825), and James Ewell Heath’s *Edge-Hill* (1828).

some of the foremost examples of the plantation pastoral in the minds of American readers. While it isn't clear whether or not Douglass himself ever read such works as *Swallow Barn*, the plantation life so idealized in Kennedy's novel would have been familiar to readers of Douglass's autobiography; thus, it is the pastoral representation of plantation life as manifested in Kennedy's work that Douglass would have been working against. And work against it he did. Douglass's 1845 narrative has been called the "text central to the anti-pastoral tradition" (Bennett 195). However, while Douglass may have established himself as an anti-pastoral writer early on, his subsequent autobiographies, particularly *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), complicate this view of him, for Douglass, like DuBois in the early twentieth century, moves from what appears an outright rejection of the idealized nature so common in works like *Swallow Barn* to an acceptance of and even nostalgia towards nature that comes the further removed from slavery Douglass sees himself. Douglass seems to argue that people can only appreciate and idealize nature so long as they are neither a piece of property nor conflated with the natural world, as slaves often were. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass complicates his own view of the pastoral, ultimately finding that the slave's relationship to the pastoral South is one of both trauma *and* beauty. He clearly recognizes the problems inherent in idealizing a natural world that depends on the institution of slavery for its survival. However, he also recognizes the beauty and healing that also can exist in nature. His narratives reveal that, for African Americans, the trauma associated with the natural world is inherent in their positions as slaves and that only when they are no longer slaves can they embrace a pastoral perspective. In other words, the pastoral cannot exist for the slave.

As an anti-pastoral text, Douglass's 1845 narrative rebukes at least two important elements of the traditional pastoral form and the plantation pastoral. First, it recognizes that the position of slaves as property does not allow them to idealize nature in the same way that traditional pastorals do. Second, the text reverses the traditional pastoral progression from corrupt city to revitalizing nature, for the more removed from nature and the closer to urban environments Douglass gets, the more revitalized and free he becomes.

During slavery, whites frequently conflated slaves with other types of property, namely domesticated animals and agriculture, in order to control them. Rachel Stein argues that while the colonizers justified their treatment of Native Americans by equating them with wild nature, the "enslavement of Africans was condoned through the view of them as a barbaric, debased form of humankind, more closely related to apes than to white fellow homo sapiens. . . .The slave trade enforced this association of blacks with beasts. . .thus further reinforcing this association of Negroes and animals in the minds of white slave owners" (13). In her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs remarks, "These God-breathing machines are no more in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend" (283). Slavery was condoned through the association of blacks with both animals and agriculture, for it was problematic for slaveowners to treat slaves as property when they refused to *act* like property.<sup>6</sup> Defining them as no more than beasts of burden, like pigs or horses, for example, helped reconcile the paradox. Just as animals might fight being "broken" or taken to slaughter, so, too, would slaves fight their enslavement.

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, the racist image of the "Black Beast" in postbellum America might be traced to whites' conflation of African Americans with animals and agriculture during the antebellum period.

Outka uses the idea of the “commodified natural” to illustrate the ways in which slave men and women were likened to other natural “resources” that could be financially beneficial to whites. This type of commodification of blacks became popular in the early days of the slave trade, when Africans were traded to plantations in the West Indies for tobacco, rice, cotton, sugar, and coffee. These commodities were in turn sold in North America and Europe with the proceeds going to purchase more slaves in Africa, thus continuing the cycle (Outka 54). But in Douglass’s view, it is the slaves’ conflation with animals, in particular, that makes the relationship between slaves and nature so problematic. Like animals, slaves were whipped in an attempt to increase their productivity or beat them into submission. Some slaves were even branded like animals. Thus, in a pastoral context, African Americans were much more likely to be regarded as “sheep” than “shepherds,” making it difficult for them to idealize nature as something revitalizing.

Douglass’s 1845 narrative repeatedly reveals the many ways in which slaves were treated as animals, thereby excluding them from any sort of rejuvenating pastoral experience. The first few lines of the narrative establish Douglass’s position as property. He writes, “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (*Narrative* 255). Not only was Douglass prevented from learning his birthday, but also he was prevented from forming a relationship with his mother. Masters treated familial relationships between slaves with little regard. Douglass explains the purpose of these broken bonds: “For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother,

and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result” (*Narrative* 256). From the first few pages of the narrative then, Douglass quickly establishes the relationship between slaves and other types of property (namely livestock), laying the groundwork for later passages detailing his descriptions of nature and the plantation. These descriptions of plantation life highlight the slaves’ inability to see nature as idealized and revitalizing; therefore, Douglass’s narrative becomes a type of anti-nature writing, for Douglass argues that the slaves’ disconnection from nature—even a removal from it altogether—becomes necessary in order for them to assert their place as human beings. Take, for example, a description of Douglass’s childhood on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. Here Douglass offers a revealing depiction of slave children. In this case, the children are conflated with animals in such a way as to completely strip them of their human qualities:

I was seldom whipped by my old master, and suffered little from any thing else than hunger and cold. I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold. In hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked—no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a course tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees. I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes. We were not regularly allowed. Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called *mush*. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells,



others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons.

He that ate fastest got most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and

few left the trough satisfied. (*Narrative* 271)

The suffering Douglass and his peers experience here comes not at the hands of the overseer's whip, but from the natural world—the very world that white southern writers depicted in pastoral terms. Like animals, the children are given no adequate clothing or shelter. They have no beds upon which to sleep. They are fed like animals—from a trough. From the perspective of Kennedy's narrator in *Swallow Barn*, these children, too, might be described as languishing terrapins on a sunny day. From the perspective of the slaves, however, they are people being brutally treated and left to fend for themselves. Two of Douglass's images here are particularly striking and speak to the conflation of slaves with animals by way of denying them reason and intellect. In the first image, Douglass depicts himself crawling into a bag with his “head in and feet out.” The head, the part of the body most closely associated with reason and intellect, is hidden while the feet hang out (Outka 61). In the second image, Douglass remarks that his cracked feet might hold the pen with which he *writes* his narrative. Here, Douglass asserts that even though his body is a piece of property, treated no better than a farm animal, his ability to reason—manifested in his writing—is what defines him as a human being.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Douglass rebukes the prevailing notion that slaves were nothing more than cattle or sheep or “terrapins;” instead, he forces readers to acknowledge him as a thinker, a writer—pen at hand. This passage highlights the problems inherent in reducing human beings to the

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<sup>7</sup> See Henry Louis Gates's *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (1989) for a fuller treatment of this idea.

status of animals. Douglass argues here that in order to establish their humanity, slaves had to disarticulate from the natural world.

Once Douglass establishes the degradation of slaves and their conflation with the natural world, his descriptions of the plantation landscape take on a clearly anti-pastoral tone. For example, Douglass describes the home plantation of Colonel Lloyd not as a place of leisure or pleasure, but as having a “business-like aspect very unlike the neighboring farms” (*Narrative* 262). The plantation from his view runs more like a machine than a pastoral garden. He also relates that the plantation fields were places to be feared. Describing an incident with Mr. Severe, Colonel Lloyd’s overseer, Douglass says, “The field was the place to witness his cruelty and profanity. His presence made it both the field of blood and blasphemy” (*Narrative* 261). Douglass’s perspective here puts to rest any notion that slaves were mere “gardeners” of the earth, working leisurely alongside other kinds of servants, overseers, and even the owners themselves, as William Byrd’s letters would indicate. Instead, Douglass here relates that the hierarchy of the fields was kept in place by the use of fear and violence, and slaves were punished brutally for the slightest transgressions.

In traditional pastoral literature, water is often an important element in the landscape. Flowing rivers, bubbling creeks, majestic waterfalls—these images consistently appear in pastoral art as calming, rejuvenating influences. In Douglass’s narrative, however, creeks and rivers offer no refuge for slaves. Douglass relates the story of Demby, a fellow slave who, in an attempt to flee a whipping by Mr. Gore, the overseer, jumps into the water to escape:

Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no

response, but stood his ground. The second and third calls were given with the same result. Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood. (*Narrative* 268)

Water, an archetypal symbol of renewal and rebirth, is here associated with death.

Demby's dead body in the water reminds readers yet again that there was no safe place for slaves in nature.

Even the natural, rural settings that *appear* to offer some refuge for Douglass ultimately serve as reminders of his degraded state. Initially, Douglass depicts the woods as a place of momentary solace and reflection and a place where slaves could express themselves "with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness" (*Narrative* 315). He tells us that slaves looked forward to going to the Great House Farm for their allowance, for it allowed them to walk through the woods and experience a brief moment of emotional "freedom." However, Douglass also ties this experience with the profound sadness generated by these songs. He says,

To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery . . . . Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery . . . . If anyone wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him . . . place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul. (*Narrative* 316)

In Melvin Dixon's interpretation, here the "slave songs developed an image of the wilderness as a region preferable to the plantation" (18). However, Douglass's memories of the wilderness, which may indeed have been "preferable" to the plantation, still haunt him. As Greene points out, "The apparent freedom of the wilderness—valued by and available to someone in Henry David Thoreau's subject position....was not available to slaves or even free blacks, who tended, with reason, to flee the countryside for life in the city" (197). Furthermore, in Douglass's narrative, the woods are also used as punishment for some. Douglass's own grandmother, being considered of "little value" at the end of her life, is left to die in the woods: ". . . they took her to the woods, built her a little hut, put up a little mud-chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die!" (*Narrative* 284). In short, neither the plantation nor the wilderness afforded solace and freedom to slaves so long as they remained the property of others.

Finally, the plantation garden, what some might consider to be the ultimate idealized image in the plantation pastoral genre, becomes the space most tempting and yet most feared by Douglass's fellow slaves.<sup>8</sup> Plantation owners often prided themselves on their gardens and, for them, their garden represented the place on their property that most closely resembled "Eden" and the pastoral ideal. In Douglass's narrative, whites come from far and near to see Colonel Lloyd's garden, which is the "greatest attraction of the place" and they come from "far and near" to see it (*Narrative* 264). Colonel Lloyd's garden is "large and finely cultivated," and it abounds in "fruits of almost every

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<sup>8</sup> The plantation garden, especially as it relates to the biblical Garden of Eden, has been the subject of numerous studies. See, for example, Lewis P. Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden* (1975), Jan Bakker's *Pastoral in Antebellum Southern Romance* (1989), J. Lee Greene's *Blacks in Eden* (1996), Carolyn Merchant's *Reinventing Eden* (2003), and Ian Frederick Finseth's *Shades of Green* (2009).

description, from the hardy apple of the north to the delicate orange of the south” (*Narrative* 264). For the slaves on the plantation, however, the garden is “not the least source of trouble,” for its fruits are “quite a temptation to the hungry swarms of boys, as well as the older slaves . . . few of whom had the virtue or the vice to resist it” (*Narrative* 264). Colonel Lloyd ultimately devises a plan to keep the “swarms” from tasting the fruit: he tars the fence all around so that, if a slave is “caught with any tar upon his person, it was deemed sufficient proof that he had either been into the garden, or had tried to get in. In either case, he was severely whipped by the chief gardener. This plan worked well; the slaves became as fearful of tar as of the lash. They seemed to realize the impossibility of touching tar without being defiled” (*Narrative* 264). This passage is important for a couple of reasons. First, the passage evokes the allegory of the plantation as the biblical Garden of Eden, complete with the tempting fruit. When slaves transgress the property, they are “marked,” very much like Cain after he killed Abel, with the tar. As Bennett points out, “In Douglass’s time, this biblical story was used to suggest that the darker races were those which had been marked as the descendents of Cain and were thus deserving of ill treatment” (200). Douglass’s use of two different biblical stories here—that of the temptation and that of Cain and Abel—seems to suggest he was interested in arguing against the notion that blacks were somehow “marked” by evil or that their relationship to the biblical garden of Eden was as the serpent. Colonel Lloyd tempts the slaves with his garden, thus positioning him, not the slaves, as the serpent. Secondly, it illustrates that the most idealized natural spaces on the plantation are not only off-limits to slaves, but also are places of punishment when transgressed.

Thus, the first half of Douglass’s narrative seeks to dispel the notion that slaves had the same sort of idealized relationship with the natural world that whites had—a notion

characterized and made popular by such works as *Swallow Barn*. Plantation spaces—from the fields and woods, to the rivers and creeks, and even (or perhaps especially) the gardens—were not, as traditional plantation pastorals asserted, an escape from the trappings of the civilized world where one could be revitalized by nature. Instead, these were spaces of punishment and terror. As chattel and in keeping with a slaveowner's livestock, slaves could neither embrace nor value the natural world in the same way as whites, for the mechanism (slavery) that allowed whites to idealize nature on the plantation was the very institution that kept the slaves from enjoying that same pastoral view.

Another way in which Douglass's 1845 narrative serves to counter the traditional pastoral form is through its movement from the rural to the urban. As an anti-pastoral text, the narrative not only rejects the notion of idealized nature from the perspective of slaves, but also it finds that city environments, not rural ones, offer the most freedom and revitalization. Leaving the rural plantation for a more urban environment was, for many slaves, the very definition of freedom. Douglass's feelings of freedom in the city reflect a more general feeling of freedom and mobility emerging in northern cities, and it provides a counter-balance to the myth of the Edenic south for northern readers. Lisa Brawley explains that during the first half of the nineteenth century, fugitive slave narratives often served as the only sources available to northerners that depicted alternative views of the southern landscape (99). By the time Douglass wrote his first autobiography, the United States had at least two emerging regional identities: the North, characterized by its relationship to modernity and industrialism, and the South, characterized by its rural landscapes and slavery, which was, in the beginning, the facilitator of its economy and, at last, the obstacle to its advancement in the form of modernization (Brawley 99).

Additionally, U.S. citizens had become increasingly mobile thanks to the rapid industrialization of the North. Fugitive slave narratives and their depictions of escape from a violent, oppressive, and rural South to a free and industrialized North mimic this mobility in important ways, connecting mobility to freedom and transformation.

Douglass writes, for example, that “it was no small affair, in the eyes of the slaves, to be allowed to see Baltimore” (*Narrative* 260). After receiving word that he himself would be going to Baltimore, Douglass spends “the most part of . . . three days in the creek, washing off the plantation scurf, and preparing [himself] for [his] departure” (*Narrative* 271). And once there, he equates the city with a level of autonomy not seen before in his narrative. Douglass senses freedom for the first time:

It is possible, even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. (*Narrative* 273)

Douglass’s experiences in Baltimore provide him with physical and intellectual nourishment—both of which he is denied on the plantation. Douglass remarks that in the city, slaves are treated less like livestock and more like human beings, for the public gaze makes it necessary for slaveowners to treat their slaves with some level of dignity. When Douglass recounts the fate of Demby, the slave murdered in the creek by Mr. Gore, he not only highlights the ways in which pastoral settings were perilous for slaves, but also shows that the peril springs from isolation. Here, Douglass illustrates “the danger faced by slaves whose masters were cut off from any social pressures to regulate their conduct”

(Bennett 201). Most often, the rural landscape afforded masters an element of discretion in the handling of their slaves not afforded them in urban environments. Douglass himself remarks that he observed a “marked difference” in the treatment of slaves in Baltimore from that which he had witnessed on the country plantation. He writes, “A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation. There is a vestige of decency, a sense of shame, that does much to curb and check those outbreaks of atrocious cruelty so commonly enacted upon the plantation” (*Narrative* 275). Slaves in the city were much more often seen in public—a public that expected better treatment of slaves than on a rural plantation. Masters could be shamed into treating their slaves properly, for a mistreated slave reflected poorly on the manners and financial status of the master. He says, “Few are willing to incur the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master; and above all things, they would not be known as not giving a slave enough to eat. Every city slaveholder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well; and it is due to them to say, that most of them do give their slaves enough to eat” (*Narrative* 276). Thus, Douglass points out that what is most lacking on the plantation—physical nourishment—is provided to him in the city.

More importantly, while in the city Douglass learns to read and write, intellectual skills that ultimately serve to gain him physical freedom. And in many ways, it is the city itself that teaches Douglass. Shortly after he comes to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, Mrs. Auld begins to teach him the alphabet, only to have her husband put a stop to Douglass’s education: “If you teach that nigger. . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. . . . As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy” (*Narrative* 275).



Thus, Douglass resorts to other ways of gaining literacy, mainly through channels that the city itself offers. The city street, for example, becomes his classroom. He claims that he devises a plan, “the one by which I was most successful. . . of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read” (*Narrative* 277).

In order to learn to write, Douglass also turns to the city, using what he sees there to construct his lessons. He states,

The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey’s shipyard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. . . . I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the shipyard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. (*Narrative* 280-81)

Thus, what Douglass is denied in a rural setting he finds and makes use of in the urban setting. The city streets and shipyards provide him an education that years on the plantation had denied him. More importantly, Douglass’s literacy is a turning point in his life, for it serves as a mode of mental freedom, a pathway from enslavement to autonomy. He recognizes the powerful tool by which whites could enslave blacks: “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (*Narrative* 275).

Upon his return to the plantation after a short time in Baltimore, Douglass is filled with an even stronger sense of despair than when he first left the farm. His return to the rural South is devastating to him, and his descriptions of his life further emphasize his role as a piece of property. Upon his return, he and the other slaves are “ranked together at the valuation. Men and woman, old and young. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination” (*Narrative* 282). Douglass’s listing of property here purposefully reinforces the idea that he is no more important than the horses being evaluated. For Douglass, having experienced at least some freedom in the city, his return to life on the plantation is even more poignant and devastating than before he left. He states, “At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder. . . . I suffered more anxiety than most of my fellow slaves. I had known what it was to be kindly treated; they had known nothing of the kind” (*Narrative* 282).

In the 1845 narrative, Douglass finds some level of solace and comfort not in an idealized rural setting surrounded by nature, but in the city streets of Baltimore, surrounded by people, buildings, and shipyards. The city affords Douglass two elements: a public gaze that protects him physically, and the ability to read and write, which ultimately is the key to his freedom. Furthermore, the narrative refutes the idealization of nature in the plantation pastoral, seen in such works as *Swallow Barn*. Almost nowhere in the 1845 narrative does Douglass idealize nature or remark in any way that he feels any connection at all to it, save for the pain and despair it often causes him. He is not like the contented “terrapias luxuriating in the genial warmth of summer, on the logs of a

mill-pond” depicted by Kennedy in *Swallow Barn* (451). Instead, Douglass points out the many ways slaves were at the mercy of the very nature so idealized by others.

Almost thirty years later, living in the aftermath of the Civil War and in the midst of Reconstruction, Frederick Douglass delivered a speech that suggests a shift in his thinking about African Americans’ relationship to idealized nature and to working the land, in particular. In this 1873 speech to the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association, he describes farming the land as a “refuge for the oppressed.” At first thought, it might seem ironic that a former slave would describe farming as a refuge. However, for Douglass, the act of farming itself isn’t the issue: it is the perspective from which one farms it—as a slave or as a landowner. The first step for blacks, he asserts, is to “accumulate property,” for property leads to wealth, wealth to leisure, and leisure to thought and progress. Knowledge and culture, he claims, were “founded on work and the wealth which work brings” (Douglass qtd. in Blight 203). These two statements point to an argument Douglass seems to have formulated in his 1845 narrative but had not fully articulated. The first statement shows that Douglass’s relationship to nature was more complicated than his 1845 narrative would suggest. While during his slave days, nature offered him nothing but violence and despair, as a free man he is able to appreciate nature: his use of the word “refuge” is indicative of the pastoral’s insistence on finding solace in nature. That he would see the natural world as a refuge, a place of contentment and freedom, is certainly a departure in his tone; however, his perspective is different as well. He is no longer a slave. He can now call the land his own. Indeed, Douglass’s second statement about the accumulation of property and wealth is what makes his first statement possible. The notion of property and who owns it is important in understanding Douglass’s relationship to the natural world. Between

the publication of his 1845 narrative and his 1873 address to the Tennessee Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association, Douglass and his fellow slaves ceased to become the property of others. They were no longer property of the plantation, where their lives were brutally shaped and ruled by the land they worked. Instead, some had become landowners themselves. The older, freer Douglass seems to advocate that nature does have some level of healing power for African Americans, but only when it is combined with an economic system that will benefit them. Only as property owners accumulating wealth, in short, can they begin to see nature as revitalizing and empowering.

His 1873 speech is not the first time Douglass begins to articulate this idea. As early as his 1855 autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass had begun to see nature as a much more complex influence on his life. In the later text, the anti-pastoral tone of his 1845 narrative is replaced with a much more nuanced perspective. As a free man, Douglass's musings on nature seem more forgiving, and his attention to plantation life in his later autobiographies focuses more on the simple pleasures of his boyhood and the childlike innocence with which he viewed the world. In fact, in both *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass, though briefly, seems to mourn the loss of his childhood and the freedom with which he experienced it much more poignantly than in his earlier narrative. As a young child, Douglass does not recognize his status as property; thus, the descriptions of his childhood tend to focus less on his status as slave, and more on his positive relationship to the natural world and his surroundings. Once he does realize his role as a slave, his childhood innocence ends and his descriptions of the natural world become more anti-pastoral. As a result, his descriptions of his environment early in the narrative are much less apt to focus on his

condition as a slave (as he does in the 1845 narrative) than on his innocence as a boy growing up in a rural environment. In other words, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass's attention to his childhood allows him to view the natural world through the innocence of a child and in a more idealized way than in his 1845 narrative. With the anti-pastoral tone of the earlier narrative muted, *My Bondage and My Freedom* offers a much more complex rendering of Douglass's views of the natural world.

