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Southern Alterity in the Global Modernist Novel, 1899-1966

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SOUTHERN ALTERITY IN THE GLOBAL MODERNIST NOVEL, 1899-1966

DISSERTATION

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

By
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Lexington, Kentucky

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2021

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

SOUTHERN ALTERITY IN THE GLOBAL MODERNIST NOVEL, 1899-1966

My dissertation examines the portrayal of southern alterity in the global modernist novel. The trope of southern spaces as sites of decay, degeneration, and dissolution proves to be remarkably durable in both fictions set within the domestic U.S. south, as well as those colonial and postcolonial texts associated with the global modernist canon. Novels like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* suggest that the alterity of places like the Congo and Haiti are inextricably bound up with racial hierarchies. On the other hand, texts such as Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* acknowledge southern alterity as structural or cultural in nature, less a product of inherent racial difference. Each chapter pairs two novels, one canonical and the other semi-canonical, not to argue that the two visions of southern alterity are complementary, but rather that they exist in dialectical relationship with one another. Building upon the work of the New Southern Studies and the increasingly transnational focus of U.S. southern studies in general, I argue that geographical designations like "south" are constructed, and "the south" is a discursive formation that shapes dominant (northern/metropolitan) views of the world.

KEYWORDS: global modernism, British literature, U.S. literature, U.S. southern literature

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Sentimental Ruined Plantation.....	1
Southern Alterity, Defined.....	5
Southern Alterity’s Global Dimensions.....	15
Modernity With Modernism.....	18
Outline of Chapters.....	36
CHAPTER 2: THE FATEFUL VOYAGE SOUTH.....	40
A Quality of Darkness.....	40
Marlow’s Seeds of Doubt.....	48
Domestic Southern Alterity in Chesnutt.....	59
The Africa That Isn’t There.....	74
The Moment of Racial Recognition.....	87
CHAPTER 3: THE ELUSIVE SOUTHERN UTOPIA.....	106
A Different Journey South.....	106
Imperial Order and Bourgeois Gender Relations.....	113
The Colonial Anti-Marriage Plot.....	123
Hurston’s Folkways.....	139
Janie Finds a Voice.....	149
Southern Alterity On and Beyond the Muck.....	161
CHAPTER 4: A DEEPER SOUTH: HAITI IN THE U.S. SOUTHERN LITERARY IMAGINATION.....	177
Rebellion in the Air.....	177
Slavery and Enlightenment in the Western Hemisphere.....	184
Faulkner’s Unenlightened South and His Postwar Reception.....	191
Up from (Poor) Whiteness.....	198
The Creolized Plantation and the Threat of Miscegenation.....	208
Revolutionary Blackness.....	217
The Currents of Gabriel’s Rebellion.....	227
Chains Mental and Physical.....	234
CHAPTER 5: CALIBAN GOES TO THE CITY.....	253
The Fateful Voyage North.....	253
Of Cannibals and Caliban.....	258
What the Plantation Ledger Measures.....	271
The Curious Position of the White Creole.....	280
The Errant Bildungsroman.....	296
The Primordial Moment of Black Awareness.....	301
CONCLUSION: SOUTHERN ALTERITY ISN’T GOING AWAY.....	323
WORKS CITED.....	334

VITA.....358

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Sentimental Ruined Plantation

In chapter XXXII of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the brutal master Simon Legree leads a recently purchased coffle of enslaved people, including the novel's titular character, to his plantation on the Red River. As opposed to the other sites of Tom's enslavement in the novel – the bucolic Shelby farm in Kentucky and the relaxed St. Clare house in New Orleans – the degraded condition of the Legree plantation is emphasized in Stowe's description of the scene of their approach:

What was once a smooth-shaven lawn before the house, dotted here and there with ornamental shrubs, was now covered with frowsy tangled grass, with horse-posts set up, here and there, in it, where the turf was stamped away, and the ground littered with broken pails, cobs of corn, and other slovenly remains. Here and there, a mildewed jessamine or honeysuckle hung raggedly from some ornamental support, which had been pushed to one side by being used as a horse-post. What once was a large garden was now all grown over with weeds, through which, here and there, some solitary exotic reared its forsaken head. What had been a conservatory had now no window-shades, and on the mouldering shelves stood some dry, forsaken flower-pots, with sticks in them, whose dried leaves showed they had once been plants... The house had been large and handsome.¹

This wordy passage does not merely describe the state of the Legree plantation, but also narrates its decline from its former order into decay, dissolution, and degeneration.

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852; New York: Penguin, 1981), 491.

Stowe, intent upon protesting the unjust social order of slavery but chiefly concerned with matters spiritual, reflects Legree's own brutality and desiccated soul through the simultaneously lifeless and overgrown scene.

Stowe attributes the plantation's state largely to Legree's evil; his inability to cultivate and maintain his property reflects his disordered soul. By this, she evokes John Locke's theory of property rights, in which labor justifies ownership. Legree's sin is therefore not just his brutality to his enslaved laborers, but his own refusal or inability to develop and cultivate his plantation. Lockean property rights, as Ellen Meiksins Wood observes, were used to justify colonialism on the basis that native inhabitants had not developed the land properly, thereby opening the door to "proper" European cultivation.

People acquire the right to property by giving it value – which Locke makes clear means exchange value. This had vast implications not only for the domestic practice of enclosure [in England] but also for the dispossession of indigenous peoples in colonial territories...the [Native American] has failed to establish his right to the land, which becomes fair game to the more "industrial" and "rational" colonists.²

This theory denies the generative abilities of colonized people; Locke refers specifically to Native Americans, but his ideas were applied widely to dispossessed indigenous groups. While native Americans are largely absent from Stowe's novel, her evocation of Lockean property rights transfers the force of the theory away from the colonized and

² Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (1999; London: Verso, 2017), 157.

towards the colonizer. Nevertheless, the same logic operates: because Legree's labor is unproductive, his right to the land is called into question.

Stowe, ostensibly concerned with the injustice of slavery, reveals herself in this passage to actually be in thrall to the specter that haunts this study, *southern alterity*. For now, I will define southern alterity as the ideological configuration of southern spaces as sites of decay, dissolution, and degeneration. The significance of its presence in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes from its orthogonal position to Stowe's avowed purposes in writing her novel. As she writes in her "Concluding Remarks," Stowe avoided the topic of slavery until her conscience was shocked by the Fugitive Slave Act. What appears at first to be a concern with matters of justice melts away into the "self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality" that James Baldwin charges to the novel.³ In her "Concluding Remarks," Stowe turns her attention south: "To you, generous, noble-minded men and women, of the South, – you, whose virtue, and magnanimity and purity of character, are the greater for the severer trial it has encountered, – to you is her appeal."⁴ What appears as an appeal to justice reveals itself as a sentimental appeal to the "good" people of the U.S. south. Although credited with enflaming the sectional tensions that eventually lead to the Civil War, Stowe had no such designs when writing the novel. Indeed, southern alterity enabled Stowe to envision the south as a zone of moral backwardness that could be corrected with sound counsel and changed hearts, not a regime of world-historical injustice that would require military action to overturn.

³ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 11.

⁴ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 622.

Although sentimentality is not a persistent feature of southern alterity as I outline it in this study, the relation between Stowe's rhetorical mode and her attitude toward the south reveal how powerfully the ideological formation of southern alterity captured the imaginations of even the most well-meaning observers. Baldwin, in his pathbreaking essay on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, criticizes Stowe as a "pamphleteer" who forsook what he considers the novelist's dedication to "the power of revelation...this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims."⁵ If southern alterity, among other things, serves as a shorthand for what is wrong with the U.S. south, then Stowe's novel bypasses that "more vast reality" Baldwin writes of in favor of a view of the south as the nation's problem region. Lauren Berlant places *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within a larger framework to which they attribute "a particular form of liberal sentimentality" that foregrounds "the capacity for suffering and trauma at the citizen's core"; Berlant does not take up the regional issues with which I am concerned with here, but they nevertheless identify the novel's capacity for "put[ting] forth characters who model virtue for the individual reader...[as] a monument to the fact that inspired art can produce a transformative environment toward which the fallen social world can aspire."⁶ In other words, the sentimental mode enables Stowe's deployment of southern alterity as the *sine qua non* of regional dynamics. Stowe charges the reader to examine their conscience: "There is one thing that every individual can do, – they can see to it that *they feel right*."⁷ Stowe's appeal to her readers, whether the northern abolitionist or the basically good-hearted southerner, flattens the difference in their respective outlooks

⁵ Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 13.

⁶ Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 636,638.

⁷ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 624. Emphasis hers.

even as her larger vision requires southern alterity to configure her picture of the U.S. and its antebellum social and political divisions. In this regard, Baldwin captures the importance of the “protest novel” for U.S. self-fashioning: not just an aesthetic failure, the protest novel not only fails to disturb the social order but is, in fact, “an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene.”⁸ Even as Stowe evokes Lockean property rights to argue for the moral unrighteousness of Simon Legree as a plantation owner, so she evokes sentimental concern as the balm to heal a divided nation. Stowe may have, against her own intentions, kicked up the regional conflict that evolved into the Civil War. More importantly for my purposes, her novel provides a popular and enduring vision of southern alterity that helps to situate the context from which emerge the modernist novels engaged in this study.

1.2 Southern Alterity, Defined

Building on scholarly accounts of U.S. southern difference articulated by Jennifer Rae Greeson and Leigh Anne Duck, I propose that southern alterity, which I define simply as the “otherness” of those locations which are perceived to be “southern,” is not unique to the U.S. south, but is in fact a constitutive part of global modernity. Greeson, focusing on the nineteenth century, describes the U.S. south as the nation’s “*internal other*...an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole.”⁹ While Duck’s focus is on the twentieth century, a similar structure informs her account of the U.S.’s shifting relationship with the south: while the nation celebrated the region when politically useful, at other times it localized regional

⁸ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” 15.

⁹ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010), 1. Italics original.

conflicts through the notion of the “backward South” as configured against the “enlightened nation.”¹⁰ Greeson and Duck alike emphasize the centrality of the disavowed south to the nation’s self-fashioning, which can be seen clearly in the titles of their books – *Our South* and *The Nation’s Region*, respectively. I build upon their work by examining how the dynamic they identify resonates throughout the anglophone world to encompass a global order pitting north against south. In this study, “south” refers less to a bound geographical space than an ideological construction, a repository for that which is not-north, a short-hand figure for that which is disavowed in spite (or because) of its necessary existence for the north’s self-definition.¹¹

In this regard, my framework owes a profound debt to Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*. Much like Said, I place Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* early in my study because I believe it offers a paradigmatic account of the globe-shaping forces of colonialism. My treatment of Conrad’s novel differs slightly from Said’s: as opposed to the “two visions” Said outlines in *Heart of Darkness*, which pits the European understanding of its colonial enterprise against the inherent instability of that undertaking, I read *Heart of Darkness* as the foundational text of southern alterity in the global modernist novel.¹² As European imperialism waned under the tensions that gave rise to the First World War, the global distinctions between north and south only grew more important, particularly as anti-colonial movements gained momentum throughout the twentieth century. “The age of colonialism was characterized in large part by a

¹⁰ Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006), 3.

¹¹ Here I follow Greeson, who writes, “I have no ‘real’ South to defend. I am not even sanguine that the notion of a monolithic South can be recuperated in U.S. cultural studies in a useful way.” Greeson, *Our South*, 10.

¹² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 25.

process of linguistic and cultural unification,” as Pascale Casanova observes, and the “exporting” of “languages and institutions” by the European colonial powers helped consolidate their influence even as colonial subjects gained independence.¹³ Instead of offering a model of potential unification across geographical spaces that connects formerly colonized zones with the metropole, such linguistic and cultural dominance instead extends the hegemony of empire into putatively post-colonial spaces, thereby reifying notions of southern alterity engendered by imperialism itself.

Hence why I begin this introduction with Stowe’s novel: not only does it fold many of my ongoing concerns into my narrative, it also demonstrates the central importance of the plantation to global modernity. As opposed to what Raymond Williams calls “metropolitan perception,” global modernism – and the ideological work of southern alterity – flows not just from the metropole, but emerges through a dialectical interplay between metropole and outpost, center and periphery. As Amy Clukey defines it, “plantation modernity” captures these dynamics: “The framework of plantation modernity reveals historical connections and ongoing cultural exchanges among various locations within the plantation complex. Bounded, yet global, the plantation’s wide-ranging instantiations reiterate startling commonalities across the circum-Atlantic world.”¹⁴

Establishing the global nature of southern alterity does not suffice to explain the relevance of the U.S. south’s position within its national imaginary to this European-dominated schema I have just described. Instead, I look to evidence which suggests the

¹³ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (1999; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 116.

¹⁴ Amy Clukey, “Plantation Modernity: *Gone with the Wind* and Irish-Southern Culture,” *American Literature* 85, no. 3 (2013): 506.

structural commonplaces between these two seemingly disparate iterations of southern alterity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, race serves as a constitutive force.¹⁵ Roxann Wheeler observes that the development of racial distinctions in eighteenth-century British thought relied in part upon theories of climate which sought to make crucial distinctions between Britain and its colonies:

Because of the excessive heat that was believed to enervate the body, mind, and morals, commonplaces about the torrid zone being the home of dark-skinned people who were indolent, lascivious, and subject to tyranny often seemed confirmed when Englishmen confronted social and political life as well as labor arrangements that were alien to them.¹⁶

Wheeler's careful reading of the archive of eighteenth century British colonial encounters reveals the fundamental misunderstanding that lies at the heart of what became nineteenth century race science. The social arrangements and lifestyles the colonists observed, measured against the supposedly superior British civilization, required an explanatory framework, and the difference in climate seemed to suffice.¹⁷ Similar climatic theories are found in New World writing as well, shaping not only metropolitan understanding of the West Indies but also the U.S. south. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's "Letter IX" in

¹⁵ Edward Said noted something similar in *Orientalism*: "Theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West most easily associated themselves early in the nineteenth century with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality." Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition (1978; New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 206.

¹⁶ Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000), 24.

¹⁷ Similarly, Said in *Orientalism*, upon noting the excessive sensuality and sexuality attributed to the Orient by nineteenth-century Orientalists, refrained from commenting upon why the region "seemed to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and thread), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, [and] deep generative energies," but the simple answer would be: climate. Said, *Orientalism*, 188.

Letters from an American Farmer, written from “Charles-Town,” opens by comparing the city to Lima, Peru, and focuses throughout on the differences in climate and social mores from the rest of the colonies. Greeson’s reading of this letter highlights the implicit distinction between the model of Crèvecoeur’s gentleman Farmer James and the plantation economy of the southern colonies; as she writes, “The persistence of the plantation in the new United States registered in ‘Letter IX’ not as a narrative process of continuous development from colony into nation, but as a geographical deviance of the southern capital from the national character.”¹⁸ The otherness of the south, therefore, is already present during the transition from colonial subjection to nascent nation-state.

But what about race? Crèvecoeur’s Farmer James, appalled by the examples of enslavement he sees, concludes his letter with a grisly scene of slave torture that may have been taken from the Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes*. This reference point echoed European misgivings about the plantation system, but slavery was not solely the south’s peculiar institution. Crèvecoeur bases his regional distinction between north and south on climate, making the south “a *tropical* American foil,” in Greeson’s words, against the “republican virtue” of Farmer James.¹⁹ In other words, the climatic theory undergirds southern alterity not just in those places colonized by the British, but also the nascent United States. The tropes of tropicality – laziness, indigence, wanton vice – shape global understandings of the south, as perceived from the metropole, before racial theories are codified in the later nineteenth century.

¹⁸ Greeson, *Our South*, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

This is not to suggest that racial difference and white supremacy were not already operative in north-south distinctions in the late eighteenth century; they certainly were. But the later development of race to explain these differences tends to obscure climate's importance in the development of southern alterity. By the time Tocqueville publishes *Democracy in America* in 1835 this shift has occurred; the very clear distinction he makes between the U.S. north and south turns on slavery, which he calls "the capital fact which was to exercise an immense influence on the character, the laws, and the whole future of the South."²⁰ Despite this, the tropes of tropicality continue to influence his perception of the south; although Tocqueville does not focus on the region at length, he proclaims its "backward" character in his description of the new settlements in the Mississippi valley, whose "inhabitants are but of yesterday."²¹ The expansion of the western frontier of the U.S., in other words, took southern alterity with it into these "uncharted territories."

Chapter Three takes up the settlement of this frontier as imagined by William Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but a look at wider westward movement emphasizes again the U.S. south's convergence with and separation from the nation as a whole. In Robert Brinkmeyer and Debra Rae Cohen's consideration of contemporary southern writers' fascination with the western U.S., particularly California, they usefully point out that the "ideological underpinnings of U.S. nationalism have primarily been located in the West, and particularly in the frontier."²² The "myths of freedom and progress" embodied

²⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (1835, 1840; New York: Everyman's Library, 1994), 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² Robert Brinkmeyer and Debra Rae Cohen, "Forward into the Past: California and the Contemporary White Southern Imagination," in *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohen (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 252.

in the west and the frontier, they observe, “have long stood opposed to those of the South.”²³ This is undoubtedly true, and yet the south has played a crucial role in the expansion of U.S. empire: the historian Matthew Karp’s work demonstrates southern lawmakers’ unduly large influence on antebellum U.S. foreign policy, which they used to expand their own imperial designs.²⁴ After the failure of Reconstruction, the nation turned away from the underdeveloped south to instead herald “the rise of a powerful imperial state,” as Harilaos Stecopoulos argues.²⁵ But this did not mean the abandonment of the south in favor of imperial development in Panama or the Philippines; instead, what Jeremy Wells calls “the nationalization of the plantation” in the latter-half of the nineteenth century shaped the U.S.’s sense not just of its past but its future as well, when southern white men believed themselves uniquely equipped to lead the U.S. out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth.²⁶ As outlined by these scholars, the south’s contradictory position within the expanding frontiers of the U.S. emerges from the cultural and political effects of the south’s reintegration into the nation-state after the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction. As the U.S. turned from western expansion to overseas imperialism, the south’s position as a defeated and once-colonized space provided the region a second chance at relevance within the national imaginary.

Not that this renewed relevance eliminated the U.S. south’s basic alterity; on the contrary, it continued to serve as an “internal other,” though one which would now,

²³ Ibid, 253.

²⁴ Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016), 50-69.

²⁵ Harilaos Stecopoulos, *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008), 12-13.

²⁶ Jeremy Wells, *Romances of the White Man’s Burden: Race, Empire, and the Plantation in American Literature, 1880-1936* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2011), 4-6.

through the post-Civil War black codes which evolved into Jim Crow, help contain the presence and threat of blackness. The historian Greg Grandin observes that after Frederick Jackson Turner presented his infamous “frontier thesis,” the meaning of “frontier” became separated from the idea of borders to instead “suggest a cultural zone or civilizational struggle, a way of life: a semantic change electrified by the terror and bloodshed that went along with settler expansion.”²⁷ Around this time, as Grandin points out, “the Confederate flag served...as a symbol not of polarization but of national unification, a prideful pennant in an extending American empire.”²⁸ Again, as I have suggested, this reintegration of the south into the U.S. depended upon that region’s ability to contain freed slaves and their descendants. Such conditions lead to W.E.B. Du Bois’ declamation in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “The North – [the south’s] co-partner in guilt – cannot salve her conscience by plastering it with gold.”²⁹ Du Bois’ own turn to the south to understand the position of African Americans in the rapidly modernizing imperial U.S. was in part a recognition that the “civilizational struggle” of the expanding frontier placed a particularly heavy burden on southern blacks. Northerner though he was, something of the U.S.’s geographical orientation can credibly be read into Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness.” Indeed, Du Bois was one of the first significant African American thinkers who, against the logic of southern alterity, posited the importance of the south for black self-understanding.

Although the post-Reconstruction imperial U.S. looked to its European counterparts for the ideological resources to justify the expansion of American empire, it

²⁷ Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016), 115-16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

²⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Modern Library, 2003), 60.

remained a nation bisected by the same climatic and racial theories that undergirded British imperialism. This placed extra importance on the frontier's regenerative abilities; if the early U.S. was to prove a staging ground for the new man, the "American Adam," the Civil War frustrated such designs. If the Civil War was the nation's fall, the frontier became its new regeneration myth. One of the consequences of southern alterity is that many of its narratives are ones of declension: Uncle Tom's condition deteriorates the further and further south he is taken; the experiences of Kurtz and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* show that the longer one stays on the Congo, the more beset they are by madness; Thomas Sutpen marries a mulatto woman in Haiti only to have his design foiled by the offspring of that union. In our own time, the antebellum south and colonial Africa and West Indies of these novels have been formally disavowed by subsequent developments, effaced by frontier-inflected narratives of a borderless 21st century world. This takes my argument away from the U.S. and the global dimensions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but that does not imply the discarding of the American myth. Indeed, I emphasize that the conception of the frontier in the U.S. is not distinctive or exceptional, but a constituent feature of globalizing, imperial modernity. The foundational logic of the U.S. frontier depends upon continual expansion, first across the continent and then into the world, as Grandin argues.³⁰ It also repudiates the old (as in Old World) in favor of the new. Such expansionist metaphors obscure the fact that before the south was the nation's "internal other," it *was* the frontier. Geographical limits, in other words, are not fixed in the modern global order, but transform as necessary along ideological lines.

³⁰ Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 45-6.

While I do not want to reify notions of U.S. or southern exceptionalism, it is important to note that even within a global framework, the U.S. south occupies a distinct position, at least when viewed on a long historical scale. The dominance of the Virginia planter class in the early republic made this “southern” state of central importance to the burgeoning U.S. Yet South Carolina, as Crèvecoeur indicates, was already perceived in the late colonial period as a place of vice and violence, a position increasingly attributed to the region as a whole. These historical realities suggest both why I refuse to codify a monolithic U.S. south, and also why I expand the range of “southernness” to take in global conditions beyond the nation-state. Hortense Spillers clears a path for my argument in her essay “Who Cuts the Border?”, in which she writes:

The construction and invention of “America,” then – a dizzying concoction of writing and reportage, lying and “signifying,” jokes, “tall tales,” and transgenerational nightmare, all conflated under the banner of Our Lord – exemplify, for all intents and purposes, the oldest game of *trompe de l’oeil*, the perhaps-mistaken-glance-of-the-eye, that certain European powers carried out regarding indigenous Americans.³¹

Bringing things back to their origins, as Spillers does here, emphasizes the global nature of empire that the U.S., for all its mighty attempts to define itself against European models, fully participates in as a colonized and colonizing space. Southern alterity, then, can be seen as a condition of colonization that the U.S. attempts to avoid by bracketing off its own internal south.

³¹ Hortense Spillers, “Who Cuts the Border? Some Readings on America,” *Black, White and in Color* (Chicago: U of Chicago P 2003), 322-23.

1.3 Southern Alterity's Global Dimensions

The dichotomous north and south sketched in the previous section is a constitutive part of global modernism, but it does not exhaust its dimensions. In other words, while southern alterity is a key aspect of this formation, it is not the whole of it. Nor is the understanding of the south as other and the north as normative universal. Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South*, serialized between September 1854 and January 1855, takes up the question of regional difference and uneven development within Great Britain. The British north-south schema challenges the logic of southern alterity as I have defined it: the south in Gaskell's novel is pastoral, bucolic, slow, while the north is industrial, crowded, busy. Although this could also describe the U.S. north and south, at this time in Great Britain the north was configured as the region of alterity. After Margaret Hale arrives in Darkshire (a lightly fictionalized Manchester) from her peaceful village in the south of England, she has an exchange with the industrial worker Nicholas Higgins which suggests both the relative meanings of "north" and "south" in this context, as well as Gaskell's desire to move beyond such boundaries to encompass a universalizing ethos of amelioration. Higgins says, upon Margaret's gifts of fresh flowers to his daughter Bessy:

"Thank yo, Miss. Bessy 'll think a deal o' them flowers; that hoo will; and I shall think a deal o' yor kindness. Yo're not of this country, I reckon?" "No!" said Margaret, half sighing. "I come from the South – from Hampshire," she continued, a little afraid of wounding his consciousness of ignorance, if she used a name which he did not understand. "That's beyond London, I reckon?" [Nicholas asked.] And I come fro' Burnley-ways, and forty mile to th' North. And yet, yo

see, North and South has both met and made kind o' friends in this big smoky place."³²

Befitting a Victorian social problem novel, Gaskell's concern with injustice and reform does not allow her to portray either the north or the south as normative. While Gaskell seems more attentive to the injustices undergone by laborers in the industrial north, her narrative does not ignore the larger condition of uneven development. As Nicholas says much later in the novel: "North an' South have each gotten their own troubles. If work's sure and steady theer, labour's paid at starvation prices; while here we'n rucks o' money coming in one quarter, and ne'er a farthing th' next."³³ The forces of labor and material conditions that constitute modernity may be deployed along distinctive geographical lines in the Britain of Gaskell's time, but her attention to them reveals their larger correspondences with a rapidly expanding global order.