The beginning pages of *My Bondage and My Freedom* characterize Douglass's place of birth in much the same way that his 1845 narrative begins. His descriptions of Tuckahoe in Talbot County, Maryland reveal a desolate, decayed landscape in keeping with the anti-pastoral tone established in his earlier autobiography. He states that Talbot County is "remarkable for nothing . . . more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever" (*My Bondage* 139). Shortly after this passage, however, Douglass begins to describe his childhood and the important relationship he had with his grandparents. Douglass tells us that his grandmother, who was held in high esteem, was a master at fishing who would sometimes spend "half the day" in the water (*My Bondage* 141). She was also skilled at growing sweet potatoes, for she took "exceeding care . . . in preventing the succulent root from getting bruised in the digging, and in placing it beyond the reach of frost, by actually burying it under the hearth of her cabin during the winter months . . . . superstition had it that if 'Grandmamma Betty but touches them at planting, they [would] be sure to grow and flourish'" (*My Bondage* 141). What is remarkable about this passage is Douglass's attention to his grandmother's abilities to fish and plant—those things that provide nourishment for Douglass and his family. Nowhere in his 1845 narrative does

Douglass spend time detailing the ways in which nature—through, for example, fishing and planting—could provide for him in any positive way. While the earlier autobiography highlights the devastating hunger he faced as a child, *My Bondage and My Freedom* allows us a glimpse into a brief time in Douglass’s childhood that is filled not with starvation but with plentifulness, thanks to his grandmother’s skills with nature. Even Douglass’s descriptions of his grandmother’s house escape the kind of anti-pastoralism of the 1845 narrative, which tends to focus solely on the lack of adequate shelter he faced as a child on the plantation. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass remarks that the dwelling of his grandparents “had few pretensions,” but that “to my child’s eye . . . it was a noble structure, admirably adapted to promote the comforts and conveniences of its inmates” (*My Bondage* 141). Again, this passage indicates a sort of ambiguity about the plantation not found in Douglass’s earlier autobiography. In one way, the description of his grandparents as “inmates” in their house seems the authorial voice of the older Douglass, who fully realizes the role of his grandparents on the plantation as that of property held against their will. However, in another way, the passage reveals a nostalgia about the house, which is further revealed as Douglass continues his descriptions of it:

A few rough, Virginia fence-rails, flung loosely over the rafters above, answered the triple-purpose of floors, ceilings, and bedsteads. To be sure, this upper apartment was reached only by a ladder—but what in the world for climbing could be better than a ladder? To me, this ladder was really a high invention, and possessed a sort of charm as a I played with delight upon the rounds of it. (*My Bondage* 142)

Once Douglass allows himself to remember the world through the eyes of a child—a child who does not yet see himself as a piece of property—the descriptions of his surroundings soften. Describing his home plantation and surrounding areas, Douglass invokes a rather pastoral nostalgia about the landscape, recalling the natural world with fondness: “There was a windmill (always a commanding object to a child’s eye) on Long Point. . . . There was a creek to swim in, at the bottom of an open flat space. . . called ‘the Long Green’—a very beautiful play-ground for the children” (*My Bondage* 161). And he describes the Sally Lloyd, a large sloop in the river not far from the home plantation, as “lying quietly at anchor, with her small boat dancing at her stern.” For the young Douglass, the windmill and sloop are “wondrous things, full of thoughts and ideas” (*My Bondage* 161). Even the “Great House” and its premises are described with a sort of wonderment and nostalgia by Douglass, as he recalls what his young mind thought of the surroundings:

The great house itself was a large, white, wooden building, with wings on three sides of it. In front, a large portico, extending the entire length of the building, and supported by a long range of columns, gave to the whole establishment an air of solemn grandeur. . . . The intermediate space was a beautiful lawn, very neatly trimmed, and watched with the greatest care. It was dotted thickly over with delightful trees, shrubbery, and flowers. . . . Carriages going in and retiring from the great house. . . were permitted to behold a scene of almost Eden-like beauty. . . . The tops of the stately poplars were often covered with the red-winged black-birds, making all nature vocal with the joyous life and beauty of their wild, warbling notes. These all belonged to me, as well as to Col. Edward Lloyd, and for a time I greatly enjoyed them. (*My Bondage* 162-

63)

The singing birds, the beautiful trees, and the “Eden-like” setting are all reminiscent of the plantation pastoral Douglass worked so much against in his 1845 narrative. Here, however, he embraces a more idealistic view of nature because, unlike in the earlier narrative, he takes on ownership of the property. It “belongs” to him and he enjoys and admires it. Douglass makes clear to his readers that his young mind did not recognize his status as that of “property” for some time and that, once he does become aware that he is a slave, owned by someone else, the innocence with which he viewed the world ends. He writes,

Living here, with my dear old grandmother and grandfather, it was a long time before I knew myself to be a *slave* . . . . Grandmother and grandfather were the greatest people in the world to me; and being with them so snugly in their own little cabin—I supposed it to be their own—knowing no higher authority over me or the other children than the authority of grandmamma, for a time there was nothing to disturb me; but, as I grew larger and older, I learned by degrees the sad fact, that the “little hut,” and the lot on which it stood, belonged not to my dear old grandparents, but to some person who lived a great distance off, and who was called, by grandmother, “Old Master.” I further learned the sadder fact, that not only the house and lot, but that grandmother herself . . . and all the little children around her, belonged to this mysterious personage . . . . These were distressing revelations indeed; and though I was quite too young to comprehend the full import of the intelligence, and mostly spend my childhood days in gleesome sports with the other children, a shade of disquiet rested upon me. (*My Bondage* 143)



The “shade of disquiet” Douglass refers to here is the revelation of his status as property. Once Douglass realizes that nothing at all belongs to him—his home, the nature that surrounds him, and even his own body—things cease to have the same meaning to him. Nature no longer offers him pleasure. The pastoralized images of his youth, he argues, are images born out of ignorance and naiveté, and only when people are either ignorant of their status as slaves or free from that status can they view nature in any idyllic way. Thus, perspective and property ownership are keys to a pastoral experience.

In the final paragraphs of the chapter in *My Bondage and My Freedom* titled “The Author’s Childhood,” Douglass makes one last observation about his childhood before moving on to those sections of his narrative where he becomes a young man and has a keen awareness of his slave status. In this chapter, Douglass remarks that, “. . . the first seven or eight years of the slave-boy’s life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted *white* children of the slaveholder. The slave-boy escapes many troubles which befall and vex his white brother” (*My Bondage* 144). The “troubles” Douglass mentions here are the rules of decorum and behavior that govern the lives of wealthy, white plantation families—rules by which he and his fellow slaves are not obliged to abide. From Douglass’s perspective, white children miss out on opportunities to experience the world as children. Instead, they must “listen to lectures on propriety of behavior” and are often chided for soiling their clothes, mishandling their eating utensils, and generally misbehaving. The slave boy, on the other hand, “freed from all restraint,” can “literally ru[n] wild” (144). He can

roll in the dust, or play in the mud, as best suits him, and in the veriest freedom. If he feels uncomfortable. . . he can plunge into the river or pond, without the ceremony of undressing, or the fear of wetting his clothes. . . . His

days, when the weather is warm, are spent in the pure, open air, and in the bright sunshine. . . . In a word, he is, for the most part of the first eight years of his life, a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back. (145)

This passage, perhaps more than any other in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, makes use of pastoral images to remark upon the ironic freedom by which little slave boys could experience childhood. Like the wandering shepherds in traditional pastorals, these slave boys can joyously play in the sunshine and open air. They escape the watchful eyes of “civilized society” and avoid some of the stifling rules that govern white children’s behavior, for a slave boy is “never expected to act like a nice little gentleman, for he is only a rude little slave” (*My Bondage* 144). Here, Douglass remarks upon the unique perspective of a child’s mind. While he and his fellow slave children are denied the fundamental right of freedom, from their perspective their happiness is governed by the perceived freedom by which they can live their lives. They have no real understanding of what it means to be a slave, and Douglass uses pastoral images to highlight that feeling of freedom.

Douglass briefly reiterates this idea in his 1881 autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. When Douglass recounts the appearance of Colonel Lloyd’s “cultivated garden,” (which he also describes in the 1845 narrative) he insists upon one’s perspective in a way that is absent from the 1845 narrative. He claims that who is viewing the garden affects how it is viewed. From the wealthy landowner's perspective, the garden is the Edenic ideal, bountiful in fruits, with people coming “from far and near” to see it. It is, indeed, a replica of Eden. However, from the slave’s perspective, it represents only hard work, temptation, and punishment to those who taste the “forbidden

fruit” and are tarred and lashed because of it. “To view the plantation and its garden as Eden”, they must be “viewed from [Colonel Lloyd’s] table, and not from his field” (*Life and Times* 508). To the wealthy landowners and slaves, the beautiful images of the plantation are a reminder of the high social status of one group and the unrelenting suffering of the other—but both cannot enjoy the view.

When Douglass wrote his 1845 narrative, he was still the property of another person; thus, the anti-pastoral tone of that work springs out of his slave status. By 1855 however, Douglass, a free man, is able to articulate more fully (albeit in only a few brief scenes) the notion that nature *could* be idealized by African Americans, but only outside the realm of slavery. He recognizes that he can indeed have a sense of nostalgia about the natural world, in particular the southern plantation on which he grew up, but only when he views himself as a free man. When Douglass is able to separate his position as property from that of a human being (as a young boy unaware of his slave status or as a free man) is he able to appreciate his environment and find pleasure in it.

The impact of Douglass’s dealings with the pastoral is far-reaching. While many critics continue to assume that African American writing, and Douglass’s works in particular, are insistently anti-pastoral, a close reading of Douglass’s autobiographies and a study of those writers he influenced show that the relationship between African American writers and the pastoral is quite complicated. What Douglass argues in his narratives is that in order for African American writers to embrace a pastoral view of nature, they must first expose the connection between property ownership and the pastoral. When one owns property, it’s much easier to idealize it than when one is *part of* the property being idealized. Once Douglass established that idea, he and the writers who followed him were able to deal more complexly with the pastoral form. Writers like

W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Angelina Weld Grimké, Jean Toomer, and Richard Wright found themselves rewriting the traditional southern pastoral, subverting it from within to reveal the often complicated relationship between African American writers and the pastoral form. Du Bois, in particular, seems to have understood the relationship between property ownership and the pastoral, and his work echos Douglass in many ways.

## CHAPTER III

PROPERTY, EDUCATION, AND THE PASTORAL IN W.E.B. DU BOIS'S *THE**QUEST OF THE SILVER FLEECE*

*So it was that the Fleece rose and spread and grew to its wonderful flowering; and so these two children grew with it into theirs. Zora never forgot how they found the first white flower in that green and billowing sea, nor her low cry of pleasure and his gay shout of joy. Slowly, wonderfully the flowers spread—white, blue, and purple bells, hiding timidly, blazing luxuriantly amid the velvet leaves; until one day—it was after a southern rain and the sunlight was twinkling through the morning—all the Fleece was in flower—a mighty swaying sea, darkling rich and waving, and upon it flecks and stars of white and purple foam. The joy of the two so madly craved expression that they burst into singing; not the wild light song of dancing feet, but a low, sweet melody of her fathers' fathers, whereunto Alwyn's own deep voice fell fitly in minor cadence. (The Quest of the Silver Fleece 66).*

*The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) has long been considered by many to be W.E.B. Du Bois's fullest articulation of the physical and spiritual life of southern blacks at the turn of the century. Indeed, the work stands as one of the preeminent statements of black consciousness at the dawn of the twentieth century. No other work in the Du Bois canon has garnered as much attention as *Souls*, for its uniqueness in form and its influence on other writers have elevated its status in the literary canon. However, while the work does masterfully set out to outline the "soul" of southern black life, in many ways the book foreshadows a more fully developed vision of black empowerment for Du Bois that he later articulates in his first novelistic effort *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). Specifically, in *Souls* Du Bois initiates some ideas concerning African Americans' complicated relationship to the land and the pastoral ideal that he finally solidifies in *Quest*.

Like Douglass before him, Du Bois's thinking about African Americans' complex relationship to the pastoral ideal took some time to develop. Indeed, the ideas concerning pastoralism, land cultivation, property ownership, and higher education that Du Bois

investigates in his earlier *Souls* are re-worked in *Quest* to form his vision of a pastoral utopia—which is also a place of black empowerment for the characters. *Quest* offers Du Bois a means to use pastoral imagery in a way that made an idyllic view of nature accessible to African Americans. Just as Douglass suggests in his narratives, a pastoral view of nature is not entirely impossible for African Americans, but it is predicated upon property ownership. Likewise, Du Bois more fully argues in *Quest* that property ownership is, indeed, an essential element of the pastoral; however, he also argues that the desire for a pastoral experience is based on spiritual fulfillment—a form of self-improvement. Thus, property ownership alone cannot create a pastoral experience, for one must do more than own the land to idealize it. Important to Du Bois's pastoral vision are two additional elements: working closely with the land and education. Combined with property ownership, these three elements could enable African Americans to have a pastoral view of nature. In *Souls*, ownership and education are lacking for the southern blacks Du Bois encounters. They are sharecroppers in the Black Belt, suffering physically, intellectually, and economically under a system that leaves them little room for opportunity. Some of Du Bois's descriptions of the southern landscape firmly adhere to a pastoral ideal, yet the totality of his experience in *Souls* does not fit neatly into the pastoral tradition, for he seems ambivalent towards the landscape and fully aware that lurking beneath any idealized image of nature he would also find the suffering of black farmers and their families, crippled by an economic system that exploited them. *Souls*, thus, reveals a contradiction between what Du Bois sees as beautiful in the landscape and what southern blacks actually experience in that same landscape. In *Quest*, he is able to take this contradiction and offer a reconciliation, arguing that land cultivation, communal property ownership, and education can serve to heal the troubling relationship between

African Americans and the natural world. Thus, in *Quest*, the characters experience a pastoral view of nature because they've worked the land, have reaped the benefits from it economically and collectively, and are educated in a way that provides self-fulfillment beyond material things.

Set in Tooms County, Alabama, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* centers on the growing love between Blessed (Bles) Alwyn, a naïve, idealistic young man in search of an education and a good job, and Zora, a wild-child of the swamp whose life seems aimless, yet free. As the novel progresses, Du Bois sets up a dichotomy between “the Swamp,” a wild and free, yet sometimes sinister, place, and the white-owned “Plantation,” which represents all that is oppressive and exploitative. This dichotomy between swamp and plantation may be the most obvious, but another set of opposing forces sheds new light on Du Bois's thinking at the time *Quest* saw publication. By novel's end, we see Du Bois using the pastoral ideal, represented by a pastoral vision of the cooperatively owned farming colony, to illustrate what is possible for African Americans through communal property ownership and education. Zora's close relationship to the swamp, her fight to purchase and own swamp land so that she may empower others, and her clearing of the swamp to grow cotton indicate a progression for Du Bois from his earlier thinking in *Souls of Black Folk* about African Americans' relationship to the land. In *Quest*, the “wonderful flowering of the fleece” becomes a symbol not only for the emotional and intellectual growth of Zora, but also for the characters' relationship to the land and their ability to use nature to empower themselves and find self-fulfillment.

The desire to own land became a driving force of black southern life after the Civil War. In the postbellum South, whites found it even more crucial to their stability as the “superior race” to oust blacks from the “Eden” they had helped to create by preventing

them from owning land and threatening those who did with violence. Following the Civil War, for example, newspaper man Whitelaw Reid observed, “In many portions of the Mississippi Valley the feeling against any ownership of the soil by Negroes is so strong, that the man who should sell small tracts to them would be in actual personal danger. Every effort will be made to prevent Negroes from acquiring lands” (Reid qtd. in Hargis 244). Furthermore, lynchings served as “No Trespassing” signs to blacks, warning them to tread carefully on the southern landscape—and especially to avoid owning a piece of it. Even still, blacks desired and risked their lives to own land. According to Manning Marable, the “thirst for land was so great within the black rural South that some blacks migrated directly to communities where there was a recent history of lynchings and mob violence, so long as land could be purchased at low prices” (148). By the early 1900s, black land ownership was on the rise. At the end of the Civil War, around four million blacks lived on the mostly cotton-producing plantations in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, and they owned almost nothing. Marable claims, however, that by 1910, “black people had seemingly succeeded in achieving a minor economic miracle in the Deep South. The number of black owner-operated farms that year was 212,972, almost double the number of only twenty years earlier” (142).

Successful ownership did not come easy, however. The Southern Homestead Act, passed by Congress in June of 1866, specified that in the distributions of public land, homesteads would not be allotted to southerners who had fought for the Confederacy. Furthermore, the plots of land were sufficiently small enough to be unattractive to Northern whites and European immigrants. Essentially, the Homestead Act was designed to put land into the hands of black owners. The problem was that publically-held land tended to be of much poorer quality, with the best land put into private cultivation long



before. As a result, land bought by farmers through the Homestead Act required heavy capital expenditures and labor in order to be successfully cultivated, and, clearly, capital was the one thing former slaves did not have (Mandle 10). Soon, black men found sharecropping, rather than land ownership, to be the most viable alternative to an already bleak situation. With few exceptions, "Negroes...were farmers without land" (Woodward 205). Further, backward modes of agricultural production, such as the disastrous impact and long-range problems associated with one-crop agriculture (cotton), left black sharecroppers crippled under the sharecropping system (Marable 143). Sharecroppers suffered under this new form of plantation agriculture for several reasons. First, it immobilized black farmers for most of the year, preventing them from leaving one employer in favor of another. Compensation to black farmers was delayed until the end of the crop year, and the cropper could leave only by forfeiting whatever compensation he was entitled at the time of harvest. Second, black labor hinged on the question of debt peonage. Peonage existed when a planter forbade the cropper from leaving the plantation because of debt. Third, landowners had tight control over their planters through a strict supervision of their work. Racist assumptions about black farmers that they were lazy, shiftless, and needed close supervision in order to "protect team, tools and crop" resulted in tenants who "typically did not have the opportunity to innovate in production methods on their own nor to gain managerial skills and experience" (Mandle 40). Lastly, the system by which credit was extended to tenants often left the tenants perpetually in debt to the landowners. As Mandle notes, "Because of the lien attached to their crops, share tenants. . . normally had no access to primary sources of credit. They thus were forced to secure advances from their own landlords" (41). Thus, an economic system was created whereby black farmers' success was made virtually impossible. With little access to

fertile land and good tools, and having been stripped of their personal autonomy by way of a debt peonage system, black farmers were left struggling to survive.<sup>9</sup>

By the time Du Bois began writing about Georgia in *The Souls of Black Folk*, African Americans had acquired title to slightly more than a million acres in that state (Hargis 241). However, as in other parts of the South, land purchased by black farmers in Georgia consisted of small, difficult-to-cultivate plots. Historian Charles Flynn notes that in the last decade of the 19th century,

. . . in Georgia, black landownership was heavily concentrated in a band of infertile, often swampy, and rather isolated piney woods near the coast. Elsewhere in the state, those few freedmen who were able to buy land could often purchase only lots large enough for a house and a garden, so many landowners still had to farm a white man's land as croppers and renters. (65)

Given the burdensome circumstances under which black farmers found themselves, it is not surprising to find Du Bois ambivalent about the landscape of the deep South. He frequently comments directly on the bleak situation for black landowners in Georgia in *Souls of Black Folk*. In the chapter “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” DuBois writes that

public lands were opened for settlements to the very few freedmen who had tools and capital. But the vision of “forty acres and a mule”—the righteous and reasonable ambition to become a landholder, which the nation had all but categorically promised the freedman—was destined in most cases to bitter disappointment. . . . If by 1874 the Georgia Negro alone owned three hundred and fifty thousand acres of land, it was by grace of his thrift rather

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<sup>9</sup> For additional treatments of sharecropping in the South and its effects on black families, in particular, see Edward Royce’s *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (1993), Manning Marable’s “The Politics of Black Land Tenure: 1877-1915” (1979).

than by bounty of the government. (629)

At least as early as the writing of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois's attitude toward the idealization of the southern landscape, particularly in the southern "black belt," is complex: he seems to value the beauty of the southern landscape, yet he also recognizes the difficulties of African Americans' survival in that environment. As Jay R. Mandle points out, "Black southern poverty. . . was structural, an inherent aspect of the plantation organization of agriculture. Because cultivation occurred on lots which were too small with yields too low, the high rents and cost of interest could only result in poverty for plantation tenants" (43). The dream of land ownership for most southern Blacks had been crushed under a new system of slavery. Thus, the "curiously mingled hope and pain" of Du Bois's sojourn in the black belt of Georgia, in *Souls of Black Folk*, echoes the hope of black farmers seeking property of their own and the pain of the sharecropping system in which they found themselves so entangled.

Complicating this, however, is the beauty in the South that existed for Du Bois when he traveled there in the summer of 1898. Some critics argue that the southern landscape Du Bois depicts in *Souls* is nothing but a barren wasteland. Lee W. Formwalt, for example, comments that in *Souls* "the world that Du Bois described. . . was a depressing one characterized by poverty, work, and a lack of leisure" (Formwalt 12). However, a more careful reading reveals more layered imagery. Indeed, many of Du Bois's descriptions begin with an idealized image, and from there move to a more desolate, decayed one. Du Bois's imagery is thus a complicated mix of the barren and the beautiful, a paradox Du Bois emphasizes in the work. Du Bois realizes in *Souls* that that form of economic exploitation inevitably prevented blacks from any pastoral experience

of nature, no matter how beautiful the scenery may appear to others. This is a problem he will, in *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, seek to resolve.

Setting out to portray the rich texture of daily life in Dougherty County, Georgia, Du Bois soon discovers that it "is a land of rapid contrasts and of curiously mingled hope and pain" (*Souls* 673). The "hope" Du Bois has for the trip manifests itself early. Soon after he leaves Atlanta and the train begins to "rumble south," he remarks that the "bare red clay and pines of Northern Georgia begin to disappear, and in their place appears a rich rolling land, luxuriant, and here and there well-tilled. . . . The sun is now setting, but we can see the great cotton country as we enter it,--the soil now dark and fertile. . ." (*Souls* 667). Soon, however, Du Bois's descriptions become less idealized and more conflicted. "The whole land seems forlorn and forsaken. . . . A resistless feeling of depression falls slowly upon us, despite the gaudy sunshine and the green cotton-fields. This, then, is the Cotton Kingdom,--the shadow of a marvellous dream. And where is the King?" (*Souls* 669). Du Bois soon recognizes that beneath the "great groves of oak and towering pine" (670) and the "graceful bit of forest and singing brook" (*Souls* 676) lies a reality of "crude abandon" (*Souls* 670), and he realizes that "with all this there was something sordid, something forced,--a certain feverish unrest and recklessness; for was not all this show and tinsel built upon a groan?" (*Souls* 672). Here, Du Bois points out the ongoing paradox of eighteenth and nineteenth century rural life for African Americans. Echoing Frederick Douglass, Du Bois suggests that the perspective from which one views a landscape affects how idealized that landscape appears. Du Bois questions, what good is the image of "King Cotton" and the plantations built around it if those places were built upon the forced enslavement of others? The "tinsel" and "groan" in Du Bois's passage

remind us that beneath the idealized images of southern plantation life lies a long history of brutality, exploitation, and oppression.