Likewise, the condition of southern alterity in early U.S. literature confounds contemporary understandings in some ways while remaining conversant in others. Few texts illustrate this better than Leonora Sansay's bizarre epistolary novel of 1808, *Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo*. Portraying a lightly fictionalized account of Sansay's experience in the waning days of the Haitian Revolution, the novel refuses some notions of southern alterity that would eventually become firmer, as well as revealing the transnational scope of at least some early U.S. literature. The French creoles portrayed in *Secret History* are foolish and decadent, carrying on with elaborate social affairs and

³² Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, (1854; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 67.

³³ *Ibid*, 279.

clandestine sexual relationships even as the threat of the rebelling black Haitian forces grows ever closer. In one of her letters, Sansay's narrator writes:

But the moment of enjoying these pleasures is, I fear, far distant. The negroes have felt during ten years the blessing of liberty, for a blessing it certainly is, however acquired, and they will not be easily deprived of it. They have fought and vanquished the French troops, and their strength has increased from a knowledge of the weakness of their opposers, and the climate itself combats for them.³⁴

It is difficult to ascertain either Sansay or her narrator's thoughts about the wider Haitian Revolution, but an aura of dread and inevitability pervades the novel; not only is the colonial project obviously doomed, but the revolution itself makes a certain amount of sense, given the decade-long "blessing of liberty" enjoyed by the free blacks of Saint-Domingue. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon argues that the novel's focus on "elite, white domestic relations against the backdrop of warfare...does not bespeak sustained delusion (or colonial nostalgia) so much as an astute analysis of the relations of production and social reproduction that stand at the core of colonial politics."³⁵ Not only is the novel aware of the wider resonances of settler colonialism beyond the nascent U.S. nation-state, early American literature in Dillon's estimation possesses a "complex relation to a variety of colonial, post-colonial, and transnational geopolitical formations that were constitutive with respect to the vexed and often less-than-coherent formulations of the 'domestic' in

³⁴ Leonora Sansay, *Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo*, in *Secret History and Laura*, ed. Michael J. Drexler (1808; Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2007), 73.

³⁵ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "The Secret History of the Early American Novel: Leonora Sansay and Revolution in Saint Domingue," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 40, no. 1/2 (2006-2007): 78.

the early national period.”³⁶ Paraphrasing Dillon somewhat, I argue that these passages from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *North and South*, and *Secret History* anticipate the modes of southern alterity in the global modernist novel.

None of these novels, in even the most generous terms, could be considered modernist, but all are deeply modern. Ascertaining the exact relationship between modernity and modernism merits a separate study in its own right, but clarifying the relationship between the two illustrates one of the larger concerns of this project: to establish the literary formation of global modernism as a relatively specific and bounded aspect of global modernity that simultaneously engages the social and material conditions of the period covered by this study, while at the same time reflecting upon modernity tout court. Undoubtedly such a wide-ranging claim involves a certain amount of generalization and flattening, but I consider this relationship key to establishing the significance of southern alterity for understanding the literature and culture of the first half of the twentieth century.

1.4 Modernity with Modernism

This study makes a large claim regarding the term “global modernism.” Contested and often poorly defined, it nevertheless offers a conceptual framework by which to comparatively read works often understood as bounded by nationality, race, period, and so forth. Global modernism describes a portion of what Pascale Casanova calls the “world republic of letters,” which in her account is created by the increasing interconnection of disparate areas of the globe over the last three centuries.³⁷ This does

³⁶ Ibid, 79.

³⁷ Casanova posits the start of “[i]nternational literary space” in the sixteenth century, which is perhaps earlier than I might, but the connection between the cultural developments of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and the economic developments of capital and

not mean the erasure of racial, ethnic, and national boundaries; in many cases, they are strengthened in the face of globalization. Nor do I want to posit a utopian dimension to this increased interconnectivity akin to the rosier accounts of globalization in the neoliberal era. For my purposes, global modernism offers a fuller and more accurate account of modernist literature. Not only were global networks of authors, publications, and literary institutions key to the development of global modernism, but the works classified as such portray the rapidly globalizing, rapidly modernizing world from which they emerge.³⁸

This all bears some relationship to Goethe's cosmopolitan notion of *weltliteratur* (world literature); as George Steiner observes in "A Footnote to *Weltliteratur*," Goethe "is specifically countering the monoglot mystique of the German-language cult" in advocating his *weltliteratur*, using a "utilitarian, positivist vocabulary" drawn from "the world of free mercantile exchange."³⁹ Goethe's use of language associated with forms of economic exchange relates to my understanding of modernity as basically coterminous with the development of capitalism. To think about modernism globally requires an understanding of its relationship with modernity, but this often raises more questions than it answers. As Peter Kalliney observes, for the "five major theorists of global or transnational literature" that he identifies (Casanova, David Damrosch, Paul Gilroy, Franco Moretti, and Gayatri Spivak), "the vexed relationship between modernism (as a

global trade are the matrix from which global modernism emerges. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 11.

³⁸ For just one example of these networks of patronage and influence, see Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013).

³⁹ George Steiner, "A Footnote to *Weltliteratur*," in *World Literature: A Reader*, ed. Theo D'haen, César Domínguez, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (London: Routledge, 2013), 116.

set of aesthetic tendencies across the arts) and modernity (as a broad historical marker associated with the dominance of capitalism and an increase in intercultural contact) has been a crucial factor in [their] discussion[.]”⁴⁰ I do not pretend to solve this conflict, but I posit a relationship between them that, drawing on the work of Karl Polanyi, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and Fredric Jameson, offers an account of global modernism that both situates it in the larger formation of modernity as well as illustrates the importance of southern alterity for the formation of both modernism and modernity.

The development of modernity, broadly understood as coterminous with the Enlightenment, overlaps with the emergence of capitalism. Wood, in her account of capitalism’s origins, eschews models rooted in urban-centered trade relationships typified by the Dutch or the Genoese, or even an industrial production; rather, she argues that it is the specific mode of “property relations between producers and appropriators, whether in industry or agriculture” that define capital, along with the market dependence of both capital and labor for the conditions of their reproduction.⁴¹ This means that the internal economic developments of Great Britain created the stage upon which capitalism springs into being. Wood’s consideration of agricultural and rural development in the emergence of capitalism obviously bears significance for an argument that seeks to undo notions of southern spaces as not modern. Furthermore, two facets of her argument are also important for my project: first, her account places British imperialism at the center of the development of global capitalism, which has profound implications for the spread of British and Anglophone culture and literature; and second, an ethos of “improvement”

⁴⁰ Peter Kalliney, *Modernism in a Global Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 5.

⁴¹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 96-97.

derived particularly from the ideas of John Locke is irrevocably built into the ideology of capitalism.⁴²

The emergence of British imperialism enabled the global export of this ideology of improvement, another constitutive feature of global modernism. In Polanyi's account, the sudden shift into modern European imperialism following the Berlin Conference of 1884 violated, or at least superseded, the previous held notion that the state apparatus was largely not meant to intervene in free trade; he writes, "Anybody who talked colonies in the century between 1780 and 1880 was looked upon as an adherent of the *ancien régime*."⁴³ After the start of the Scramble for Africa, what Polanyi calls the "double movement" took hold in Europe: "The pattern of international trade which was now spreading at an accelerated rate was crossed by the introduction of protectionist institutions designed to check the all-around actions of the market."⁴⁴ Imperial development of putatively undeveloped colonies relied therefore on this ideology of improvement, spurring greater governmental intervention into both the colony and the market. Wood makes clear that the ideology of improvement was central to the development of capitalism imperialism: "Making land productive – that is, *improving* it – was becoming the basis of property rights; and, more particularly, the *failure* to improve could mean *forfeiting* the right to property."⁴⁵ The point for my account is that if the rise of capitalism in the seventeenth century, along with the liberalizing philosophical

⁴² Ibid, 109-115.

⁴³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944; Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 222. Exceptions exist, of course, such as the Dutch East India Company, but the direct governmental rule over the colonies was not widespread until after 1884.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 223.

⁴⁵ Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 157. Emphasis hers.

investigations of the Enlightenment, marked the inauguration of modernity, a similar linkage constitutes the emergence of high imperialism and literary modernism. In other words, while the relation between modernism and modernity may not be straightforward, both formations develop alongside dynamic, world-historical economic, social, and intellectual movements. Without the rapid and heretofore unheard-of spread of European imperialism engendered by new technologies of travel, navigation, and communication, global modernism could not have developed.

The ideology of improvement and development, read alongside Goethe's mercantilist vocabulary in describing *weltliteratur*, suggests the pervasiveness of economic ideas and subsequent cultural developments in the modern world. Although this study does not primarily engage the economic dimensions of global modernism, the importance of market-thinking to the matrix of ideas from which modernist literature emerges is key to my point about the relationship between modernism and modernity. The profound worldwide upheaval following in the wake of the Berlin Conference leads many to emphasize rupture in their accounts of modernity. Arjun Appadurai exemplifies this line of thought:

For many societies, modernity is an elsewhere, just as the global is a temporal wave that must be encountered in *their* present. Globalization has shrunk the distance between elites, shifted key relationships between producers and consumers, broken many links between labor and family life, obscured the lines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 9-10.

Appadurai certainly captures the uneven and often deleterious effects of globalized modernity. The implications for an account of modernist literature are apparent, given how central rupture and fragmentation are to its aesthetic practice. Yet, against Appadurai's account, I position Jameson's notion of a singular modernity as more faithfully capturing the dynamics undergirding the position I lay out.

Jameson observes that, after the failure of the Soviet Union and the triumph of liberal capitalism captured in Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, the recovery of modernity as a paradigm of global development is meant, in part, to reinscribe some sense of telos in the underdeveloped parts of the globe:

The revival of the concept of modernity is an attempt to solve that problem: in a situation in which modernization, socialism, industrialization (particularly the former, pre-computerized kind of heavy industry), Prometheanism, and the "rape of nature" generally, have been discredited, you can still suggest that the so-called underdeveloped countries might want to look forward to simple "modernity" itself.⁴⁷

This, however, creates its own conceptual issues by implying a return to something already surpassed, if not entirely discredited. Hence, the rise of "'alternative' modernities," which offer cultural formations that bypass the "hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model." The attractiveness of these alternative modernities for those of us who recognize the plentitude of injustices committed in the name of progress and development against the colonized of the Global South cannot be denied. The problem, however, lies not in the moral orientation of this model, but its incompleteness; or, in Jameson's words, "this is to

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 8.

overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself.”⁴⁸ On the one hand, the failure of the Soviet Union means the failure of an alternative to this condition, an unsurprising implication for a Marxist theorist such as Jameson to make. On the other hand, the post-Soviet condition now being basically triumphant leads to a reconsideration of the history of modernity into the present as one of a rather unbroken project of Western liberal capitalism.

Again, this is not to deny the very real ruptures that Appadurai describes; the question is how they are understood. Jameson’s singular modernity, as the Warwick Research Collective writes, is also marked by its simultaneity. This means that those ruptures are in fact constitutive of the system that creates them: “Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development...the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history[.]”⁴⁹ The WReC, glossing this, writes:

Capitalist modernisation entails development, yes – but this “development” takes the forms also of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development...The idea of some sort of “achieved” modernity, in which unevenness would have been superseded, harmonised, vanquished or ironed out is radically unhistorical.⁵⁰

The ruptures, the uneven development, the deliberate underdevelopment that shape and touch subaltern spaces and lives are central to my account of the relation between

⁴⁸ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 307.

⁵⁰ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015), 13.

modernism and modernity for the way in which they illustrate so clearly the fundamental apparatus of southern alterity. The condition of southern alterity, indeed, could be described as shorthand for the concept of combined and uneven development.

Herein lies the primary paradox of *weltliteratur*: at the same time that Goethe was keen to articulate a vision opposed to nascent German nationalist conceptions of literature, literary nationalism was coalescing not just in Germany but across Europe, part of what Casanova describes as the “Herder effect.”⁵¹ Casanova’s account of “international literary space” as typified by competition and a reification of nationalist cultural tendencies that could only be transcended by becoming fully internationalized through Parisian acceptance and dissemination does not fully describe what I am attempting to establish, but nevertheless demonstrates that the marketization language Steiner finds in Goethe to be remarkably salient for the development of world literature, perhaps against Goethe’s explicit desires but nevertheless in line with the development of global capitalism that he (perhaps unknowingly) drew upon. Casanova, correctly I think, posits that decolonization “marks the third great stage in the formation of international literary space.”⁵² Following this, my study could be said to concern itself with the period in between the rise of *weltliterature* and the start of decolonization, a period when capitalism, through imperialism, becomes truly globalized.

Postcolonialism offers an account of world literature’s emergence that unsurprisingly sees the colonial enterprise as imbricated in it. Gayatri Spivak, in *Death of*

⁵¹ Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 78.

⁵² *Ibid*, 79.

a Discipline, proposes to correct the distortions of world or global literature by using “the planet to overwrite the globe”:

The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe.⁵³

Against the capitalist formation of globalization and the postcolonialist formation of nation against empire (and globalization), Spivak invites us to imagine “planetary” as a “utopian idea” that can serve to unsettle “a ‘reformed’ comparative literary vision [which] may remain caught within varieties of cultural relativism, specular alterity, and cyber-benevolence.”⁵⁴ Despite Spivak’s provocative suggestion, I retain the term global modernism because, while I recognize that “global” conjures up the neo-imperialist forces of global capitalism and the utopian ameliorations of neoliberal financialization, my account recognizes the power of these formations even as they reinforce southern alterity. It is, in fact, this very ideological condition that makes up the contemporary world we live in, one that the term “global modernism” adequately describes.

That does not mean that I treat these conditions uncritically; indeed, I follow Spivak’s observations in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* where, reflecting on Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, she explains how the degraded condition of colonized spaces flows directly from Enlightenment philosophical concepts:

⁵³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 72.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

The dangerous transformative power of philosophy, however, is that its formal subtlety can be travestied in the service of the state. Such a travesty in the case of the categorical imperative can justify the imperialist project by producing the following formula: make the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself; in the interest of admitting the raw man into the noumenon; yesterday's imperialism, today's "Development."⁵⁵

Few have limned the condition of southern alterity with more accuracy than this, not just its origins in European thought, but its continuation into the present, far beyond the scope of this study. While I would not describe this study's methods as postcolonial, that discourse's ability to describe the conditions attendant upon colonialism make thinkers like Spivak invaluable for my project's understanding of how regions are formed both materially and ideologically.

Furthermore, there is an affective or phenomenological dimension to many of the novels considered here which convey the "structures of feeling," following Raymond Williams, of the conditions of colonialism and its afterlives. In Neil Lazarus' words:

The success of writers in "opening up" for us structures of feeling or fields of vision, in enabling us as readers imaginatively to "inhabit" these structures or fields, depends on their ability to find the words, concepts, figures, tropes, and narrative forms to mediate between and thread together – in ways that are not merely plausible but, more importantly, *intelligible* and *transmissible* – what are in fact discrepant and discontinuous aspects of reality: for example, landscape,

⁵⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 123-124.

forces and relations of production, community, awareness of self, gender, language.⁵⁶

Lazarus describes a significant component of the appeal of postcolonial literature for those of us researching and writing in the hegemonic political structures of the U.S. or British university. At the same time, he engages in a defense of Jameson's famous and notorious essay on Third World literature, in which Jameson argued: "All third-world texts are necessarily... allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly Western machineries of representation, such as the novel."⁵⁷ While I do not entirely discount Jameson's intervention here, I quibble with his notion of "national allegories" on the basis that many postcolonial works, at least as I define the term, are unconcerned with questions of nationalism. Particularly when considering modernist novels written by African Americans living under apartheid conditions, the question of nationality is not clear-cut; although not traditionally considered postcolonial novels, they nevertheless share an essential condition with those novels traditionally understood as postcolonial by writing against the condition of colonization.

Aijaz Ahmad's noted critique of Jameson's Third World argument holds that the term "Third World" itself "is, even in its most telling deployments, a polemical one, with no theoretical status whatsoever...there is no such thing as a 'Third World Literature' which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge."⁵⁸ I

⁵⁶ Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 79-80. Emphasis his.

⁵⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 165. Emphasis his.

⁵⁸ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 96-97.

follow Ahmad in noting not just the unsatisfactorily theoretical dimension of “Third World,” but also the limits of the ascription of “national allegory” to this formulation. Herein lies the descriptive utility of the term “global modernism”: without discounting the myriad forms under which global anglophone novels have been produced in the twentieth century, no formation such as race, nationalism, ethnicity, gender, or the like can be said to predominate over all the others. I am not discounting these social relations; rather, I am seeking to account for them in their fullness without reducing them to essentialisms. In this regard, Paul Gilroy’s account of the Black Atlantic, while incomplete in many ways, gestures towards what I am here outlining. Gilroy writes:

But that narrowness of vision which is content with the merely national has also been challenged from within that black community by thinkers who were prepared to renounce the easy claims of African-American exceptionalism in favour of a global, coalitional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse.⁵⁹

This formulation – or Spivak’s, who in Kalliney’s words uses Sigmund Freud’s uncanny to “help us get beyond the Manichean binaries of early postcolonial theory – white-black, metropolitan-colonial, modern-traditional” – represents the kind of work I hope this study achieves, one that eschews the very boundaries that engenders the conditions of southern alterity in the first place to instead encounter the singular modernity that creates the ground upon which the novelists treated in this study “interact, if not...fuse.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 4.

⁶⁰ Kalliney, *Modernism in a Global Context*, 15-16. Ellipsis mine.

In that spirit, I take up an observation of Said's in *Culture and Imperialism* as one central to this study: "One of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world closer together, and although in the process the separation between Europeans and natives was an insidious and fundamentally unjust one, most of us should now regard the historical experience of empire as a common one."⁶¹ That this common historical experience, this singular modernity, shapes our understanding of the modernist literature produced across the globe stands to reason; at the same time, there are clearly issues with the concept of global modernity, or in its older formulation, world literature, that should be attended to. Aamir R. Mufti observes that world literature itself partakes of the colonial formation:

"World literature" came into being (only) when the cultural system of the modern bourgeois West had appropriated and assimilated – that is, "discovered," absorbed, recalibrated, rearranged, reevaluated, reclassified, reconstellated, compared, translated, historicized, standardized, disseminated, and, in short, *fundamentally transformed* – the widely diverse and diffuse writing practices and traditions of the societies and civilizations of the "East," which extended in the Euro-Occidental imagination from the Atlantic shore of North Africa to the littoral of the Sea of Japan.⁶²

What Mufti describes as the West's formation of "world literature" along the east-west axis could as easily be ascribed to the north-south axis as well. In arguing for the necessary relationship between global north and global south in this study, I do not seek to ignore the hegemonic and imperial conditions of the north upon the south; indeed,

⁶¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxii.

⁶² Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016), 49. Emphasis his.

southern alterity emerges from this reality. In this regard, southern alterity shares something of the nature of Orientalism: as Said observes in his pioneering study, “the durability and strength” of Orientalism emerges from “the cultural hegemony [of Europe, or the global north] at work[.]”⁶³

Likewise, notions of world literature in the post-Second World War global political order offer pitfalls of their own. In his study of the formation of world literature after the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Joseph R. Slaughter observes:

Thanks to transnational cultural exchange across the “literary channel” and to the material circulatory systems of imperialism, *Robinson Crusoe* represented for the delegates [who drafted the UDHR] a common universal culture (a “world heritage”), in which reposed the collective wisdom of centuries of social history, practice, and theory necessary to rearticulate the proper relations between individual and society as international human rights law.⁶⁴

For the world novel, particularly the *bildungsroman*, the Enlightenment subject reigned supreme as the material for novelistic treatment: “The result is a paradoxical ‘historical figure’ of Enlightenment civil subjectivity that is neither man nor citizen, but is what Étienne Balibar calls the ‘Citizen Subject.’”⁶⁵ Here we may seem to be back in the territory of national allegory, considering that Slaughter regards the *bildungsroman* in its idealist form as the incorporation of the individual, particularly the “historical marginal”

⁶³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Ed. (1978; New York: Vintage, 2003), 7

⁶⁴ Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007), 53.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 110.

one, within the fold of national citizenship.⁶⁶ Similarly, Sarah Brouillette in her study of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), writes that “a global high-literary milieu has in fact been a part of the culture of a particular phase in the history of bourgeois social formation,” one that will “likely continue to crumble along with its key foundations: a robust system of higher education and liberal democracy.”⁶⁷ In Brouillette’s pessimistic account, UNESCO has fallen from its 1970s heyday to a contemporary condition marked by its “belief that literature has become what cultural sociologists studying the literary field have called ‘an object of cultural consumption for dwindling and aging publics.’”⁶⁸ Whatever the fate of the literary is to be in our present lies beyond the scope of this study, but I want nonetheless to register the force of Brouillette’s critique for its warning against such formulations such as global modernism as fodder for the relatively well-heeled audiences who have the leisure time and expense account for literary exploration. Such definitions of world literature or what-have-you lie beyond my purview here, but I think we should keep a watchful eye on these developments.

As I mentioned above, attempts to expand the geographic and cultural remit of modernity through such frames as “global modernity” involve the risk of flattening complex social and cultural dynamics. While I am sympathetic to her efforts to expand and improve upon previous models, Susan Stanford Friedman’s recent volume *Planetary Modernisms* represents the temptation inherent in drawing the circle of “modernism” and “modernity” so wide as to strain conceptual coherence. Friedman writes:

⁶⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁶⁷ Sarah Brouillette, *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019), 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 18.

To fulfill the promise of the planetary turn, I suggest, we must rethink *modernity* and *modernism* outside the long twentieth century, outside the post-1500 temporal frame commonly understood as the *period* of the *modern* in its stages from early to late. I use the term *planetary* to invoke this greater expanse of time and space, to signal my attempt to break away from periodization altogether. *Planetary...is an epistemology, not an ontology.*⁶⁹

Here I have to break with Friedman's unusual provocations to align with Emily Apter's observation that world literature "extended the promise of worldly criticism, politicized cosmopolitanism, comparability aesthetics galvanized by a deprovincialized Europe" to find itself instead constricted by the "psychopolitics of planetary dysphoria...itself definable as the depression of the globe or the thymotic frustration of the world."⁷⁰ While I agree with Friedman that Western-centric literary study has often served to displace non-hegemonic, non-white modernist literary and cultural products as aberrant or inferior, I nonetheless hold to a relatively narrow historical and cultural definition of both modernism and modernity.

Indeed, I emphasize the specificity of the period this study treats, 1899-1966, because within these dates we see the modernist literary aesthetic move from engages the forces of high European colonialism and the emergence of U.S. empire at the close of the nineteenth century forward through the Civil Rights and anticolonial movements of midcentury. In these developments, the ideological content of southern alterity is consolidated and repudiated; the centuries of European exploration, conquest, and

⁶⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015), 7. Emphasis hers.

⁷⁰ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 7-8.

empire-building that created the modern world also brought about the movements to resist, cast off, and overthrow that very world-historical cultural formation. Southern alterity therefore should not be seen just as a condition imposed upon those spaces configured as southern, but as a contested condition that intersected with some of the most arresting efforts of modernist novelists in the roughly the first half of the twentieth century.

I end this section with a brief consideration of *Blake; or, The Huts of America*, Martin R. Delaney's novelistic rejoinder to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Delaney's radically transnational vision, the struggle against the plantation and enslavement stretches beyond the U.S.'s borders to encompass the whole of the plantation system. The imperial designs of the southern planter class are made clear, particularly in the novel's portrayal of Judge Ballard and Major Armsted, who travel early in the novel to Natchez on a particular mission that illustrates the interconnectedness of the U.S. south and the wider Caribbean's plantation network:

The Judge had come to examine the country, purchase a cotton farm, and complete the arrangements of an interest in the "Merchantman." Already the proprietor of a large estate in Cuba, he was desirous of possessing a Mississippi cotton place.⁷¹

For the titular protagonist of Delaney's novel, the struggle against the plantation order both emerges from his West Indian origins and culminates in the raising of an insurrectionary force in Cuba, which had long been in the sights of those southern

⁷¹ Martin R. Delaney, *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859-62; Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 59.

planters and political leaders who desired an empire of slavery, as Karp outlines in his study, quoted above.

Henry Blake, a free West Indian black enslaved in Mississippi, faces the sale of his wife to a Cuban plantation, echoing the plight of Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Whereas Eliza and her child, once reunited with her husband George, flee to Canada, Blake takes a more militaristic tack. As he makes his way from plantation to plantation to sow the seeds of the revolution, Delaney outlines the possibilities inherent in this undertaking:

From plantation to plantation did he go, sowing the seeds of future devastation and ruin to the master and redemption of the slave, an antecedent more terrible in its anticipation than the warning voice of the destroying Angel in commanding the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt.⁷²

Andy Doolen argues that “the capaciousness of the novel form released Delaney from the formulaic and political restrictions of abolitionist writing,” also freeing him from the “trap” of a nationalist framework, thereby creating the space for a “rejection of American revolutionary rhetoric and ideology [which] serves as a catalyst for the novel’s transnational turn toward revolutionary Cuba.”⁷³ It is this transnational and revolutionary dimension I want to highlight here; not only does *Blake* engage southern alterity in ways that anticipate some the modernist novels considered in this study, but it also gestures towards the larger historical story I seek to tell. The “structure of attitude and reference” (following Said) of southern alterity has never been one-dimensional; from virtually the

⁷² Ibid, 83.

⁷³ Andy Doolen, “Be Cautious of the Word ‘Rebel’: Race, Revolution, and Transnational History in Martin Delaney’s *Blake; or, The Huts of America*,” *American Literature* 81, no. 1 (2009): 156-157.

first moment it emerged in literary modernism, it has been contested by other accounts that offer not just an alternative to colonial hegemony, but a fuller picture of the condition of modernity. As Said writes, “What does need to be remembered is that narratives of emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest form were also narratives of *integration* not separation, the stories of people who had been excluded from the main group but who were now fighting for a place in it.”⁷⁴ This is the narrative movement of the global modernist novel as it encounters, engages, and resists southern alterity.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

In the chapters that make up this dissertation, I follow a basic pattern of choosing two novels to read comparatively, or following Said, “contrapuntally.” Each chapter treats a theme I consider basic to understanding southern alterity through these contrapuntal readings. Other, similar literary texts that bear on the issue will be touched on from time to time; furthermore, I have not “front-loaded” my entire theoretical apparatus in this introduction, but develop it across the subsequent chapters in hopes that my larger argument will unfold dynamically throughout the whole study.

In Chapter One, I locate the foundational narrative movement of southern alterity in the global modernist novel. I explore this “fateful voyage south” through two novels central to the narrative frameworks that this study returns to again and again: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Charles W. Chesnutt’s *Marrow of Tradition*. Both of them portray voyages into the south, the former by ship and the latter by train, that prove deleterious for virtually everyone involved. Conrad’s protagonist Marlow embarks on his voyage to recover the elusive and enigmatic Kurtz, the exemplar of European learning

⁷⁴ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxvi.

and innovation, who has fulfilled the “civilizing mission” of imperial exploration to the point of “going native” and establishing a brutal, frightful outpost of colonial hegemony. Chesnutt’s Dr. Miller, a light-skinned, middle-class professional, returns south to his North Carolina home to find himself caught up in the political intrigues and treachery of a coordinated effort on the part of avowed white supremacists to overthrow the Fusionist government in favor of their regime. Both novels establish southern alterity as a geographically bound condition, but their accounts differ in important ways: while Conrad’s novel ontologizes the condition as one inherent to southern spaces and their inhabitants, Chesnutt lays the blame clearly on the hegemonic cultural and political orders of white supremacy. While both feature indeterminate endings, *Heart of Darkness* seems incapable of envisioning a political order that does not rest upon the exploitation and virtual enslavement of African subjects, whereas Chesnutt makes a gesture towards some manner of racial reconciliation, albeit one that can only emerge as a possibility by reckoning with the condition of the U.S. south.

Chapter Two looks at two somewhat different views of southern spaces, offering a pair of quasi-utopian configurations that stand as possible alternatives to the strictures of metropolitan modernism. Virginia Woolf, in her debut novel *The Voyage Out*, follows Conrad’s narrative movement in *Heart of Darkness* but also offers a reflection on the culture and politics of Edwardian Britain through the experience of her protagonist, Rachel Vinrace. In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the willful protagonist Janie embarks upon a varied life that often holds out the promise of freedom before circumstances change to reveal a world with codes as rigid as those experienced by Rachel in Woolf’s novel. For both of these protagonists, their unconventional desire

for freedom and self-understanding reaches a moment of possible transcendence in the less “civilized” settings of the South American interior in the former and the “muck” of the Everglades in the latter. Both novels end by foreclosing this possibility, by deadly illness in Rachel’s case and the “natural” disaster of a hurricane in Janie’s. Much as in the texts treated in the first chapter, these indeterminate endings underscore the inescapable realities of southern alterity even as one of the novels, in this case Hurston’s, offers a picture of a possible form of freedom and self-determination.

Chapter Three turns to the figure of Haiti in U.S. modernist writing through a reading of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder*. Haiti, I argue, is the shadowy other of the U.S. south, the “south’s south,” and in these two novels serves as an uncanny Caribbean double to their respective settings, Mississippi and Virginia. Both are historical novels that reach into the antebellum past to explore pressing contemporary issues; both furthermore position Haiti as a key to understanding. *Absalom* does not explicitly evoke Haiti, but suggests that it is the place where Thomas Sutpen is able to acquire enough wealth, enslaved people, and materiel to realize his dream of carving out a great plantation. For the enslaved rebels of *Black Thunder*, lead by Gabriel, the success of the Haitian Revolution inspires their efforts to overthrow slavery in Henrico County and throughout the region. The figure of the plantation, central to any account of global modernity, is seen in this chapter as a contested site that either represents the failure of the antebellum southern economy and culture or serves as a ground of contestation with the forces of enslavement and white supremacy that echo long past the end of the Civil War. Again, both novels offer indeterminate endings: whereas Faulkner ironizes the legacy of the south through

Quentin Compson's disavowal of his hatred of the south, Bontemps leaves the reader with the distinct impression that Gabriel's rebellion, although a failure, will continue to resonate with further developments of black radical self-determination.

In the final chapter, I reverse the narrative movement of Chapter One through my reading of Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Both novels feature protagonists from southern spaces who move to the metropole only to find themselves configured as southern subjects. Here I use the figure of Caliban, so important to the imagination of twentieth-century Caribbean theorists and literary writers, to stage the question of what might have happened at the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* if Caliban had left the island. Unsurprisingly, given the previous three chapters, the condition of southern alterity beyond the Global South still obtains. Rhys' novel ends with the same pessimistic indeterminacy of the white-authored novels previously considered. By contrast, I leave Ellison's protagonist midway through the novel, standing on the Harlem sidewalk where he agitates against the eviction of an elderly black couple from the south. The second half of Ellison's novel, I argue, represents a new chapter in the wider story I am telling here, one that will have to wait for a subsequent study exploring southern alterity through the cultural ferment of the latter half of the twentieth century, such as the Civil Rights movement, decolonization, and the racist backlash against immigration in Great Britain. The Conclusion gestures towards the foment of these movements with a brief reading of Tayeb Salih's 1966 novel, *Season of Migration to the North*, a response to *Heart of Darkness*.

CHAPTER 2. THE FATEFUL VOYAGE SOUTH

2.1 A Quality of Darkness

At the start of *Travels Without Maps*, his 1936 travel book chronicling his four-week journey through Liberia the year previous, Graham Greene recounts his visit to the Liberian Consul in London to secure the paperwork necessary for his travel:

I examined the usual blank map upon the wall, a few towns along the coast, a few villages along the border. “Have you been to Liberia?” I asked. “No, no,” the large man said. “We let them come to us.” The other man struck a round red seal on my passport; it bore the National Mark, a three-masted ship, a palm tree, a dove flying overhead, and the legend “The love of liberty brought us here.”¹

Greene takes pains in his chronicle to present himself as a knowledgeable and worldly traveler despite not having undertaken the necessary preparations for the trip. Noting that Liberia’s “history...was very little different from the history of neighboring white colonies,” he ironically observes that “one can hardly blame these half-caste settlers when they found that love of their own liberty was not consistent with the liberty of the native tribes” (15). Greene displays an awareness of Liberia’s origins as a settlement of the American Colonization Society, which worked under the assumption that free African Americans would prefer – indeed, would fare better – returning to Africa to living in the U.S. As is invocation of the “native tribes” suggests, this knowledge does not keep him from looking past the Republic’s distinctiveness into a romanticized view of the continent based around “a quality of darkness”:

¹ Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (1936; New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 12. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

It is not then *any* part of Africa which acts so strongly on this unconscious mind; certainly no part where the white settler has been most successful in reproducing the conditions of his country, its morals, and its popular art. A quality of darkness is needed, of the inexplicable. (17)

While Greene seemingly acknowledges the variegated qualities to be found in a continent as vast as Africa, in reality his evocation of the “quality of darkness” needed for his travels evinces the ideology of European empire. Greene has been writing of South Africa, Kenya, and Rhodesia, areas of the continent colonized by European powers; for the purposes of his journey and what he hopes to find, such places will not suffice. Instead, he requires darkness, the inexplicable: in short, Greene’s quest requires an area characterized by “the usual blank map.” Greene, following the blank map, imparts the quality of darkness to those regions of Africa untouched by the white settler.

As befitting his still-journeyman status as a writer and would-be explorer of what was then tellingly known as the Dark Continent, Greene evokes Joseph Conrad. Not, however, the text seemingly alluded to, *Heart of Darkness*, but rather the source material for that novel: the *Congo Diary* in which Conrad records the fateful and decisive steamer journey he undertook in the Congo on behalf of a Belgian trading company.² That Greene could, in all confidence, allude to *Heart of Darkness* but instead cite the *Congo Diary* (along with Céline) suggests not just an audience familiar with Conrad’s novel, but also its reception as a signal modern text which purports to convey the reality of Africa for the European reader.

² “This Africa may take the form of an unexplained brutality as when Conrad noted in his Congo diary: ‘Thursday, 3rd July...met an off^{er} of the State inspecting. A few minutes afterwards saw at a camp place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot? Horrid smell’...” Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, 17.

Six essays on *Heart of Darkness* collected in a volume on Conrad published in 1960 suggest something of the novel's reception among critics after the study of modernism began in earnest, but prior to the advent of postcolonial studies. To take just three: Jerome Thale compares Marlow's journey to a "grail quest," Lillian Feder likens "Marlow's journey [to] the epic descent in general...most specifically related to the visit to Hades in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*," and Robert O. Evans references the Underworld along with the "hollow" and "stuffed" men of T.S. Eliot's long poem "The Hollow Men," which begins with an quote from *Heart of Darkness*.³ I do not cite these essays simply to observe that white critics of a certain generation were particularly susceptible to the temptation to elide the presence of blackness in Conrad's text, or that they uphold Eurocentric notions of civilization; all this is well-established. Rather, these essays demonstrate how the Anglo-American view of Africa, which *Heart of Darkness* is itself of two minds about, could be taken for granted in such a way that it was for many years not only *not* considered the novel's primary exigency, but merits only the slightest mention. One need not, as Conrad aptly demonstrates in the novel, be a committed anti-racist to question the colonial project, and yet the thoroughness with which it is ignored here suggests the invisibility of the very phenomenon of southern alterity engaged by the novel.

To begin a study of the global modernist novel with *Heart of Darkness* seems quixotic; almost universally held in esteem, it has produced a cottage industry of

³ Jerome Thale, "Marlow's Quest," 154; Lillian Feder, "Marlow's Descent Into Hell," 162; Robert O. Evans, "Conrad's Underworld," 171. In *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium*, ed. R.W. Stallman (Michigan State UP, 1960).

criticism, not merely by literary scholars.⁴ Writers of all sorts continue to use it as a window onto discussion of Africa even today.⁵ At the same time, its familiarity lends it particular relevance to my account of the literary expressions of southern alterity. While many of the novels considered in *Went South* arrived at their canonicity belatedly, and others arguably still lack such status, the centrality of *Heart of Darkness* for my argument rests on the novel's influence on both modernist and postcolonial studies, two of the most significant aspects of my account of global modernity. On the one hand, *Heart of Darkness* inspired metropolitan writers such as Greene and Virginia Woolf (the latter discussed in the next chapter). On the other, it provided a model of opposition for colonial writers, who, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe, were keen on "re-placing the text" of English literature in the colonies.⁶ More to my argument, while the trope of the fateful north-south voyage and the vision of the deracinated global south do not have their origins in Conrad's novel, they find a salient expression within it.

⁴ Peter Edgerly Firchow, *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 3.

⁵ As recently as 2017, an article by Maya Jasanoff appeared in *The New York Times*, in which the author evokes Conrad as a window onto her assignment, which is to travel the Congo River and report on the "progress" of the nation: "The Democratic Republic of Congo, I read in my guidebook, was "a huge area of dark corners, both geographically and mentally," where "man has fought continuously against his own demons and the elements of nature at large." This, in other words, was the heart of darkness, which was why I had wanted to come. More than 100 years ago, a Polish sailor named Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski traveled to Congo to take a job as a steamboat captain on the river." Maya Jasanoff. 2017. "With Conrad on the Congo River." *New York Times*, August 18. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/opinion/joseph-conrad-congo-river.html>.

⁶ They write: "It is through an appropriation of the power invested in writing that this discourse can take hold of the marginality imposed on it and make hybridity and syncreticity the source of literary and cultural redefinition." Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002 [1989]), 77.

Edward Said's observation in *Culture and Imperialism* "that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions" forms the basis of both my primary argument and my reading of the two novels I take up in this chapter, *Heart of Darkness* and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*.⁷ Following the Said-inspired contrapuntal mode of reading discussed in the introduction, I argue that reading Conrad and Chesnutt together reveals how, against the normative standard of the north, the south is figured as a zone of decay, dissolution, and degeneration. This geographic orientation is foundational to every novel discussed in this study.

This chapter establishes the pattern, repeated throughout this study, of juxtaposing novels not usually considered together to reveal deeper correspondences that reflect the condition of southern alterity as it is portrayed in global modernism. For instance, both Conrad and Chesnutt portray the effects of uneven development typical of colonial zones as enervating, even deadly, for the subjects forced to live under these regimes. Furthermore, both examine north-south divides through the modernist trope of the encounter with the other. Like other pairings in this study, these two novels also sharply diverge; I focus particularly on Conrad and Chesnutt's incommensurate accounts of the nature of southern alterity. This chapter also largely bypasses questions of influence and the circulation of texts to instead account for how similarities and differences between *Darkness* and *Marrow*, both formal and stylistic, demonstrate the comparability of uneven development and racial difference across the disparate regions of the Congo and the U.S. south. As I have argued in my introduction, southern alterity possesses a distinctly global cast; here I hope to demonstrate this more specifically. In other words,

⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 52.

while the geographical movement of Conrad and Chesnut's novels establish southern alterity through the fateful journey into the south, their differences serve to illustrate the flexibility of the meaning and significance of "southernness" across divergent contexts.

The primary point of comparison is each novel's major plot point of the fateful voyage into the south. This geographical movement creates conflict in both novels, but the different visions and outcomes that follow reveal the protean nature of southern alterity. While both configure southern space as a site of decay, dissolution, and degeneration, Conrad essentializes the Congo as an always-already decaying space, whereas Chesnut grounds the U.S. south's state of disrepair in racial discrimination and material conditions particular to the socio-political order of the U.S. at that time. Similarly, while both endings are indeterminate, the bleak vision at the close of *Heart of Darkness* contrasts with the ambiguous gesture towards racial reconciliation Chesnut employs.

It cannot be stressed enough that these disparate endings are a function of the novelists' divergent views of race, a major and recurring theme of this study. Conrad plays with the notion of kinship between Europeans and Africans, largely through the casual speculations Marlow makes while narrating his story. As Chinua Achebe writes in his famous criticism of the novel, "[Conrad] would not use the word brother however qualified; the farthest he would go was kinship."⁸ Such notions of kinship cannot transcend the hegemonic colonial view of the African as essentially distinct from and inferior to the European; Conrad can call the stability of the colonial enterprise into

⁸ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong, Norton Critical Editions, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2006), 343.

question, but cross-racial identification does not necessarily follow. Chesnutt, on the other hand, anticipates contemporary understandings of race elsewhere in his work. Against the view of race as reflective of an immutable hierarchy, Chesnutt, in an essay from 1900 on the “future American,” argues from science in order to “[sweep] away many hoary anthropological fallacies.”

[Science] has demonstrated that the shape or size of the head has little or nothing to do with the civilization or average intelligence of a race; that language, so recently lauded as an infallible test of racial origin is of absolutely no value in this connection, its distribution being dependent upon other conditions than race. Even color, upon which the social structure of the United States is so largely based, has been proved no test of race.⁹

Chesnutt writes here ostensibly to defend miscegenation, which characterizes his own racial subjectivity as a light-skinned African American, but his tacit acknowledgement of the social construction of race in the United States calls upon science to discount that discipline’s then-contemporary attachment to racial theories. While the tortured discussion of kinship in Conrad’s novel may weakly gesture towards Chesnutt’s position, *Heart of Darkness* ends up reinforcing the dominant racial hierarchies even as it questions the colonial project.

Conrad and Chesnutt alike portray the effects of uneven development; although neither are *bildungsroman*, both novels engage with what Jed Esty calls “antidevelopmental temporality.” Across the yawning gulf that separates the wasteland of

⁹ Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Future American,” in *Stories, Novels, Essays*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Library of America, 2002), 845-6.

Conrad's Congo, emptied out in the name of colonial "development," and Chesnutt's Wellington, a burgeoning southern city infused with northern investment capital, uneven development gives way to antidevelopment, particularly under the logic of capital accumulation. Esty's identification of "the intertwined tropes of frozen youth and uneven development...[that] play a crucial role in the emergence of modernist fiction and in the reimagination of colonial space at the fin de siècle" converges with the rhetoric and ideology of improvement under Lockean property rights that Ellen Meiksins Wood outlines, as discussed in the Introduction.¹⁰ Both the Belgian colonial regime depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, and the northern investment capital interests portrayed in *The Marrow of Tradition* owe much to Locke's theory of property, which states that those who do not work the land are not fit to own it.¹¹

This chapter's contrapuntal readings of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Marrow of Tradition* will establish the basic tropes and framework of southern alterity as depicted in the global modernist novel. While there is no reason I know of to think that Chesnutt had read *Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1899 in *Blackwood's* (two years before *The Marrow of Tradition* was published), by reading them contrapuntally I will establish what Said calls a *cantus firmus*, the musical term he employs to describe his lifelong recurring engagement with Conrad's work, for this study as a whole.¹² In other words, this chapter establishes the centrality of *Heart of Darkness* to what follows, while at the same time complicating its vision through a reading of *The Marrow of Tradition*, which

¹⁰ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 7.

¹¹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (1999; London: Verso, 2017), 157-8.

¹² Edward W. Said, "Interview," in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White (London: Routledge, 2005), 283.

demonstrates a contemporary alternative way to understand southern space at the turn of the twentieth century, one at once less indebted to European essentialisms and more aware of possible ways out of the impasse southern alterity presents.

2.2 Marlow's Seeds of Doubt

As with other authors whose writings span periods of social transition, Joseph Conrad's work can be credibly classified a number of ways. His status as a modernist or proto-modernist seems grounded in a quality of radical indeterminacy that proved influential for later modernists. *Heart of Darkness* typifies this aspect of Conrad's work; as Mark Wollaeger observes, three of Marlow's favorite adjectives are "inconceivable," "impenetrable," and "inscrutable."¹³ Wollaeger attributes this to the vocabulary of negative theology, but I instead argue that this indeterminate terminology emerges from the Marlow's attribution of formlessness to Africa. Marlow's description of the coastline demonstrates the peculiar way in which a profusion of words manages to obscure the object in view, a technique repeated throughout the novel:

We called at some more places with farcical names where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime,

¹³ Mark Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 57.

invaded the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair.¹⁴

Marlow's language – the metaphor of “an overheated catacomb,” the personification of “Nature herself,” and phrases like “streams of death in life” – is strained and indirect. Despite these frequent circumlocutions, Marlow can achieve directness when he chooses; take, for instance, his memorable description of Brussels as “a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre” (9). In contrast with that laconic proclamation, his descriptions of Africa teem with detail that, far from describing Africa clearly, obscure it in a linguistic fog.

Marlow's language, perhaps unconsciously, reflects his view of both Africa and European colonialism. Cannily, given his traveling companions' business interests, he never criticizes the colonial enterprise as such, but instead sows the seeds of doubt in his listeners' minds by approaching colonialism as a digression from his story. This is nowhere better displayed than in the series of convoluted reflections offered as prologue to his story, which he caps with this remarkable reflection:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.

(7)

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, Ed. Paul B. Armstrong, Norton Critical Editions, 4th Edition (1899; New York: Norton, 2006), 14. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

Marlow dances around his ostensible subject, choosing to obscure his misgivings regarding colonialism with a disquisition on the *idea* itself, ending with a telling allusion to idol-worship. Yet, this recourse to idealism ends up complicating his profound ambivalence. On the one hand, this belief in a pure idea of colonialism is offered as the only thing that can redeem it; his language here is appropriately sacramental and ritualistic. On the other hand, Marlow admits without difficulty that it is “not a pretty thing when you look into it too much;” that is, the practice falls short of the purity of the idea.

Said describes the contradictory pull of Marlow’s language here as the “two visions” found in *Heart of Darkness*: the first being the conventional Western narrative of imperialism, the second “as Conrad saw his own narratives, local to a time and place, neither unconditionally true nor unqualifiedly certain.”¹⁵ Conrad’s qualification undermines the inevitability of empire, or “dates” it, in Said’s term. The unbridgeable distance between these two visions emerges in Conrad’s form, he writes:

Conrad’s way of demonstrating this discrepancy between the orthodox and his own views of empire is to keep drawing attention to how ideas and values are constructed (and deconstructed) through dislocations in the narrator’s language. In addition, the recitations are meticulously staged: the narrator is a speaker whose audience and the reason for their being together, the quality of whose voice, the effect of what he says – are all important and even insistent aspects of the story he tells.¹⁶

¹⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 29.

Marlow's curious descriptions, then, represent his own unsettled thoughts on the colonialism; his doubts about how the work in the Congo is carried off remain even as he wants to redeem such work through commitment to "an idea at the back of it."

Through Marlow's language, Conrad opens up a space for doubt about colonialism in practice, but this is not sufficient to rebut Chinua Achebe's charge that *Heart of Darkness* replicates the "desire – one might indeed say need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe."¹⁷ While the novel acknowledges the dehumanizing force of imperialism for both the subjugated Africans and their European overlords, that is a far cry from acknowledgment that Africa and its people possess equality with Europe. Conrad destabilizes imperial epistemology, but only by half. Marlow's perspective on Africa is not that of the colonial overseer or the businessman with colonial investments. His cast of mind throws doubt on the validity of colonization while at the same time he still others the Africans he encounters, as well as the land itself, with its formless coasts and rotting banks.

Marlow's phrase "formless coast" echoes the language of the biblical creation narrative: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep[.]"¹⁸ Instead of the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters, we have banks rotting into mud. The implication, it would seem, is that Africa lacks the organization that comes from God's creative energies. Conrad, avowed atheist, ironically substitutes the organizing powers of European civilization for God's handiwork. Wolleager's attention to Conrad's skepticism and use of negative theology in *Heart of*

¹⁷ Achebe, "Image of Africa," 337.

¹⁸ Genesis 1:2 (Revised Standard Version).

Darkness echoes Achebe's contention that Africa in the novel is "a place of negations at once vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest."¹⁹ Furthermore, the double negativity Wolleager identifies – negative theology applied to an emptiness, the God who is not there – implicates more than just the African landscape. For Marlow, Africa's condition is ancient, its decay existing time out of mind. However, he also acknowledges the tremendous devastation rendered by the colonial enterprise itself: "A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs amongst a waste of excavations hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation" (15). Marlow's contemptuousness towards colonial trading outposts and the shady characters that populate them reveals his misgivings regarding the destructive force of rapacious colonialism. By the same token, this activity does not despoil a pre-colonial paradise, but furthers the dissolution of a land whose darkness predates the arrival of Europeans. Africa is ominous, barren, rotten, and decaying even as it is rich in those things desired by the colonial powers: bauxite, iron, copper, tin, cotton, lumber, and especially in *Heart of Darkness*, ivory: "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it" (23). Ivory is a god that, through European desire, effects destruction on an already dark land, further negating a negative space. Marlow's use of indirect, "impressionistic" language reveals his fundamental

¹⁹ "Given that the nature of the unseen is more often diabolical than divine, the ineffable evoked through negation may itself be negative. Absence need not be evil, but Conrad's readiness to gesture towards something beyond phenomena cannot conceal the fear that the absolute otherness of the holy may prove merely destructive, that the shattering of the ordinary may issue in ruins rather than renewal." Wolleager, *Fictions of Skepticism*, 55; Achebe, "Image of Africa," 337.

ambivalence regarding the colonial enterprise at the same time he holds onto familiar European attitudes of African inferiority.

Marlow's hierarchical approach, which places European civilization above African formlessness, is there from Marlow's first, indelible words, "And this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth" (5). Conrad stages the difference between the two rivers of the book, the Thames and the Congo, by asserting that Europe, specifically England, possesses the means to emerge from that darkness and into the light of civilization; although the Africans lack this self-creative energy, this shared historical "darkness" makes comprehensible Marlow's allowance of a distant kinship with African subjects. While the temptation to identify the words of a first-person protagonist with the author should always be eschewed, there is good reason to think that Marlow provides insight into Conrad's thinking. After all, Conrad took his own voyage up the Congo in 1890, and had his own doubts about imperialism, especially the brutal Belgian rule he (like Marlow) observed firsthand. He offered limited support for Roger Casement's investigation for the British Foreign Office into the Congo Free State, although he was also by turns skeptical of the various anti-imperial and reform efforts of the time.²⁰ Conrad's skepticism towards both colonialism and reform efforts sits alongside Marlow's ironic account of European civilization versus African darkness. While Marlow remains faithful to the cultural taxonomy that reifies European superiority through their ability to build a culture from their own, the utter ecological disaster the Belgians wreak on the Congo, as well as their monstrous crimes against humanity, call into question the

²⁰ Hunt Hawkins, "Joseph Conrad, Roger Casement, and the Congo Reform Movement," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 9 no. 1 (1981-1982): 65-6.

civilizing powers imputed to Europe. If the colonial enterprise is a civilizing mission, then what explains the state of the Congo?