As Du Bois ends his chapter "Of the Black Belt," he leaves the reader with yet another contrasting image, blending his pastoral impulses with the stark reality of poverty and pain for black sharecroppers. He writes,

I remember wheeling around a bend in the road beside a graceful bit of forest and a singing brook. A long low house faced us, with porch and flying pillars, great oaken door, and a broad lawn shining in the evening sun. But the window-panes were gone, the pillars were worm-eaten, and the moss-grown roof was falling in. Half curiously I peered through the unhinged door, and saw where, on the wall across the hall, was written in once gay letters a faded "Welcome." (*Souls* 676)

Like an impressionistic painting, Du Bois first envisions the landscape from an idealized, pastoral perspective. The forest is "graceful," the brook is "singing," and the lawn is "shining in the sun." However, on closer inspection, these images are soon replaced with images of decay and ruin, evidenced by the "worm eaten pillars" and caving roof.

This sort of dualism is a common thread woven into *The Souls of Black Folk*. Hope and pain, beauty and trauma, black and white—these dualities pervade *Souls*. Perhaps the most notable example of this type of dualism is "the Veil," an image that forms the book's thesis. Early in the work, he writes,

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always

looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro. . . two warring ideals in one dark body. (*Souls* 615)

The “two worlds within and without the Veil” is the first glimpse we see of Du Bois's dualistic thinking, and it is this image that permeates the book and serves as its foundation (*Souls* 613). In “The Veil Transcended: Form and Meaning in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*,” Stanley Brodwin asserts that “. . . beyond the clear sociological analysis of the black man's plight during the nineteenth century, Du Bois presents an intensely personal vision of how one man confronted and transcended the complex tragic life generated in living behind the veil of the color line” (305). The image of the Veil, though, is more than a deeply personal metaphor for Du Bois's own individual journey. It marks a boundary between two worlds—white and black—and affects all who look through it. Du Bois writes, “Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls” (*Souls* 613). Du Bois must *raise* the Veil, rather than allow people to look through it. A “veil” is not a wall or peephole—it is something that neither blocks a view of something nor allows a full, clear observation into another world. Instead, a veil functions to screen or even distort what is being viewed. And Du Bois did not think of the Veil as a one-way perspective. Instead, he comments on the ways in which the Veil distorts images for those on either side of it. For whites, it creates and reinforces stereotypes of blacks, distorting the black image in the eyes of whites and allowing whites to continue believing that their own comfortable status as the dominant group is deserved. For blacks, it prevents them from any true self-understanding, always having

to define themselves based on how whites perceive them. As Virginia Burke notes, “The primary aspect of the Veil seems to be the inability of most people on either side of it to see themselves clearly, whether they realize it or not” (91).

The world inside Du Bois’s Veil, however, is not simply an emotional or psychological one. The Veil is also an image that reflects the complicated natural imagery in *Souls*. When he writes that the “problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,” he further suggests that the “two worlds” to which he refers are also marked by *physical* distortions and boundaries (*Souls* 620). He writes, “. . . there stand in the South two separate worlds, and separate not simply in the higher realms of social intercourse, but also in church and school, on railway and street-car, in hotels and theatres, in streets and city sections, in books and newspapers, in asylums and jails, in hospitals and graveyards” (*Souls* 659). For blacks in the Deep South, the environment on their side of the color-line—behind the Veil—afforded them little opportunity to flourish. That environment also made it difficult to access the transformative beauty of the natural world. Thus, while many of Du Bois’s passages about southern landscapes depict the natural beauty of the scenery, many of these same passages contain a current of pessimism and a portrait of human suffering. The image of the “two worlds within and without the veil” extends to the natural landscape, as Du Bois attempts to reconcile the pastoral ideal historically celebrated by whites living outside the veil with the harsh reality of life on the land for African Americans. Du Bois’s musings on the South are paradoxical: how can something so beautiful be so oppressive?

For Du Bois, fully experiencing and appreciating beauty in nature was not entirely out of reach for African Americans, but required a different approach than what he saw in the South. First, Du Bois seems to argue that only when nature is removed from economic

concerns—when it ceases to be a personal commodity, specifically—is it ever beneficial to African Americans seeking to enjoy it. The tilling of fields, clearing of forests, and building of railroads and cities so prevalent in the thinking of some of his peers, including Booker T. Washington, was too much about control over nature for individual capital purposes only and not enough about the ways in which nature could promote self-development. In other words, land cultivation for Du Bois should be less about how much money can be made and more about the ways in which the land could improve the lives of the people. In “Of the Wings of Atalanta,” for example, Du Bois remarks that the “true college will ever have one goal. . . not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (*Souls* 653). He suggests here that while the land can and should offer sustenance, it cannot offer spiritual nurturing if its only use is for economic concerns. Cultivation of the land and economic success is crucial for survival, but if one is not able to form a spiritual connection to nature, then self-fulfillment is lost. Thus, the pastoral images Du Bois employs in *Souls* serve an important purpose. They remind the reader that beyond serving to support the interests of those who cultivate the land for money or who wish to control and even exploit nature for selfish purposes, nature can offer a much more fulfilling reward: self-improvement.

Secondly, he argues that only when intellectual cultivation is combined with land cultivation can an idealization of nature be formed and self-fulfillment be attained. Du Bois writes,

When sticks and stones and beasts form the sole environment of a people, their attitude is largely one of determined opposition to and conquest of natural forces. But when to earth and brute is added an environment of men and ideas, then the attitude of the imprisoned group may take [on the form of]...a determined effort at



self-realization and self-development despite enviroing opinion. (*Souls* 636)

Here we find Du Bois at a crucial moment in his thinking about the pastoral. Land cultivation and private property ownership alone cannot lift up an oppressed people. However, if land ownership is combined with intellectual development, groups may rise above their circumstances, become empowered, and begin to see nature in more idealized ways, resulting in the fulfillment of one's personal and spiritual self. In "The Training of Black Men," Du Bois counteracts Booker T. Washington's insistence that industrial training was the only education needed for blacks at that time. Famously, Du Bois writes,

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. . . . So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Malekite, we sight the Promised Land? (*Souls* 665)

The "dull red hideousness" is perhaps a reference to cultivating the red soil of Georgia and to those whites who would like to re-enslave blacks to the land by denying them educational and economic freedom. Byerman claims that it is the image of the Promised Land that is significant here: it is not the "land of materialism or the violence associated with the 'red hideousness' of the New South" (6). The "Promised Land" is a land of ideas, of education. However, the red soil of the South is not altogether "hideous" to Du Bois. Rather, Du Bois argues that blacks must use education, combined with the economic opportunity available in communal property ownership, as a means to reformulate their relationship with the natural world.

In his chapter “Of the Meaning of Progress,” Du Bois grapples with this notion of education, land cultivation, and the pastoral. Du Bois writes of his experiences as a teacher in “the hills of Tennessee, where the broad dark vale of the Mississippi begins to roll and crumple to greet the Alleghanies” (*Souls* 642-43). The chapter makes use of the pastoral mode, with many passages depicting the idealized landscape of the countryside. In fact, Du Bois’s descriptions of the landscape are some of the most idealized in the entire work. Cabins and farmhouses are “sprinkled over hill and dale” and are “shut out from the world by forests and the rolling hills toward the east...the blue and yellow mountains stretch toward the Carolinas, then plunge into the wood” (*Souls* 643). His prose often makes use of the pastoral images to describe a scene. His use of verbs, in particular, adds a pastoral quality to the passage. The farmhouses are “sprinkled” over the landscape, the hills “roll,” and the mountains “stretch.” He also writes about the South, “I have seen a land right merry with the sun, where children sing, and rolling hills lie like passionate women wanton with harvest” (*Souls* 633). The personification of the hills and the “merriness” of the land are highly idealized natural images here. As he describes making his way to the schoolhouse to meet the Commissioner, he recalls that “the road ran down the bed of a stream; the sun laughed and the water jingled” (*Souls* 644). He writes about picking flowers with his students and “rest[ing] under the great willows” (*Souls* 643), a passage reminiscent of wandering herdsmen in traditional European pastorals who gather to talk, sing, and play music. However, because education has not been available to the black citizens of the small village, the beauty of the landscape means little, for they toil day after day with little progress, having no time or energy to linger in nature. While Du Bois had visions of a schoolhouse with “neat little desks and chairs,” the reality was “rough plank benches without backs, and at times

without legs” (*Souls* 644). The sharecroppers “lazily dig in the earth to live” (*Souls* 647) for “it is a hard thing to dig a living out of a rocky sidehill” (*Souls* 644). In fact, the educated teacher, Du Bois himself, seems the only one capable of seeing the beauty of the landscape, of “paus[ing] to scent the breeze” (*Souls* 647). Du Bois writes, “I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; and yet there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land, and low wages; and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity” (*Souls* 646).

Once Du Bois leaves, only to return ten years later to check in on the community, he finds that “they’ve had a heap of trouble since [he’d] been away” (*Souls* 647). Most families are still in debt, toiling every day on farms they either do not own or are having trouble keeping. The school itself is still there and the county holds a session each year; however, it is in desperate need of repair. Windows are broken, the seats still do not have backs, and “part of an old stove lay mournfully under [it]” (*Souls* 647). There is, however, some sense of hope upon his return. The Burke family, who had been trying for years to buy the seventy-five acres where they lived, now held “a hundred acres” and had built on to their cabin to create a half-finished six-room cottage (*Souls* 648). However, Du Bois ends the chapter questioning just how meaningful this type of progress really is. He asks, “How many heartfuls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat? How hard a thing is life to the lowly, and yet how human and real! And all this life and love and strife and failure,—is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day?” (*Souls* 649). For Du Bois, there is little purpose in life without the self-development that comes with education. For these people he lived among for two years,

hard labor in the name of “progress” impeded their attempts at intellectual development. The children there “longed to go away to school,” but the families never got far enough ahead financially to let them (*Souls* 646) or, in some cases, “the doubts of the old folks about book-learning...conquered again” (*Souls* 645). The cycle of hard labor and long-term debt makes the opportunity of education for the children a fading dream, and they ultimately wither under the oppressive work and financial hardship. An opportunity to see nature as anything other than oppressive is out of reach for these families so long as their lives are defined by working the land and attempting to make a living for their individual families off of a sharecropper’s wage. Du Bois, however, is capable of “pausing to scent the breeze” because, as an educated man, he does not depend upon the cultivation of the land for survival.

Shortly after the publication of *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois published "The Economic Future of the Negro" (1906). By this time, Du Bois had already started writing *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, and his ideas concerning education, land cultivation, and land ownership, which he had only begun exploring in *Souls of Black Folk*, would form the basis for this novel. In "The Economic Future of the Negro," Du Bois seeks to study the economic factors affecting black Americans in an attempt to forecast their future as American citizens. In this essay, Du Bois more clearly outlines the ideas about land ownership alluded to in *Souls of Black Folk*—ideas that would be even more vividly defined in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Discussing the poor quality of land available to black farmers which, combined with "bad roads, comparatively few railroads, and few navigable rivers," throws "much of this land out of usefulness," Du Bois introduces an idea central to the plot of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*: a cooperative farming colony developed by a school for African Americans. He writes,

In this county, during the last ten years there had been carried on a scheme of cooperative land buying under the Calhoun School. It was asked for by a few Negroes who could not get land; it was engineered by a Negro graduate of Hampton; it was made possible by the willingness of a white landlord to sell his plantation. . . . It was capitalized by white Northerners and inspired by a New England woman. Here was every element in partnership and the experiment began in 1897. (234)

He goes on to say that the "Negroes round about call this the 'Free Land'--there are no overseers or riders whipping the workers. . . . there is an eight months school . . . a pretty new church, monthly conferences, a peculiar system of self-government, and a family life untainted in a single instance" (235). Central to his ideas about cooperative farming is the notion that the physical and mental serfdom in which blacks found themselves trapped could be overcome by "seek[ing] the protection of some community life with [their] own people" ("Economic Future" 231). In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, he goes even further by recognizing that some whites, too, were oppressed by economic and political conditions and that only through a cooperative effort between black families and sympathetic whites could conditions be improved. Thus, in "The Economic Future of the Negro," Du Bois formulates all of the elements for *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Ultimately, *Quest* represents Du Bois's vision of a pastoral utopia for black Americans based on education, land cultivation, and communal property ownership, all qualities that are, as he learns from his work in *Souls*, crucial to a pastoral experience and self-fulfillment. The pastoralization of the swamp in *Quest* becomes a symbol of the economic empowerment, educational growth, and spiritual awakening of the characters who work and live on the farm.

According to Arlene Elder, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is structured upon the "clash of two opposing world views, that of the Swamp and that of the Plantation" (358). The Cresswell Plantation serves as a symbol of racial oppression and capitalist greed. Located a short distance from the plantation, The Swamp, where Zora was born and lives wildly free, is much more complex, for it is both ugly and beautiful, both sinister and hopeful. For Du Bois it represents the future of black life in the Deep South and the ability to rise above weakness and ignorance (the dark sides of Swamp life) to create a community based not on greed and selfishness, but on self-development and reverence for the land. The dichotomy between Swamp and Plantation serves as the foundation for the entire novel, for every character, symbol, and plot device rests upon an understanding of what swamp and plantation represent in the novel. While the plot moves back and forth from Tooms County, Alabama, where swamp and plantation life collide, to Wall Street in New York City, to the political venues of Washington, D.C., the novel begins and ends with the Swamp and the Plantation, and the characters' development in the novel revolves around their relationship to these two settings. While the novel is full of polarities--white/black, wealth/poverty, male/female, experience/innocence, morality/immorality, North/South--the ideological contrast between Swamp and Plantation, and, more specifically, between capitalism and socialist democracy, is central to the novel's message about culture and land ownership.

In his 1926 essay "Criteria for Negro Art," W.E.B. Du Bois proclaimed, "I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda" (757). Du Bois's artistic "propaganda" was heavily influenced by socialist ideas fairly early in his literary career, even much earlier

than 1926. During the year "Criteria" saw publication, Du Bois visited the Soviet Union and later immersed himself in Marxism, but what many critics fail to discuss is that Du Bois's socialist leanings date much earlier than the 1920s and even earlier than his tenure as *Crisis* editor, a position he began in 1910 and which allowed him to advocate publicly his support of socialist ideology. In fact, the *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, which Du Bois drafted in 1905, might be seen as one of the earliest expressions of black socialism in the Du Bois canon. Mark Van Wienen and Julie Kraft argue for this alternative genealogy of the origin of Du Bois's socialist leanings: "The fullest expression of Du Bois's early socialism comes . . . not in his nonfiction prose but in his first novel, his 1911 romance *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, which offers both a specifically socialist critique of US economics and an alternative economic model originating in cooperative, southern black folkways" (68). While *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* does not contain any overt references to a specific political party or program, it does highlight some of Du Bois's collectivist ideas, "insofar as he saw collectivism as a means to a more equal distribution of wealth as opposed to merely an efficient method for organizing an unruly public" (Van Wienen and Kraft 68).

Du Bois's formulation of what could become of the Swamp relies heavily on the collectivism and communal property ownership important to socialist ideology. Du Bois, it seems, had already begun to conceptualize the settings of the Swamp and the Plantation (and their relationship to each other) when he was writing *Souls of Black Folk*. In *Souls*, he describes a visit to Dougherty County, Georgia, and he discusses the destructive influence of the "Wizard of the North--the Capitalist" on the county, its inhabitants, and its homes. He writes that "the Capitalist had rushed down in the seventies to woo this coy dark soil," and had mismanaged the money and ultimately left town, leaving the

houses, furniture, and machinery to "rust and rot" (671). He describes the main plantation home as a dilapidated ghost of its former self:

We plunge even now into great groves of oak and towering pine, with an undergrowth of myrtle and shrubbery. This was the "home-house" of the Thompsons,—slave-barons who drove their coach and four in the merry past. All is silence now, and ashes, and tangled weeds. The owner put his whole fortune into the rising cotton industry of the fifties, and with the falling prices of the eighties he packed up and stole away. Yonder is another grove, with unkempt lawn, great magnolias, and grass-grown paths. The Big House stands in half-ruin, its great front door staring blankly at the street. (*Souls* 671)

Du Bois strips the plantation of its idealized descriptions and renders it instead as a worn-out, decayed image of what was once a "merry" home for its owners, if not for the slaves who worked there. In the next paragraph, he portrays a swamp as a sullen, yet beautiful place:

First there is the Swamp, to the west, where the Chickasawhatchee flows sullenly southward. The shadow of an old plantation lies at its edge, forlorn and dark. Then comes the pool; pendent gray moss and brackish waters appear, and forests filled with wild-fowl....Then the swamp grows beautiful; a raised road, built by chained Negro convicts, dips down into it, and forms a way walled and almost covered in living green. Spreading trees spring from a prodigal luxuriance of undergrowth; great dark green shadows fade into the black background, until all is one mass of tangled semi-tropical foliage, marvelous in its weird savage splendor. (671-72)



The description of the “chained Negro convicts” reminds the reader that the beauty of the landscape came with a price. “This land was a little Hell,” says a “ragged, brown, and grave-faced man” to Du Bois. “I’ve seen niggers drop dead in the furrow, but they were kicked aside, and the plough never stopped. And down in the guardhouse, there’s where the blood ran” (*Souls* 672). However, Du Bois’s descriptions of the beauty of the swamp, with its “spreading trees,” “dark green shadows” and “marvelous. . . splendor,” foreshadow the imagery he will go on to use in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.

Our introduction to the Swamp in *Quest of the Silver Fleece* is full of contrasting images. The first portrayal of the Swamp comes as Bles, the young hero of the novel, approaches the end of his long journey on foot to Miss Smith's school, a place where black children can learn not only how to cultivate the land, but also to read and write and improve themselves intellectually. Bles arrives at night, feeling lonely and exposed to the natural world: "The red waters of the swamp grew sinister and sullen. The tall pines lost their slimness and stood in wide blurred blotches all across the way, and a great shadowy bird arose, wheeled and melted, murmuring, into the black-green sky" (*Quest* 13). Frightened by this image, he walks into the darkness but "of a sudden up from the darkness came music. It was human music, but of a wildness and a weirdness that startled the boy as it fluttered and danced across the dull red waters of the swamp" (*Quest* 13). He spies Elspeth's cabin, "crouched ragged and black at the edge of black waters. . . .With a revel of shouting and noise. . . .and a flood of light," and then Zora:

Amid this mighty halo, as on clouds of flame, a girl was dancing. She was black, and lithe, and tall, and willowly. Her garments twined and flew around the delicate moulding of her dark, young, half-naked limbs. A heavy mass of hair clung

motionless to her wide forehead. Her arms twirled and flickered, and body and soul seemed quivering and whirring in the poetry of her motion." (*Quest* 14)

The first description of the swamp "suggests the danger, despair, and loss of vision which it represents" (Elder 359). Elspeth, "an old woman--short, broad, black and wrinkled, with fangs and pendulous lips and red, wicked eyes" (5) has raised Zora and allowed white men to gather at night and sexually exploit the women, including Zora, who live in her hut. Zora hates Elspeth and finds every opportunity to roam the swamp freely so as to avoid the gatherings at night. When Bles first sees Zora, he sees a "wild, ignorant 'elf-girl,' full of dreams and fantasy" (Elder 359). This description of Zora is important, for just as the swamp defies a simple description, so, too, does she. Both are full of despair as well as hope, nightmares as well as dreams. Significantly, Zora acknowledges early in the novel what the Swamp could become. When Bles asks Zora, "what's beyond the swamp?" she answers, "Dreams. . . . over yonder behind the swamps is great fields full of dreams, piled high and burning" (*Quest* 17). Her reaction to the possibilities of the swamp suggests Zora is looking for more than an economic relationship to it. It is full of "dreams," and awakens in her a need for spiritual and self-fulfillment. Zora's relationship to the land, to the swamp, is symbiotic. She "had dreamed her life away in wilful wandering through her dark and sombre kingdom until she was one with it in all its moods" (*Quest* 38). As their friendship grows, Zora begins to show Bles "all the beauty of her swamp world--great shadowy oaks and limpid pools. . . and sweet flowers; the whispering and flitting of wild things. She had dropped the impish mischief on her way, and up from beneath it rose a wistful, visionary tenderness; a might half-confessed, half-concealed, striving for unknown things" (*Quest* 39). There is a beautiful, vibrant aspect

to the swamp, reflected in the spirit of Zora. Her music, her poetry, and her dreams are Du Bois's most striking representatives of good Swamp qualities (Elder 360).

Zora's vision for what the swamp can become—a pastoral utopia for her community—is in many ways a revision of the traditional southern pastoral. If, as Jan Bakker remarks, “Southern pastoral juxtaposes a real, changing world with an idyllic, static vision,” (2) then Du Bois reverses that notion, for the pastoral vision in *Quest* depends largely on economic and educational changes in the characters' lives. Du Bois's pastoral novel becomes one of change, not of bucolic tranquility. Once Zora meets Bles, she acknowledges that her life and the lives of other black families in the community are crippling under white oppression and lack of educational opportunities. Zora's life is often not her own, for Elspeth's cabin is not a safe place for Zora at night. For other black families, the wealthy Cresswell family has created a sharecropping system whereby black tenants are held forever in debt to the Cresswells who, in turn, treat the sharecroppers no better than slaves. Keith Byerman points out that Colonel Cresswell is “old enough to have held slaves in the antebellum South, and he is portrayed as never having quite accepted the outcome of the Civil War. He still treats the blacks working his land as though they were slaves and Northerners as though they were the enemy” (*Quest* 62). The Cresswells operate under a system of lies and exploitation of black farmers, cheating them out of money and ensuring that farmers are never allowed to actually buy the property they've been working. Colonel Cresswell believes that the “only way to get decent work out of some niggers is to let them believe they're buying land. In nine cases out of ten he works hard a while and then throws up the job. We get back our land and he makes good wages for his work.” In the tenth case, “we could get rid of him when we want to. White people rule here” (*Quest* 282). Nor is this

exploitation aimed solely at blacks. Poor southern whites, some of whom work in the mills which Northern capitalists built and many of whom own very little land of their own, are as over-worked and trapped as many of the black tenant farmers. As one black sharecropper explains, the Cresswells "naturally owns de world" (*Quest* 32).

The key to Zora's escape from the oppressive atmosphere of the swamp is education and ownership of the swampland she so loves, so that she may cultivate it, sell the cotton, and turn it into the cooperative farming colony we see at the end of the story. Thus, when Bles says to Zora, "Even if white folks don't know everything they know different things from us, and we ought to know what they know" (*Quest* 40), Zora begins to see a new way. Zora's journey from impish "elf girl" to educated landowner and community leader by novel's end is dependent upon at least two things: education (in both a classical and an industrial sense) and the cultivation of the Silver Fleece, the cotton which she and Bles grow and harvest on her island deep in the swamp. She would be incapable of the land purchase she wittingly pulls off without first becoming educated about the complicated political, economic, and social affairs that dictate the purchase of land for black citizens. In addition, Zora is unable to continue her education without tuition. Devising a plan to plant and hide a crop of cotton for profit, Zora and Bles set out to make money for her education. Zora's attitude toward work serves her well here, for tending to the cotton is hard, often bloody work which almost kills her at one point. "I don't like to work," Zora proclaims, "But I can work, and I will--for the wonder things--and for you" (*Quest* 42). For Zora, work is only valuable if it is self-fulfilling. Money means nothing to her and "wonder" things are those things that bring her joy, like spending time with Bles and helping her community out of the economic oppression that stifles it. Later, Zora tells Miss Taylor, a teacher at the school, "If you likes it, it ain't work. . . . I wouldn't work for

pay" (*Quest* 60). Zora's attitude toward physical labor is diametrically opposed to that of the Plantation owners. In fact, throughout the novel, Du Bois describes the toil of black men in the cotton fields as one of a "Song of Service," an act almost in reverence to the land and what it produces for the world:

After the miracle of the bursting bolls, when the land was brightest with the piled mist of the Fleece, and when the cry of the naked was loudest in the mouths of men, a sudden cloud of workers swarmed between the Cotton and the Naked, spinning and weaving and sewing and carrying the Fleece and mining and minting and bringing the Silver till the Song of Service filled the world and the poetry of Toil was in the souls of the laborers. (*Quest* 46)

This passage foreshadows the cooperative farming colony established by Zora and alludes to her own ideas about work and service to others. To Zora, the ownership and cultivation of land for the benefit of all, rather than contributing to the wealth of a single person or family, is something to be celebrated. For white landowners, the only reverence is for the profits the cotton can bring them personally: "Yet ever and always there were tense silent white-faced men moving in that swarm who felt no poetry and heard no song" (*Quest* 46). According to Elder, the plantation viewpoint is "most clearly distinguished from that of the Swamp by its purely economic attitude toward the cotton crop" (361). For Zora, growing and tending the cotton is not only a labor of love, but also a fulfillment of her dreams, for she anticipates that the Silver Fleece will bring her more than a profit--it will bring her self-fulfillment. Once it begins to grow, the cotton sprouts become her "dream-children, and she tended to them jealously; they were her Hope, and she worshipped them" (*Quest* 100). The money she makes from the cotton will fund her education and, perhaps most importantly to Zora, it will bring her closer to

Bles, with whom she has fallen in love. But Zora does not own the swamp land she is cultivating and must grow the cotton secretly. When Zora shows Bles the island in the swamp where she plans to plant the cotton seed, she claims, "It's where the Dreams lives" (*Quest 64*). However, only once she owns the swamp land and shares it with her community can her dream become reality. The island is a pastoral paradise to both of them, representing a utopic vision of what their lives *could* become should they succeed in selling the cotton and ultimately owning the land for future cultivation:

[Bles] followed eagerly, but cautiously; and all at once found himself confronting a paradise. Before them lay a long island, opening to the south, on the black lake, but sheltered north and east by the dense undergrowth of the black swamp and the rampart of dead and living trees. The soil was virgin and black, thickly covered over with a tangle of bushes, vines, and smaller growth all brilliant with early leaves and wild flowers. (*Quest 64*)

The beauty of the Swamp landscape is such because of the future of change it represents for Zora and, ultimately, her entire community. The swamp's pastoral beauty comes from its potential to improve lives. Its "virgin soil" is equated not with mere cultivation for the sake of greed (as with the Cresswell family), but with progress in the name of education for Zora and, ultimately, freedom for black sharecroppers in the novel once they take collective ownership of the land. Land, education, and change are inextricably linked here.

Zora's dream to cultivate the cotton and buy the land is not in keeping with the traditional "American Dream" represented by most of the white characters in the novel, including the plantation-owning Cressells and John Taylor, the Northern capitalist whose only interest in the South is how much money he can make off of the cotton grown there.

For Colonel Cresswell and John Taylor, ownership of "things" is the reason for living; for Zora, "Living just comes free, like . . . sunshine" (*Quest* 61). Zora's attitude toward work and property ownership early in the novel foreshadows the cooperative qualities of the farming colony she establishes at the end of the novel. To Zora, "folks ain't got no right to things they don't need. . . . You don't own what you don't need and can't use. God owns it. . . ." (*Quest* 65). Ownership of the farming colony is essential, however, to Zora's plans. Without owning the land, she cannot cultivate it and her community cannot move forward.

However, before Zora's utopian farming community can be established, she must first transform both physically and intellectually. Like the silver fleece, Zora must be carefully tended so that she can grow full and strong. Zora's entrance into Miss Smith's school coincides with the appearance of the "tender green" stalks on the "black ground" (*Quest* 97), and her refinement through education is closely aligned with the growth of the Silver Fleece she and Bles grow. As the cotton grows, so, too, does Zora. The first changes we see in her are physical:

Slower, subtler, but more striking was the change in Zora....Dresses hung straighter; belts served a better purpose; stockings were smoother....Then her hair--that great mass of immovable infinitely curled hair--began to be subdued and twisted and combed until, with steady pains and study, it lay in thick twisted braids about her velvet forehead, like some shadowed halo. (*Quest* 98)

Zora's intellectual development likewise transforms her from the wild, almost primitive girl Bles meets in the swamp to a young woman who "was drifting away from him in some intangible way to an upper world of dress and language and deportment" (*Quest* 101). Her education comes in two main forms: a traditional, classical education at Miss

Smith's school and the "real-world" experience she gets as the wealthy Mrs. Vanderpool's attendant, a position she accepts after Bles rebukes her when he learns she is not sexually pure. Her schooling--both at Miss Smith's school and as Mrs. Vanderpool's attendant--is necessary for her work to transform the swamp into a farming colony that benefits all who work it. Her education and her farming of swamp land are both important; they represent for Du Bois the two most essential elements for personal autonomy: culture (or the cultivation of the mind) and work (or the cultivation of and reverence for the land), a "dualism" he first begins investigating in *Souls*. To upper-class white characters in the novel, these two things cannot and should not exist together for anyone but themselves, for "culture and work" are "quite incompatible" for the masses (*Quest* 50). "Educating! The word conceals so much," as Mrs. Vanderpool explains. Learning to "handle a hoe and to sew and to cook" are fine methods of educating black children, but teaching them "French and. . . dinner etiquette and tea-gowns" is entirely unacceptable. Mrs. Vanderpool claims that the "modern idea" of education for blacks is "too socialistic," and "as for culture applied to the masses . . . you utter a paradox . . . .The masses and work is the truth one must face," alluding to the notion that labor is all that is available to the "masses" and that they should abandon their efforts at education for self-improvement (*Quest* 50).

What Zora receives at Miss Smith's school is a traditional classical education, or the "modern idea of taking culture to the masses," so frowned upon by the southern white community (*Quest* 50). And what she learns traveling with Mrs. Vanderpool only amplifies her intellectual development. Zora's books, provided to her by a softened, more sympathetic Mrs. Vanderpool, open up a "dreamland" (*Quest* 196). She studies Herodotus and Demosthenes and the sculptures of Phidias. She reads about Joan of Arc,



Napoleon and Balzac, and in her studies, “in that thought-life, more and more her real living centred” (*Quest* 196). Visiting Atlanta, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, Zora gains a new appreciation for the Swamp, for she finds the “whirling change” of city life barren and empty. Sitting in a top-floor hotel room in New York City, Mrs. Vanderpool wonders if Zora finds more beauty in the city than her home in the swamp: “Oh, no; not nearly so beautiful. . . . It's people in the swamp. . . . The difference is, I think, that there I know how the story will come out; everything is changing, but I know how and why and from what and to what. Now here, everything seems to be happening; but what is it that is happening?” (*Quest* 192). For Zora and Bles, the swamp itself offers an autonomy that could not be found in urban areas.

Here, Du Bois integrates Booker T. Washington’s advocacy of blacks remaining in the South and nurturing a relationship with the land. However, as Gerald Home asserts, “Du Bois is not arguing that the southern blacks’ progress relies [only] on learning a viable trade; instead, he argues for a personal or spiritual autonomy that derives from economic and cultural control over one’s life” (175). In *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, working and owning the land (in this case, the swamp) becomes the vehicle through which black characters can salvage their autonomy. By remaining in the South, cultivating the swamp land, and ultimately claiming it as their own, Zora and Bles reclaim the autonomy lost to blacks during slavery, peonage, and Jim Crow. Significantly, Zora and Bles find their autonomy not in the large, industrial cities of the North, but in a swamp in the rural South—in the very place that their autonomy was stripped from them. More specifically, they reclaim that autonomy through a crop (cotton) that also was used as a tool of oppression against blacks. This makes their descriptions of the cotton even more

poignant. When the Northern teacher, Ms. Taylor, questions Bles early in the novel about cotton, his

eyes lighted, for cotton was to him a very real and beautiful thing, and a life-long companion, yet not one whose friendship had been coarsened and killed by heavy toil. He leaned against his hoe and talked half dreamily. . . . pretty soon there comes a sort of greenness on the black land and it swells and grows, and—shivers. Then stalks shoot up with three or four leaves. . . . I think it must be like the ocean—all green and billowy; then come little flecks here and there and the sea is filled with flowers—flowers like little bells, blue and purple and white. (*Quest 27*)

This passage, filled with a sort of pastoral reverence for cotton, also suggests a view of the crop not often seen in African American literature. Here, the cotton and the swamp land that Bles and Zora cultivate offer an opportunity for redemption. While Frederick Douglass found sanctuary and opportunity in the city, Zora and Bles find it in the swamp, and in their cotton crop. Also, Zora feels a loss of control amidst the bustling of the city; she feels this loss even more intensely as she observes Bles's downfall in a short-lived political campaign in Washington, D.C., where he loses his own autonomy. After Bles is betrayed by his political "friends," and after suffering a betrayal herself at the hands of Mrs. Vanderpool, Zora's "education" is complete and she returns to the Swamp to apply her knowledge.

Significant to this middle section of the novel is Zora's education and her realization that what she has learned must be applied somehow in a way that can help others. In *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, owning and working the land and working the mind should not be mutually exclusive—an exclusivity that seems to have troubled Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* and which he seems to reconcile in *Quest of the Silver Fleece*. In

order for black farmers to make a living off the land, they must first succeed at cultivating their minds. Miss Smith is perhaps the one character who has known this all along. When Robert, a young farmer whom Miss Smith hopes will graduate from her school and go on to college, asks her, "what opening is there for a--a nigger with an education?" she pleads with him:

Robert, farming is a noble calling. Whether you're suited to it or not, I don't yet know, but I'd like nothing better than to see you settled here in a decent home with a family, running a farm. But, Robert, farming doesn't call for less intelligence than other things; it calls for more. It is because the world thinks any training good enough for a farmer that the Southern farmer is today practically at the mercy of his keener and more intelligent fellows. And of all people, Robert, your people need trained intelligence to cope with this problem of farming here. Without intelligence and training and some capital it is the wildest nonsense to think you can lead your people out of slavery. (*Quest* 109)

Miss Smith's lecture to young Robert is very much the voice of Du Bois, advocating that black farmers use education to reformulate their relationship to the land. In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, the education of Zora and Bles is necessary for their cooperative farming colony to exist. When Zora returns to the Swamp, she returns a very different person than when she left it. She is worldly-wise and dedicated to helping her community mired in powerlessness: ". . .she looked on the world about her with new eyes. These men and women of her childhood had hitherto walked by her like shadows; today they lived for her in flesh and blood. She saw hundreds and thousands of black men and women: crushed, half-spirited, and blind" (*Quest* 276). Zora has also spent time studying the laws governing land purchase, for she predicts rightly that the

Cresswells, who own the land she wants to purchase, will cheat her. However, Zora now clearly understands the socio-political circumstances in the town. She knows that the industrialization of Tooms County has created a rising lower class of whites who are increasingly agitated by the status quo and the power the wealthy wields over them. When she takes Colonel Cresswell to court after he tries to cheat her out of the land she has purchased, she idealistically remarks that "as a black woman fighting a hopeless battle with landlords, I'll gain the one thing lacking . . . the sympathy of the court and the bystanders" (*Quest* 317). As Arlene Elder points out, "by the close of the book, [Zora] has moved beyond strictly racial concerns and sees her struggle as one on behalf of the oppressed class of both races" (366).

While the cooperative farming colony established by Zora may be the clearest expression of Du Bois's socialist indictment of the socioeconomic order of the deep South, there are other, subtler critiques of capitalism and property ownership in the novel. When Zora steals a brooch from Miss Taylor, her teacher at Miss Smith's school, she cannot understand why the act of taking the pin is condemned by her teacher. Noting that Miss Taylor has "four other prettier ones" to wear, Zora admonishes her teacher for owning things she does not need. When she says that ". . . folks ain't got no right to things they don't need. . . . You don't own what you don't need and can't use" (*Quest* 65) her sharp words foreshadow the valuation of property she establishes in the farming colony. Here, she argues the idea, which the novel seems to endorse, that our "possessions" must be useful to more than ourselves and that we must "own" only the things we need. Ownership and use are crucially intertwined in Zora's mind. Also, Zora's view of labor is based not on wage-earning, but on service to one's self and others. When Miss Taylor suggests that Zora take a job as a cook or a maid to earn money, Zora

replies that she "wouldn't work for pay" (*Quest* 60). Zora finds "the idea of helping someone she loves incompatible with receiving a wage for it (Van Wienen and Kraft 70). Her dedication to the original crop of the "silver fleece" is based on a labor of love for Bles, not on a monetary reward. Even though the "toil was . . . sickening weariness and panting despair," Zora refuses to stop working until the island is cleared and the seed planted (*Quest* 73). The reward she earns from the cotton crop is one of self-fulfillment, love for Bles, and, ultimately, service to her community. Finally, the success of the cooperative's future lies with the inclusion of white as well as black working people. Zora exclaims, "Think of the servile black folk, the half awakened restless whites, the fat land waiting for the harvest, the masses panting to know--why, the battle is scarcely even begun" (*Quest* 332). Du Bois, then, offers a "plan for black communities to exercise agency rather than wait for a revolution led by white labor. Cooperative colonies . . . serve as a sanctuary for exploited blacks, though only as a temporary refuge and a stepping stone to the liberation of all the exploited masses" (Van Wienen and Kraft 71).

What the swamp becomes by novel's end is utopic for Bles, Zora, and the rest of the community; in fact, it is perhaps the fullest expression of Du Bois's utopic vision.

Describing what he hopes the swamp will become, Bles says,

Here Miss Zora will carry on her work and the school will run a model farm. . . .

We want to centre here agencies to make life better. We want all sorts of industries; we want a little hospital with a resident physician and two or three nurses; we want a cooperative store for buying supplies; we want a cotton-gin and saw-mill . . . . This land here . . . is the richest around. We want to keep this hundred acres for the public good, and not sell it. (*Quest* 312)

Bles goes on to explain that everyone in the community will be responsible for working the farm: "Each man is going to promise us so many days' work a year, and we're going to ask others to help--the women and girls and school children--they will all help" (*Quest* 313). Bles's vision for the colony is not entirely his own, for Zora has helped him become the kind of leader he was not able to be in Washington. Both Zora and Bles find value in work when it contributes to the common good and when they can own the land they work. In buying the swamp land to cultivate, she has combined the best values of the swamp--honesty, joy, and reverence for the land--with the best values of the plantation--cleverness and ambition to create a utopian community (Elder 365). Finally, she has also combined her desire to cultivate the land with her desire to cultivate her mind.

After returning from Washington, D.C., Bles seeks out Zora in her home on the grounds of the farming colony. When she shows him her "den," he finds that "all round the room, stopping only at the fireplace, ran low shelves of . . . yellow pine, filled with books and magazines. He scanned curiously Plato's Republic, Gorky's 'Comrades,' a Cyclopaedia of Agriculture, Balzac's novels, Spencer's 'First Principles,' Tennyson's Poems" (*Quest* 309). Zora's "university," as she refers to her library, is a last reminder that the farming colony is about much more than cultivating land for profit. It serves to educate the people who live there, so that work and knowledge can combine for self-fulfillment. The "magnificent crop" of cotton that the land bears, then, is a signifier not only of their hard work and dedication to the land, but also of their own personal development. In the novel's last paragraph, we find that the swamp has become the pastoral utopia that was once only a possibility. It is described as "living, vibrant, tremulous. There where the first long note of night lay shot with burning crimson, burst

in sudden radiance the wide beauty of the moon. There pulsed a glory in the air" (*Quest* 334). The transformation of the swamp is complete, as is the transformation of Zora and Bles. Zora has moved from the dark swamp of "superstition, ignorance, illegitimacy, immorality, and lassitude," and through "careful guidance and desire [she] makes the swamp and herself into centers of wisdom, education, community, moral probity, and hard work" (Byerman 69). Bles has proven himself capable of rejecting the temptation of money and power and returned to the swamp with his self-respect and an appreciation for community. Zora's proposal of marriage to Bles in the last line of the novel is a unity not only for Bles and Zora, but also for the physical, moral, and economic utopia the swamp has come to represent.

From a relatively early date, Du Bois saw these kinds of cooperative efforts among black communities as an economic necessity for black Americans. His ideas in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* would go on to form an ideological foundation for Du Bois in the period just after its publication. In his 1917 essay "Co-Operation," which appeared in *Crisis*, he argues for a rejection of the traditional, oppressive economic structure:

Shall we try the old paths of individual exploitation, develop a class of rich and grasping brigands of Industry, use them to exploit the mass of the black laboring people and reproduce in our own group all the industrial Hell of old Europe and America? No! If we American Negroes are keen and intelligent we can evolve a new and efficient industrial co-operation quicker than any other group of people, for the simple reason that our inequalities of wealth are small, our group loyalty is growing stronger and stronger, and the necessity for a change in our industrial life is becoming imperative. (166)

This passage reveals Du Bois's belief that the economic cooperatives that form the basis of *Quest of the Silver Fleece* were crucial to African Americans' survival in America, and in the rural South, in particular.

*The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, then, presents itself in the tradition of several different types of literature. Sentimental romance, political realism, socialist propaganda--the novel defies genre in its search to "tell [the story] well, to tell it beautifully, and to tell the truth," as Du Bois sets out in his prefatory note (*Quest* 11). Here, he combines the story (to tell it well), the language (to tell it beautifully), and the purpose (to tell the truth) so that he may at once create a piece of art that will stir the masses to a new order. Most interesting, however, is that the novel is a culmination of thought, a fuller articulation of ideas with which he seems to struggle in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In some ways, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is a more complete picture of his ideas than what we see in *Souls*, for the paradox of pastoral beauty and economic oppression so obvious in *Souls* is somehow reconciled in *Quest* through the efforts of Zora. Through his use of pastoral imagery, Du Bois reveals that, despite a long and troubled relationship to nature, African Americans can reclaim and reframe that relationship as a means to personal and spiritual redemption.



## CHAPTER IV

## NO TRESPASSIN': VIOLENCE IN THE PASTORAL

In 1936, Jewish schoolteacher Abe Meeropol saw a photograph of two black men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, who had been lynched by a white mob in Marion, Indiana. The photograph so horrified and shocked Meeropol, he was inspired to write a poem dedicated to the brutal practice of lynching. "Strange Fruit," originally published by Meeropol under the pseudonym Lewis Allan and later performed famously by singer Billie Holiday, highlighted the cruel irony of dead, black bodies hanging from trees in the midst of a pastoral scene:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
 Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees,  
 Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
 Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,  
 And the sudden smell of burning flesh,  
 Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,  
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
 For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,  
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.

"Strange Fruit" is firstly an anti-lynching protest poem, but it also participates in the anti-pastoral tradition by poignantly illustrating the paradox of burned bodies hanging from poplar trees and connecting the "pastoral," "gallant," and magnolia-perfumed South with

the brutality and tragedy of lynching. Daniel J. Martin writes about the poem, “Meeropol juxtaposes images of death against natural images. . . . But he also chose to name the connection explicitly and to identify the South with the pastoral so that he could exploit the bitter hypocrisy of lynching against a backdrop of purported gentility and agrarian simplicity” (95). The image of the magnolia tree, in particular, is used to point out the hypocrisy of those who would allow lynching as a culturally accepted practice. Many southerners associated the magnolia with southern beauty, gentility, and purity (Martin 95). The irony in “Strange Fruit” is that the magnolia tree is used as a lynching tool by a society that claims to value gallantry and politeness and which idealizes the natural world. Farah Jasmine Griffin argues that in “Strange Fruit,” the “Southern earth is fertilized with the blood of black people [linking] black blood to the tree organically. . . . Like the cotton they pick, the lynched bodies are also a Southern crop” (16). Griffin here points out an important connection between traditionally pastoralized landscapes and violence. For African Americans, their relationship to idealized nature in the South was compromised by the violent use of it against them, for the connection between the blood of black people and the very trees used to lynch them renders a pastoralization of those trees impossible.

Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit” stands today as one of the foremost examples of lynching literature from the early twentieth century. However, other writers of the time, perhaps motivated to comment upon the large numbers of African American families leaving the South in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, also used the paradox of violence in pastoral settings as a theme in their works. While many readers and critics view early twentieth century black literature, particularly that of the Harlem Renaissance, through a strictly urban lens, some writers of the time, like Douglass and Du Bois before them, also

attempted to come to terms with the African American's place in the rural South, and the relationship between African Americans and the idealization of nature so often found in writings about the South.<sup>10</sup> The question becomes, in the midst of the Great Migration, what had happened to the hopefulness of Douglass and Du Bois, who both, at last, saw potential for African Americans to reconnect with nature and participate in a pastoral view of the South? Writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Angelina Welde Grimké and Richard Wright attempted to answer this question and grappled with how to reconcile their own desire to embrace the traditional pastoral notion of idealized nature with a rural South that had failed to give them access to nature in any safe, much less pleasurable way. The focus of this chapter is on those writers who, still drawn to the rural pastoral ideal, used their works to highlight the reasons why many African Americans could not, in the face of the brutal violence used against them in nature, share the same pastoral view of it as their white counterparts. They could not—as Douglass and Du Bois before them—imagine a sustained pastoral relationship to nature.

By the early twentieth century, not only were idealized natural settings not made readily available to blacks, but also they were then, more than ever before, associated with brutality and violence. Following the Civil War, white southerners moved to protect their economic, political, and social interests by terrorizing black families through lynchings. During the years following Emancipation to the years of the Great Depression—often referred to as the “era of lynching”—about 3,000 blacks were

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<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the African-American southern experience is not a thing of the past. I do not mean to imply here that post-Harlem Renaissance writings and critical studies focused entirely on urban texts. Rather, my focus here is on a shift that seems to have occurred as a result of the Great Migration, as writers turned their attention to “the city” as the new home for African Americans and began using the landscape of the urban north as the dominant setting. Obviously, writers such as Alice Walker, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor are still writing about the complexities of the relationship between African Americans and the rural South.

lynched in the American south” (Beck and Tolnay 526).<sup>11</sup> Investigations into the causes of lynchings across the South have turned up several reasons for the popularity of the practice during these years. In her *A Red Record* (1895), Ida B. Wells-Barnett aptly outlines several of the “excuses” southern whites gave as justification for their actions: to “repress and stamp out alleged ‘race riots’,” to prevent black men from exercising their right to vote, and to protect white women and “avenge [Negroes’] assaults upon [them]” (597-598).

In addition, whites feared economic competition from newly freed blacks, and they sought to assert and maintain the caste boundary that assured white superior social status. While lynchings did occur in other parts of the country, the rural South saw the highest concentrations of them, particularly between the years 1890 and 1919. According to a study in *The American Journal of Sociology*, lynchings were “relatively sparse in states that were closer to the North, such as North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee. In contrast, they were more common in the historic “Black Belt,” which ran southwesterly from South Carolina through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana” (Tolnay, Deane, and Beck 791). In fact, evidence suggests that areas that had larger concentrations of black populations were more vulnerable to “clusters’ of lynching episodes (792). A driving force behind this “era of lynching” had to do with economic pressures faced by southern whites. E.M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay illustrate how the cotton market, combined with radical racism, fueled lynching practices:

. . . the peak of black lynchings in the early 1890s coincided with a softening demand for southern cotton, the rise of populism and agrarian protest, and the birth

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<sup>11</sup> Of course lynchings during this time were not limited to the South, but they did assume proportions there not seen elsewhere in the country.

of radical racism. The bloody 1890s were followed by several years of ballooning cotton prices and an apparent decline in violence against southern blacks.

Following WWI, however, there was a significant reversal of this trend, when an alarming bottoming of the cotton market was accompanied by another wave of radical racism, signaled by the dramatic re-birth of the Ku Klux Klan and the popular acclaim lavished on D.W. Griffith's epic film, *Birth of a Nation*. ("Killing Fields" 528)

According to Tolnay and Beck, late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural southern white society consisted of two groups—the dominating planters and employers, and a class of day laborers, sharecroppers, and tenants. While planters and employers depended on cheap labor from blacks, white laborers were threatened by the competition from a cheaper black labor force. And “when cotton profits were down, both the white elite and the white poor may have perceived certain advantages to heightened racial hostility and mob violence” (“Killing Fields” 527). In addition, those blacks who owned property were even more vulnerable. For want of black land, whites would intimidate, push out, and even murder black landowners.

Significantly, lynching events in the rural south in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century served as marked territories to black men and women to “keep out.” Feeling threatened by the possibility of African American economic and political power, whites used lynchings to frighten black men and women in an attempt to prevent them from purchasing land, casting a vote, or interacting socially with whites. Furthermore, lynchings became a form of entertainment for white groups. Husbands would bring their wives and children to witness the scenes of violence against blacks. Whites would take “souvenirs” from the bodies—teeth and body parts, for example—as keepsakes. Often,

they would take photographs of the victims' bodies hanging from trees. In fact, lynching photographs were used on postcards, which could be addressed and mailed with the consent of the U.S. postal service. Often, the postcards would contain a message or poem about the photograph. A poem of the "Dogwood tree," a symbol of white supremacy in the South, was one such message on lynching postcard. It read, "This is the only branch of the Dogwood tree; an emblem of white supremacy. A lesson once taught in the pioneer's school that this is a land of white man's rule. . . . The negro now by eternal grace must learn to stay in the negro's place. In the sunny south, the land of the free, let the white supreme forever be. Let this a warning to all negroes be, or they'll suffer the fate of the Dogwood tree" (qtd. in Holloway 60). As this poem suggests, warnings of lynchings were to be taken seriously, and to be truly effective, threats of lynching needed to be widely known. As historian Edward Ayers notes, "For generations, young black men learned early in their lives that they could at any time be grabbed by a white mob—whether for murder, looking at a white woman the wrong way, or merely being 'smart'—[and] dragged into the woods. . . to be tortured, burned, mutilated. It was a poisoned atmosphere. . ." (Ayers qtd. in Tolnay, Deane, and Beck 790). And given the Deep South's racial caste structure and racist judicial system, whites could lynch blacks with virtual impunity.

Literary renderings of lynchings are most frequently set against a backdrop of the pastoral South. Rolling hills, wooded areas, stately oak trees—these settings frequently appear in lynching scenes and have become standard in depictions of lynchings. Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "The Haunted Oak," for example, focuses on the brutalities and injustices of lynching practices from the perspective of a pastoralized image: a tree in the woods. While many of his poems focus on universal themes of nature, love, and death,

Dunbar also turned his attention to righteous anger over racial injustice, particularly in his collection *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). “The Haunted Oak,” for example, is an indignant stand against lynch mob mentality and the horrifying irony of a beautiful oak tree scarred by a lynching—a lynching that goes unpunished. Partially narrated by the “haunted oak” itself, the poem is a melancholy story of the lynching of an innocent black man. The old oak tree, once a proud image of pastoral beauty, is now bare and haunted by the spirit of the lynched victim. Contrasting descriptions of green leaves and barren boughs reflect the damage to the pastoral scene. Before the lynching, the tree’s “sap ran free in [its] veins,” and its leaves “were green as the best” (5). After the white mob hangs their victim from the tree’s boughs, however, “never more shall leaves come forth” from it (53). Furthermore, the murderers—a judge, a doctor, and a minister—go free and are never charged with their crime. Dunbar uses these occupations to point out the hypocrisy of a society that reveres justice (the judge), healing (the doctor), and religion (the minister), and yet allows, indeed even encourages, the murder of innocent men, women, and children.

Dunbar’s anti-lynching poem was succeeded by a number of poems and narratives during the 1920s and 30s that focused on the startling contrast of human bodies—shot, mutilated, and/or burned—hanging from trees or otherwise discarded in pastoral landscapes. In the works of Angelina Weld Grimké, the theme of violence and death in the pastoral plays out in many ways, for Grimké not only explores the brutality of lynching scenes, but also argues that the pastoral is an impossibility for African Americans so long as the violence against them continues. Four of Grimké’s works focus almost exclusively on the lynching theme and on the role that trees in particular played in lynching practices. Her poems “Trees” and “Tenebris,” and her short stories “Blackness”

and “Goldie” are mournful, hushed illustrations of the horror a lynching invokes.

Pastoral descriptions are used in those works in contrast with the ugliness of a lynching.

In “Black is, as Black Does,” Grimké offers what she thinks may be the only pastoral experience African Americans can have—in the form of a dream.

Trees play an important role in representations of the pastoral South. Matthew Silvis argues that in southern literature in particular, “trees often function as connecting points between human experience and the natural world, as anchors in time, place, and human consciousness” (89). The Civil War, the failure of Reconstruction, and the mass migration of millions of African Americans in the early twentieth century had left the South a socially unstable region and, as Silvis asserts, trees in the South “stand as anchors securing characters and symbols to the land. Southern literary trees are stable components in a shaky world of racial discord and are, therefore, the best nesting places for symbols” (90). In Grimké’s works, trees frequently stand as symbols of the racial discord Silvis alludes to, and take on a rather narrow range of figurative meaning: as tools of torture and violence. In “Trees,” Grimké contrasts the God-made beauty of the trees with the gruesomeness of black bodies hanging from them. The first half of the poem sings of the trees’ loveliness:

God made them very beautiful, the trees;  
 He spoke and gnarled of bole or silken sleek  
 They grew; majestic bowed or very meek;  
 Huge-bodied, slim, sedate and full of glees.  
 And He had pleasure deep in all of these.  
 And to them soft and little tongues to speak  
 Of Him to us, He gave, wherefore they seek



From dawn to dawn to bring us to our knees. (1-8)

Here, Grimké relishes the majesty of the trees in all their various sizes and shapes. They are god’s creations—pleasurable and awe-inspiring, “bring[ing] us to our knees.” She imparts them with personalities (“meek,” for example), and gives them purpose, for their “tongues” speak of “Him” and minister to us. In the second half of the poem, however, the beauty, innocence, and naturalness of the trees is contrasted with the very unnatural image of a human body hanging from one of them:

Yet here amid the wistful sounds of leaves,  
 A black-hued gruesome something swings and swings,  
 Laughter it knew and joy in little things  
 Till man’s hate ended all.—And so man weaves.  
 And God, how slow, how very slow weaves He—  
 Was Christ himself not nailed to a tree? (9-14)

The beauty of the trees here is replaced with the tragic image of a lynched body that, at one time, might have been much like the trees—majestic and joyful. The person, at one time, was filled with laughter and “joy in little things” until hate and racism brings his life to an end. The last two lines of the poem suggest some element of redemption, though, for Grimké aligns the lynching victim with the crucifixion of Christ. While “man weaves” destruction and death upon his fellow man, God weaves redemption for those murdered.

Grimké’s short story “Blackness” (1919) and its revised version “Goldie” (1920) take the anti-lynching theme in “Trees” and develop it into haunting narratives that both celebrate the pastoral and mourn its destruction in the face of Southern barbarism. Based on the horrific 1918 lynching of pregnant Mary Turner, a Valdosta, Georgia woman

whose unborn child was cut from her body and stomped to death, Grimké's stories rely heavily on pastoral images of the southern landscape before revealing the brutality behind those images. "Blackness" and "Goldie" both focus on the victim's brother and his horrifying discovery of his sister's body hanging in the woods. In "Blackness," the victim's brother, an unnamed southerner living and working in the North as a lawyer, confides in his law partner the events surrounding his trip to the South to visit his family. Reed, the colleague and narrator of the story, listens attentively as the brother explains the details of his trip. Mixing both beauty and horror, Grimké seems to be working to come to terms with how a landscape filled with such pastoral beauty can contain and even facilitate the horrors of a lynching. The brother begins his narrative by first explaining to Reed the journey south in the "pig pen," or Jim Crow car. Here, the brother invokes the legacy of slavery by pointing out his reduction to animal status in order to travel to the Deep South. However, he also admits his admiration for the pastoral landscape the South offers, as we see in this exchange between the two of them:

“. . . and yet, will you believe it, there is a beauty still left in the South—that even the polluting touch of the white man can never spoil.”

“Beauty! In the South?”

“Yes, Reed, beauty in the South.”

“It must be nature, then, you're meaning.”

“I am. They may never spoil, try as they may, the beauty of the days and of the nights, those of the dawns, and of the dusks. Each has a loveliness, all its own, you know here, so much more genial are they, so much more exquisite, so much softer. Nor can they spoil the beauty of the bird-songs, nor of the flower-blooms, nor the beauty of the wave-like, wave flung changing green on green of the little bulls and

of the mountains; nor can they spoil the beauty, either, of their peace to tired eyes made weary with long waiting. . . . “

“But are you not forgetting?”

“Forgetting?”

“Yes, one more at least of the beautiful things there.”

“What?”

“Why, the trees?”

I was certain, at that, I heard him draw in his breath sharply and suddenly. I strained my eyes. I could not see that he moved.

“You do not think them beautiful?” I persisted.

“Once,” he said finally. (233)

What we soon learn is that the brother’s journey south ends in the discovery of his sister’s body hanging in the trees, her body ripped open, and her unborn baby brutally crushed on the ground. This discovery, however, comes after a series of pastoral images in which the brother finds himself nearing the family home and experiencing a sense of near-sublimity: “It was one of those beautiful nights about which I have told you. There was no wind, no moon, no clouds. The skies were crowded with stars. . . . It was such a relief to be at last alone amid all this goodness of quiet and beauty and cleanness that I refused to think at all for a while just to absorb it, drink it all in, as it were, if you understand” (239). The description of the brother’s horrific discovery is drawn out over several pages, with the brother’s narration concentrating on three things: the pastoral beauty of the southern night; the trees, which were “where the blackness was” and which he describes as “line on line, row on row, deep on deep;” and a “creaking” sound which he is unable to identify and which persists in interrupting the silence of the night. He

continues by saying, “. . . I wish I could tell you of the breath taking, poignant beauty and wistfulness of it all, the pale twilight everywhere, the freshness, the softness of the greens—the deep blue and purple shadows, the frailest gossamers of mist softly iridescent. The wonder of the bird songs here there and everywhere and with every bird well hidden, well I can’t, I sat there drawing it in. And then the breeze blew” (242). What follows the breeze is a series of creaking sounds, which ultimately turn out to be the rubbing of the lynch rope on the bark of the tree. Even just as the brother makes the discovery, he finds himself behind a “thin screen of delicate and beautiful green leaves” that he must push aside to reveal the gruesome scene, which is thrust upon him abruptly and suddenly (243).

The juxtaposition of the sister’s “golden body” hanging from the trees in such a gruesome way and the pastoral beauty surrounding the brother as he makes his way into the woods, drawn in by the loveliness of the landscape, is startling not only for the brother but also for readers. The brother’s experience begins as a somewhat traditional pastoral narrative might. He wanders, becoming immersed in nature and absorbing the beauty of it, and he uses it as an escape from his fears, which, as we learn, are ironically founded and foreshadowed by the very nature in which he seeks solace. That solace, however, is abruptly destroyed when he pushes back the green leaves to reveal the dark image of his sister. Here, Grimké deliberately uses the horror of the scene to point out the fact that racial violence—lynching in particular—renders impossible a romanticized view of nature by African Americans. And she does this in at least two ways. First, the brother’s idealized view of nature is violently yanked away when he sees his sister’s body. But the scene is important in another way. Grimké seems to be using the scene to remind readers that lying beneath the surface of any idealized view of nature is a

reminder of the brutality inflicted on African Americans in those settings. In “Blackness,” the brother’s pastoral experience is abruptly replaced with trauma and brutality.

“Goldie,” Grimké’s second version of the Mary Turner lynching story, is a much more brooding, haunting narrative. The brother, unnamed in “Blackness,” is appropriately named Victor Forrest in “Goldie,” for it is the forest that causes his grief and his own death (he, too, is lynched after seeking revenge for his sister’s brutal murder). “Goldie” reads much like an anti-pastoral narrative, with the trees playing an ominous, almost threatening role. The story focuses exclusively on Forrest’s walk from the train station, to his sister’s house, and into the woods where he discovers her body. Unlike “Blackness,” “Goldie” does away with the pastoral facade and sublime experience of nature Forrest has in “Blackness” on his journey into the woods. Instead, the landscape invokes fear in him and foreshadows what he will find. From the beginning of the narrative, the trees frighten him:

At any rate, it seemed to him, the woods, on either side of him, were really not woods at all but an ocean that had flowed down in a great rolling black wave of flood to the very lips of the road itself and paused there as though suddenly arrested and held poised in some strange and sinister spell. . . . But there were bright spots, here and there in the going—he found himself calling them white islands of safety. These occurred where the woods receded at some little distance from the road. (282-283)

The oppressiveness of the trees here is almost suffocating to Forrest and foreshadows what he later finds in the “black flood” of trees. The one moment of pastoral beauty in the story appears immediately before Forrest sees his sister’s body. Having fallen asleep on the steps of her house before continuing into the woods, he wakes up to find that the

“grey world became a shining green one. Why were the birds singing like that, he wondered” (301). Soon after, however,

his eyes dropped from the trees to the ground and he beheld what looked like to him a trampled path. It began, there at the trees. . . . he arose and followed the path. Quite automatically, he drew the branches aside and saw what he saw. . . . Something went very wrong in his head. He dropped the branches, turned and sat down. A spider, in the sunshine, was reweaving the web some one had just destroyed while passing through the grass. He sat slouched far forward watching the spider for hours. He wished the birds wouldn't sing so. (302)

Having just seen his sister's dead body, underneath it the body of her dead child, Forrest is left in shock, watching a spider weave its web in the sunshine. An interesting contrast of the pastoral with the morbid, this passage acknowledges the ways in which traditional views of nature were made impossible for African Americans. Nor, as the image of the spider reweaving its web suggests, was the situation likely to change. This image of the weaving spider is reminiscent of Grimké's poem “Trees,” in which she writes that “man weaves” his hate upon his fellow man. The spider re-weaving his web foreshadows the other victims that are sure to be entrapped and see death in those woods.

Grimké did, however, in at least one of her poems, envision nature as something African Americans could powerfully wield against their oppressors. In “Tenebris,” Grimké subverts the traditional use of trees as lynching tools and describes them, instead, as tools of revenge on whites, in the form of a black hand:

There is a tree, by day,  
That, at night,  
Has a shadow,

A hand huge and black,  
 All through the dark,  
 Against the white man's house,  
 In the little wind,  
 The black hand plucks and plucks  
 At the bricks.  
 The bricks are the color of blood and very small.  
 Is it a black hand,  
 Or is it a shadow? (1-12)

The tree here becomes an instrument of justice and revenge—slow, deadly revenge. The “plucking” of the black hand causes the bricks to “bleed,” an allusion, perhaps, to the sorts of things whites would do to black bodies during a lynching. Laura Rival points out in her study of tree symbolism that “associations between . . . sap and blood, leaves and hair, limbs and arms, bark and skin, or trunk and the human body should not be taken as merely analogical,” and that “Tenebris” is “a good example of how the southern tree becomes anthropomorphized while signifying racial violence” (Rival qtd. in Sivils 90). The poem also uses the tree as a symbol of an uprising, a change in things to come. However, the last line questions whether or not change will actually take place; it may, after all, be only a mere shadow that plucks at the white man's house.

While “Goldie,” “Blackness,” and “Tenebris” all envision nature as something stained by the history of lynchings, one of Grimké's short stories, “Black is, as Black Does,” envisions the one place, perhaps, where the foulness of a lynching may be washed away by the beauty of a pastoral scene: in a dream of heaven. The short story begins as the narrator lies half-awake in the middle of a “dark, rainy morning,” the “wind blowing

drearly,” and the rain “dripping from the eaves” (213). Soon, a “great feeling of peace” comes over her and she finds herself “not prepared for the loveliness of the scene” that sits before her: “All around stretched a wide, green, grassy plain. Each little blade of grass sang in the gentle wind, and here and there massive trees spread their branches, and the leaves sang, and the birds, and a river that passed through the meadow sparkled and sang as it sped on its way” (213). The narrator then discovers she is in heaven after passing “silently over the velvety grass, over hill and dale, by laughing brooks, and swiftly flowing rivers” (214). Ending at the place where “God weeds out the wicked from the good” (215), the narrator finds herself at the place of judgment and across from a black man who “had been foully murdered” (216). The man’s limbs are missing, and he is “lame” and “torn,” most of his features unrecognizable. Grimké’s emphasis here, however, is not so much on the obvious torture the man had endured before his death, but on his redemption in heaven—and his murderer’s punishment in hell—with heaven described in overtly pastoral terms. In this story, Grimké finds a way to reconcile the pastoral with the brutality African Americans had endured in it—but only by way of rendering the pastoral outside of the realm of reality. For Grimké, the only way African Americans could experience the pastoral in any way was in a dream. . . or in the afterlife.

The fact that Grimké uses heaven to locate a pastoral experience suggests that she actually did desire that sort of experience for herself and for other African Americans, and that the pull of an idealized relationship to nature was strong. Just as Grimké seems to have turned away from the idea that nature could ever be pastoralized by African Americans, Richard Wright’s works take an equally anti-pastoral approach. Like the brother in “Blackness” and “Goldie,” who is drawn in by the natural world, Wright’s narratives also suggest a desire on the part of African Americans to idealize nature; in



fact, we find his characters frequently tempted by or yearning for a pastoral experience, and, in some cases, experiencing the pastoral for a brief moment, only to find themselves enmeshed in the violence that accompanies that desire. His poem “Between the World and Me,” his short story “Big Boy Leaves Home,” and even his urban novel *Native Son* all in some way use idealized natural imagery to highlight a sort of pastoral impulse or tension in Wright’s works. In other words, his characters are drawn to the pastoral—believing it to be possible—only to have their pastoral experience violently interrupted.