The short answer is, of course, the white supremacy at the heart of the colonial enterprise. Conrad shares in this, but idiosyncratically: for one thing, Conrad does not view European civilization and imperialism monolithically, but hierarchically. As Peter Edgerly Firchow writes, “Conrad seems to be claiming that there are two kinds of imperialism: one is British and good; another is non-British and, to varying degrees, not good.”²¹ From a postcolonial perspective, the difference between “enlightened” British imperialism and the brutal Belgian rule of the Congo seems slight; nonetheless, there is a moral component to Conrad’s view of imperialism. It lies behind the genuine horror that Marlow expresses throughout his tale, such as when he first saw the remnants of the land at the mouth of the Congo:

A rocky cliff appears, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs amongst a waste of excavations hanging on to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. (15)

The existential horror of Marlow’s vision is not any less powerful in light of his questionable support for the “idea” of imperialism. Conrad’s awareness of colonial injustice leads to scrutiny of ideas like “civilization,” but he is far from abandoning colonialism entirely, let alone embracing the Africans as siblings. Despite the horror of

²¹ Firchow, *Envisioning Africa*, 21. Firchow writes this in the course of a nuanced inquiry into whether or not Conrad was truly racist and imperialist, paying careful attention to the shifting meaning of those terms across the decades. I do not entirely buy his argument (Conrad was undoubtedly racist), but he is correct to note that Conrad did not see imperialism monolithically, as I have said.

the scene, the Congolese are described as moving about like ants; they may be objects of pity in Marlow's eyes, but they retain an animalistic nature all the same. Conrad, in other words, is limited by the same imperial perspective that he elsewhere scrutinizes.

The portrayal of African landscape in *Heart of Darkness* reflects not just Conrad's conflicted colonial attitude, but also his rejection of nineteenth-century pastoral convention. Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy writes, "While other writers pronounced nature's restorative power in poems and novels of Romantic confidence in a benevolent natural world, Conrad offers a savage alternative to Victorian sentimentalism and thereby thrusts his novel into a formative debate for modern discourses of nature."²² By rendering nature as dark and maleficent instead of pastoral and beneficent, Conrad works against Romantic conventions, typified in Raymond Williams' description of Wordsworth's "confidence in nature, in its own workings, which at least at the beginning was also a broader, a more humane confidence in men."²³ *Heart of Darkness* possesses little humane confidence in either Europeans or Africans. Conrad breaks with the Romantic confidence in amelioration to instead look askance at nature and humans alike.

Conrad was just one of several late nineteenth-century British writers who rejected Romanticism; Thomas Hardy's novels, existing as they do on the "border country" of a rural landscape undergoing the changes and pressures of a rapidly modernizing economic and social context, implode Romantic conventions.²⁴ While Hardy chronicled of a particular domestic English milieu under the developmental

²² Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, "A Choice of Nightmares': The Ecology of *Heart of Darkness*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 3 (2009): 626.

²³ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 127.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 197, ff.

pressures of industrialization and capital, Conrad was a Polish émigré and novelist of imperialism. While both portray the deleterious effects of uneven development, Hardy's gaze is inward, domestic; Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* looks beyond England to take in these effects on African and European subjects alike in a decimated and deracinated Congo. I argue therefore that two significant elements constitute Conrad's vision in *Heart of Darkness*: one, a steady gaze at the realities of imperialism, divorced from notions of the civilizing mission of colonialism; and two, a turn away from Britain to a landscape of radical southern alterity. Allowing for the fact that Conrad wrote about the Congo because he had been there, setting the novel in what he perceives as a wasteland allows him to shape a vision as far from bucolic English landscape as possible. The novel betrays Conrad's belief in the inferiority of Africa and Africans, but it also puts the lie to the justification of colonialism as a "civilizing mission" through Kurtz's infamous scribbled addendum to his "seventeen closely argued pages" for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (50).

Kurtz's ideas in that pamphlet are shot through with the rhetoric of racial superiority that elevates the European to ludicrous, godlike heights, instructing colonizers that "we approach them with the might as of a deity," in order that "we can exert a power for good practically unbounded."²⁵ In one of the novel's many ironies, Kurtz's downfall is the opposite of his doctrine's intended outcome, the mirror image of the civilizing mission. Contemporary anxieties about the colonizer "going native" lie behind Kurtz's transformation, and McCarthy argues that *Heart of Darkness* reverses these fears to

²⁵ Ibid, 49-50.

undermine notions of European racial superiority.²⁶ Going a step further, Nidesh Lawtoo writes that Conrad creates a “direct continuity between Kurtz’s anthropological rituals in Africa and his political rituals in Europe,” and by this continuity, the novel collapses the neat distinction between civilized European and primitive African, thereby rendering a “picture of Europe” that is far more irrational, violent, and yes, dark, than what was ascendant at the time: “What Conrad’s picture of Europe reveals, if we look carefully, is a foreshadowing of mimetic rituals presided over by charismatic leader of extreme parties with hypnotic voices that can take possession of the masses and are soon to enact sacrificial horrors on an unprecedented scale.”²⁷ Lawtoo has in mind not only colonialism and its attendant atrocities, but the coming carnage of the twentieth century’s two World Wars: “In short, the inability of the West to confront the atrocities that continue to be committed in the name of progress, freedom, and democratic ideals [...] is the horror that *Heart of Darkness* tries to render visible.”²⁸ Conrad’s imperial skepticism, more felt than stated, nevertheless gestures towards already apparent tendencies that would find their ultimate expression in the destructive nationalism that would engender two world wars, countless lives lost, and genocide. Torn between his inability to see the Africans as equal, but aware of the capacity of Europeans to commit atrocities, Conrad pours contradiction and ambivalence into the African landscape, where one can see a thing monstrous and free. While the paranoia and white supremacy Conrad deals with may indeed augur future European horrors, a contemporary novel illustrates these forces already at play through the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War. If Kurtz represents the full flowering of European

²⁶ McCarthy, “A Choice of Nightmares,” 630.

²⁷ Nidesh Lawtoo, “A Picture of Europe: Possession Trance in *Heart of Darkness*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 45, no. 3 (2012): 427.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 429.

cultural and political superiority, then his downfall suggests a susceptibility to the same forces of southern alterity Europe attributes to the Global South.

2.3 Domestic Southern Alterity in Chesnutt

Heart of Darkness envisions Africa as a defining counterpoint to European civilization, the very soul of southern alterity. The novel's significant influence has ensured that its view of African-European, or south-north, relationships has shaped the way in which other modernist narratives have used the geographical alterity of southern spaces as a lens through which to view and define northern ones. Charles W. Chesnutt's portrayal of the north-south voyage in his novel *The Marrow of Tradition* offers a different view to Conrad's influential treatment, one that instead configures regional variations between north and south as owing little to the ontological view of African degeneration found in *Heart of Darkness*.

Chesnutt's fictionalized account of the Wilmington, North Carolina Insurrection of 1898 was intended for a white audience as well as a black one.²⁹ Chesnutt wrote the novel in the hope of moving white people to pity and action. *The Marrow of Tradition* consciously countered contemporary newspaper accounts that cast Wilmington's black community as the instigators of the violence to instead portray life on both sides of the color-line and offer a more nuanced and accurate depiction of the Insurrection. Chesnutt, with his southern roots, experience as a light-skinned northerner, intellect, and legal training, was uniquely suited among his contemporaries to challenge ascendant notions of race and the political realities of the time. His series of essays on "The Future American

²⁹ The Wilmington Insurrection has also been known as the Wilmington Riot (or Race Riot). I use the term "insurrection" throughout - except when quoting sources which refer to it otherwise - because the term more accurately captures what the event was: not a race riot, but rather a *coup d'état*, thus far the only successful one in the United States.

Race,” written between the Wilmington Insurrection and the publication of *The Marrow of Tradition*, reflect both Chesnut’s powerful denunciation of then-ascendant white supremacist views and the deteriorating state of race relations in the U.S. post-*Plessy v. Ferguson*. In this regard, *The Marrow of Tradition* reflects both Chesnut’s life and experiences as well as his deep reflection on race in the fin-de-siècle U.S.

The Marrow of Tradition may seem an odd fit for my argument. Chesnut’s novel cannot credibly be considered modernist in a formal sense, for one thing: its blend of realism, plantation romance, and journalistic convention suggests a more appropriate comparison with the novels of Thomas Dixon Jr. and Thomas Nelson Page. The thematic materials of these postbellum novels, as described by Scott Romine, offer more relevant comparisons to Chesnut’s work than does Conrad:

Originating in psychological carnage and not bracing, ennobling experience, the formation of modern white southern identity capture by Page and Dixon registers the irrevocable alteration produced by the Reconstruction encounter...In history’s nightmare, things fall apart, and awaking to a new day requires the Old South be consigned to an archive irretrievable except through strategic representation.³⁰

While Chesnut surely wrote against these contemporary white southern novelists and was likely unfamiliar with Conrad’s novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* offers a compelling alternative to the trope of the fateful southern voyage as typified by *Heart of Darkness*. The traveler in this instance, light-skinned Dr. William Miller, is not passing into an alien south, but rather returning home. While Miller’s home is not alien, it is hostile: for all the

³⁰ Scott Romine, “Things Falling Apart: The Postcolonial Condition of *Red Rock* and *The Leopard’s Spots*,” *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 177.

doctor's wealth, professional success, and bourgeois trappings, he remains barred from full participation in the common life of his city by virtue of his blackness. Unknown to Miller, three avowed white supremacist city leaders are at the same time unfolding a conspiracy to break the back of the Fusion government that has allowed for real, if modest, success to come to the city's Black community. Chesnut's South is no less dark than Conrad's Africa, but instead of an ontological account, *The Marrow of Tradition* firmly places its southern alterity in the legal, cultural, and racial components that constitute the world of the novel. These concerns, along with the novel's portrayal of racial violence, a recurring theme throughout the novels discussed in this study, may not make Chesnut's novel modernist in the aesthetic sense, but certainly indicate the modernism of its subject matter.

After four chapters of introduction to the prominent white leaders of Wellington (Chesnut's fictionalized Wilmington), Chesnut moves the setting to a passenger train making its way south, thereby directing the reader's sympathy to the novel's primary protagonist, Dr. Miller. Much like Chesnut, Dr. Miller is light-skinned, educated, and a member of the black bourgeoisie, but nevertheless experiences racial discrimination and segregation under post-*Plessy* Jim Crow arrangements. Before Captain McBane – one of the Big Three conspiring to overthrow the Fusion government – can complain to the conductor about Miller's presence in the first-class car, the narrator sets up the conversation between Miller and his colleague and former teacher, the white Dr. Alvin Burns:

A celebrated traveler, after many years spent in barbarous or savage lands, has said that among all varieties of mankind the similarities are vastly more important

and fundamental than the differences. Looking at these two men with the American eye, the differences would perhaps be the more striking, or at least the more immediately apparent, for the first was white and the second black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states, as a “visible admixture” of African blood.³¹

Chesnutt’s arresting phrase “the American eye” nationalizes what are often seen as regional distinctions in racial evaluation and treatment (as well as suggesting, ironically, an implicitly white “American eye”). The phrase also subverts a notion of northern, and by extension, national exceptionalism: unlike the “celebrated traveler,” the American eye emphasizes difference over sameness. According to Stephen Knadler, Chesnutt’s language and perspective here echoes his legal training as well as the emerging discourse of anthropology.³² Through similar heteroglossic shifts in discourse throughout the novel, Chesnutt emphasizes the ironies of the color line and advances his critique of race in the United States; in this instance, he draws upon anthropology and legalese. As opposed to Conrad’s “impressionistic” language, Chesnutt’s prose is precise and clear-eyed, peering across class and color-lines. Conrad’s obscures the Congo through Marlow’s narration;

³¹ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition: Authoritative Text, Context, Criticism*, Ed. Werner Sollors, Norton Critical Editions, (New York: Norton 2012), 33. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

³² “Through the language of comparative anthropology, Chesnutt reminds his white audience that their objectivity is only an American, not a transhistorical or cross-cultural, outlook. By incorporating in turn both legal language and the African-American’s own perception of his skin color, Chesnutt implies that even within this national territory, what is ‘immediately apparent’ or ‘correctly speaking’ are legal fictions. In contrast to the white ‘American’ eyes, and its prevailing homogenization of the Negro, the unidentified narrative voice sees individual variations.” Stephen P. Knadler, “Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness,” *American Literary History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 432.

the “European eye” of *Heart of Darkness* cannot affirm with Chesnutt’s “celebrated traveler” that “the similarities [between humans] are vastly more important than the differences.”

Miller’s experience crossing the Mason-Dixon dramatizes the uneven development segregation effected across U.S. regions. The “legal fictions” upholding segregation originate in the U.S. Constitution, but became fully enshrined in the postbellum era by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision by the Supreme Court, which upheld and extended the Jim Crow laws. This decision merely legalized what was already custom in North Carolina, a situation Chesnutt wrote about at length when he lived there. Although “legal segregation came late to the state,” Chesnutt “confided to his diary” during his teenage years in North Carolina in the 1870s “the absurdity of walking around in a place where the color line moved under his feet.”³³ Southern cultural customs and the rule of law – de facto and de jure segregation – together create the conditions under which Miller must move to the Jim Crow train car.

Undergirding this legal reality, Chesnutt characterizes the “American eye” through McBane, himself not a representative American eye but a specifically regional and class-based one. McBane’s actions on the train demonstrate how long-held prejudices could be underscored by force of law:

As this passenger turned his head and looked back at Miller, the latter saw a broad-shouldered, burly white man, and recognized in his square-cut jaw, his coarse, firm mouth, and the single gray eye with which he swept Miller for an instant with a

³³ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2.

scornful glance, a well-known character of Wellington, with whom the reader has already made acquaintance in these pages. Captain McBane wore a frock coat and a slouch hat; several buttons in his vest were unbuttoned, and his solitaire diamond blazed in his soiled shirt-front like the headlight of a locomotive. (36)

McBane is an almost stereotypical version of the nouveau riche New Southerner, lower-class by birth and inclination, who has made his fortune through “a contract with the State for its convict labor.” His initial presentation in the novel closely matches Dr. Miller’s perception of him, and Chesnut’s account of McBane’s origins and rise is unsparing and accurate: “Captain George McBane had sprung from the poor-white class, to which, even more than to the slaves, the abolition of slavery had opened the door of opportunity. No longer overshadowed by a slave-holding caste, some of this class had rapidly pushed themselves forward” (24). In fact, the rapidly industrializing post-Reconstruction South was full of McBanes seizing the opportunity to improve their fortunes. The historian C. Vann Woodward in his landmark volume *Origins of the New South* cites “a study of the background of 254 industrialists in the South of this period reveals that ‘about eighty percent came of nonslaveowning parentage.’” In taking on “the mantle of leadership that had descended from the planter,” not only were these yeoman industrialists reshaping the southern class system through their ascent, but they had found a system on which to build that wealth: “The ‘natives,’ white as well as black, not only constituted an expanding market but a limitless source of cheap labor as well.”³⁴ McBane contracts with the state to use cheap convict labor, but his methods are sufficiently cruel

³⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 152, 153, 114.

to bring him under investigation, which he only manages to scuttle through the great wealth he has amassed. Chesnutt scrupulously avoids the term “slavery” in describing these work arrangements, but his account of McBane’s rise lends the impression nonetheless. Writing thirty-four years after *The Marrow of Tradition*, W.E.B. DuBois is polemically direct about how the post-Reconstruction south made possible the abuses of men like McBane: “It must be remembered and never forgotten that the civil war in the South which overthrew Reconstruction was a determined effort to reduce black labor as nearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists on this foundation.”³⁵ Despite their common origins, the wealth and influence of figures like McBane made them indispensable to aristocratic white supremacist southerners who sought to subvert any effort towards racial equality in the post-Reconstruction south.

The Big Three of Chesnutt’s novel represent the efforts of these white supremacist southerners to undo the cross-racial Fusionist coalition. McBane is by far the most crude and vociferous of the Big Three. Of the other two, Major Carteret has an aristocratic background, but his family was “hopelessly impoverished by the war” (5) until he married into wealth; General Belmont is a scion of plantation aristocracy. Carteret and Belmont are at times taken aback by McBane’s vulgarity and manners, but the shifting post-Reconstruction political landscape does not allow them to proceed without his patronage; indeed, he is very useful to them. As Gene I. Gorman writes, aristocratic Southerners used lower-class whites “to do their bidding,” thereby

³⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (1935; New York: The Free Press, 1998), 670.

maintaining their own “class and racial identity.”³⁶ As Carteret and Belmont’s attitudes toward McBane suggest, this applies equally to poor whites who have amassed wealth and influence. Miller, on the other hand, has unalloyed disdain for McBane, and takes umbrage when he enters the Jim Crow car, in which Miller is otherwise alone, to smoke a cigar. Chesnutt provides yet another description of McBane, this time through the black bourgeois eye:

Miller knew him quite well by sight and by reputation, and detested him as heartily. He represented the aggressive, offensive element among the white people of the New South, who made it hard for a negro to maintain his self-respect or to enjoy even the rights conceded to colored men by Southern laws. McBane had undoubtedly identified him to the conductor in the other car. (38)

Leaving aside the socio-political aspect of the novel for a moment, this passage demonstrates Chesnutt’s subtle shifting of perspective to encompass the thoughts and emotions of his characters while maintaining the free indirect discourse of the narrative voice. This formal feature of *The Marrow of Tradition* enlarges the generic source material to present individual consciousness in a manner that, if not quite modernist stream-of-consciousness, allows for the voicing of attitudes and prejudices appropriate to the class position, race, and gender of the characters. In this particular instance, Miller thinks himself better than McBane by virtue of his gentility, education, and professional accomplishments, but the logic of white supremacy – toasted to by the Secret Three, two chapters prior – reveal the uselessness of his cultural attainments under Jim Crow.

³⁶ Gene I. Gorman, “Awakening a Dormant Appetite’: Captain McBane, Convict Labor, and Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 44, no. 2 (2012): 2.

Alongside its concern with class relations, *The Marrow of Tradition* portrays the reality of Jim Crow for all its African American characters, not just the educated professionals such as Miller. As I have already suggested, Chesnutt, with his training as a lawyer and work as a legal copyist, possessed a keen grasp of the legal issues of Jim Crow as codified in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.³⁷ *Plessy* involved not merely race, but also class and labor, and these strands are braided together in the character of McBane. In his study of how white supremacy created the Wilmington Insurrection, Michael Honey argues that the white elites' "struggle for control [...] went back to the origins of North Carolina society," and that "white supremacy maintained its signal importance in North Carolina because, perhaps more than any other Southern state, North Carolina had a bitter history of class divisions."³⁸ Honey supports W.E.B. DuBois' analysis in *Black Reconstruction* that throughout the South, the elite class of whites utilized racial resentment and labor issues to turn poor whites away from class solidarity with black workers towards a doctrine of white supremacy that marginalized them much as it oppressed blacks.³⁹ Reconstruction offered the opportunity for poor whites like McBane to seize wealth and power through exploiting these same labor practices and the class and race divisions that

³⁷ Along with local custom, local laws were passed throughout the South, including North Carolina, which upheld segregation during and after Reconstruction. The emphasis I place on *Plessy v. Ferguson* stems from both its proximity in time to the events fictionalized in the novel, as well as its lending of federal legitimacy to local law, as landmark Supreme Court decisions often do. After *Plessy*, segregation could no longer be understood as a local or regional concern.

³⁸ Michael Honey, "Class, Race, and Power in the New South: Racial Violence and the Delusions of White Supremacy," in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1896 and Its Legacy*, ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 165-6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

they enabled. This, along with the Fusion government that threatened the power of white supremacy, made Wilmington a powder keg, as Honey writes:

Wilmington provided the ideal setting in which to play out white fantasies of “Negro domination.” Here African American men held important elective and appointive office. A significant number of Wilmington blacks owned property and had skills that elevated them above the conditions of the average white. Some of them were highly educated and lived in the “better” part of town with white neighbors. Moreover, in this and other predominantly black areas of the state they actively contested white supremacy.⁴⁰

This is the world that Miller is riding into, one in which he has lived most of his life and knows intimately. However, the situation is about to deteriorate in ways that he seems incapable of imagining, even during his bitter reflections in the Jim Crow car. Riché Richardson describes the structural function of the train car episode in the novel, writing that the chapter’s title, “‘A Journey Southward,’ signals the novel’s North-South regional schema and the transition Dr. Miller makes as one of legal and symbolic significance entailing tremendous psychological challenges.” Although Chesnut does not, like Joseph Conrad, see southernness as ontological, he does measure the effect that Southern degeneracy has on black subjects, as Richardson argues: “[Miller] encounters a moral universe in the South so foreign and opposite to the northern one he is leaving that entering the South by train is the equivalent of undergoing a shift in cosmology as a human being.”⁴¹ The land Miller rides into does not possess the formlessness of the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁴¹ Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 26-7.

African coast as perceived by Marlow; rather, it is a land ordered by the rule of law, which establishes the separateness of white and Black not by virtue of ontological but legal status.

At the same time, Chesnutt is too keen an observer of classism to let Miller entirely off the hook. After McBane finishes his cigar and leaves, a group of Black farm laborers, “noisy, loquacious, happy, dirty, and malodorous” enter the car, and while Miller is initially “amused and pleased,” eventually his classism emerges:

He could easily imagine that people of refinement, with the power in their hands, might be tempted to strain the democratic ideal in order to avoid such contact; but personally, and apart from the mere matter of racial sympathy, these people were just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train. Surely, if a classification of passengers on trains was at all desirable, it might be made upon some more logical and considerate basis than a mere arbitrary, tactless, and by the very nature of things, brutal drawing of a color line. (40-41)

Despite Miller’s admirable qualities, his snobbish tendency with regard to working-class blacks partially obscures his view of the reality of oppression which will soon shape events in Wellington. He is aware of the horrors suffered by black southerners, true; as he reflects on the “veritable bed of Procrustes” that is the color line, he acknowledges that the upper classes “have their heads cut off, figuratively speaking,” and “those who fell beneath the standard set had their necks stretched, literally enough, as the ghastly record in the daily papers gave conclusive evidence.” He rallies himself, though “his philosophy had become somewhat jaded on this journey,” by thinking of how the cheerfulness of blacks enabled them to suffer ignominy as they made their “slow emergence” from the

“long servitude.” He concludes by quoting Jesus: “‘Blessed are the meek [...] for they shall inherit the earth.’ If this be true, the negro may yet come into his estate, for meekness seems to be set apart as his portion” (41). Chesnutt may be reflecting on his own experience; as a member of the educated, professional class, he likely entertained such notions at some point. Crucially, though, he undercuts Miller’s optimism by giving the “dusty tramp,” who Miller had earlier observed casting a murderous glance at McBane, the last word of the chapter: “But I got my job ter do in dis worl’, an’ I knows I ain’ gwine ter die ‘tel I’ve ‘complished it” (42). Although the violence in the closing pages of the novel will touch both Miller and Josh Green, the “dusty tramp” seen here, Green’s fate is a function of his goal of killing McBane in revenge, whereas Miller’s tragedy is partially a failure of his bourgeois worldview. In other words, even in the novel’s most egalitarian impulses, a classism emerges that delineates the differences in status between a Dr. Miller and a Josh Green.

This classism, far from marring the narrative perspective, provides insight into the thinking and social position of Dr. Miller. Not merely shaped by bourgeois sensibilities, he also evinces an attitude of professionalism. A relatively recent ideological formation in the U.S., the assimilationist branches of the turn-of-the-century racial uplift movement often adopted professionalism as a lodestar for their efforts. Susan Danielson writes that “for assimilationists, professionalism provided an economic/social equivalent of Progressivism,”⁴² one that (quoting Michael Augspurger) “promised an escape from

⁴² Susan Danielson, “Charles Chesnutt’s Dilemma: Professional Ethics, Social Justice, and Domestic Feminism in *The Marrow of Tradition*,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 41, no. 1 (2008): 75.

traditional class conflicts and offered the hope of a fair, rationally planned society.”⁴³ Both assimilationist and accommodationist perspectives sought racial uplift, and both “were committed to individual self-help, thrift, self-reliance, [and] economic security,” among other things, but what separated them was the assimilationist’s “deep commitment to equal civil rights for black and white Americans.”⁴⁴ As Danielson’s argues, Miller, like Chesnutt, is steeped in professionalism: his European education, his familiarity with cutting-edge medical practice, and his commitment to racial uplift set him apart not merely from other blacks but the white characters as well, save perhaps his teacher and companion Dr. Burns.