In his 1941 work *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright aptly characterizes the contradictory nature of life in a pastoral, southern setting for millions of African Americans, and he highlights the fictitious nature of the southern pastoral life that had become so ingrained in cultural memory. He says, “To paint the picture of how we live [in the South] is to compete with mighty artists: the movies, the radio, the newspapers, the magazines, and even the Church. They have painted one picture: charming, idyllic, romantic; but we live another: full of fear of the Lords of the Land” (2). Just as Douglass had argued decades earlier, Wright, too, argues that the South is not as it seems, especially when viewed from the perspective of those who own the land rather than from the perspective of those who must labor on it. Here, Wright highlights both the contradictory nature of the pastoral setting so celebrated in his contemporary media and the notion that property ownership is fundamental to an appreciation of a pastoral setting. The land is beautiful and fulfilling—but only for the proprietary “Lords of the Land.” Like Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Wright seems drawn to idealized, pastoral settings in his works. Unlike Du Bois, however, Wright’s characters, like those in Dunbar’s and Grimké’s works, do not find the same kind of autonomy and fulfillment in nature as Du Bois’s characters, particularly Zora and Bles in *The Quest of the Silver*

*Fleece*. There are no communal utopias, no “wonderful flowering of the fleece” for Wright’s characters. Instead, their pastoral experiences often end in violence. The pastoral impulse in Wright’s works, in particular, is full of tension—tension between a desire for a pastoral life or experience and the often violent realities of what that experience can actually offer. Wright perhaps best describes this in *12 Million Black Voices* when he writes,

The land we till is beautiful. . . with fresh and hungry smells, with pine trees and palm trees, with rolling hills and swampy delta—an unbelievably fertile land. . . . Our southern springs are filled with quiet noises and scenes of growth. . . . In summer the magnolia trees fill the countryside with sweet scent for long miles. . . . But whether in spring or summer or autumn or winter, time slips past us remorselessly, and it is hard to tell of the iron that lies beneath the surface of our quiet, dull days. . . . Two streams of life flow through the South, a black stream and a white stream, and from day to day we live in the atmosphere of a war that never ends. Even when the sprawling fields are drenched in peaceful sunshine, it is war.

(2-4)

The “two streams of life” Wright alludes to informs much of his writing and is an important metaphor for my purposes here. First, it signifies the distinct separateness of black and white life in Wright’s childhood and adulthood. Second, it uses a rather pastoral image (a stream in the countryside) to remark on this segregation and the harsh realities of life for black Americans. For Wright, like Du Bois before him, a beautiful pastoral setting could be deceiving to the eye, for lurking beneath the surface of such beauty was “war.”

As in Grimké's works, violence in the midst of pastoral settings is a recurrent theme in Wright's short stories and novels. While many critics view Wright as an entirely "urban" writer, the pastoral impulse in his work is strong enough to warrant attention. In fact, the pastoral "pull" for Wright—and the violence that typically follow— informs much of his writing. The tension between the desire to occupy a pastoral place and the often brutal consequences that come with that occupation are a frequent source of conflict in Wright's short stories and novels.

In his 1937 autobiographical sketch, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1938), Wright muses on the "lessons" he learned about how to live as a black person in the segregated South. His first lesson, he tells us, is the epiphany he had about the profound differences between the physical spaces of blacks and whites. Remembering his boyhood in Arkansas, Wright recounts "the green trees, the trimmed hedges, the cropped lawns" of the white neighborhoods, claiming that they "grew very meaningful, [they] became a symbol" (1388). He says that when he thinks of white people, "the hard, sharp outlines of white houses surrounded by trees, lawns, and hedges are present somewhere in the background of my mind" (1389). This passage is important for the contrast it establishes between the green, natural spaces of the white families with what he calls his own "cinder environment," for the contrast seems to idealize, at least a bit, the "green spaces" of the white children juxtaposed to the hard concrete of his own property. His childhood home stood behind railroad tracks, with a "skimpy yard" paved with black cinders. "Nothing green ever grew in that yard," he writes. "The only touch of green we could see was far away, beyond the tracks, over where the white folks lived" (1388). Significantly, Wright realizes early on the "appalling disadvantages of a cinder environment" (1388). One day, when Wright and his childhood friends find themselves engaged in a fight with the white

boys on the other side of the tracks, Wright learns that the white boys have the advantage of fortification behind their green, natural spaces. A battle breaks out between the boys:

As usual we laid down our cinder barrage, thinking that this would wipe the white boys out. But they replied with a steady bombardment of broken bottles. We doubled our cinder barrage, but they hid behind trees, hedges, and the sloping embankments of their lawns. Having no such fortifications, we retreated to the brick pillars of our homes. During the retreat a broken milk bottle caught me behind the ear, opening a deep gash which bled profusely....I felt that a grave injustice had been done to me. It was all right to throw cinders. The greatest harm a cinder could do was leave a bruise. But broken bottles were dangerous; they left you cut, bleeding, and helpless. (1388)

Here Wright illustrates that for him and his friends, natural, green spaces are sources of danger. These spaces, owned and maintained by whites, were places to be feared and avoided. Lacking trees or hedges (natural spaces) to hide behind, Wright and his companions are defeated. More importantly, however, is that the green spaces used by the white boys as "cover" later became a symbol of fear and injustice to Wright. He writes, "through the years they [trees, lawns, hedges] grew into an overreaching symbol of fear" (1389). This scene from Wright's childhood poignantly foreshadows the violent encounters Wright's characters face amidst pastoral settings.

Wright's poem "Between the World and Me" (1935) is perhaps the best example of what Daniel J. Martin calls a "curtailed pastoral." In the work, "Wright may not really be challenging the validity of the pastoral ideal as much as he is simply excluded from it" (102). While anti-pastoral works deny the power of the pastoral experience itself, "Between the World and Me" has the narrator seeking out a pastoral experience and

beginning to enjoy it, only to have that experience quickly tainted by what he finds. In fact, the poem draws upon this tension throughout as the narrator struggles to comprehend how such brutality could occur amidst such natural beauty.

In the poem, the narrator is walking through the woods and abruptly discovers the abandoned scene of a lynching. What follows is a series of contrasting images, including conventional uses of the pastoral followed by terrifying details of the lynching scene. The poem begins with a walk in the woods, but before the first line ends the speaker has “stumbled suddenly” upon “the thing,” which is later revealed to be a lynching scene (1-2). Implied in the poem is that the narrator was out walking for enjoyment—perhaps to clear his head or simply enjoy the woods, as is common in pastoral literature. It is morning, the “sun pour[s] yellow” (20) and the narrator finds himself in a grassy clearing, surrounded by “scaly oaks and elms” (3-4). Soon, however, his enjoyment is interrupted by the “sooty details of the scene” (5).

The poem is divided into three parts: the first section describes the narrator’s astonishment at what he finds and lists the items left behind by the lynch mob and its witnesses. The second section has the narrator envisioning and reliving the lynching itself, bringing it into the present as he imagines the sights and sounds of the horrible event. And in the third section, the narrator becomes the lynched victim, describing the brutal agony of his last moments. What is consistent in all three sections is the juxtaposition between what had once been pastoral beauty and the brutality that destroyed it. The first section has the narrator “stumbling” suddenly upon the details of the scene, all while he is positioned under the canopy of trees that “guard” him (3). Wright’s use of the word “guard” here is interesting, for it suggests that, early in the poem, the narrator still sees nature as comforting, even protective. The next stanza combines natural images

with unnatural violence: there is a sapling, tree limbs, and leaves, but they are “stumped,” “torn,” and “burnt” (9-11). The stanza goes on to catalogue the remains of the scene, including material things left behind by the witnesses: “buttons,” “dead matches,” “peanut shells,” a “drained gin flask,” and a “whore’s lipstick” litter the “trampled grass” (15-17). There are also scattered traces of tar and feathers and a faint scent of gasoline, suggesting the victim was burned to death. Martin points out that, as one might expect, “the catalogue in Wright’s poem shows the violence that disturbed whatever harmony may have existed in this clearing” (98). And Wright does suggest there was harmony. The natural images Wright uses—grass, wind, sun, woods, darkness, and water—suggest the various natural elements that, but for the lynching, create a beautiful, peaceful setting; but they are quickly tainted by the grisly reality of the lynching that occurs there. Once the narrator begins imagining what the scene must have looked like had he been there, the natural images lose their pastoral qualities. The sun, once yellow, “die[s] in the sky,” the wind “mutters” in the grass, and “the woods pour forth the hungry yelping of hounds” (26-28). In the final section, the narrator becomes the lynching victim and all semblance of a pastoral scene is destroyed. He is stripped naked, his teeth beaten into his throat, and his body tarred and feathered. Lastly, he is “baptized” (49) by the cool gasoline, which is followed by the flames that boil his limbs until he dies.

By the end of the poem, the narrator’s desire to seek comfort and protection in nature turns to nightmare, as the brutal reality of the lynching scene is juxtaposed with the pastoral qualities of the woods through which he walks. The last lines, “Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun” (53-54) suggests that a pastoral view of nature is deemed improper or impossible in a world where

lynching takes place. The victim is “surprised” at the yellow sun—perhaps questioning how natural beauty can exist among such tragedy. Just as the narrator is “surprised” by the scene before him, so, too, is the victim, caught off guard by the abrupt ending to his life, and by the beauty that surrounds him while his body burns.

Wright’s first novel, *Lawd Today* (published posthumously in 1963) continues the tension between pastoral places and human cruelty that we see in “Between the World and Me” and in many of Wright’s other early works. In one scene, Jack, the protagonist, and three of his fellow postal workers in Chicago, reflect nostalgically on the South and its natural beauty:

"There was some good days in the South...."

"Yeah, in the summer...."

"...when you didn't have nothing to do but lay in the sun and live...."

"I use' to go swimming in the creek...."

"And in the summer when the Magnolia trees is in blossom...."

"...you can smell 'em for half a mile!"

"And them sunflowers...."

"...and honeysuckles...."

"And them plums...."

"...so ripe they was busting open!"

"And sugarcane...."

"...and blackberries...."

"And them long rains in the winter...."

"...and you set inside and roast corn and sweet potatoes!"

"Boy, the South's good...."

"...and bad!"

"It's Heaven...."

"...and Hell...."

"...all rolled into one!"

While *Lawd Today* has been criticized as one of the least imaginative and powerful of Wright's novels, it does establish Wright's use of the pastoral motif that we see most clearly in his more critically acclaimed work "Big Boy Leaves Home." The rhythmic chanting of the friends and their recollections of the pleasures of the pastoral South—a South full of blossoming magnolia trees, honeysuckle, and sunflowers—are interrupted by the stark realities of racism. The last three lines of this passage characterize the tension the characters feel about the pastoral setting. From a sensory perspective, it is heaven. The smell of the trees, the taste of the ripe plums, and the image of a cool creek in the hot sun all point to an experience of the pastoral as free, even "heavenly." However, the cloud of racism—Hell—interrupts those memories and serves as a stark reminder that things are not always as they appear. A sort of pastoral tension is created with these images—heaven, represented by the natural world, is intruded upon by notions of hell, represented by the oppression the characters endure. Kenneth Kinnamon points out that this "paradoxical contrast between natural bounty and human cruelty generates the tension that informs Wright's view of the rural South" (43).

Wright relies on the use of pastoral images more fully in "Big Boy Leaves Home" than in any of his other works. Furthermore, he more clearly defines certain "transgressions" made by African Americans that could ultimately get them lynched. The story graphically illustrates the consequences of trespassing onto properties that are both idealized through the use of pastoral descriptions and owned by whites. In his



“American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised,” Lawrence Buell argues that the story “reinvents the classic American male-bonding-in-nature story in protest against the excision of blacks from the American arcadia. . . . White injustice is dramatized by the scene of exclusion from pastoral fulfillment” (13). I agree with Buell that the story highlights the exclusion of blacks from “pastoral fulfillment.” In many ways, the story is very much about African Americans’ denial into pastoral settings. However, the story focuses equally on the temptation of pastoral settings for the characters. Like the temptation Colonel Lloyd’s garden holds in Douglass’s narratives, or the pull of the natural world for the brother in “Goldie” and “Blackness,” or even the lure of the woods for the narrator in “Between the World and Me,” the beauty of the landscape in “Big Boy Leaves Home” tempts the boys to transgress multiple boundaries, and they are punished for it. The boys are not excluded from or denied entry into a pastoral landscape. Rather, they are tempted to enter and then violently forced out of it.

The story tells of four young boys who, playing hooky from school, decide to trespass onto a white man's property in order to go swimming in his pond. Once there, they take off their clothes and enjoy a swim, later sitting beside the water to dry off. There they are discovered, naked, by a white woman, Bertha, who immediately screams for help from her rifle-toting beau, Jim. Startled and afraid, the boys try to flee, but first Big Boy attempts to retrieve their clothes, inconveniently positioned beside the white woman. As they attempt to get away into the woods, two of the boys, Lester and Buck, are shot dead by Jim. A scuffle ensues and Big Boy, who has managed to wrestle the gun away from Jim, shoots and kills him. Big Boy and Bobo both flee for home to make plans for their escape. In the end, Bobo is lynched by a white mob while Big Boy is forced to look on as he hides in a kiln, awaiting the truck that will take him North to safety.

As the story opens, Wright uses pastoral descriptions of the landscape to illustrate the boys' ease and happiness. They wander rather aimlessly in the woods, taking comfort in nature: "Laughing easily, four black boys came out of the woods into cleared pasture. They walked lollingly in bare feet, beating tangled vines and bushes with long sticks" (239). The boys clearly yearn for the peace this setting provides them. They see nature here as an escape—an escape from school and other tools of a civilized world. They soak up the beauty of the landscape and the feelings it gives them: "Their shoulders were flat to the earth, their knees propped up, and their faces square to the sun. . . . They fell silent, smiling, drooping the lids of their eyes softly against the sunlight" (240). At this point in the story, the boys seem in little danger of the horror that awaits them. However, when one of the boys suggests they go "t the creek fer a swim," Big Boy stands alone as the voice of reason. "N git lynched? Hell naw!" (242). Situated on property owned by old man Harvey, the pond is clearly off limits to anyone, especially young black men. The "NO TRESPASSIN" sign read aloud by Lester is interpreted as "...ain no dogs n niggers erllowed" by one of the boys (246). The boys are fully aware that the sign speaks to them: "Yuh know ol man Harvey don erllow no niggers t swim in this hole. . . jus las year he took a shot at Bob fer swimmin in here" ( 245). The water, though, is tempting, and they cross over the barbed wire encircling the property. After their swim, the idealized natural setting is amplified and then quickly destroyed: "They grew pensive. A black winged butterfly hovered at the water's edge. A bee droned. From somewhere came the sweet scent of honeysuckles. Dimly they could hear sparrows twittering in the woods. They rolled from side to side, letting sunshine dry their skins and warm their blood. They plucked blades of grass and chewed them" ( 248). This pastoral scene is soon interrupted. In the next line, the boys are shocked to discover they are not alone.

"Oh!' A white woman, poised on the edge of the opposite embankment, stood directly in front of them, her hat in her hand and her hair lit by the sun" (249). The embarrassment, shock, and violence that ensue are not only a result of their trespassing onto private land; they have also "trespassed" onto a white man's "property" by inadvertently revealing their naked bodies to Bertha.

Thus, their transgressions are two-fold. First, lured by a pastoral setting, they have been tempted to cross over the barbed wire and trespass onto property owned by a white man. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they have inadvertently crossed yet another, more rigid boundary of white womanhood, which has historically been linked with the Garden of Eden and with an idealized natural world. In terms of the biblical connection, Sandy Alexandre argues that the pond and its surroundings are more than a simple pastoral setting. Rather, it is a "restored Eden," with Bertha acting as the biblical Eve, while the boys become "the snake." However, Bertha is not the one tempted—the boys are. And Bertha's body is not the one exposed to the boys—the boys' bodies are exposed to her. In Wright's story, the boys are the ones who have been violated, not Bertha. Their naked bodies have been espied by her, yet they are the ones subsequently punished for it. The nakedness of the boys defines their actions once Bertha comes upon them. Their first instinct is to cover themselves and reach for their clothes: "They stared, their hands instinctively covering their groins....'Cmon, les git our clothes,' said Big Boy" (249). In the next few pages of the story following the boys' discovery by Bertha, the text makes no less than nineteen references to the boys' nakedness or to their desire to get dressed. "We wanna git our cloes," Big Boy keeps exclaiming while Bobo is described repeatedly as "ha[ving] the clothes in his arms," "holding the clothes in front of his chest," and "crying and clutching his clothes" (250-251). The presence of the black boys

in this pastoral, Edenic setting complicates things. Bertha (as Eve) and Jim (as Adam) certainly see the boys' presence as intruding evil, complete with phallic snake symbolism. Complicating the myth, however, is that the boys do not attempt to seduce or tempt Eve. In fact, nature itself is the seductress, luring the boys into the swimming hole in the first place and ultimately causing their "fall." Kinnamon argues that "Contributing a certain emotional resonance to the story, then, is a pattern of incident reminiscent of Genesis: the Garden, nakedness, the woman, the snake" (44). But Wright inverts the myth, for the nakedness of the innocent boys positions them as Eve, tempted by the beauty of nature. The exposure of their naked bodies to Bertha initiates their "fall," with Jim's rifle serving to cast them out of this Eden forever.<sup>12</sup>

The second half of the story focuses on Big Boy's successful attempt to escape the lynch mob and head to the north. Big Boy and Bobo make a plan to meet on a hillside near the kilns they had dug earlier in the week. Once Big Boy arrives and hides in one of the kilns, he then must witness the lynching of his friend, who is caught by the white mob, hung upon a tree, tarred and feathered, and then burned to death. Interestingly, Wright continues to draw attention to the natural world during Big Boy's escape—perhaps to highlight, once again, the violence used against blacks in such settings. As Big Boy arrives at the hillside, "a light wind skipped over the grass. A beetle lit on his

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<sup>12</sup> The most common reading of this story tends to point to the connections it has to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, paralleling Wright's story with the Actaeon legend. *Metamorphoses* recounts the tale of Actaeon, the hunter, who stumbles upon the secret cave of the virgin goddess Diana. Out hunting midday with his companions, Actaeon calls a halt to a successful day of hunting and, quite accidentally, finds himself alone in the idyllic, pastoral scene of Diana's grotto pool, nestled in a valley. When he comes upon Diana in the water, she is disrobed and disarmed, bathing with her maidens. As punishment for seeing her nakedness, Diana turns him into a stag and he is torn apart by his own hunting dogs.

cheek and he brushed it off. Behind the dark pines hung a red sun” (263). And later, as he waits in the kiln, Big Boy describes the view from his kiln:

[it was] fringed by the long tufts of grass. He could see all the way to Bullard’s Road, and even beyond. The wind was blowing, and in the east the first touch of dusk was rising. Every now and then a bird floated past, a spot of wheeling black printed against the sky. Big Boy sighed, shifted his weight, and chewed at a blade of grass. A wasp droned. He heard number nine, far away and mournful. . . .Dusk was slowly deepening. Somewhere, he could not tell exactly where, a cricket took up a fitful song. The air was growing soft and heavy. He looked over the fields, longing for Bobo . . . (265)

Here, Wright parallels the opening scene of the story. Big Boy is lying down, chewing blades of grass. Birds “float” past, wasps “drone,” crickets chirp, and the air is “soft.” What follows the pastoral descriptions in the opening scene—two of the boys getting shot by Jim—is repeated by what follows the descriptions in this scene—Bobo’s lynching.

“Big Boy Leaves Home” can be seen as an early example of a struggle with the pastoral that we see repeated in Wright’s fiction. Like Grimké before him, Wright suggests that when black characters attempt to claim a pastoral experience, that experience is usually fraught with danger and violence. In his essay on African American ecocriticism, Scott Hicks claims that “Wright unsettles and upends the pastoral. He rejects a simplistic appreciation for nature. . .in favor of one in which danger and disorder are imminent and endemic, one in which terror and fear are always but a few steps away” (213). Big Boy, lured into a pastoral setting, must then suffer the consequences of trespassing and is forced to flee his home and family. He is thrust out of a pastoral setting for daring to attempt participation in it. At story’s end, he is a kind of

“post-pubescent Huck Finn who must light out for the territory—ironically, in Wright’s story, the urban ‘territory’ of Chicago—in order to achieve his freedom” (Kinnamon 43).

It is the urban north that offers Big Boy safety.

Two years after the initial publication of “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Wright published *Native Son* (1940), the novel some consider the seminal text of urban realism.

Interestingly, Wright’s comments on the creation of Bigger Thomas focus exclusively on those “Biggers” of the rural South who persistently transgressed or “trespassed” legal, spatial, and social boundaries, just as Big Boy does in the earlier short story. In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright says, “The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken” (857). Big Boy’s three friends—two shot and one lynched—certainly paid this kind of price for their transgressions. And Big Boy, though he “escaped,” is then forced into exile in a new place without his friends or family. Wright goes on to say,

The feeling of looking at things with a painful and unwarranted nakedness was an experience, I learned, that transcended national and social boundaries. It was this intolerable sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality where the look of the world which one did not make or own struck one with a blinding objectivity and tangibility, that made me grasp the revolutionary impulse in my life and the lives of those about me and far away.

(863)

Living with boundaries established by others and looking at surroundings built by others, Wright is struck by the contrast between what one knows intellectually and what one is forced to endure physically: understanding something and living it were often very different experiences. In terms of the natural world, Wright knew that nature had something to offer African Americans, indeed all people. His narrator in “Between the World and Me” sets out into the woods for what we presume to be some sort of communion with nature, some sort of pastoral experience. But as Wright and Grimké argue, desiring a pastoral experience and being able to physically enjoy it were mutually exclusive for African Americans. For Wright and Grimké, the history of violence used against African Americans in traditionally pastoralized settings had severed any possible connection between African Americans and the pastoral experience.

For those “Big Boys” who dared to cross over the rigid property and social boundaries established by whites, the images of lush, rolling, green fields, cool swimming holes, orderly gardens, and wooded landscapes were often followed by exclusion and violence. Not surprisingly, during the time Grimké and Wright published these works, African Americans were migrating to northern cities, fleeing the violence and oppression of the rural South. Big Boy’s escape to Chicago reminds us that the Great Migration was, in many ways, a literal escape for millions of other black men and women suffering in the South. The urban north offered new opportunities for employment, for social interaction, and for educational advancement that were unavailable to them in the South. However, the pull of the pastoral and the connection that many African Americans felt they shared with each other in the rural South served to anchor many African Americans—at least metaphorically—to the southern landscape. And for many writers of the early twentieth century, the push-and-pull of the urban North/rural South experience created a sense of

dislocation, as writers focused on the significance of geographic identity in the African American experience.



CHAPTER V  
 URBAN/RURAL DICHOTOMIES AND THE PASTORAL IDEAL IN  
 JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*

The urban north provided a new kind of geographic identity for African Americans who had left their lives in the South and moved north in search of opportunity. And many writers of the time enthusiastically embraced urbanity. James Weldon Johnson, upon seeing New York for the first time in 1899, wrote that “the glimpse of life I caught during our last two or three weeks in New York. . . showed me a new world, an alluring world, a tempting world of greatly lessened restraints, a world of fascinating perils; but above all, a world of tremendous artistic potentialities” (152). Less than a decade later, thousands of African American families began leaving the segregated South in search of opportunities in the industrial cities of the north. What has come to be called the “Great Migration” was the result of years of discrimination and violence against African Americans following the end of Reconstruction and the legalization of segregation, most notably in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Echoing Johnson’s sentiments about New York, Langston Hughes said of the city, “There is no thrill in all the world like entering, for the first time, New York Harbor. . . New York is truly the dream city—city of towers near God, city of hopes and visions” (Hughes qtd. in Rampersad 50). Like Hughes, for many writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the northern city, the “promised land,” was the only viable alternative to the decayed image of the pastoral South. Johnson’s 1925 poem “The City” perhaps best illustrates the contrast between rural and urban, and the sense of belonging many African Americans had established in northern cities:

When I come down to sleep death’s endless night,

The threshold of the unknown dark to cross,  
 What to me then will be the keenest loss,  
 When this bright world blurs on my fading sight?  
 Will it be that no more I shall see the trees  
 Or smell the flowers or hear the singing birds  
 Or watch the flashing streams or patient herds?  
 No. I am sure it will be none of these.  
 But, ah! Manhattan's sights and sounds, her smells,  
 Her crowds, her throbbing force, the thrill that comes  
 From being of her a part, her subtle spells,  
 Her shining towers, her avenues, her slums—  
 O God! the stark, unutterable pity,  
 To be dead, and never again behold my city!

While certainly a study in rural/urban contrasts, Johnson's poem is also more than that. "The City" attempts to take the spirit of the pastoral tradition out of the rural landscape and pull it into the cityscape, investing it with new meaning for the young communities forming in the north. The "sights and sounds," the "subtle spells," the "crowds" and "throbbing force" of the people living there echo the traditional pastoral's emphasis on mobility and wandering, sensory stimulation, and freedom. But while the traditional pastoral relies on simple, idealized rural landscapes for its base, with the senses in tune with nature as the central focus, Johnson's urban pastoral uses the spirit of the urban people to redefine what "pastoral" means for city dwellers.

For some writers, however, creating a sense of place and belonging in urban centers was challenging. While Johnson's preference for urban over rural in his poem is swift

and decided, the shift away from the traditional, rural pastoral to a redefinition of the pastoral in urban terms was not as clear for other writers struggling to deal with the migration north. The South had been associated with “home” for many African Americans, in both a metaphorical and physical sense; what then did it mean to leave that home? Artistically, how did some African American writers deal with the loss of “home” and African Americans’ relocation to northern cities? For some writers, coming to terms with the formation of a new African American experience in the north was challenging, as they sought to reconcile a new urban African American identity with the history of their southern experience.

Jean Toomer’s *Cane* is one work that attempts such a reconciliation. Like Grimké and Wright, Toomer recognizes the complicated, violent history between African Americans and the natural world. He does not, however, render impossible a fulfilling relationship between the two. In fact, Toomer, like Douglass and Du Bois, finds the rural South and a relationship to the land as something that can be healing, even spiritually fulfilling. Toomer also recognized that, celebrated as it was in the eyes of some African Americans, the urban north did not necessarily offer the kind of fulfillment and contentment it initially seemed to promise. For Toomer, then, African Americans found themselves facing a sort of geographic displacement and he uses the pastoral to highlight those feelings of placelessness. In *Cane*, pastoral descriptions serve as geographic markers, signposts of sorts that signify the dislocation faced by many African Americans in the early-to-mid twentieth century as they struggled to come to terms with their new urban lives.

When it appeared in 1923, *Cane* was described as “wholly unlike anything of this sort before,” by a contemporary reviewer in the *New York Tribune*. The work defies literary

classification, for it consists of a number of works of prose, poetry, and passages of dramatic dialogue. The work moves as a circle, from simple, rural life in the South in section one, to more complex, urban life in section two, and finally back to the rural in section three. More specifically, the first section focuses on life in rural Georgia; the second section turns its attention to Chicago and Washington, D.C.; and the third section, “Kabnis,” depicts an urban black in the rural South. Thematically, the work is fragmented between black and white, male and female, rural and urban, with Toomer’s intent being to find a unifying principle for what he saw as a disjointed America and, in particular, dislocated African Americans struggling to find a place and a sense of belonging in a country that had long sought to alienate them. For Toomer, the South and the inherent beauty of its landscape was an essential element for African Americans seeking a spiritual, healing connection to their racial past and the geography of that past. Toomer’s argument, however, seems to be that by embracing *both* the beauty—in the form of the pastoral—and the pain, African Americans could reconnect with their rural roots and come to spiritual fulfillment.

*Cane* is perhaps the best representation of the geographic duality and dislocation African Americans were facing during the first few decades of the twentieth century, and Toomer masterfully uses pastoral descriptions to reveal mournfully both a diminishing connection to the southern landscape and a spiritual void in the urban cityscape. The basic structural principle of *Cane* is the conflict between the South, which Toomer associates with both beauty and suffering, and the North, the industrial, white culture that “threatens to destroy the inherent value of [African Americans’] racial heritage” (Lieber 182). Toomer uses pastoral imagery in all three sections to remark upon the difficulties black people had in forming a geographic identity for themselves.

In section one, the pastoral descriptions reflect a South that is both beautiful and painful; more importantly in this section, however, is that the descriptions also suggest the vanishing of a culture that is, at least for Toomer, crucial to the spirit of black people in America. According to Lieber, “In the lives of southern Negroes and the heritage of slavery, Toomer found a reality to which his spirit could respond, a ‘usable past’ from whose roots his art could grow and flower” (181). For Toomer, African Americans must be able to embrace the paradoxical beauty and trauma of their southern past in order to find spiritual fulfillment.

Section two leaves the pastoral South and presents images of a cold, spiritually void urban existence, in which characters find themselves yearning for the kind of fulfillment a pastoral experience can bring. For Toomer, the pastoral was deeply connected to the spiritual, for in spite of the violence and trauma African Americans faced in traditionally pastoralized settings, those settings are also crucial to African American’s spiritual fulfillment and sense of belonging. In the second section, Toomer’s portrayals of urban life indicate that a sense of belonging and a connection to a racial and spiritual past for African Americans is dependent upon their connection or reconnection to the southern landscape from their relocated position in the urban north.

Finally, in section three, Toomer depicts Kabnis, an urban man in a southern landscape, as he struggles to reconcile the sublimity of the natural world with the trauma that often occurred there, and, thus, feels incapable of connecting to any geographic identity. Thus, the work both celebrates and mourns the pastoral South, while criticizing urban life as materialistic and spiritually void.<sup>13</sup>

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Toomer himself called *Cane* a “swan song” for a dying black culture, “strong with the tang of fields and soil” (Toomer qtd. in Benson and Dillard 28). The impetus for the work came from a two-month trip to Georgia Toomer took in 1921. He had accepted a position as a substitute principal of the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute, an all-black school in Georgia. Reminiscent of the trip south which W.E.B. Du Bois writes about in *Souls of Black Folk*, Toomer’s trip is also a significant turning point in his writing career and in his own connection to black life.

Toomer’s struggle with his own racial identity has been well documented. While he often rejected his black heritage, ignoring race and instead embracing his “Americanness,” in *Cane* he seems to have found a connection to his racial past, sparked by a visit to Sparta, Georgia (his father’s home state) in the fall of 1921. Living there for eight weeks, Toomer was deeply moved by his southern rural experience. The emotions were so strong, in fact, that he went home to Washington, D.C. and immediately began working on *Cane* as a way to capture the significance of what he had experienced. For Toomer, the rural South was a source of connection to other African Americans, and he mourned the idea that that sort of connection would be lost as African Americans turned their attentions north. His “swan song” was inspired partly by the folk songs and spirituals he heard in Georgia: Hearing these for the “first time,” he writes,

They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the

Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them shouting. . . So I realized

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<sup>13</sup> Another duality prevalent in the work is the black/white or biracial identity that Toomer himself seemed to have grappled with throughout his life. Toomer’s conflict with his own racial position is implicit in *Cane*. He defined himself as the “first American,” an identity characterized by no particular race and one that questioned the authenticity of the notion of a “pure” race. While my focus here is more on the loss of a geographic identity, certainly the racial identity element is an important one.

with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. . . . The folk spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum up life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. . . . It was the song of an end. (xxii)

The “song of an end” Toomer writes about here is the death of the folk spirit practiced through spirituals, but the language and images in *Cane* suggest it to be much more. In many ways, the work signals the importance of a spiritual connection to the natural world, which, unlike Grimké for example, Toomer did believe was possible. However, Toomer also acknowledged the ways in which that connection was endangered by a history of violence and oppression. While some scholars see the work as a nostalgic yearning for a peasant existence, shown through the use of the pastoral, others see it as a work not only about a vanishing black culture but also about “the pain and struggle wrung from the soul of a people,” a pain often connected to pastoralized landscapes (McKay 177). Hence, it is a work that uses pastoral forms to celebrate and mourn a connection to the natural world.

The tension in *Cane* is between the beautifully lyrical, even haunting passages depicting the southern landscape and the realities of harsh black life in that landscape. As Lucinda MacKethan argues, Toomer uses the southern pastoral tradition as a starting point, structuring the entire work around the contrast between the urban north and the rural South (231). But the work departs from the traditional southern pastoral when it takes up the issue of race and the conflict for African Americans who seek a connection to a landscape that has been used to treat them harshly. MacKethan writes that the book is “a version of Southern pastoral perceived with the black man’s double vision of deep belonging and forced alienation” (231). MacKethan might agree with me that Toomer

seems to have taken Du Bois's idea of black "double-consciousness" and applied it geographically, with black southerners struggling to reconcile the beauty of the pastoral South, their home for centuries, with the violence and alienation they faced in that home. Mary Weaks-Baxter offers a similar reading, asserting that "the intensity of Toomer's emotional representation of the rural South—the 'hysterical rapture' with which he writes—seems then the result of the anguish he felt (and that Kabnis feels) in being pulled two directions, both toward and away from a region that gave shape to his identity" (60). However, the work does more than remark upon the duality addressed by MacKethan and Weaks-Baxter. *Cane's* use of pastoral descriptions is unified and deliberate: descriptions in section one almost always depict a vanishing or gradual disappearance of a pastoral scene, while those in section two describe what happens to the spiritual lives of African Americans once they are completely removed from the rural South. These descriptions suggest that Toomer was deeply concerned with what was being lost in the new urban lives of African Americans who had left the South behind. Thus, *Cane* attempts to do at least three things: celebrate the pastoral as a necessary part of African American spiritual life, while simultaneously remarking on blacks' forced alienation from it; point out the ways in which urban life for African Americans was spiritually unfulfilling; and finally, somehow unify those two themes to point out the racial and spiritual impossibilities faced by African Americans in both North and South. Combined, these things create a complex work that is ultimately a portrayal of the sense of "placelessness" felt by many African Americans because of their feelings of alienation from the southern landscape and spiritual emptiness in the northern cityscape.

A recurring image in section one of *Cane* is that of "dusk," or a setting sun, and each of the works in section one take the reader one step closer to the end of a way of life.



“Dusk” is perhaps the most important metaphor in the entire work. It is fleeting and signals the coming of darkness—an end to something. However, it also signifies a time of day that is both day and night, an idea that speaks to the tension in the work between rural and urban life and the sense of belonging Toomer feels lacking in African-American life. Like dusk, African Americans find themselves in a sort of “no man’s land,” caught between the push-and-pull of rural and urban life. Section one ends with the lynching of Tom Burwell in “Blood-Burning Moon,” a story which serves as a metaphor for the death of the black rural experience in the South. Alain Solard points out that “most of the narratives take place in the atmosphere of the setting sun, at dusk, a symbol of the vanishing slave culture” (551). More than a symbol of the vanishing slave culture, however, the setting sun also represents a vision of the South that Toomer finds essential for African American spiritual fulfillment, but which has long been unattainable for most of them. For Toomer, the setting sun, like his “swan song,” reflects a diminishing connection to a southern landscape essential to African Americans’ racial past.

The first three works in section one establish the themes of fading and tension that other works in the section more thoroughly explore. “Karintha,” “Reapers,” and “November Cotton” all use the southern setting to remark upon the following paradox: African Americans are forced to break their connection to the South, yet doing so leaves a terrible emptiness. In “Karintha,” Toomer uses a beautiful woman to symbolize the weakening connection between African Americans and the South. Karintha is a “growing thing ripened too soon.” In traditional pastorals, innocence and simplicity abound. Wandering shepherds seek a simple, rural landscape to escape the influences of civilization. Here, Karintha, as a “growing thing ripened too soon,” is too knowing in the ways of the world. She has matured too quickly. She is incapable of innocence, for “old

men could no longer ride her hobby-horse upon their knees.” Her skin is “like dusk. . . perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (1170). Like dusk, Karintha’s beauty and innocence is accessible for only a short while. She is also impossible to catch and hold onto: “Karintha, at twelve, was a wild flash that told the other folks just what it was to live. At sunset, when there was no wind, and the pine-smoke from over by the sawmill hugged the earth. . . her sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color, like a black bird that flashes in light. . . Karintha’s running was a whir” (1170). Thus, Karintha, as representative of a fleeting pastoral experience, is impossible to possess. “Karintha” ends with the sinking sun and the words “Goes down. . . “ (1171). Lovely and unattainable, Karintha represents the beauty in nature from which African Americans have been alienated and disconnected. This sense of fading so dominant in “Karintha” is carried forward in the next work, “Reapers,” the first words of the poem being “black reapers” (1). Herbert W. Rice notes that the “reapers’ skins are like the blackness which follows the falling sun. Furthermore, the transience, the fading of day and life suggested in ‘Karintha’ by dusk and smoke, is carried forward by the image of the reaper, so often associated with death” (Rice 101). In “Reapers,” nature and death are closely aligned, with the reapers sharpening their scythes and silently swinging them through the weeds. Made up of heroic couplets, the poem reminds us of the monotony of working the fields. The death of the field-rat, “startled and squealing,” its blood staining the scythe, symbolizes the death of a way of life for African Americans (6). Moreover, it symbolizes the violence used against them in pastoral scenes, such as we see in the works of Grimké and Wright. And in “November Cotton Flower,” Toomer uses anti-pastoral images to depict the coldness and sterility that await African Americans alienated from their southern roots. It is autumn, with “winter’s cold” fast approaching (1). The cotton stalks

“look rusty” and cotton is “scarce as any southern snow” (2-3). The “drouth fighting soil” has taken “all water from its streams,” and dead birds are found underground (6-7). The poem uses a single image, however, to suggest the possibility of a reclamation of the pastoral experience. A single blooming cotton flower—“beauty so sudden for that time of year”—startles the “old folks,” and allows “brown eyes [to] love without a trace of fear” (10-14). Much like Zora and Bless’s cotton crop in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, and as the single source of beauty in the poem, the flower has the capability to transform not only the people from the loveless into “lovers,” but also the barren land itself, for the cotton crop that was supposed to die turns out to bloom. Here, Toomer suggests that a pastoral connection to the southern landscape is not only possible but necessary, with the blooming flower representing the hope and possibility for spiritual healing to occur. The loneliness of the flower, however, remarks upon the odds against which African Americans work to form that connection.

Like “Karintha” and “November Cotton Flower,” companion pieces “Song of the Son” and “Georgia Dusk,” along with “Fern,” also contain recurrent images of dusk or fading. In “Song of the Son,” Toomer writes of an age quickly passing and a yearning to somehow grasp it before it fades. Narrated in first-person, the poem sings of a seeking out of the pastoral experience—an experience made impossible because of the legacy of slavery and violence in the South. Images of idealized nature run throughout the lyrical poem: the air is full of “velvet pine-smoke” and the poet sings “O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree” (3-6). The black slaves are compared to “dark purple ripened plums. . . bursting in the pine-wood air,” who “carol softly” (16-21). The poet singing of velvety smoke, the bursting air, and soft caroling are pastoral images. Although the “sun is setting on/A song-lit race of slaves,” it has not yet set and “it is not too late yet” (11-

13), suggesting the same sort of possibility we see in “November Cotton Flower.” One plum is “saved” for the son, and the seed becomes “an everlasting song, a singing tree” (21). While the images of trees in African American literature are often associated with lynching, as we see in the previous chapter, here, Toomer uses the tree in a very different way. It is a “singing” tree, full of life—not a tree that is “stripped bare” (19) or from which are hanging lynched bodies. Rather than focusing on the trauma associated with trees in African American history, Toomer celebrates them as symbols of a racial past. Furthermore, a “singing” tree suggests something that will “sing of” and maintain that racial past, passing down memories of that past from generation to generation. The “seed becoming song” is perhaps a reminder that the spirit of black southern culture must always remain a part of the lives of black people, even in the face of oppression in the South and migration to the North. “The fading, the setting sun, the movement toward death—all signify the passing of a culture, of a way of life, of the black rural experience” (Rice 103), but it is through idealized images of nature that Toomer hopes to reconnect African Americans to the southern landscape and to their racial past by both celebrating the landscape and acknowledging the pain it brought.

Likewise, “Georgia Dusk,” a companion poem to “Song of the Son,” begins with a setting sun that is “too indolent to hold” and that “passively darkens for the night’s barbecue” (1-4). The first-person voice of the son in “Song of the Son” is replaced by a third-person narrator. The men have gathered for a “feast of moon and men” amidst a landscape of “plowed lands,” “soft settling pollen,” and “blue ghosts of trees,” where they will sing folk-songs for some “genius of the South/With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth” (5-12), a foreshadowing of the death in “Blood-Burning Moon.” The song of the son continues in “Georgia Dusk,” although the song is fading above the

“sacred whisper of the pines” (26).

In “Fern,” Toomer uses the body of a black woman as a metaphor for the complexities inherent in the African American pastoral experience. In the work, the landscape is vanishing, and Fern herself seems to follow. While Karantha is “dusk-colored,” Fern is dissolving, cream-colored, her eyes a “soft cream foam” (1177). Descriptions of the sun falling, the evening folk songs, and the coming of dusk are all described in relation to Fern’s eyes, which are “dissolving like smoke.” Fern is both a symbol of a dying culture and a woman deeply saddened by the loss. Her existence is one of sorrow: “If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile” (1178). Fern’s eyes are the focal point of her sorrow. They seek out what she knows is fading:

Her eyes, if it were sunset, rested idly where the sun, molten and glorious, was  
Pouring down between the fringe of pines. Or maybe they gazed at the gray cabin  
on the knoll from which an evening folk-song was coming. Perhaps they followed  
a cow that had been turned loose to roam and feed on cotton-stalks and corn leaves.  
. . . Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into  
them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia’s South. (1178)

Here, Fern’s eyes not only rest on pastoral scenes—the fringe of pine trees, a cabin pouring forth a folk-song, a roaming cow—they also become the countryside itself. The conflation of Fern’s body with the pastoral revises the traditional southern plantation pastoral, one which, as we see in earlier works such as John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* and in Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies, positions black men and women as necessary parts of the creation of the plantation pastoral but which excludes

them from enjoying it in the same manner as whites. According to Maria Farland, “In his literary as in his social experiments, Toomer employed and updated the conventions of the pastoral to naturalize the minds and bodies that his contemporaries deemed ‘degenerate,’ whether by virtue of their racial or rural affiliations” (929). “Fern” does just this, conflating Fern’s body, particularly her eyes, with a disappearing pastoral landscape. Farland continues,

While . . . paeans to the beauties of farm and field were highly conventional within the pastoral mode, their use by Toomer demanded a radical reevaluation of the southern agrarian scene, from its consecration of white womanhood, to its corresponding denigration of black embodiment and work. Pastoral modes in *Cane* structure a surprising reversal of these staple elements of the plantation pastoral, reassuring readers that the black agrarian, like his white counterpart, is a flourishing feature in the southern regional landscape. (929)

Farland argues here that Toomer revises the plantation pastoral in his descriptions of Fern and the pastoral landscape in order to remark upon the ways in which black agrarians are a “flourishing” feature of the rural South. While I agree with Farland that Fern, unlike the black men and women in Douglass and Grimké, is the embodiment of the pastoral, rather than the antithesis of it, Toomer seems to be arguing not that the black agrarian is not a flourishing but rather a diminishing feature of the South. Toomer is mourning the loss of the black agrarian, not celebrating his vitality. Unlike Douglass and his fellow slaves, Fern’s conflation with nature is a positive one. She is not someone’s property and valued along with beasts of burden; instead, she is representative of idealized nature. As such, Fern is desirable to men—both sexually and spiritually. The narrator in the poem pursues her. At dusk, he takes her to a remote part of the landscape, near a stream, and

beyond the canebrake so that he may have “a vision” (1180). Along the way there, others sit on their porches “gaping” at them, knowing where they are going and what they are going to do. Symbolically, however, he is seeking more than a sexual relationship with Fern. He also desires a pastoral experience, for “the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes” (1178). Ultimately, however, Fern denies him. In the climactic final scene, Fern walks with the narrator and reaches a “canebrake that was ripe for cutting” and “under a sweet-gum tree, and where reddish leaves had dammed the creek a little,” they sit (1180). In this concluding scene, Fern expresses herself for the first time to the narrator. He writes that she “fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds. . . . She fainted in my arms” (1180). Everything around Fern dissolves. A symbol of a vanishing culture and connection to the land, Fern falls apart and is “burned.” The dusk, the boiling cane, the inarticulate spirit that escapes her, the broken song she sings, and her ultimate fainting all suggest the spiritual death and disconnection with nature with which Toomer was so concerned. The narrator also mourns, aware of the importance that the beauty of the landscape holds and its role in connecting African Americans to their ancestry. He says, “When one is on the soil of one’s ancestors, most anything can come to one” (1180). The “soil of one’s ancestors” is described in such a lyrically beautiful way in *Cane*—in near rapture—yet ultimately Fern denies him and “nothing ever really happen[s]” (1180). “Fern” masterfully captures the yearning for a pastoral experience and the alienation from it that African Americans had for so long endured in the South.