This professionalism lends Dr. Miller an above-it-all attitude most clearly seen in his initial political inaction during the coup. As Danielson writes, “modern professionalism includes a commitment to an ethical standard that in theory rises above the provincial claims of race or region.”⁴⁵ Despite Chesnutt’s understandable attraction to professionalism, its limitations become clear in the face of the violence unleashed by the white supremacist conspiracy in the latter portion of the novel. The realities of race and region that professionalism sought to elide instead emerge through an ironic logic, revealing that the conditions that made Wilmington hospitable to its professional Black citizens also motivated the white supremacists that overthrew the city’s Fusion government. “Never before and never since had blacks occupied such a central place in a city’s political and economic life as they did in Wilmington from 1865 to 1897,” H. Leon

⁴³ Michael Augspurger, “Sinclair Lewis’ Primers for the Professional Managerial Class: *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Dodsworth*,” *Journal of the Midwest MLA* 34, no. 2 (2001): 74, quoted in Danielson, “Charles Chesnutt’s Dilemma,” 75.

⁴⁴ Danielson, “Charles Chesnutt’s Dilemma,” 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

Prather writes in his history of the Insurrection. Not merely in Wilmington, but across North Carolina, there was a “white supremacy crusade in 1898, unparalleled in American history.”⁴⁶ Professional Black citizens like Miller found themselves unequipped to resist this crusade; the “provincial claims of race and region” have the upper hand over cosmopolitanism and education. What is more, as Danielson argues, Miller’s worldview unwittingly offers concessions to white supremacy, part of the “New South Creed.”⁴⁷ This New South is well described in the words of Boston capitalist Edward Atkinson, who said in Atlanta in 1880: “When we, who are business men take a firm hold upon political questions, and try men and measures by their effect on industry and commerce, a great advance in the true science of politics will have been made,” thereby making north and south “one in faith and one in hope.”⁴⁸ The New South was dependent on an increase in industry as well as professionalism, while at the same time evoking a progressivism that, while similar its northern counterpart, was “in no sense derivative” as C. Vann Woodward writes in his description of southern progressivism in the 1890s:

[It] was essentially urban and middle class in nature, and the typical leader was a city professional man or businessman, rather than a farmer. Under the growing pressure of monopoly, the small businessman and urban middle class overcame their fear of reform and joined hands with the discontented farmers. They envisaged as a common enemy the plutocracy of the Northeast, together with its

⁴⁶ H. Leon Prather, *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1984), 23, 55.

⁴⁷ “The ‘modern’ ideologies of assimilation and accommodation, with their endorsement of what are often considered the predominant American values of individualism, rationalism, and professionalism, are revealed as deeply, though unwittingly, intertwined with the white supremacy of the New South creed.” Danielson, “Charles Chesnut’s Dilemma,” 76.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 144.

agents, banks, insurance companies, public utilities, oil companies, pipelines, and railroads. Southern progressivism often took a sectional character, identifying the enemy with “foreign” interests. These interests were defended by Southern apologists who were strongly entrenched within the old party and frequently controlled it through bosses and state machines.⁴⁹

The Fusion government that held power in Wilmington prior to the Insurrection stands out starkly against this New South backdrop Woodward describes: “Southern progressivism generally was progressivism for white men only, and after the poll tax took its toll not all the white men were included.”⁵⁰ For a few years, North Carolina’s Fusion government expanded southern progressivism beyond whites, but larger regional and national forces exerted pressure on this bold experiment, culminating in the *coup d’état* in Wilmington. Black professionals such as Dr. Miller possessed little that could withstand the assault of white men with money and influence.

While the threat of white supremacist government undercut the gains of the southern Black professional class, at the same time, economic opportunity meant that many whites were too busy making money to be bothered overmuch with the race question. The campaign for white supremacy founders early in *The Marrow of Tradition* for the simple reason that economic prosperity causes Major Carteret’s newspaper columns defending white supremacy to initially fall flat:

There were thoughtful men, willing to let well enough alone, who saw no necessity for such a movement. They believed that peace, prosperity, and popular

⁴⁹ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 371.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 373.

education offered a surer remedy for social ills than the reopening of issue supposed to have been settled. There were timid men who shrank from civil strife. There were busy men, who had something else to do. There were a few fair men, prepared to admit, privately, that a class constituting half to two thirds of the population were fairly entitled to some representation in the law-making bodies.

(51-52)

Chesnutt allows that “a single white man” might have been found “ready to concede that all men were entitled to equal rights before the law” (52), but this is after-the-fact speculation. While such imaginative thought remained his prerogative as novelist, Chesnutt surely knew that as long as progress was assured, powerful whites possessed no impetus to examine the race question with an eye to equality for black and white, but rather their own advantage. Even black Wellingtonians such as Dr. Miller were dissuaded from political activity, despite their second-class status, due to their own professional success and relative prosperity. Southern progressivism could allow for relatively peaceful race relations, provided that, in that infamous phrase, African Americans “know their place.” Perspective matters, however; the suffering of a working-class character like Josh Green, or the near-lynching of Sandy, Mr. Delamere’s faithful servant, point to darker realities for those African Americans not part of the professional class in Wellington. Chesnutt’s social panorama uncovers the social practices and hypocrisies as the narrative unfolds, portraying the striations of class on both sides of the color line. Importantly, the values of progressivism and professionalism implicate the influence of northern investors and capital, which in turn exerts a significant influence over southern social hierarchies. Rather than a region detached from larger national concerns, the

Wellington of *The Marrow of Tradition* is fully imbricated in a national economy that renders racial issues a second-order concern at best.

2.4 The Africa That Isn't There

Similar to the northern influence on southern business and politics in *The Marrow of Tradition*, Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* does not flinch from portraying the deleterious effects of European colonialism for Africa. This does not mean, however, that imperial hierarchy disappears from the novel: while Marlow harbors profound doubts about imperialism and Kurtz's "method," he also confesses to the Manager, "I think Kurtz is a remarkable man" and assures Kurtz's Russian acolyte that "Mr. Kurtz's reputation is safe with me" (62). Solicitous to the last, Marlow lies to Kurtz's Intended, concerned that the truth would have been "too dark altogether" for her refined sensibilities (77). Tellingly, Marlow retains his scrupulousness towards the Intended despite his realization on her doorstep that the darkness Kurtz contended with is as much the product of Europe as Africa: "It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which it seemed to me I would have to keep back for the salvation of another soul" (73). Marlow's belated realization of the darkness at the heart of the imperial metropole, however, possesses none of the power of Kurtz' half-mad ravings. Like similar insights Marlow has throughout the novel, it does not stick. What Raymond Williams calls "metropolitan perception" pales in comparison to the darkness. Of his observation of the work of the Inner Station, Marianne DeKoven writes that Marlow's perception is a "reversal of [his] prevoyage position" in which "Marlow has shifted his allegiance from the order of the European father to the wilderness of the African mother," but it remains temporary. His primary allegiance wins out:

Ultimately, again, Marlow is a European man. Although he distances himself decisively from the “pilgrims” of phallo-imperialist Western culture, and although it is he who opens the passage to the maternal origin, his relation to the heart of darkness is, like Conrad’s, inevitably ambivalent, his positive attachment to it coexisting with fear and “horror.”⁵¹

Marlow’s experiences in the Congo enable him to question imperialism but finding himself stuck between the rapacious destruction of the colonizer and the otherworldliness of the African, he instead retreats to a posture of ironic commentary. In the end, his allegiance to European racial taxonomy will not allow him to follow his insights into imperialism’s dark heart to effect a rejection of it.⁵²

In fact, Conrad’s vision of Africa is more congruent with contemporary British imperial discourse than a departure from it. As Benita Parry observes, many of Conrad’s descriptions of the Congo and its people – the jungle populated with naked natives bearing weapons, for instance – are longstanding tropes in Western writing, saying “Africa” to the reader even though the word itself appears nowhere in the novel.⁵³ The

⁵¹ Marianne DeKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 109, 114.

⁵² Conrad is a novelist, not a political theorist, and *Heart of Darkness* does not succeed or fail on the basis of its ability to critique imperialism. The aesthetic rubrics of modernism, which Conrad’s work helped constitute, typically spurn the didactic in favor of instability and ambiguity, a result of the questioning of accepted cultural phenomena, such as imperialism, that are typified in Marlow’s discourse and modernism more generally. I have in mind something more akin to Wayne C. Booth’s description of “ethical criticism,” in which the reader has an ethical responsibility to the text and the author, as well as their reading of the text. To note the failure of Conrad to go beyond questioning of imperial practice is an ethical response to the text along Booth’s lines, while at the same time acknowledging that a full critique of imperialism is in some ways beyond the purview of the novel. See Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1988), 10 ff.

⁵³ “Although critics have observed that ‘Africa’ is never named [in *Heart of Darkness*], few readers could doubt that the continent is a referent in a novel that draws on and elaborates

simultaneous presence/absence of Africa in the novel harken back to Wolleager's argument about the double negativity in *Heart of Darkness*: the "absence" is obvious enough inasmuch as "Africa" itself is nowhere to be found in the novel, nor even "the Congo." Africa's illusory presence in the novel, in spite of the thick details of Marlow's account, indicates the familiarity of Africanist discourse in European writing in the high colonial period. Although his descriptions are quite evocative if sketchy, this remains a story told by Marlow to his traveling companions aboard the *Nellie*. Through this clever framing device, Conrad can draw on imperial images of Africa overly familiar to his readership, even as his narrative subverts them. Instead of taking readers to the Congo, we instead "hear" Africa described by one who has been there and lived to tell the tale. This frame screens the reader from direct experience, creating a further absence which makes the never-named Africa of the novel even more shadowy and elusive.

The present absence of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* presents one of the oldest literary-critical problems: how to discuss stories and characters, the products of the author's imagination, against the backdrop of material reality evoked by the literary work itself. Without being flippant, I suggest we need not rehash fifty or more years of scholarship to recognize that I am identifying a particular crux for the interpretation of Conrad's novel. My point is that the question of how novels like *Heart of Darkness* exist in relation to the colonial project, constituted by and constituent with imperial discourse,

images long familiar to a Western readership from prior ideologically saturated texts – an unearthly landscape of immense, matted jungle, an impenetrable forest, a human environment inhabited by naked black bodies bearing spears and bows 'who howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces' [...], whose speech is heard as a savage discord and whose souls are perceived as rudimentary." Benita Parry, "The Moment and After-Life of *Heart of Darkness*," in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White (London: Routledge, 2005), 40.

obtains for understanding the novel within the framework of southern alterity. In short, the fictional characters and situations created by Joseph Conrad reveal his own thinking but also reveal something about high imperialist thought regarding colonial space. To that point, the curious narrative absence of Africa in the novel suggests that Conrad, despite the arresting originality of his novel, nevertheless relied in the writing of his novel on conventional tropes regarding Africa and its inhabitants, regardless of his position on the imperial project as a whole. Attempting to peer beyond the familiar images of Africa he relied upon in crafting *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad finds only more darkness. His connection of that darkness back to Europe and colonialism remains a moment of great insight into the ideological function of empire, but nonetheless the vision of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* reveals the poverty of the European perspective even more starkly. No wonder then that Conrad sees the continent's unearthliness as an ontological condition, not something constructed by European discourse, or a material condition produced by rapacious imperialism.

In addition to the conventional ontological perspective Conrad displays towards the African characters in his novel, his images of the African landscape are likewise conventional. I return to my discussion in the Introduction of on Lockean property rights, which according to Ellen Meiksins Wood extend the logic of the domestic enclosures outwards to the colonies, justifying the imperial project itself: "People acquire a right to property by giving it value – which Locke makes very clear means exchange value. This had vast implications not only for the domestic practice of enclosure but also for the dispossession of indigenous peoples in colonial territories."⁵⁴ Locke wrote with the

⁵⁴ Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 157.

colonies of the Western Hemisphere in mind, but his theories undergird both Conrad's portrayal of both the "declivity" of colonial landscape and Kurtz's ideas about colonial rule from his writings:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings...By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," etc. etc...It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. (50)

These peculiar terms – "Immensity" and "Benevolence" – demonstrate the obscurity that often attends to Conrad's "impressionistic" language. Capitalized as they are, they may bring to mind the tradition of German Idealism, but what Marlow wants to express as almost spiritualized concepts screen the naked material component of Locke's ideology. Wood again:

Even if land is occupied by indigenous peoples, and even if they make use of the land themselves, their land is still open to legitimate colonial expropriation. [Locke's] notion that property derives from the creation of value, from "improvement" that enhances exchange value, implies not only that mere occupancy is not enough to establish property rights, or even that hunting-gathering cannot establish the right of property while agriculture can, but also that insufficiently productive and profitable agriculture, by the standards of English agrarian capitalism, effectively constitutes waste.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 158.

The crucial point here is that the creative energies of the Congolese do not constitute “improvement” of the land according to the Lockean scheme. Their land, by this measure, was already a waste land when the imperial forces found and appropriated them; despite colonial improvements turning the land into a different kind of waste, it is now profitable according to the imperial capitalist scheme.

As Achebe reminds us in his critique of Conrad’s novel, Marlow’s realization of the darkness at the heart of European colonialism is only possible because of Africa’s position as a foil to Europe. *Heart of Darkness* suggests an essential relationship between the decaying, decimated African landscape and the “savage” colonial subject. Yet, I suggest the novel is neither fully convergent with nor fully opposed to imperial discourse; Marlow assents to certain colonially-inflected understandings of Africa while expressing doubt about the rack and ruin he witnesses. Furthermore, Marlow at times challenges the correspondence between the primeval landscape and its savage inhabitants but fails to overcome it entirely. Even when the colonial overlords clearly engender the suffering of both Africa and its inhabitants, such as when Marlow first sees the company station, the novel retains its basically hierarchical orientation. Alongside that “scene of inhabited devastation” full of people “moving around like ants,” consider Marlow’s recounting of the voyage upriver, which simultaneously correlates the African environment with its inhabitants, and then questions the premise:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were....No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would

come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. (36)

Marlow's circumlocutions, which this passage exemplifies, have long been a source of fascination for critics, who generate virtually endless meanings from his linguistic vagaries. Here his language, although circling around the subject as he tends to do, is derived from the familiar "ideologically saturated texts" Parry describes, grounded in the distinctly European perception of the relationship between Africa's unearthly earth and its savage inhabitants. The phrase "a thing monstrous and free" is frustratingly unclear – is Marlow describing Africa or Africans? – but Marlow regardless senses an uncomfortably close kinship with the Africans. The ambiguity arises from the thinking-out-loud quality of Marlow's attempts to articulate the emotions and thoughts that these sights create in him, to the point that he may indeed be confusing the land with the people, or vice-versa. This passage and others have proven ripe material for critics, following Achebe, who are quick to implicate Conrad's racism. That Conrad could be simultaneously a racist and a critic of colonialism is indisputable, yet Marlow's encounter with the other here echoes across the modernist novel.

Simon Gikandi describes the modernist experience of the other as "the deep ambivalence at the heart of what appears to be modernism's revision of alterity." Modernism initially, according to Gikandi, "set out to transform" the Enlightenment notion "that there was a deep affinity between the racial character of a people, their morality, and their aesthetics." In effect, modernism staged a revolt against the very modern culture that it has subsequently come to represent. In Gikandi's account, though,

modernism was only half successful: “At the same time, however, modernism – which we have come to see as the radical critique of modernity – carried within it powerful residues of the civilization it sought to negate via the primitive.”⁵⁶ In his essay, Gikandi turns briefly to *Heart of Darkness*, noting that “the world of the savage is always written about retrospectively as a place of death and danger,”⁵⁷ a narrative movement that Conrad’s novel clearly possesses. Although he doesn’t say so, Gikandi’s argument supports my contention that *Heart of Darkness* is an ur-text of this modernist phenomenon, similar to my argument for its north-south narrative movement as a template.

Gikandi’s account of how modernists harnessed the energies of their real and imagined encounters with the other to create their art is the linchpin for my “contrapuntal” reading of Charles Chesnut’s *The Marrow of Tradition* alongside *Heart of Darkness*. Moreover, Gikandi forces us to consider the contradictions at the heart of the modernist project, the “deep ambivalence” he identifies. The root of this ambivalence is not actually in the encounter with the other, but rather in the appropriation of the other; the eventual enshrinement of modernist art in “museums and galleries as the visible symbol of the triumphant culture of capitalism” belies its origins in “the desire to merge with the other.” This “revolutionary rupture” was short-circuited when modernism came to produce “forms of art and literature that now buttress the institution of culture in Europe and the United States.”⁵⁸ In short, modernism pulled away from the other as a

⁵⁶ Simon Gikandi, “Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism,” in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, ed. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

necessary condition for the institution of its art and literature. Although Gikandi does not explicitly state that this institution is what made modernists' use of the other appropriative, he describes the way in which the appropriation does so: "In order for modernism to appropriate the other and to see it as the condition of possibility of modern art, it needed to separate the body of the savage from its aesthetic objects so that the latter could be valued even in the face of hostility toward the former."⁵⁹ Similarly, in his discussion of "neotraditional" African art in his essay "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?", Kwame Anthony Appiah observes that African art is often understood "by contrast" to postmodernism as "premodern, that is, traditional."⁶⁰ Appiah's point comes by way of his discussion of a 1987 show at the Center for African Art in New York, underlining Gikandi's point about the institutionalization of modernism. "For modernism," Appiah writes, "primitive art was to be judged by putatively *universal* aesthetic criteria, and by these standards in was finally found possible to value it."⁶¹

Gikandi finds threaded throughout modernism a vacillation between celebration and repudiation of the other. The former is perhaps most typified by the simultaneous "discovery" of African art shared by Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso, which Michael North has written about at length. Even here we find ambivalence, an eventual drawing back.⁶² However, nowhere in *Heart of Darkness* does Conrad really celebrate the alterity

⁵⁹ Ibid, 42.

⁶⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?", *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 343.

⁶¹ Ibid, 347. Emphasis his.

⁶² On the second page of North's chapter on Stein and Picasso in his book *The Dialect of Modernism* we see evidence of their drawing back from African influence: "Late in his life, Picasso strenuously denied that he had been crucially influenced by African art, and Stein said of herself in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: 'She was not at any time

of the Africans he portrays, unlike other modernists. Instead, Conrad's novel is "a powerful act of exorcism," in Gikandi's words: "The narrative of modernism, or its art objects, must hence be read not as the medium through which the Western self and the African initiate meaningful encounters, but as a symbolization of their separation at their moment of recognition"⁶³ Marlow's brief conversation with the head-man of his cannibalistic crew members illustrates this separation at the moment of recognition:

"Catch 'im," he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth – "Catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?" "Eat 'im!" he said curtly...I would no doubt have been properly horrified had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry, that they must have been growing increasingly hungry for at least this month past. They had been engaged for six months (I don't think a single one of them had any clear idea of time as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time – had no inherited experience to teach them, as it were) and of course, as long as there was a piece of paper written over in accordance with some farcical law or other made down the river, it didn't enter anybody's head to trouble how they would live. (40; ellipsis mine)

Marlow's reflections on the head-man's pronounced desire to eat the flesh of another human being initially finds him rejecting his potential horror in an act of attempted identification of the head-man's identity. In his parenthetical aside, however, he removes

interested in African sculpture" (60). North is heartily skeptical towards these pronouncements, not least because in the case of Stein, a frontispiece of her sitting at a desk bearing an African sculpture appeared in *The Autobiography*. See Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 59 ff.

⁶³ Gikandi, "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism," 46.

the cannibals from civilizational (and therefore imperial) time, choosing instead to see them as noble savages of a kind. Conrad again takes up a familiar Western trope in order to both inform his characterization and subvert it, as Parry observes: “So too the book’s chiaroscuro of light and dark, which simultaneously reiterates and compromises the customary evaluation attaching to white and black in colonial discourse, is imbued by historical usage.”⁶⁴ Marlow’s attitude toward the cannibals leads him beyond “historical usage” to question the very civilizing powers of empire, as his comment on the “farcical law or other made down the river” makes clear. In short, Marlow’s attempt to identify common humanity with the cannibals’ head-man ends in a cynical rejection of the regenerative powers of Western civilization in such an inhospitable territory. Furthermore, his speculation that the cannibals are unencumbered by historical time reinforces the implicit connection between the so-called savage subject and their primeval environment.

As I have already discussed, the anxiety and ambivalence of *Heart of Darkness* arise from Conrad’s groping sense that the darkness of Africa reveals more fully the darkness at the heart of civilization, Europe. The Africa of the novel is a pre-civilizational void, a blank space, that ideally should reveal the glories of Europe all the more clearly. *Heart of Darkness* does not do that. If Africa is suspended in a timeless void, Europe is mired in a civilizational quagmire, undoubtedly more advanced but seemingly unredeemable. Although critics have long recognized the novel’s skepticism toward

⁶⁴ Parry, “Moment and After-Life,” 43.

colonialism, the scope of *Heart of Darkness* extends beyond the specific brutalities of the Congo to question the legitimacy of European civilization.⁶⁵

Marlow's opening utterance reveals Conrad's hierarchy of civilizations, revealing how Europe's development from a pre-civilized darkness into a continent of imperial powers makes it objectively superior to Africa.⁶⁶ Still, Marlow's doubts about civilization develop not by looking at Europe, but instead through his contact with Africa and the ensuing "separation at the moment of recognition." But it should be emphasized that Marlow journeys through *colonial* Africa. However much Africa may be an unregenerate space to his way of thinking, the destruction and darkness unleashed by colonialism calls European civilization into radical question. Europe may still be higher in the hierarchy of civilization, but Marlow's tale put the idea of European "civilization" into question. Gikandi writes that modernists avoid saying "explicitly that the horror they had encountered in the heart of darkness validated the culture of modernity," but alongside this we should consider Marianne DeKoven's observation of the difference between the novels putative, unnamed narrator, and Marlow's narrative voice, which reveals the depths of knowledge and skepticism Marlow attained on his Congo journey:⁶⁷

The first narrator's neat, comfortable dualism, separating the gloom of modern London from the shining heroic past of British might, is collapsed in a stroke, as

⁶⁵ I have focused relatively little on Kurtz in my reading, which is against the grain of most criticism of *Heart of Darkness*. A focus on Conrad's vision of Africa requires, I think, a focus on the character who shares his perceptions with the reader, Marlow. Inasmuch as "all Europe made" Kurtz, these reflections on the novel's view of civilization are by necessity bound up in him as a character.

⁶⁶ Just as the modernism Gikandi writes about in his essay is white, European modernism, the Europe of *Heart of Darkness* is Western Europe. The hierarchies implied bear comparison.

⁶⁷ Gikandi, "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism," 46.

we move through Marlow into modernist narrative. Marlow insists that the darkness is always already part of the solar logocentric might of Britannia. His historical imagination carries him back not to Elizabethan glory days but to the Thames's ignominious, squalid, Western-cultural origin as colonized rather than colonizing river.⁶⁸

Even as Marlow's own cultural hierarchy reifies European superiority, he cannot avoid reflecting on the darker colonial history of Britain. For DeKoven, this is, if not the genesis, at least a constitutive aspect of modernism. Marlow's views Africa myopically at best, but he nevertheless possesses a darker view of Europe than he had before his African sojourn.

Like DeKoven, I read *Heart of Darkness* as a generative, even exemplary modernist narrative. Modernism styled itself from its origins as an interrogation, if not outright rejection, of Enlightenment principles, civilization included.⁶⁹ *Heart of Darkness* fits the pattern, but it is the novel's unstinting horror at colonialism along with the African other that makes it exemplary, or at least generative. The moment of recognition occurs, and Marlow surely disavows it, but his encounter with the Kurtz's Intended not only seems "a moment of triumph for the wilderness" (73) when he is on her doorstep, but her gesture towards the window, arms outstretched, reminds him of Kurtz's African woman, "tragic also and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness" (76). For one intense

⁶⁸ DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*, 93.

⁶⁹ To this point, in 1931 Edmund Wilson was tracing modernism (a term he does not use in the book) through French Symbolism, which he calls "that second swing of the pendulum away from a mechanistic view of nature and from a social conception of man," the first being Romanticism. See Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994), 17.

moment of recognition, the differences between Europe and Africa are collapsed. As he looks back on it, however, Marlow is unable to fully recognize the identification – “the heavens do not fall for such a trifle” (77). Perhaps the knowledge of full identification is too much for him to bear. If so, it would explain why he is haunted instead of illuminated. Lawtoo explains this peculiar dimension of Marlow’s story as a mimetic crisis:

Inherent in Marlow’s oscillating narrative is not only a projection of mimetic affects on racial/gendered others, but also an attempt to take hold of the mimetic conception of the subject he initially disavows. In short, *Heart of Darkness* insistently tells us that where there is racism and sexism lurks the disavowed phantom of mimesis – a phantom endowed with a kind of affective, rhythmic power to sweep not only women and African, but also white male colonialists, off their feet.⁷⁰

Marlow’s tale is inconclusive because it ends with him admitting his failure in light of the abortive encounter with the Intended. Conrad’s modernist narrative expresses the affective component of the dark truth of colonialism. However much Marlow may want to believe that the “idea at the back of it” redeems the imperial project, he has seen too much of colonialism’s horrors to wholeheartedly accede to that notion.

2.5 The Moment of Racial Recognition

The Marrow of Tradition is a densely plotted novel, intertwining several distinct stories through familial connections, social relations, and professional networks, helping constitute the social panorama. Complex plotting is not necessarily innovative, but

⁷⁰ Nidesh Lawtoo, “The Horror of Mimesis: ‘Enthusiastic Outbreak[s]’ in *Heart of Darkness*,” *Conradiana* 42, no. 2 (2010): 60.

Chesnutt's social panorama allows him to present a teeming, busy city connected to a modernizing nation through technologies such as newspapers, trains, and the telegraph. Dr. Miller is the paragon of modern professionalism, but so is the Chronicle's city editor, Lee Ellis, who Major Carteret holds in high regard for both his winsome nature and his "business value" (12). Vestiges of the antebellum social order do remain, most notably in the person of "old Mr. Delamere," an aged plantation owner, but he is clearly a figure from a bygone time. Through this social panorama, Chesnutt evokes the unevenly developing New South as well as the social anxieties then felt in the South as well as the wider U.S., as well as dramatizing several moments of the modernist separation at the moment of recognition that Gikandi describes.

Despite its elements of plantation romance, in its modernity and its concern with social class, *The Marrow of Tradition* sits cheek-to-jowl with realism. Amy Kaplan describes how American realism of the 1880s and '90s "both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life."⁷¹ Although her study is concerned with white authors such as William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and Theodore Dreiser, *The Marrow of Tradition* fits within this framework, albeit uneasily. Howells was an early champion of Chesnutt's dialect fiction, and Chesnutt was well aware of the state of U.S. letters, writing deliberately against the backdrop of both realism and Southern plantation romance typified by Thomas Dixon and Thomas Nelson Page. As Kaplan writes of the authors in her study,

⁷¹ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9.

This unreal quality comes from two major sources for the novelists in this study: intense and often violent class conflicts which produced fragmented and competing social realities, and the simultaneous development of a mass culture which dictated an equally threatening homogenous reality. Attempting to steer a precarious course between these two developments, realists contribute to the construction of a cohesive public sphere while they at once resist and participate in the domination of a mass market as the arbiter of America's national idiom.⁷²

The same social and ideological pressures are found in Chesnut's novel, but whereas white novelists were still invested in the "cohesive public sphere," Chesnut unveils the way the public sphere is constituted by white supremacy. As Walter Benn Michaels argues, there is "an important body of Progressive literature that [...] *was* deeply concerned with questions of racial and national identity."⁷³ Page and Dixon's work is part of that. Michaels writes against an account of literary realism and Progressivism which emphasizes a homogenous American identity that seeks to circumvent racial difference. Similarly, Chesnut not only challenges this view of American identity, but furthermore shows how race constitutes American identity.⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, Pluralism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1995), 9-10.

⁷⁴ Michaels critiques Chesnut's redemptive picture of the mulatto as a way to surpass black-white distinctions in his novel *The House Behind the Cedars*, pointing out that "although [the novel] beings in a world of black, white, and mulatto, it ends in black and white." Chesnut's thinking about race does at times fall short of contemporary standards as articulated by critical race theory; for instance, in the *Boston Evening Transcript* articles quoted earlier in the chapter. To my mind, Chesnut's weaknesses should attributed to the limitations of post-Reconstruction racial discourse rather than his own thinking. Within the extreme constraints placed on African American writers at this time, which he dramatizes through the anti-rape law editorial in *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnut managed to advance some arresting ideas, notably that race is a cultural rather than biological distinction. See Michaels, *Our America*, 54.

Intertwining the plots of *The Marrow of Tradition* is one of Chesnutt's strategies for rewriting an American identity free of race. Susan Danielson, along with many other critics, differentiates between the novel's "private, sentimental plot" and "'public' and apparently major plot."⁷⁵ Both of these plots primarily involve the white characters of the novel, with the exception of Sandy, Mr. Delamere's faithful black retainer, and the subplot in which Olivia Carteret uncovers the marriage her father had late in life to one of his slaves, a union from which Dr. Miller's wife Janet resulted (and would also legitimize her claim on her father's estate, not incidentally). The threads of the plot threaten to undo Chesnutt's narrative control, with a couple of the narratives remaining unfinished.⁷⁶ Although it reduces the complexity of the narrative movement, the distinction between private and public plots allows for thinking about the novel without getting lost in granular detail. Elements of both the sentimental, domestic plot and the public plot respond to (and parody) the genre of plantation romance then in vogue.⁷⁷ Far from an empty exercise in nostalgia, postbellum plantation novels were not paeans to the Old South, but an expression of the authors' visions for the emerging New South. Writers like Dixon and Page were filled with contemporary urgency, writing about the plantation in an effort to shape the emerging New South in relation to but independent of the antebellum.

Dixon and Page were interested in the plantation South inasmuch as it provided a usable past with which to confront the challenges of the post-Reconstruction South. The

⁷⁵ Danielson, "Charles Chesnutt's Dilemma," 73-4.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁷ The private, sentimental plot of *The Marrow of Tradition* also reflects the influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The significance of Stowe and Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand* on Chesnutt's novel is significant, but not really part of my reading. See Werner Sollors, "Introduction," in Chesnutt, *Marrow of Tradition*.

emergence of plantation romance literature “coincided with the emergence of a new *interpretation* of the old plantation,” according to Jeremy Wells.⁷⁸ This effort went beyond regional concerns; as the South rejoined its place in the Union, especially after the painful experience of Reconstruction, the plantation moved beyond the regional to become national in scope. “It provided numerous writers new ways of imagining the nation’s founding and development; and, for an institution whose allure was connected to its supposed pastness [...] figured conspicuously in visions of the nation’s future, too.”⁷⁹ This merging of “national fantasy and southern mythology”⁸⁰ is inextricably bound up with the imperial United States that was then coming into power. Indeed, Wells’ argument is that the U.S. as a whole, but particularly the South, sought to follow Rudyard Kipling’s lead in taking up the white man’s burden, plantation romance doing its part in the U.S.’s cultural and political shift from a Republic to an empire.⁸¹ Novels like Page’s *Red Rock* and Dixon’s *The Klansman* and *The Leopard’s Spots* feature the intertwining of private and public plots much like *The Marrow of Tradition*; whereas, however, they sought to “preserve the purity and, to some extent, the homogeneity of the people,” in Scott Romine’s words, Chesnut’s aim is to sweep away the sentimental pieties and demonstrate the manifestly non-homogenous nature of the South.⁸² He uses plantation novels as his template; indeed, “the Eastern literary establishment and sympathetic white

⁷⁸ Jeremy Wells, *Romances of the White Man’s Burden: Race, Empire, and Plantation in American Literature* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7-18.

⁸² Scott Romine, “Things Falling Apart: The Postcolonial Condition of *Red Rock* and *The Leopard’s Spots*,” in *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 177.

philanthropists would not have him write any other way,” as Stephen P. Knadler writes.⁸³ However, as I have already suggested, Chesnut’s proto-modernist tendencies and social position allow him to refashion the plantation novel to his own ends: “By borrowing modern experimental techniques in multiple perspectives and indirect discourse, however, Chesnut would release the repressed black gaze.”⁸⁴

The plantation romance is a genre built explicitly, like the New South’s political order, on white supremacy. Military occupation and Reconstruction shaped the South’s post-Civil War experience. The “collective attempt to make sense of a fractured past and a traumatic present” animated these novels, as Romine argues.⁸⁵ Whether through politics or aesthetics, the post-Reconstruction South attempted to enshrine the white supremacist doctrine that had been threatened by the Civil War and its aftermath. Romine reads these plantation romances as postcolonial novels, writing: “Originating in psychological carnage and not bracing, ennobling experience, the formation of modern white southern identity captured by Page and Dixon registers the irrevocable alternation produced by the Reconstruction encounter.”⁸⁶ There is an ironic valence to Romine’s argument, as he attempts to show how the “imperial” occupation of the South after the Civil War creates postcolonial conditions comparable to those more familiar varieties explicated by critics and theorists such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. At the same time, the liberatory impulse of postcolonial literature is subsumed in an overwhelming white supremacy in the post-War South:

⁸³ Knadler, “Untragic Mulatto,” 431. See note 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Romine, “Things Falling Apart,” 176.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

By situating whiteness as the traumatized subject of the Reconstruction encounter, Dixon simultaneously equates whiteness and civilization while registering the gap between whiteness and the civilization it “ought” to entail. Standing at once for civilization and for the imperative to restore it, whiteness shifts from essence to contingency as a project of regaining power.⁸⁷

In Romine’s reading, postcolonialism is a hermeneutic tool that helps us understand the novels of Dixon and Page in their post-Reconstruction context. Chesnutt, however, writes against this understanding of “imperial” international colonialism and the enshrinement of white supremacy which followed the failure of Reconstruction, as well as the increasingly imperial nature of U.S. foreign policy at this time. Against an ontological hierarchy as exemplified by *Heart of Darkness*, to say nothing of Page and Dixon’s novels, Chesnutt views white supremacy as a political and ideological position that underlies and connects slavery, Reconstruction, and U.S. imperialism.

Scattered throughout *The Marrow of Tradition* are moments when Chesnutt evokes U.S. imperialism directly, at times in direct comparison to the plight of Southern blacks. In the weeks leading up to the *coup d’état* in the novel, Chesnutt writes that “public sentiment all over the country became every day more favorable to the views of the conspirators.” Chesnutt credits the “obscure jealousy” and “fear” of blacks in the South, and the North’s “new Pharaoh...who knew not Israel,” distant from the sectional controversies of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and therefore more tolerant of the South’s treatment of African American” (142-3; ellipsis mine). But he also casts an eye

⁸⁷ Ibid., 189.

towards international developments as well, specifically the Spanish-American war and growing U.S. imperialism:

The nation was rushing forward with giant strides toward colossal wealth and world-dominion, before the exigencies of which mere abstract and ethical theories must not be permitted to stand. The same argument that justified the conquest of an inferior nation could not be denied to those who sought the suppression of an inferior race. (142)

In the following chapter, General Belmont explains that as long as the conspirators and their fellow whites “have the guns,” they will be successful, at least based on his experiences “in Nicaragua, ten years ago, when Paterno’s revolution drove out Igorroto’s government” (149). Although Chesnutt concocted this fictional South American revolution for the novel, it forcefully suggests a relationship between domestic race relations and foreign policy.

Chesnutt, like many of his African American contemporaries, was thinking internationally. DuBois was making his first gestures beyond the nation state around this time in *The Souls of Black Folk*; recall that he defines the “problem of the color-line” as “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”⁸⁸ Although Chesnutt’s vision was not as expansive as DuBois’, he nevertheless clearly perceived the internal colonization of blacks as related to the increasingly imperial U.S.⁸⁹ Harilous Stecopoulos argues that “the federal government’s

⁸⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 15.

⁸⁹ Chesnutt also “appears to have concurred in the widely held belief that the Spanish-American War, by inciting a patriotic marital frenzy throughout the nation, had completed the South’s post-Reconstruction rapprochement with the North, at the expense of its black

decision to abandon the onerous task of building democracy in the region not only devastated the African American South, but also laid the groundwork for the U.S. betrayal of many other communities of color overseas.”⁹⁰ As the post-Reconstruction U.S. turned its eyes from the South to the world, it was also looking away from the deteriorating conditions of blacks in the South. Although the *coup d'état* is the climax of this deterioration, Chesnutt enumerates several other examples, including the abysmal working conditions many blacks found themselves in, typified by Captain McBane’s abuses of his workers; the threat of lynching and the specter of the black rapist, as in the framing of Sandy for the murder of Polly Ochiltree; the separate-but-equal logic of Jim Crow, shown in all its falsity in the train-car episode with Dr. Miller. Each of these added up to an increasingly intolerable situation for black Americans, particularly in the South. As Stecopoulos writes,

Chesnutt makes evident how the white takeover of Wellington and the white American attempt to redefine the nation in Anglo-Saxonist terms nourished each other...Chesnutt also recognized that the appeal of white sectional reconciliation depended on the ‘escalation of racial discrimination and violence’ in the global arena.”⁹¹

Chesnutt, in short, examines the South in the context of U.S. foreign policy in his effort to understand the shifting place of African Americans both regionally and within the nation state as Reconstruction gives way to an imperial United States.

citizens.” Frederick Wegener, “Charles W. Chesnutt and the Anti-Imperialist Matrix of African-American Writing, 1898-1905,” *Criticism* 41, no. 4 (1999): 469.

⁹⁰ Harilaos Stecopoulos, *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 43. Ellipsis mine.

As I have suggested, *The Marrow of Tradition* bears comparison with *Heart of Darkness* because of the shared use of the fateful southern voyage trope, but both novels interrogate their respective empires as well. If Conrad is ambivalent towards British imperialism, Chesnutt is firmer in his disapproval of the nascent American variety. Then again, many white Southerners likewise opposed U.S. expansionism, anxious as they were about imperial conquest potentially “upsetting the racial balance of power at home.”⁹² As Edward Said writes of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow’s emphasis on the “discrepancy” between the “idea” of empire and the reality of Africa ends up throwing “reality itself” into question.⁹³ Chesnutt views imperialism from the other side of the color-line, and unlike the Southerners with their racial anxiety and Conrad with his skepticism towards reality itself, he perceives the interworking of race and empire in its terrible potential to disenfranchise people of color. As he writes of Carteret’s campaign for white supremacy, “The provisions of the Federal Constitution, it was maintained, must yield to the ‘higher law,’ and if the Constitution could neither be altered nor bent to this end, means must be found to circumvent it.” The “grandfather clause” was eventually adopted to disenfranchise the black vote legally, but the white supremacists would not stop there: “By fraud in one place, by terrorism in another, and everywhere the resistless moral force of the united whites, the negroes were reduced to the apathy of despair, their few white allies demoralized, and the amendment adopted by a large majority” (143-4). In *The Marrow of Tradition*, this “higher law” applies not only to the disenfranchisement and continued oppression of blacks after Abolition, but also the new American

⁹² Wegener, “Anti-Imperial Matrix,” 468. See note 51.

⁹³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 29.

imperialist project, as Frederick Wegener observes.⁹⁴ Among the through-lines which connect slavery to imperialism, U.S. foreign policy displays surprising continuity. As mentioned in the Introduction, Matthew Karp makes the case that Southern slaveholders in and outside the federal government fought to maintain and expand a distinct empire that existed primarily as a bulwark for the institution of slavery – until the Civil War necessitated that they change strategy.⁹⁵ The notion of the U.S. being an empire was therefore not exactly new to southern politicians and leaders in the 1890s. By invoking the “higher law,” Carteret and the other campaigners for white supremacy uphold the continuity between slavery, Jim Crow, and U.S. imperialism; the “higher law” may uphold white supremacy and superiority in the minds of the Big Three, but Chesnut “asks us to consider how the belief in a higher law is a historically and contextually bound condition.”⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Indeed, it was with the institution of slavery in the antebellum South that Chesnut ultimately associated the very different maneuvers in which the nation had recently indulged. Just as that earlier crime involved the subjugation of one race by another, so what most alarmed Chesnut about the specter of an American *imperium*, beyond its damaging impact on one or another sovereign state (to say nothing of its own incompatibility with the nation’s own democratic principles), was a specifically racial component that had begun to claim the attention of most other African American spokesmen at the time as well. Wegener, “Anti-Imperial Matrix,” 475.

⁹⁵ “In the two decades before the Civil War, proslavery elites and their largely compliant northern allies maintained a vise-like grip on the executive branch of the U.S. national government, including the presidency, the cabinet, and important lower levels of federal administration. [...] Relative to its free population, the South held disproportionate influence in virtually every branch of the antebellum U.S. government. [...] But in the 1840s and 1850s slaveholding leaders did not assume cabinet posts to prepare for a coming conflict of arms, or even to augment their sectional strength in a divided union. Instead they sought with terrific ambition to command the power of the entire United States – and then, crucially, to use that power in world politics.” Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4-5.

⁹⁶ Peter Zogas, “Realist Historiography and the Legacies of Reconstruction in Charles Chesnut’s *The Marrow of Tradition*,” *American Literary Realism* 48, no. 2 (2016): 160.

Chesnutt makes his political points in *The Marrow of Tradition* largely through digressive passages, in which the narrative voice explains the situation directly to the reader. These explicatory sections remind us that he was self-consciously writing to an intended audience of whites, in part to correct inaccurate newspaper accounts of the Wilmington Insurrection, but also attempting to convince lawmakers to intervene in the situation, at one point mailing copies to several members of Congress, all to no avail.⁹⁷ Despite the avowed purpose of the novel as a call-to-action, it avoids bogging itself down in allegory and sermonizing, unlike many of the plantation novels that Chesnutt was evoking (or parodying). Again, Chesnutt's choice of form and genre is a deliberate one, tooled to both meet and challenge his audience's expectations. The private plot of *Marrow* stands as a domestic analogue to the public plot; the same complex post-Civil War politics of race and land play out in the Carteret home as they do in the streets of Wellington. Samina Najmi describes the intertwining of family dynamics and the politics of race and gender:

The loss of [Major] Carteret's ancestral home – and we later discover that he has lost it to the former slave, Adam Miller, father-in-law of Olivia's unacknowledged black step-sister, Janet – is alleviated by the acquisition of Olivia's ancestral home, the violation of white patriarchal space consoled by the invasion of white woman's space. Indeed the invasion is also of body space. [...] Even more tellingly, it is literally through Olivia's body that Carteret hopes to rescue his ancestral line from extinction.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Sollors, "Introduction," in Chesnutt, *Marrow of Tradition*, xxxii-i. See note 93.

⁹⁸ Samina Najmi, "Janet, Polly, and Olivia: Constructs of Blackness and White Femininity in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*," *The Southern Literary Journal* 32, no. 1 (1999): 5.

Just as the private plot is an analogue or companion to the public plot, so are the Carteret and Miller families related. The Major and his wife have a close proximity to blackness in both of their family histories, an uncomfortable reality for both of them. For Olivia, the very sight of Janet Miller makes her ill (66-68), while Carteret's loss of his ancestral home is painful and defining enough that both his marriage to Olivia Merrell and his campaign for white supremacy can be read as compensating gestures. Chesnutt is clearly not to be included in Gikandi's account of white modernity's use of the black or African other to constitute its own art, but he does present a graphic portrayal of the separation at the moment of recognition in Olivia's repulsion toward Janet. *The Marrow of Tradition* is a novel of alterity that does not view otherness as something to be screened from the reader, but rather as an artificial barrier put in place to uphold white supremacy.

Beyond the obvious symbolic loss of the ancestral house and the threatened masculinity it entails, Chesnutt explores the racial anxiety, especially surrounding rape and miscegenation, which animates the racial politics of Carteret. Even for genteel white supremacists such as Carteret and General Belmont, racial anxiety proves to be an animating force for their politics and their desire to overthrow the Fusion government. Although they abhor the vulgarity and violence of McBane and abjure his desire to kill blacks during the *coup d'état*, they share more with him than they would perhaps care to realize. Carteret's anxiety has a sexual component as well, and not merely because of the Merrell family and his loss of property to the Miller family. Carteret uses the specter of the black male rapist to enflame white racial passions as the *coup d'état* grows closer (*Marrow* 54-56, 145-146). Chesnutt uses the complicated family relationship at the heart

of the novel's domestic plot to "examin[e] the history of racial intermixture in [the South]," but Chesnutt pulls the curtain back on black/white sexual relations even further, as Riché Richardson writes: "[Chesnutt] examines the social injunction and taboos against interracial sex that obscured the more commonplace white male sexual abuse of black women through rape and other forms of sexual subjection during slavery and within the system of Jim Crow."⁹⁹ While white Southern men sought to conceal the true nature of racial intermixture, they were simultaneously creating a narrative and myth of the black rapist and a cult of Southern womanhood.¹⁰⁰ In short, a myth of interracial violence was created in order to hide the reality of interracial violence. This terrible dynamic played out in homes across the south, but it was felt in the public sphere as well; when not mentioned, as an undercurrent regulating everyday life, and when discussed, powerful enough to inspire terrible violence. Put simply, the Wellington *coup d'état* was a direct result of the violent political wielding of the black rapist myth.

Chesnutt also emphasizes white supremacy as one of the sources of the South's degeneracy in the unfolding of the Big Three's conspiracy. DuBois likewise looked to the oppressive nature of white supremacy in his account of the poverty-stricken lives of black

⁹⁹ Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ Louise Westling writes: "Traditional defenses of slavery were intimately intertwined with declarations about the veneration and protection of white women. Yet these women in fact shared inferiority and powerlessness with black as subjects of the ruling patriarchs. [...] Black men and white women shared the deepest kind of sexual humiliation, and black women were denied control of their own bodies and forced into concubinage. [...] All along, the white Southern lady had been left in chilly isolation on her pedestal, for the facts of miscegenation spelled rejection and rendered chivalric tributes as a painful lie." Westling's first chapter, "The Blight of Southern Womanhood," goes into great detail about the myth of Southern womanhood and the realities of miscegenation through plantation rape of female slaves by male masters. Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 22-3.

southerners. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he describes the “forlorn and forsaken” land of the Black Belt, with its “remnants of the vast plantations,” worked solely by miserable black sharecroppers: “Only black tenants can stand such a system, and they only because they must.”¹⁰¹ Very different than the bustling medium-sized city of Wilmington, DuBois’ account of life in the cotton fields of Georgia leaves little question as to what upholds the system that keeps black laborers in penury. The Big Three’s conspiracy is another spoke on the wheel, so to speak, but whereas the Southern landowners DuBois writes about used the grinding debt and poverty of the sharecropping system as means of social control, the conspirators turn to violence, ginned up by the publication of an editorial from Wilmington’s black newspaper decrying the myth of the black rapist. Again, there is an historical analogue in the Wilmington insurrection: Alex Manly, the editor of Wilmington’s black daily, published a response to a speech by Rebecca Latimer Felton, in which she called for lynchings “a thousand times a week if necessary” to protect white womanhood from rape.¹⁰² Manly’s editorial put the lie to the myth of the black rapist but went further, suggesting that sexual relations between white women and black men were consensual. When in the novel Carteret comes across the editorial penned by the black journalist and publisher Barber, he immediately recognizes the value

¹⁰¹ DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 117-8.

¹⁰² “Indeed, one of the riot’s contributing factors had been the excessive publicity given to a verbal skirmish between Wilmington’s Alexander Manly and Georgia’s Rebecca Latimer Felton. A white feminist and the wife of a Georgia senator, Felton had claimed that only an increase in lynching (‘a thousand times a week if necessary’) would ensure the protection of rural white women from black attack; Manly, the leading black journalist of Wilmington, responded that white females might actually be attracted to black men and not desire such protection. This assertion cost him his newspaper and very nearly his life, as his was the first black-owned building razed in Wilmington on the day of the violence.” Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 63.

of it as political propaganda, and shares it with his fellow conspirators. Chesnutt writes, “Its great offense was its boldness [...] The article was racial *lese-majesté* in the most aggravated form. A peg was needed up which to hang a *coup d’état*, and this editorial offered the requisite opportunity” (146-147). While Belmont thinks “there’s some truth in it, at least there’s an argument,” McBane responds, “Truth or not, no damn nigger has any right to say it,” to which Carteret concurs, in his more genteel way, that the editorial “violates an unwritten law of the South” (55). The editorial, along with the revelation that Miller’s wife Janet is the legitimate descendant and heir of Samuel Merckell, “allows Chesnutt to evacuate from the text the notion of victimized white womanhood, the idea of rape, and (therefore) the stereotype of black male criminality,” according to Sandra Gunning. “The ties of blood and tradition that Wellington’s white men attempt to suppress through the riot, continually surface in the domestic drama surrounding the Merckell-Brown family history.”¹⁰³

While the violent climax of the novel brings together several loose strands of the plot, the ending is not conclusive. Rather, it is apocalyptic: the *coup d’état* unites the two main plots of the novel with such irrevocable force that the public/private distinction they – and the Southern social order itself – turn on is revealed to be false. The violence unveils the public/private distinction as not only artificial but as a functional component of white supremacy. The ending also upholds and breaks with the convention of the plantation romance. White supremacy triumphs per usual for the genre, though Chesnutt does not valorize it as Dixon and Page do in their work. More than that, the novel undercuts that triumph through the murder of McBane by Josh Green and the horror that

¹⁰³ Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching*, 66.

Carteret feels over the escalating violence. The concluding pages show the Carterets at their weakest and the Millers utterly broken at the death of their son. The families finally cross the color line, but the ghoulis circumstances illustrate how cavernous is the divide between them despite their ties of blood. At the same time, the ending undercuts the othering that modernist fiction turns on. Olivia is compelled by circumstance to appeal to Julia as a sister, an ostensibly private gesture that points towards a kind of racial reconciliation impossible according to the schema Gikandi finds in modernism.