In the final work of the first section, “Blood Burning Moon,” Toomer, like Dunbar,

Grimké, and Wright before him, uses a lynching scene to acknowledge the history of violence in the South for African Americans. “Blood-Burning Moon” ends the first section of *Cane* and takes on a distinctly anti-pastoral tone to highlight the horrors of lynching practices in the South. It is the story of a black woman being courted by two men—one white, the other black. The two men in the story, Bob Stone and Tom Burwell, desire Louisa, and Tom hopes to propose marriage to her. However, Louisa cannot decide between the two. Finding Louisa with Tom, Bob lunges at Tom, a fight ensues, and Bob is stabbed. A mob captures Tom and lynches him by burning him alive.

The opening line of “Blood-Burning Moon” is in keeping with the recurrent image of dusk in earlier parts of *Cane*, only this time dusk is used in connection with anti-pastoral imagery: “Up from the skeleton stone walls, up from the rotting floor boards and the solid hand-hewn beams of oak 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” (1186). According to Alain Solard, “The imagery of ‘Blood-Burning Moon’ is based upon the folk beliefs of southern blacks regarding the evil influence of the moon over their lives” (551). The story is full of anti-pastoral images, all of which foreshadow Tom’s lynching. The air is “heavy with the scent of boiling cane” and the moon glows like a “fire-pined knot” (1186). Louisa’s song grows “agitant and restless” as “rusty black and tan spotted hounds, lying in the dark corners of porches or prowling around back yards, put their noses in the air and caught its tremor. . . . all over the countryside dogs barked and roosters crowed as if heralding a weird dawn or some ungodly awakening” (1187). The setting of “Blood-Burning Moon” plays an essential part in the narrative. The rivalry between Bob and Tom is “enacted in the midst of semi-darkness, vaguely lighted, at one stage, by the glow from a boiling pan of cane syrup. . . . And just as echoes of howlings



reverberate upon the surrounding hills, so the final outburst of the lynching crowd spreads and multiplies” (Solard 552). Gone are the fading pastoral images of the earlier works in *Cane*. Here is blackness, death, finality, for Tom Burwell’s lynching marks not only the loss of African Americans’ connection to their roots in the South, but also the reason for that loss: terrible violence. “Blood-Burning Moon” stands in contrast to most of the imagery we see in other works from this section, thereby reinforcing the paradoxical qualities of the work. The pastoral beauty so lyrically emphasized in most of section one has vanished and been replaced by the ugliness of a lynching. Nellie McKay aptly argues that, in section one, “Toomer’s portrait of Georgia, with its many contradictory elements, constitutes his search for and recovery of the meaning in the roots of black life in white America” (124). Toomer’s imagery at the end of this section is a stark reminder of the feelings of brutality, powerlessness, and alienation faced by African Americans in the South, while the images in much of the rest of the section highlight the loss of connection, meaning, and spiritual fulfillment. It is this sort of tension upon which *Cane* rests.

While section one is filled with rural images of cotton, corn, sugar cane, pine trees, and red soil, section two, which takes us to urban areas, describes city streets, apartment buildings, theatres, and alleyways. Toomer, like many other writers of his time, used the landscape of the city as a theme in his work. In fact, many writers of the Harlem Renaissance began using the cityscape for their own pastoral impulses. As many writers began turning their attention away from the rural South, they began looking for ways to find elements of the pastoral in the urban experience, with mobility being a key characteristic. Like wandering “shepherds” in the traditional pastoral, Sydney Bremer observes, “writers of the Harlem Renaissance were an extremely mobile crew, who felt

joined, not estranged, by their wanderings. . . . Collectively they developed a vision of an urban home that was at once an organic place, a birthright community, and a cultural aspiration” (48). Writers were seeking ways to ease the pain of what was lost in their migration north, and they found ways to integrate elements of the pastoral in their urban texts. The geography of the city itself became a type of pastoral rendering. Writers’ use of sensory images focused not on the mechanical, concrete elements of the city, but on its lively people, tastes, sounds, and colors. According to Bremer, “In Harlem Renaissance literature, [the] city is organic” (49). Homes in the rural South are replaced by new homes in the north—in Harlem, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.—where writers could take the city spaces and celebrate them in much the same way the pastoral South was celebrated and romanticized by whites. The magnolia trees, rolling hills, fertile soil, and lush gardens of the pastoralized South were replaced by exotic foods, colorful hues, and crowded spaces of the city. For writers such as James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, the organic energy of the city found its place as the most important characteristic in the new urban pastoral of the Harlem Renaissance.

For Toomer, however, the shift away from the rural pastoral to an urban one was difficult, for he clearly did not privilege the urban north in the same way other writers did. The contrast between the first two sections of *Cane* highlights Toomer’s emphasis on the importance of a pastoral connection to the rural South, not the urban north, and symbolizes the “duality” African Americans faced geographically during and after the Great Migration. As McKay points out, “the shift brought monumental changes, both negative and positive, to the black community. It also caused the irretrievable loss of many of the qualities of beauty and art that Jean Toomer would never have encountered had he not gone to Georgia in the fall of 1921” (125). Migration north certainly opened

up opportunities for economic, educational, and social advancement not available to blacks in the deep South. But for Toomer, a void was left as a result of the shift away from rural life. Although he had written to Waldo Frank in 1922 that he was “nostalgic for the streets and faces of Washington” (qtd. in Rusch 13), Toomer does not privilege urban life in *Cane*. Just as his descriptions of the southern landscape point out what is both beautiful and dangerous to African Americans, so, too, do his descriptions of life in northern cities. The excitement, diversity, and sense of freedom the north offers are offset by a lack of communion with other African Americans. According to Weaks-Baxter, “Toomer believed that urbanization can isolate human beings from one another and leave the human being in spiritual decline” (66). The northern sketches illustrate this sort of spiritual sterility Toomer felt many African Americans experienced in the north, cut off from their roots. Thus, section two is dominated by two themes: “the divorce of the mind from body and body from soul in the spiritually stifling environment of the North; and the result of this divorce, which is conveyed through images of burial and spiritual death” (Lieber 185). The second section of *Cane* illustrates the dehumanizing effect of urban life, thereby emphasizing what Toomer felt was lost when African Americans turned away from the South: a spiritual connection to the earth, to their past, and to each other.

Most of the works in section two are concerned with the effects of white culture on transplanted southern blacks living in the north. In this section, Toomer’s northern black characters seem to undergo a spiritual death, not unlike the physical death of Tom Burwell in “Blood-Burning Moon.” The first work in section two, “Seventh Street,” is a work characterized by drinking, money, and jazz. It is a forceful, aggressive piece and characterizes the black life that entered northern cities in the early twentieth century.

McKay argues about the work,

The individuals in this new environment have long since lost the need for a gentle nurturing. Easy money, illegal activities, material goods, and the swift movement of city life have displaced nature and perfect beauty. . . . There are no delicate sensibilities here, no sunsets and dusky colors; there is an aggressive force that cannot be ignored. The flow of this life-giving blood is associated with violence, and all the imagery of “Seventh Street” reinforces that concept. (126-27)

For McKay, the black presence affects the city in a forceful, dynamic way. However, what McKay does not mention is this reading is that black life, too, is impacted by its introduction into the city. While “Seventh Street” exudes “the energy and determination of the black people who left the oppression of the South” (McKay 128), it also speaks to assimilation, disillusionment, and spiritual death. Seventh Street itself is “crude-boned” and the “black reddish blood” of black life flows into the “white and whitewashed wood of Washington” (1112). The blood “[flows] down the smooth asphalt of Seventh Street, in shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets” (1192). The word “whitewashed” here is significant, for it speaks both to the assimilation of urban blacks into white culture and to the spiritual “void” left when this occurs. The narrator’s question to blacks, “Who set you flowing?” is a metaphor for the Great Migration and a reminder of what was left behind in the first section of *Cane*—a beautiful and yet painful racial past to which African Americans must stay connected if they are to keep the spirit of their culture alive. The work also comments on the shallowness of capitalism and materialism. The first lines of the work are a significant contrast to the poems and stories in section one: “Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts/Bootleggers in silken shirts/Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs/Whizzing, whizzing,

down the street-car tracks” (1-4). Gone are canefields, fir trees, and red soil, all replaced by street-car tracks, asphalt, and expensive cars and clothes. For Toomer, life in the urban north meant that African Americans’ own desires were subordinated by the “urge to act and live like the white man, and in the process their own essential identity is lost” (Lieber 186). The economic and social freedom experienced by some northern blacks comes at a price, for the trade-off, like the money in the pockets, “burns” and “hurts.”

“Rhobert,” which follows “Seventh Street,” perhaps best illustrates the pain, disillusionment, and spiritual decline some African Americans faced in the urban north. In this work, Toomer seems to argue the failure of urbanity, which is portrayed as just another form of slavery, and the difficulties for blacks to find redemption in the north. Mired in urban life and material culture, Rhobert has lost his soul. Toomer depicts him “wear[ing] a house, like a monstrous diver’s helmet, on his head”; under its weight Rhobert is “sinking as a diver would sink in mud should the water be drawn off.” The metaphorical house here is a place that offers no redemption for those who live in it. It symbolizes the quest for material goods and the death of one’s spiritual self that often follows in consumer culture. Rhobert’s value system is based entirely upon his social status and the material goods that must accompany it. He has a distorted sense of values and of self, and it is killing him. The house is described as a “dead,” “stuffed” thing that “weights [Rhobert] down,” suggesting something that he feels obligated to carry around or live in but that is killing him. Rhobert’s legs are “banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets,” perhaps a reference to Rhobert’s life in a city without much access to sunshine. The narrator tells us that the “dead house is stuffed. The stuffing is alive. It is sinful to draw one’s head out of live stuffing in a dead house” (1192), suggesting Rhobert’s unwillingness to remove himself, even when it causes him to betray his own

moral code, for he “cares not two straws as to whether or not he will ever see his wife and children again” (1192). While “Rhobert” concludes with a reference to a spiritual, it also suggests a drowning: “Brother, Rhobert is sinking/Lets open our throats, brother/Lets sing Deep River when he goes down” (1-3). The city has failed Rhobert, ultimately drowning him.

Other characters in this section of *Cane* also find themselves lost in some way. In “Beehive,” the narrator (a drone bee) is among a swarm of “a million” bees “passing in and out of the moon.” Silver honey drips from the swarm as the narrator lies on his back and wishes he might “fly out past the moon/And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower” (10-14). Here, the natural world of a farmyard flower seems a long distance from the busy, bustling, chaotic world of the “city” in which he finds himself stuck. As a “drone” bee, his existence is particularly limited. He has but one role (to fertilize a receptive queen), and so he sits, getting “drunk with silver honey” and wishing for an escape (12). The city, Toomer seems to be saying, offers very little in the way of self-development in the natural world. While worker bees are responsible for nectar gathering and hive construction (akin to black farmers in the South responsible for planting, tilling, and harvesting), drone bees lead a much less productive existence. Northern, urban culture, Toomer argues, produces nothing more than drones.

Finally, in “Calling Jesus,” a work originally titled “Nora,” we read a portrait of an urban woman whose “soul is like a little thrust-tailed dog that follows her, whimpering” (1202). Like the dog, her spiritual self exists in a “no-man’s land between her house of ‘whitewashed’ wood, which symbolizes her desire to achieve the values of the white, northern culture, and the soil of its ancestors, the South, a world that the woman permits herself to remember only in dreams” (Lieber 187). The woman is at odds, physically and

spiritually, with the city, for while she has a “large house” and walks the city streets during the day, at night her eyes “carry to where builders find no need for vestibules, for swinging on iron hinges, storm doors” (1202). Although the woman is a city-dweller, her soul yearns for a warm spot, away from the “dusty asphalt” and “alleys” where there are “bales of southern cotton. . . that will cover [her soul] that it need not shiver,” and where she can sleep “cradled in dream-fluted cane” (1202). The short work speaks beautifully to the sort of geographic double-consciousness of transplanted African Americans so pervasive in *Cane*. While her physical self seems at peace in the urban north, evidenced by her ability (or willingness) to separate her soul from the rest of her existence, her spiritual self is cold and shivering, left “outside the storm door. . . in the vestibule,” while she “sleeps upon clean-cut hay in her dreams” (1202). This work, perhaps more than any other in *Cane*, speaks to the spiritual loss African Americans suffered as a result of their having to escape from the rural South and to the feelings of dislocation and placelessness that resulted from that escape. This displacement both unifies and complicates *Cane*, as Toomer argues that while connection to the pastoral South is necessary for the spiritual survival of transplanted African Americans, it is also that same South that forced millions of them into exile in the north.

In “Kabnis,” *Cane*’s third and final section, Toomer relies loosely on his own experiences as a northerner living in the South to once and for all highlight the effects of migration and African Americans’ disassociation from the natural world. Kabnis, as a northerner, has difficulty accepting the natural world as anything but an intrusion upon his existence. When confronted with natural beauty, he resists it, fears it, hates it:

Kabnis: ‘Hell of a fine quarters, I’ve got. Five years ago; look at me now. Earth’s child. The earth my mother. God is profligate red-nosed man about town.

Bastardy; me. A bastard son has got a right to curse his maker.’ Kabnis is about to shake his fists heaven-ward. He looks up, and the night’s beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. Sharp stones cut him through his thin pajamas. The shock sends a shiver over him. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes. ‘God almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, do not torture me with beauty. Take it away. Give me to an ugly world. Ha, ugly. Stinking like unwashed niggers. Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and 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 me 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. What beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you? God, he doesn’t exist, but Nevertheless, He is ugly. Hence, what comes from Him is ugly. Lynchers and businessmen. . . . (85)

While “Calling Jesus” illustrates the cost of spiritual separation from the pastoral South, “Kabnis” reflects both physical and spiritual angst in the face of pastoral beauty. Kabnis wants to appreciate the scene before him, but to do so requires him to forget about the legacy of slavery and violence so entangled in the black southern experience. The scene tortures him. It is both a sublime experience--sending “shivers over him” and causing him to cry—and a nauseating one. He sees the beauty in two ways: first, he views the Georgia countryside as a scene of the pastoral sublimity that can exist in the natural world; second, he recognizes that acknowledging this beauty also requires him to ignore the oppression and atrocities committed towards African Americans in the pastoral landscape. Thus, Kabnis sees *both* the “night’s beauty” and the “lynchers.” By the end of this scene, however, Kabnis rejects the former and, instead, disassociates entirely from



the natural world:

He totters. . . . as a completely artificial man would. . . . His gaze drifts down into the vale, across the swamp, up over the solid dusk bank of pines, and rests, bewildered-like, on the court-house tower. . . . Christ, how cut off from everything he is. And hours, hours north, why not say a lifetime north? Washington sleeps. Its still, peaceful streets, how desirable they are. Its people whom he always halfway despised. New York? Impossible. It was a fiction. He had dreamed it. An impotent nostalgia grips him. It becomes intolerable. He forces himself to narrow to a cabin silhouetted on a knoll about a mile away. Peace. Negroes within it are content. They farm. They sing. They love. They sleep. Kabnis wonders if perhaps they can feel him. If perhaps he gives them bad dreams. (85-86)

Tension between urban and rural dominates this passage. On one hand, Kabnis is nostalgic for a sort of urban pastoral experience—the streets of the city are “peaceful” and “desirable.” As an “artificial” man, Kabnis has chosen to reject nature and all it signifies, both good and bad. He chooses neither the sublimity of nature nor the foulness that it represents historically. However, his glance at the cabin in the distance gives him pause, for he recognizes that there are those who can reconcile this tension in nature, for they can “sleep” and “sing” and “love” in nature in a way that he finds impossible. As Paul Outka argues, “Kabnis can neither embrace the rural without risking degradation, nor can he separate from it, at least not without losing the immense cultural and aesthetic possibilities it possesses” (186). It is this paradox that *Cane* ultimately confronts. Kabnis is caught between two worlds. His double-consciousness paralyzes him and he ends up in drunken despair, lying in a dirt floor basement by the end of the work, “railing

impotently against the legacy of slavery” (Outka 186). Kabnis’s inability to connect to the southern landscape as a pastoral landscape is at the heart of *Cane*, for Kabnis represents every other African American caught in the same paradox. While Kabnis, Rhobert, and the unnamed woman in “Calling Jesus” may have found physical safety in northern cities, they have been forced to do so at the expense of their spiritual connection to the land, a connection which, as we have seen in previous chapters, is fraught with complexities. For Kabnis, it is an impossibility, for the legacy of slavery has tainted the southern landscape forever in his mind.

This sort of unresolved tension lies at the center of *Cane*, for almost every piece in the work uses this tension to define the African American experience in the North and South. It is a work full of contrasts and unreconciled desires: from the dusk-filled, disappearing rural images in section one, to the spiritual emptiness of the city in section two, and finally to Kabnis’s inability to reconcile the beauty of the rural south with what he knows has happened to blacks in that landscape, all of *Cane* speaks to this sort of spiritual placelessness for African Americans.

While Toomer found the urbanity of northern cities to be potentially damaging to the spirit, it is also the city that he and so many other writers found comforting. Like Johnson and Hughes, Toomer did love the city—its textures, its special geographies, its capacity to stimulate the emotions and the intellect. He called New York “one of the few liveable places on earth,” thus echoing Johnson’s preference for the city (qtd. in Scruggs and Van Demarr 159). But the emptiness of the northern city and the hauntingly beautiful rural South portrayed in *Cane* suggest Toomer himself felt dislocated, just like the characters in his work. He found a home in the city, but it was the rural South that haunted him and provided him with what he needed to complete the work. Shortly after

his return to Washington from Sparta, Georgia, he wrote, “My seed was planted in the cane-and cotton-fields, and in the souls of black and white people in the small southern town. My seed was planted in *myself* down there” (qtd. in Turner 148).

In African American literature, the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance is often dated to the year 1923—the year *Cane* was published. The complexity of the work, the unresolved tensions between North and South, urban and rural, and the contrast between the freedom and opportunity sought in the north with the disillusionment and spiritual void often found there help make *Cane* a poignant portrayal of the geographic duality facing many African Americans at the time, a theme visited repeatedly in the African American literature that followed. From Bigger Thomas’s painful, harsh, and brutal urban existence in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, to the journey of the unnamed narrator from oppression in the rural South to disillusionment in New York City in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, these writers make clear that the transition to urban living was often fraught with loneliness, violence, and spiritual emptiness. It seems that for Toomer, crafting an “urban pastoral” was not always the answer, for there was too much in the southern past for African Americans to leave it behind entirely. *Cane* speaks to the difficulty that African Americans—dispossessed of a land of their own and yearning for a natural world that would provide them comfort, pleasure, and spiritual fulfillment—had reconciling their new lives in the north with their painful history in the South.

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Few works have, as *Cane* has, studied the psychological impact of the Great Migration and the subsequent feelings of emptiness that many African Americans may have felt as a result of leaving behind their southern homes. As I have argued throughout this project,

the idealization of the natural world was fraught with complexities for African Americans living in the rural South, a South frequently depicted in pastoral terms by whites. However, as *Cane* suggests, the urban North often left African Americans feeling displaced and empty. My efforts here to trace the African American response to the pastoral South have focused on that period in history—the antebellum period to the late 1930s—when oppression and violence towards African Americans was especially virulent. Of importance, too, however, is what seems to have occurred in the years following. Many writers, perhaps inspired by Toomer’s work, have turned back to the landscape of the South, reclaiming and celebrating it, in order to point out the significance of the relationship between African Americans and the land so often pastoralized. While the scope of my project focuses on specific themes and a certain historical framework, it is worth mentioning that further analysis of other writers inspired to view the southern landscape through a pastoral lens would make a nice continuation of this study. While the writers in my previous chapters all struggled to come to terms with a pastoralized South and a natural world that was often a source of trauma, we find that there were also writers who embraced the pastoral and a nostalgia for the South as something that could ultimately be positive and rewarding. The journey from the oppression of slave’s working the land to characters relishing their connection to it is filled with pastoral impulses that pull these writers in multiple, varied directions. From Frederick Douglass’s recognition of property ownership as a way to a pastoral experience, to Jean Toomer’s struggle to find a geographic identity that speaks to the complexities of the African American experience in the urban north and the rural South, the works of these writers all speak to the recognition that the pastoral ideal is as

important to discussions of the African American experience as any other type of literary image.

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