Dodie, the Carteret child that earlier in the novel the Major refused to allow Miller to operate on, is sick, and the Major has requested Miller to perform the life-saving operation. Miller, grieved over the loss of his son during the *coup*, refuses. Olivia goes to the Miller residence, hoping to appeal to the doctor's humanity. As Miller opens the door to her, the description of Olivia focuses on the physical similarities between her and Janet:

A lady stood there, so near the image of his own wife, whom he had just left, that for a moment he was well-nigh startled. A little older, perhaps, a little fairer of complexion, but with the same form, the same features, marked by the same wild grief. (192)

Miller, perhaps moved a bit by the undeniable physical resemblance, allows Janet to decide whether or not he will go, but only if Olivia will ask her as she watches over the body of their dead son. Olivia, humbled, recognizes Janet as her sister, after which Janet allows Miller to go and save Dodie. Chesnutt, at this moment of truth, sets aside the color line for a moment to focus on the disavowed familial bond the women share. While not ignoring the profound divisions that separate the half-sisters, Chesnutt's handling of the

situation suggests that such divisions are fundamentally foolish and ultimately tragic. Najmi writes that “Chesnutt’s final appeal is to the maternal instinct in his white female audience,” the same appeal that Harriet Beecher Stowe made in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but with an important difference: “Chesnutt appropriates Stowe’s model only to invert it: whereas in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* white women have power over black women, Chesnutt’s novel acknowledges but overturns this power dynamic in the end.”¹⁰⁴ The ending of *The Marrow of Tradition* points toward racial reconciliation, unmarked by sentimentalism. Eric Sundquist calls it an ending of “the utmost novelistic restraint on Chesnutt’s part,” writing, “He would have been within the bounds of artistic responsibility had he allowed Miller to pursue his own personal vengeance and cut Dodie’s throat.”¹⁰⁵ The ending is, of course, ambiguous as to Dodie’s survival or the outcome of the surgery, but it is as “a figure of healing” that Miller becomes a “sign of forgiveness and reconciliation – both in his final act and in his mere survival.”¹⁰⁶ And Najmi writes that although what happens after the surgery is left unstated, Olivia’s request and Janet’s generosity “speaks of a connection that survives,”¹⁰⁷ perhaps like Olivia’s son.

The reconciliation of the ending points a way forward, but it occurs only in the domestic sphere. On one hand, there was simply little way for Chesnutt to imagine a public manner of racial reconciliation at the time; indeed, the public plot in the novel ends with Miller’s hospital burned to the ground and McBane and Josh Green lying

¹⁰⁴ Najmi, “Jane, Polly, and Olivia,” 14.

¹⁰⁵ Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 447.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Najmi, “Jane, Polly, and Olivia,” 15.

dead.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, there is potential for the private reconciliation of the Millers and the Carterets to develop publicly. The last words of the novel – from Dr. Evans – indicate as much: “There’s time enough, but none to spare” (195). The ambiguity of those words and the ending more generally, however, does not allow for conclusions, as it should be for a novel designed to move its readership to action, whether U.S. lawmakers or middle-class white women. Contrasted, however, with the lie Marlow tells Kurtz’s Intended in an attempt to protect the domestic sphere from the public – in other words, to keep separate the lives of women from the work of men – the end of *The Marrow of Tradition* suggests that racial reconciliation is possible, but that it must begin by an invasion of the private by the public. For as Chesnutt knows, those distinctions exist only to serve the purposes of the powerful.

¹⁰⁸ “In their mirror acts of killing each other, one might say, Captain McBane and Josh Green cancel each other out. In Chesnutt’s terms, both are outlaws to represent a loss of control: on the one hand, Carteret and Belmont’s loss of control over the unruly mob [...] and on the other Miller’s loss of control over the forces led by Josh, who leap into suicidal confrontation with the white mob. The difference, nonetheless, is obvious: Carteret and Belmont, like the Secret Nine of Wilmington, already represent lawlessness.” Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 445-6.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ELUSIVE SOUTHERN UTOPIA

3.1 A Different Journey South

At the close of *Heart of Darkness*, the men who have listened to Marlowe's tale sit in stunned silence until the Director speaks, at which point the narrator looks around him:

The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.¹

The effect brings the otherworldly shroud of darkness Marlow attributes to the Congo over the Thames, an otherwise “tranquil waterway” actually connecting Britain to the far reaches of empire. Whether in its bloodily rapacious Belgian variety or the ostensibly civilizing mission of the British, colonialism configures the darkness as out there, other to Europe. Marlow's first words of the novel – “this also...*has* been one of the dark places of the earth” (emphasis mine) – place England's darkness in its pre-capitalist, pre-imperial past.² By novel's end, the “immense darkness” of the “black bank of clouds” hanging over the Thames, leaves the reader unsure from where exactly the heart of darkness emanates.

The journeys south in *Heart of Darkness* and *Marrow of Tradition* are declension narratives; they have their own narrative logic and their own ends, but read together, they portray the inescapably degraded nature of the south. This archetypical form does not exhaust the global modernist novel's portrayal of southern alterity. In this chapter, I take

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, A Norton Critical Ed., 4th ed. (1901; New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006) 77.

² *Ibid*, 5.

up two novels that portray southern space as a site of potential, but unrealized utopia: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The protagonists of both novels embark upon voyages to exotic southern locales holding the promise of utopian community, but both are undone by tragedy and death in the end. Within this overarching shared narrative movement, the novels sharply diverge. Woolf's staging of a scene of cross-racial feminine identity is ultimately revealed as illusory under the pressures of British bourgeois society. Hurston's protagonist finds her utopian community, but it is upended by the racial apartheid of Jim Crow revealed in the wake of a destructive hurricane. In short, both novels approach southern alterity as a ground upon which to work against the dominant societal relations that constrain their protagonists; both fail to imagine a sustained alternate community, but only Hurston's successfully envisions life after tragedy.

As with most of the novelistic pairings in this study, the initial comparisons seem unpromising. At the narrative level, Woolf's Rachel and Hurston's Janie go south for starkly different reasons. Furthermore, Woolf and Hurston have sharply diverging aesthetic strategies. And most significantly, the differences between the Edwardian British Woolf and the African American Hurston suggest the deeper national, racial, and social divisions separating these works. Even their respective knowledge of the regions they write about reveals a gulf. Woolf, testing the boundaries of Edwardian bourgeois culture, sets her novel in an imaginary colony in South America, a place of which she had no first-hand experience. Hurston, on the other hand, writes of the U.S. south from deep familiarity as one who grew up there and, while conducting her anthropological field work, traveled extensively throughout the region and the wider Caribbean. Beyond a

basic geographical narrative movement and a modernist bildungsroman form, the novels share little. At the same time, I argue that *The Voyage Out* and *Their Eyes*, by holding the utopian possibility of community found in the voyage south, offer a radical revision of the narrative movement outlined in the previous chapter. Although these utopian gestures ultimately fail under the weight of the contradictions inherent in their protagonists' social positions, these novels nevertheless complicate the account of southern alterity seen in archetypal southern voyage of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Marrow of Tradition*.

The failure of Woolf and Hurston's utopian visions should not be taken as an indictment of the novels as failures; indeed, a sense of failure is embedded in the very concept. Joshua Kotin, in his study of utopian literary expression, observes that not only is the word "utopia" by now virtually meaningless, but all utopias "share at least one basic feature: failure."³ Kotin argues that from the failure of collective utopian efforts, a "utopia of one" emerges, with Thoreau's *Walden* being a paradigmatic example. Against the modernist utopian experiments typified by liberalism and communism, Kotin situates the singular utopia in language, writing: "Language becomes a medium of independence, and independence an opportunity for perfection."⁴ Similarly, Nicholas Brown writes of the utopian element of the modernist sublime as set out by Georg Lukács, arguing that this aesthetic utopia seeks to unite "the intellectual antimonies opened up by the rift that runs through capitalism...by means of the sublime object that was supposed to represent the unrepresentable totality[.]"⁵ Echoing Kotin's observation that utopias irrevocably fail, Brown traces how "utopia is a space opened up only in the end to be foreclosed," not just

³ Joshua Kotin, *Utopias of One* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2018), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 20.

in European modernism but the work of postcolonial writers as well.⁶ While Brown's account offers a transnational and comparative perspective on the possibilities and failures of utopia, the specifically utopian dimensions afforded by southern alterity requires further elaboration.

My comparative readings of *The Voyage Out* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* aim to explicate the possibilities and pitfalls of southern alterity's utopian dimensions. Following Kotin's observation that the term "utopian" has become an empty signifier through excessive misuse, some explanation is in order. Greg Forter argues that the utopian in postcolonial historical fiction offers "the dream of alternatives to colonial capital rather than the imposition of preconceived blueprints."⁷ The very "imperfections" of utopia, he writes, "enables the genre to counter the criticism of premature closure by acknowledging that no society is ever fully closed or static; none will/can ever provide a total satisfaction of Desire or the plentitude of Being so thoroughly discredited by poststructuralist critique."⁸ In this spirit, I emphasize the provisional nature of Woolf and Hurston's utopias. Certainly, neither of these novels portray a utopia marked by closure or stasis; many if not most of their protagonists' desires remain unfulfilled. By the same token, these novels attempt to find a utopian space set apart from, yet tied to, the cultures that inform and shape their protagonists' worlds. The conclusions of both novels bear this out. Woolf, despite her exotic South American setting, cannot turn her gaze from a society whose strictures result, perhaps indirectly, in Rachel's demise. Conversely, Hurston concludes her novel with Janie defiantly uninterested in explaining her absence

⁶ Ibid, 33.

⁷ Greg Forter, *Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction: Atlantic and Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019), 8.

⁸ Ibid, 9.

to the city of Eatonville. Desirous to enjoy her solitude, Janie shares her story only with her closest friend Pheoby, relying on her as a kind of translator to the community, if need be.⁹ While both novels foreclose the possibilities of utopia, the differences in their conclusions indicate the particular social problems each seeks to address through the utopian gesture: *The Voyage Out* fails due to Woolf's inability to imagine a fate for Rachel beyond the bourgeois marriage plot, whereas *Their Eyes Were Watching God* attempts an end-run around the societal expectations placed on Janie through the vision of female companionship she shares with Pheoby.

Woolf intends in *The Voyage Out* to reckon not just with bourgeois Edwardian society, but also imperialism, one of the primary specters haunting southern alterity. Although Woolf returned to British imperialism towards the end of her life in her long essay *Three Guineas*, *The Voyage Out* is her only novel with a colonial setting. Like many first novels, its influences are readily discernable, chief among them that of Joseph Conrad.¹⁰ For British writers and intellectuals skeptical of empire, Conrad loomed large;

⁹ Janie has clearly separated herself from Eatonville, as she says to Pheoby: "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf." Pheoby dutifully replies: "If you so desire Ah'll tell 'em what you told me to tell 'em." Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in *Novels and Stories: Jonah's Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Moses, Man of the Mountain, Seraph on the Suwanee, Selected Stories*, Ed. Cheryl A. Wall (1937; New York: Library of America 1995), 179. Subsequent citations come from this edition.

¹⁰ Regarding Conrad's influence on the novel, Marianne DeKoven identifies several parallels in narrative structure between *Voyage* and *Heart of Darkness* and, most significantly, states the obvious debt Woolf owes Conrad in the novel's river voyage sequence; along similar lines, Mark Wollaeger includes Conrad as one of three "male discourses," alongside Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Leonard Woolf's novel *The Village in the Jungle*, each of which offer Woolf an alternative to the marriage plots of Jane Austen, whose influence Woolf both emulated and sought to distance herself from. See DeKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 87-88; and Mark Wollaeger, "The Woolfs in the Jungle: Intertextuality, Sexuality, and the Emergence of Female Modernism in *The*

his view of empire and his aesthetic and narrative innovations both exerted a powerful influence on Woolf. Leonard Woolf, who completed his own colonial novel, *The Village in the Jungle*, during the period Virginia Woolf was drafting *The Voyage Out*, likewise felt Conrad's influence, and his novel's exploration of colonialism in turn influenced Virginia. Based in part on his own experiences as a civil servant in Ceylon, the novel fails to free itself entirely from a metropolitan perspective, but Leonard nonetheless thought it a reflection of his budding anti-imperialism.¹¹ While Virginia Woolf's travels never took her beyond continental Europe,¹² she absorbed the colonial fictions of Conrad and her husband, repurposing them for her own use. E.M. Forster described Woolf's fictional colony of Santa Marina as one "not found on any map, and reached by a boat which would not float on any sea, an America whose spiritual boundaries touch Xanadu and Atlantis."¹³ Like its impossible geography, *The Voyage Out* sits somewhere between the earnest but misguided anti-imperialism of *The Village in the Jungle* and the metaphysical irony of *Heart of Darkness*, hovering between the explicitly anti-colonial position Leonard envisioned for his novel and the evasiveness of Conrad's Marlow. While Forster in his gauzy description of Santa Marina captures the novel's somewhat naïve portrayal

Voyage Out, The Village in the Jungle, and Heart of Darkness," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (March 2003): 34, 44-5.

¹¹ Wollaeger, "The Woolfs in the Jungle," 54.

¹² While Woolf never visited South America, the novel is informed by her sea voyages to Portugal and Greece. On the latter trip, taken with her brothers Thoby and Adrian, sister Vanessa, and Violet Dickinson, Vanessa, Violet, and Thoby fell seriously ill, Thoby eventually succumbing to his illness. Louise A. DeSalvo's book-length study of *The Voyage Out* suggests that not only was Thoby's death influential on Woolf's composition of the novel, but that Rachel's death at twenty-four, "Virginia Woolf's age when Thoby died...can be viewed also as a symbolic substitution of [her] death for Thoby's." DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 4.

¹³ E.M. Forster, "The Novels of Virginia Woolf," in *The Criterion 1922-1939, Vol. IV*, Ed. T. S. Eliot, (1926; London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 277-78.

of the fictitious colony's tropical charms, it also represents a backwards outpost of English civilization, a site of uneven development and arrested modernity suspended in time against a self-consciously exotic jungle backdrop. Not just the bourgeois marriage plot, but British imperialism also threatens the novel's utopian gesture; indeed, in *The Voyage Out* these two cultural and political forms are mutually constitutive.

Hurston's portrayal of black folkways in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* could be said to echo the stasis of Woolf's Santa Marina in its conjuring of a mode of societal organization removed from the forces of modernization. For all that, Hurston captures the modern dynamics of southern alterity in her portrayal of Janie's time on the muck in a fashion bearing little resemblance to Woolf's arrested colony. Writing at a time that folkloric materials were viewed with some suspicion in African American letters as inimical to the rapid modernization experienced since World War I, Hurston created a counternarrative in her anthropological work and fiction rooted in the celebration of rural black life and folkways. This narrative strategy attracted prominent critics in her day, chief among them Richard Wright and Sterling Brown, and still draws critique in contemporary scholarship. Hortense Spillers, for instance, questions Hurston by arguing that her "quite moving sense of integrity...is undercut," with Janie's relationship with Tea Cake revealing in particular that "Hurston's pursuit of an alleged folk philosophy...is a concession to an obscene idea" that does not break free from the bind of double consciousness.¹⁴ On the other hand, Leigh Anne Duck sees the novel, through its critical engagement of modernity, as "determined to create a protected space for folkloric

¹⁴ Hortense Spillers, "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love: Three Women's Fiction," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), 104-106.

enjoyment – preserving this form of expression amid cultural changes as potentially destructive.”¹⁵ That Janie’s life unfolds not in the context of the Great Migration, but rather within a narrower zone of rural Florida within which she moves instead further south into the Everglades does not escape Duck’s attention.¹⁶ Understood as one black woman’s quest for self-determination and wholeness, *Their Eyes* creates through its sequences on “the muck” a portrait of transnational black community that counters understandings of southern alterity rooted in racial difference. These scenes, along with Janie’s (relatively) peaceful marriage to Tea Cake offer the novel’s most sustained utopian gesture. While the community on the muck is undone by the devastation rendered by the specter of Jim Crow following a massive hurricane, Hurston concludes the novel by reorienting Janie peacefully in her former community of Eatonville, though at a remove from the daily doings of the town. For Hurston, southern alterity is then not a condition of racial otherness, but rather a state of affairs to be resisted both communally and through the search for individual wholeness. Hurston’s utopia, like Woolf’s, ultimately fails, but by the same token *Their Eyes* offers a literal vision of survival beyond the conception of *The Voyage Out*. Together Woolf and Hurston provide a counterweight to *Heart of Darkness* and *Marrow of Tradition* in their glimpse of utopian alternatives within the otherwise societally determined fateful voyage south.

3.2 Imperial Order and Bourgeois Gender Relations

Before the upriver sojourn in *The Voyage Out* which serves as its main point of comparison with *Heart of Darkness*, the novel portrays a long sea voyage from London

¹⁵ Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006), 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 133.

to South America, which takes up slightly less than a quarter of the text.¹⁷ Having “left London sitting on its mud,” the travelers are suffused with a sense of freedom once the ship *Euphrosyne* reaches the sea: “They were free of roads, free of mankind, and the same exhilaration at their freedom ran through them all.”¹⁸ Having seemingly slipped the bonds of empire and even civilization itself, the sea’s vastness promises escape to the travelers, but this notion is quickly attenuated through the reassertion of the domestic social order, particularly in Richard and Clarissa Dalloway’s brief time on board.¹⁹ The novel’s protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, is buffeted by the barely navigable social waters stirred by the Dalloways’ presence. Finding herself caught between the promise of freedom and the strictures of bourgeois British society, Rachel discovers the former elusive even as the latter continues imposes its will upon her. As Hermione Lee writes, “Both on the ship and in Santa Marina, Rachel’s development takes places within a microcosm of the upper-middle-class conventional English way of life.”²⁰

¹⁷ Though I argue that the river voyage is the main point of comparison between *Heart of Darkness* and *The Voyage Out*, it is not the only one. Significantly, both novels are equally engaged with extractive imperial industry, as DeKoven observes: “Rachel Vinrace’s father, Willoughby, owner of the ship, is engaged in the same endeavor as Marlow’s detestable Company, and Woolf’s voyage out is just as much contaminated by the profit motive as is Conrad’s voyage in.” The primary difference here is that Conrad keeps this at the forefront of his novel, while it is largely subtext for Woolf. See DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*, 100.

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (1915; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 23-4. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson writes of Joseph Conrad’s use of the sea, particularly in *Lord Jim*, as one of his “aestheticizing strategies” (230) but also reminds us that the “ideological cohesion of class values” of sailors must also include “the ruling class of the British Empire, the heroic bureaucracy of imperial capitalism which takes that lesser, but sometimes even more heroic, bureaucracy of the officers of the merchant fleet as a figure for itself.” *The Voyage Out*, influenced by Conrad, likewise reveals the machinations of empire under the seemingly utopian sea voyage; as Jameson writes, “the sea is both a strategy of containment and a place of real business.” Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 265, 210.

²⁰ Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1977), 34.

Unconventional and comparatively poorly educated, Rachel cuts an odd figure in a milieu dominated by the masculine, colonial imperatives of men like her father and Richard Dalloway.²¹

Rachel's liminal status is established from the start: already on board as the novel opens, she simultaneously sits within the seat of empire and at a slight remove from it. Despite the novel's repeated stressing of her unconventionality, she never quite breaks free of her position between empire and freedom. Her aunt Helen early on wonders "what [she] *did* do with herself?", to which the narrator answers, "absolutely nothing" (32-33). In her room on the ship, just as in her life in England, Rachel "would sit for hours playing very difficult music, reading a little German, or a little English when the mood took her, and doing – as at this moment – absolutely nothing" (31). The novel's repeated emphasis on her stasis only reinforces this initial establishment of her fundamental liminality. Despite the complications of her static condition during her sojourn in Santa Marina, she never properly escapes it.

Rachel's propensity towards inaction is credited to "a fine natural indolence," but by the same token, "she had been educated as the majority of well-to-do girls in the last part of the nineteenth century were educated," leaving her with "no subject in the world which she knew accurately" (31). A paradox, one never directly addressed, emerges: if Rachel's education is conventional for women of her age and background, why is she considered unconventional by so many other characters? One possibility is her upbringing by her two spinster aunts after her mother's early death, leaving her largely

²¹ "In Conrad, as in Woolf, a neochivalric gender ideology becomes the language of mystification for men living too close to the volatile contradictions between imperialist rhetoric and imperial practice." Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 133.

ignorant of sex, gender, relationships, and the cultural expectations placed upon “well-to-do girls.” Woolf enumerates this ignorance with a peculiar historical reference:

Her mind was in the state of an intelligent man’s in the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth; she would believe practically anything she was told, invent reasons for anything she said. The shape of the earth, the history of the world, how trains worked, or money was invested, what laws were in force, which people wanted what, and why they wanted it, the most elementary idea of a system in modern life – none of this had been imparted to her by any of her professors or mistresses. (31)

Rachel’s cast of mind not only displaces her from her era and her milieu, but – despite the advantages of her class position and her London residence – from modernity itself. While aware of her failure to meet expectation, Rachel cannot rectify her position and fall in line with the dominant model of Edwardian bourgeois womanhood. Her indecision and malleability have lead critics towards negative characterizations. Allison Pease describes her as “silent, vague, and more of an absence than a presence...[she] knows nothing; she thinks and feels, but she is an outsider to a system that produces knowing individuals.”²² Similarly, Jed Esty finds her “a classic symbolic orphan, a many-parented figure who...stands as a kind of ‘semantic void,’ the null function that can carry the symbolic weight of *Bildung* as both a biographical and social process.” This underdevelopment makes her “the object of other characters’ projections and desires,” as Esty writes, and she shares a “formlessness” with the colony.²³ While *The Voyage Out* hints at identifying

²² Allison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 101.

²³ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 133.

Rachel with Santa Marina, with both protagonist and colony sharing in their underdevelopment, the limit of this comparison falters considering that the colonial setting in the end proves hostile to Rachel's very existence.²⁴

Keeping that in mind, the underdevelopment Rachel shares with Santa Marina nevertheless does play a significant role in determining their relative value within the imperial system. Like Rachel, Santa Marina appears full of Elizabethan anachronisms. The novel's brief but allusive account of the Santa Marina's history underlines its historical disjointedness: first a British possession, then Spanish, then British again, the imperial jockeying that marks the colony's history after its European discovery leaves it a curious specimen of uneven modernity:

In population it is a happy compromise, for Portuguese fathers wed Indian mothers, and their children intermarry with the Spanish. Although they get their ploughs from Manchester, they make their coats from their own sheep, their silk from their own worms, and their furniture from their own cedar trees, so that in arts and industries the place is still very much where it was in Elizabethan days.

(97)

²⁴ Hermione Lee has argued for a not-too-close identification of Rachel with Santa Marina, writing that "The analogies [between Rachel and Santa Marina] are not firmly drawn. We are not being forced to think of Santa Marina as symbolic of Rachel's virginal state of mind, liable to be impressed by the political and physical onslaught of a man like Dalloway. Nor do we have to imagine Rachel as a naïve, adventurous Elizabethan settler. But some such suggestions are lightly made by the fluid link between the vestal ship, the doomed Elizabethan colony, and the girl's mind..." I would finesse Lee's point about Dalloway's "political and physical onslaught," as at the time of the novel's composition, the primary extractive forms of British colonialism were taking place on the African continent. Nevertheless, imperial trade clearly goes on in South America: witness Rachel's father. Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 33.

Colony and protagonist both “reel with anachronism” in a modernizing world, in Esty’s words: “Having failed to form itself into something firmly British and modern the first time around, Santa Marina appears as a cultural backwater.”²⁵ Rachel, a premodern apparition floating through a modern world, remains unaware of everything from the shape of the earth to the various partisanships that make up the political scene of her own country. Both “protagonist and colony share a generalized unboundedness and a resistance to purposeful or smoothly clocked development.”²⁶ The colony’s multiracial inhabitants, “a happy compromise” in Woolf’s phrase, denote a pre-modern conception of race at the same time the Manchester-derived ploughs suggest Santa Marina’s peripheral connection to the global imperialist order.²⁷ For all this, the comparison can only go so far: the colonial order itself divides Rachel, the underdeveloped British citizen, from Santa Marina, the underdeveloped colony. Although partly by virtue of Rachel’s imperial privilege, the comparison finally breaks down due to the colony’s southern alterity. In other words, the foreclosure of Rachel’s identification with Santa

²⁵ Ibid, 132.

²⁶ Ibid, 134.

²⁷ Roxann Wheeler’s account of the development of race in eighteenth century Britain recovers a pre-modern sense of the determinative factor of things like skin color in racial categories, which was less important than markers of “civility” as to determining racial difference. This helps place Woolf’s Santa Marina, with its unassuming multiracial intermarriages, outside the early twentieth century: as Wheeler argues, “throughout the eighteenth century older conceptions of Christianity, civility, and rank were *more explicitly* important to Britons’ assessment of themselves and other people than physical attributes such as skin color, shape of the nose, or texture of the hair.” Added to this, Wheeler observes, while writing of the development of British thought concerning African blacks, that there “was an uneven, not a cumulative development of racial ideology...Racial ideology forms mainly around English responses to certain customs, dress, religion, and especially trading – in short, around a concept of civility.” Santa Marina exists within and outside the development of racial categories, underlining its anachronism. See Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 7, 92.

Marina's results from the colony's inherent otherness, as dramatized in Rachel's failed encounter with the indigenous women late in the novel and her eventual death. Indeed, a more salient parallel exists between the sea voyage on the *Euphrosyne* and the colony of Santa Marina. While both initially appear to be utopic spaces, the insertion of empire and the bourgeois domestic order upsets this illusion to reveal the true nature of empire's reach.

Woolf's failure to imagine an alternative to empire does not mean it escapes her satirical energy. Indeed, Richard and Clarissa Dalloway's brief sojourn on the *Euphrosyne* plunges Rachel into imperial and sexual awareness. To Richard's captivating political fulminations, Rachel poses the question, "what *is* your ideal?" Rising to the full height of his grand imperial vision, he responds: "In one word – Unity. Unity of aim, of dominion, of progress. The dispersion of the best ideas over the greatest area" (66-67). While admitting Britain's shortcomings, he nonetheless maintains "that the English seem, on the whole, whiter than most men," and prides himself on his reform of factories in Lancashire, where "some thousands of girls...and many thousands to come after them – can spend an hour ever day in the open air" (66), unlike their predecessors. This paternalistic attitude towards women extends to his home life, as well. While he credits his success in part to Clarissa's orderly running of their domestic affairs, he also claims that "no woman has what I may call the political instinct," and compares society to a "complicated machine," admitting that he "can conceive of no more exalted aim – to be the citizen of the Empire" (69).

Clarissa, spying imperial ships, interrupts this conversation: “Warships, Dick! Over there! Look!” A long passage follows which contrasts the patriotic sentiment of the passengers against the scathing descriptions of the narrator:

She had sighted two sinister grey vessels, low in the water, and bald as bone, one closely following the other with the look of eyeless beasts seeking their prey...“The Mediterranean Fleet,” [Richard] answered. The *Euphrosyne* was slowly dipping her flag. Richard raised his hat. Convulsively Clarissa squeezed Rachel’s hand. “Aren’t you glad to be English!” she said. The warships drew past, casting a curious effect of discipline and sadness upon the waters, and it was not until they were again invisible that people spoke to each other naturally. At lunch the talk was all of valour and death, and the magnificent qualities of British admirals. (72; ellipsis mine)

Beneath the conventional bourgeois attitudes of respect for the signs and instruments of empire, Woolf detects a menacing, mindless animal undercurrent of conquest. The pious thoughts stirred by the sight of the British Navy sit uncomfortably next to the novel’s sardonic characterization of the warships as “sinister” and “eyeless beasts seeking their prey.” Woolf later employs a similar satiric energy in her portrayal of Santa Marina.

Woolf connects Richard’s imperialist philosophy to Rachel’s forced sexual awakening. During the lunch conversation that follows, Rachel sits silently, “look[ing] queer and flushed,” presumably lost in the thoughts stirred by the conversation with Richard, whose blustering, masculine prerogative soon captures Rachel in its grasp – quite literally, and against her will. While later visiting her room during a storm, Richard takes advantage of the rolling of the ship to grasp Rachel and engage her in a violent kiss.

Just prior to this, confessing to her that “you made me think,” he bloviates at length about the alienation of modernity: “What solitary icebergs we are, Miss Vinrace!...This reticence – this isolation – that’s what’s the matter with modern life!...When I think of the age we live in, with its opportunities and possibilities, the mass of things to be done and enjoyed – why haven’t we ten lives instead of one? But about yourself?” To all this, Rachel answers simply and truthfully: “You see, I’m a woman” (79; ellipsis mine). Against Rachel’s unornamented declaration of her social position, Richard’s violation appears stark. The immediate aftermath is full of confusion:

“You tempt me,” he said. The tone of his voice was terrifying. He seemed choked in fight. They were both trembling. Rachel stood up and went. Her head was cold, her knees shaking, and the physical pain of the emotion was so great that she could only keep herself moving above the great leaps of her heart. She leant upon the rail of the ship, and gradually ceased to feel, for a chill of body and mind crept over her...Life seemed to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed at...Nevertheless something wonderful had happened. (80; ellipsis mine)

Following this, Richard completely ignores Rachel at dinner, who, confessing her tiredness, retreats to her room, her sleep tormented by strange dreams. The violent, sexualized imagery of her dreams has been oft-noted by psychoanalytically-inclined critics,²⁸ but even more striking is the brief description of Rachel’s seemingly conscious auditory hallucinations: “She felt herself pursued, so that she got up and actually locked her door. A voice moaned for her; eyes desired her. All night long barbarian men harassed the ship; they came scuffling down the passages, and stopped to snuffle at her

²⁸ For a representative example, see DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*, 105-6.

door. She could not sleep again” (81-2). On the surface level, Rachel’s sleepless, traumatized mind transforms the creaks of the ship and the sounds of the ocean into monstrous personifications, but Woolf’s description of the harassing men as “barbarians” thins the distinction between civilization and barbarity that Richard Dalloway’s political imagination turns upon. More to the point, Rachel’s nightmarish visions are reminiscent of the earlier image of the warships as “eyeless beasts seeking their prey.” Although Rachel’s later encounter with the indigenous women ends up reinforcing the civilization-barbarism binary, this passage juggles such distinction in a way not wholly indebted to the modernist fetishization of primitivism, but rather firmly rooted in a critique of imperialism and masculinity.

The implicit barbarism of Richard Dalloway’s behavior, taken alongside the dream image of harassing men prowling around the ship, obliquely references the acquisitive colonial business practices of Rachel’s father, Willoughby. The aftermath of Richard’s assault crystalizes the relationship between gender and colonialism in the novel. The scenes on the ship and the scenes in the colony work dialectically: the sense of freedom at the voyage’s start is shaken by the arrival of the Dalloways, leaving Rachel disturbed after the encounter with Richard.²⁹ Similarly, while the initial period in Santa Marina allows a glimpse of a political and social order quite apart from Richard’s “[u]nity of aim, of dominion, of progress,” the patriarchal order returns through the two marriage plots that unfold, foreclosing the possibility of alternative social relationships in

²⁹ DeKoven correctly writes that the Dalloways’ presence makes “the dimensions of the gender system...more explicitly political,” with Richard serving as the link between gender and capitalism and imperialism. The initial period in Santa Marina contrasts their conventionality by allowing for the investigation of “alternatives to the social order whose oppressive dimensions the ocean voyage has revealed” before the marriage plot introduces itself, ending this promise as well. DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*, 102, 106.

the colony. The imperial order Richard defends sews the seeds from which the colonial space of Santa Marina proves unable to sustain the existence of utopian community.

3.3 The Colonial Anti-Marriage Plot

The rapacious imperialism of Conrad's Congo exists worlds apart from Woolf's leisurely, tourist-friendly Santa Marina, but whether extractive, modern, and destructive in the former or atemporal, languid, and pastoral in the latter, both novels portray the necessity of southern alterity for colonialism's operation. While both complicate colonialism, they nonetheless share characteristics with imperial romances like H. Rider Haggard's *She* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, novels that counter the disenchantment of the late nineteenth century Britain with narratives that, in lieu of "casting doubt on the imperial undertaking, serve to confirm and celebrate its success," in Edward Said's words. Said values Conrad's writing for its simultaneous reproduction of "the aggressive contours of the high imperialist undertaking" along with his portrayal of that undertaking's infection by "the easily recognizable, ironic awareness of the post-realist modernist sensibility."³⁰ Woolf, for whom imperialism was not a central concern, writes with the same ambivalence that marks Conrad's work; they are simultaneously drawn to and repelled by the foreign and the exotic.

The fascination towards and repulsion from exoticism run through the modernist metropolitan novel, grounded in – and reinforced by – southern alterity. Julia Kuehn draws attention to "two modes of exoticism" in *The Voyage Out*, the first being "the external description of otherness in the portrayal of the fictitious colony...and an internal exoticism which realizes, through the voyage into consciousness, that the stranger lies

³⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1993), 187-88.

often within.”³¹ These two modes are reminiscent of *Heart of Darkness*, which also juxtaposes the inhospitable landscape with Marlow’s alienated interiority. Woolf challenges (but does not overcome) Conrad’s separation of Europeans and non-Europeans through Rachel’s encounter with the indigenous women in the colonial interior, and this frustrated narrative gesture reveals a preoccupation of both novels: the specter of colonial death.

To the operative trio of decay, dissolution, and degeneration in southern alterity, death could be added, but in a narrow sense: here as in Conrad, death is brought on by the colony itself. Chesnut’s *Marrow of Tradition* contains deaths aplenty, but his account of the Wilmington massacre clearly attributes the violence to the politics of white supremacy in the U.S. south. The Congo and Santa Marina, on the other hand, extinguish European life through tropical disease. True, Conrad portrays the deadly effects of extractive imperialism on the Congolese people, but not without dehumanizing them in the process. On the other hand, the bucolic Santa Marina offers the promise of a way of life apart from metropolitan domination, but the moment proves too short-lived and illusory to sustain itself. Woolf feels her way towards solutions to the intractable problem of Rachel’s gender and cultural identity, but those possibilities are foreclosed as the strictures of the Victorian marriage plot reassert themselves and the exoticism of the colony takes its deadly toll. Terence Hewet’s offer of marriage to Rachel does not afford her a way out of her intractable cultural bind; just as utopia proves illusory in Santa Marina, so Rachel will not be saved by the conventions of bourgeois culture.

³¹ Julia Kuehn, “*The Voyage Out as Voyage In: Exotic Realism, Romance, and Modernism*,” *Woolf Studies Annual* 17 (2001): 127.

The Voyage Out reflects Woolf's own hesitations and misgivings regarding marriage; she was both skeptical of the cultural institution itself, as well as conflicted about her own marriage to Leonard.³² Woolf writes against the aesthetics of the Victorian literary tradition, particularly its enshrinement of marriage. Talia Schaffer describes what she calls "familiar marriage" as a "literary device" in Victorian fiction which separates it from both "the eighteenth-century marriage of rational esteem" as well as the romantic marriage of the early nineteenth century, morphing instead "to answer social problems of the period, to provide participants with certain kinds of life choices that the romantic marriage failed to offer."³³ Importantly, Schaffer argues that in an era when women suffered from a lack of "guaranteed economic agency, legal status, or political representation," familiar marriage offered the possibility of strategic choice through the agency marriage offered them.³⁴ Just as in Schaffer's account this conception of marriage arises in response to changing conditions, so Woolf's profound misgivings towards it reflect the changing conditions of Edwardian England, as well as her search for different, better literary models of female agency.

Woolf's portrayal of southern alterity seemingly breaks from Conrad's in her shift in emphasis from colonial conquest to the marriage plot, but *The Voyage Out* demonstrates that the two concerns are not so easily separated. Similar to Kurtz's failure

³² As Hermione Lee writes, the "arguments and images" of the early letters between Leonard and Virginia "got into both their writings. The lovers in *The Voyage Out* are full of melancholy bewilderment. Rachel - who is going to die rather than marry - vacillates painfully with Terence between detachment, fear, and a sense of intimacy. She finds peace only when she can think of them not as 'little separate bodies' who 'struggle and desire one another' but as disembodied, impersonal entities." Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 307.

³³ Talia Schaffer, *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 3.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

to bring “civilization” to the African interior, the upriver journey in Woolf’s novel serves as the marriage plot’s culmination and apotheosis. The anachronistic setting more sharply reveals the stultifying forms of domestic romance that Rachel experiences, destroying the fragile sense of freedom she seeks. The upriver voyage ties the novel’s major themes together. By placing Rachel’s engagement and the scene of failed encounter with the indigenous women in the same lengthy narrative sequence, Woolf brings her foreign and domestic concerns together more explicitly than anywhere else in the novel, while also setting the stage for the marriage plot’s ultimate failure in Rachel’s death. Furthermore, Rachel’s shared underdevelopment and uneven modernity with Santa Marina reaches its climax. Jed Esty describes their relationship:

Rachel’s development...is not so much absent as staccato: thrust in and out of her amorphous youthfulness by turns, she is now frustratingly pillowed in innocence, now suddenly alert to adult possibilities. More to the point, Woolf sets this story of fits and starts, of beckoned and deferred maturity, in an unevenly developed coastal enclave, Santa Marina, a misbegotten tourist colony that seems to have deferred its own modernity only to have it arrive belatedly.³⁵

The lines that unite and separate Rachel and the colony become clear: she shares in its underdevelopment, yes, but not its southern alterity. The imperial binary of civilization and barbarity proves inviolable. Under the weight of empire and the demands of domesticity, what Rachel shares with Santa Marina disappears; in the colony, the strictures of the marriage plot cling to the novel like a vestigial organ, all the more potent despite (because of?) the exotic setting.

³⁵ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 132.

The question of marriage follows Rachel throughout the novel, from Helen's observations of her on board the *Euphrosyne* forward to its conclusion. Although Schaffer's concept of familiar marriage offers a Victorian model not strictly dependent upon desire, the marriage plot of *The Voyage Out* is driven by desire: not Rachel's, however, but that of others directed towards her.³⁶ Rachel's desirability reflects the colony's recreational status, but the pressures of marriage and the demands of childbirth also create comparisons with more extractive colonial models, such as Conrad's Congo. The violent, unwelcome encounter with Richard graphically illustrates this, but so does her suitor Terence Hewet's close observation of her body on one of their excursions. While taking in the view of the harbor from a cliff, Hewet comments, "I'd like to be in England!" (237). In response, "Rachel murmured in the absorbed tone of one whose eyes are concentrated upon some sight [,] 'What d'you want with England?'" (238). Preoccupied with the view, and not possessing the same warm associations with home, Rachel eschews Hewet's sentimental attachment to England, but while she lays down in the grass, taking in the vista, Hewet allows himself to take her body in:

He could look at Rachel without her noticing it...He noticed that she was wearing a dress of deep blue colour, made of a soft thin cotton stuff, which clung to the shape of her body. It was a body with the angles and hollows of a young woman's body not yet developed, but in no way distorted, and thus interesting and even lovable...[Her] expression was one of childlike intentness...nevertheless her twenty-four years of life had given her a look of reserve...With something like

³⁶ Schaffer, *Romance's Rival*, 13.

anguish Hewet realized that, far from being unattractive, her body was very attractive to him. (238-39; ellipsis mine)

Hewet's association of Rachel's underdeveloped body with a lack of distortion ties several of the novel's threads together: gender and power, colonialism and development, desire and perception. Hewet's mind is on England, where his "friends...and all the things one does" are (238; ellipsis mine). At the same time, Hewet's gaze fills him with desire and "something like anguish," a far cry from Rachel's intent, "childlike" gaze. Colony and metropole symbolically converge in Hewet's gaze; with the freedom afforded him by Rachel's distraction, he is able to look upon her in a way comparable to what Raymond Williams terms metropolitan perception.³⁷ Williams argues that this way of seeing develops not only from imperialism but also the widening gulf between European capitals and the provinces. This developmental lag, in other words, builds off of the divided center and periphery. Hewet's gaze upon the underdeveloped Rachel partakes of the same masculine prerogative to possess women and colony shared by Richard Dalloway. At the same time, the exotic setting of Santa Marina gives Hewet's gaze added potency: Simon Gikandi's argument that the "epiphanic" perception of metropolitan modernism needs to "merge with the other" to reject "previous forms of consciousness, the ones associated with tradition and modern industrial culture" captures the sense of awareness Santa Marina provides Hewet.³⁸ Although he does not take Rachel in as an exotic or primitive other, the colonial locale shapes his vision of her in a way the

³⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), 37-48.

³⁸ Gikandi, "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism," in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, Ed. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005), 32.

drabness of London would not allow. The desire expressed in Hewet's gaze carries something of Marlow's childhood desire to travel, fueled by his endless fascination with maps. Hence the significance of both novels opening on the Thames: Marlow and Hewet's gazes flow, as it were, directly from that symbol of British power.³⁹

The utopian possibilities Hewet perceives in Rachel's body remain out of his grasp; likewise, Rachel remains here as elsewhere quietly resistant to the expectations placed on her by dominant social relations, distancing herself from the marriage plot. When, during a prior sightseeing excursion, Rachel and Hewet stumble upon Arthur Venning and Susan Warrington subsequent to their engagement in an intimate and vaguely sexual embrace, Rachel experiences a near-physical revulsion at frank display of sexuality, conditioned by the memory of Richard Dalloway's forceful and unwelcome kiss. "I don't like that," Rachel says, to which Hewet responds, "I can remember not liking it either... Well, we may take it for granted that they're engaged." The narrator explains, "Rachel was still agitated; she could not get away from the sight they had just seen," and her unsettled mood prompts an awkward conversation, Rachel expressing her confusion bordering on disdain:

"Love's an odd thing, isn't it, making one's heart beat." "It's so enormously important, you see," Hewet replied. "Their lives are now changed for ever." "And

³⁹ Rebecca Walkowitz writes: "The idea of 'metropolitan perception,' while registering the influence of increasing mobility, social diversity, and consumer culture on modernist ideas of consciousness and perspective, should not lead us to imagine that modernist writers as different as Woolf and Conrad shared the same experience of centrality." In other words, Woolf and Conrad are, by virtue of their social positioning as a woman and an immigrant, respectively, removed in some sense from the metropolitan order. Walkowitz's delineation of the limits of metropolitan perception goes a long way towards explaining the ambivalence towards empire expressed in both *The Voyage Out* and *Heart of Darkness*. See Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), 19.

it makes one sorry for them too,” Rachel continued, as though she were tracing the course of her feelings. “I don’t know either of them, but I could almost burst into tears. That’s silly, isn’t it?” “Just because they’re in love,” said Hewet. “Yes,” he added after a moment’s consideration, “there’s something horribly pathetic about it, I agree.” (156)

Far from escaping them, the demands of bourgeois marriage are felt more intensely in Santa Marina; DeKoven describes aptly the “ludicrousness” with which the “colony recreates bourgeois propriety.”⁴⁰ Rachel’s quiet resistance to this reaches its apex at the hotel dance thrown in honor of Arthur and Susan’s engagement. Taking her seat at the piano as the band packs up, the partygoers encourage her to play for their continued amusement, but Rachel soon runs out of dance tunes and opts to play Mozart instead. “‘But that’s not a dance,’ said someone pausing by the piano. ‘It is,’ she replied, emphatically nodding her head. ‘Invent the steps... This is the dance for people who don’t know how to dance!’” (185). Nodding to her own peculiar position in the social world revolving around the hotel in this witty comment, Rachel, typically confined to the background in public, indulges in a rare bit of spectacle, continuing to play for her own amusement after the dancers cease to dance and step outside.

Woolf develops her colonial anti-marriage plot by playing off the conventions of imperial romance. In Wollaeger’s reading, the novel’s gestures towards imperial romance take place against a backdrop of imperialist capitalism’s increasing global reach: returning to Conrad, he observes that “Marlow’s lament... that all the blank spots of the map had already been colored in by colonial powers” is echoed by [Woolf’s] description

⁴⁰ DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*, 106.

of the “‘odious green’ of Spain’s holdings in South America.”⁴¹ The novel’s critique of domestic forms such as marriage and class is not incidental to the novel’s setting and her own ambivalence regarding empire.⁴² Rachel’s greatest frustration with the demands of domestic order comes when she, having been caught in a series of bizarre encounters with other women in the hotel after a wretched church service, reflects on the day in a quiet spot at the end of a hotel hallway.

All day long she had been tantalized and put off. She had now reached one of those eminences, the result of some crisis, from which the world is finally displayed in its true proportions. She disliked the look of it immensely – churches, politicians, misfits, and huge impostures...Meanwhile the steady beat of her own pulse represented the hot current of feeling that ran down beneath; beating, struggling, fretting. For the time, her own body as the source of all life in the world, which tried to burst forth here – there – and was repressed now by Mr Bax, now by Evelyn, now by the imposition of ponderous stupidity, the weight of the entire world. (300; ellipsis mine)

Against these pressures which threaten to pull her in contradictory directions, Rachel is thrown back on her own physicality – the steady beat of her pulse, her body as the source of all life – in search of relief. Nor does Woolf merely personalize or domesticate the scene; although now finally alone at the end of her “miserable” day, she

⁴¹ Wollaeger, “Woolf, Postcards, and the Elision of Race: Colonizing Women in *The Voyage Out*,” *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no. 1 (January 2001): 54.

⁴² “[T]he colony’s distance and difference from London allow Rachel and Terence to pursue their ideas about a more authentic, honest, gender-egalitarian way of life. The issue of class, though not treated explicitly again after its prominence in the opening section, functions silently as a central premise of the novel...” De Koven, *Rich and Strange*, 106-107.

feels she sees the world, not just her situation, as it is. Rachel's normal credulity fades as she fathoms the interconnectedness of what oppresses her; Wollaeger states that Woolf here "links Rachel's everyday life to a sense of global interrelatedness, weaving Christianity along with English imperialism, marriage, and patriarchy into the great design shaping Rachel's confused maturation."⁴³ Indeed, she has been treated to a virtual gallery of various forms of bourgeois British femininity through the social interactions she has been subjected to, finding herself at the nexus of these forces and being offered little by way of escape. The following chapter, as she and the others embark upon the Amazonian voyage that will lead to her engagement with Hewet and the illness that precipitates her death, emphasizes the inescapability of the forces of domestic order and empire alike.

This moment of utopian crisis, similar to her engagement that soon follows, are the culmination of an inner journey (in Kuehn's formulation) that begins on board the *Euphrosyne*. Instead of offering Rachel an opportunity for individuation not possible in the milieu of London and her spinster aunts, she resumes her fitful place in society. In Allison Pease's reading, Rachel exists as a definable type within this order: "In post-Enlightenment culture that values productivity and discourse as the product of knowing that creates individuals as such, Rachel's idleness, coupled with her nonlinguistic expression through music, makes her a cipher. But this cipher exists as a type."⁴⁴ Rachel's unconventionality, instead of allowing her to define her individuality, shunts her into a predetermined social role – one that Hewet imagines in the turn-of-the-century

⁴³ Ibid, 56.

⁴⁴ Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*, 111.

portrait style.⁴⁵ Just as the novel credits her nature to her education, Pease argues that Woolf “reveals the fallacy of the individualist argument: Rachel is unable to be an individual because she has not been trained to be one.”⁴⁶ Without the proper education, Rachel cannot not struggle against being typed; and yet, with that education, Rachel would still be typed, albeit in a way conforming to bourgeois standards. Without that education, she struggles instinctively, leading to her moment of anguish and confusion in the hotel hallway.

Rachel is hardly the sole character to exist as a type; Woolf collects a healthy cross-section of bourgeois British types in the novel and places them on display. Rachel’s various frenetic encounters in the hotel after church serve as the most breathlessly parodic example of this in the novel, but so too are the Dalloways a distinctive type of conservative, upper-class elite. In a novel that seeks, among other things, to parody a class-bound society, it does not surprise to see such a collection of types – but for all that, clearly British types. Woolf uses these familiar types in service of a satirical energy, but during the encounter between Rachel and the indigenous women, she succumbs to the temptations of her own imperial gaze. Throughout the entire upriver journey sequence, Woolf falls back on the stereotypes of imperial romance that she so effectively parodies elsewhere in the novel, in the process betraying the originality earlier displayed in her descriptions of Santa Marina and its colonial history. Mr. Flushing’s meticulous planning reveals him to be fully cognizant of the imperial dimensions of the trip:

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Mr Flushing, as he sat down, advised them to keep their eyes fixed on the left bank, where they would soon pass a clearing, and in that clearing was a hut where Mackenzie, the famous explorer, had died of a fever some ten years ago, almost within reach of civilization – Mackenzie, he repeated, the man who went farther inland than anyone’s been yet. Their eyes turned that way obediently. The eyes of Rachel saw nothing. (323)

As St. John Hirst and Mr. Flushing engage in speculative conversation about the political possibilities for the colony, Helen realizes that Rachel has stopped paying attention. Rachel’s boredom and inattention discounts the masculine, imperial authority of Mr. Flushing’s guided tour, but Woolf herself cannot avoid the temptation to exoticize the landscape. For instance, the tropical setting “melts” the hesitation and sense of unreality Rachel and Hewet experience during their hesitant, lengthy talk of engagement:

With every word the mist which had enveloped them, making them seem unreal to each other since the previous afternoon melted a little further, and their contract became more and more natural. Up through the sultry southern landscape they saw the world they knew appear clearer and more vividly than it had ever appeared before. (328)

The novel is threaded throughout with the sensation of unreality; the borders between reality and imagination frequently blur. In this passage, however, southern alterity sneaks into Woolf’s vision through her evocation of the “sultry southern landscape” and its disorienting effects on European subjects. Hewet imagines walking together with Rachel, but in London; Rachel tries to fathom what it means to spend the rest of her life with Hewet; both feel drawn together and separated at the same time. Santa Marina becomes

elusive: now indistinguishable from other imperial landscapes, it brings Rachel and Hewet together, but within its atmosphere of unreality they feel their relationship illusory.

For a novel whose title and opening section suggest the restless exploratory travel of modernity, *The Voyage Out* contains very little narrative movement, offering instead the interrogation of surfaces: consciousness, class, social relations, gender. Allowing the reader to peer under the surface often reveals yet another surface, as in Hewet's imaginary walk with Rachel in London. At other times, surfaces melt in the tropical heat, as previously mentioned, but the revelation may be disturbing, as in the moment shortly following Rachel and Hewet's engagement, when Helen throws Rachel to the ground: "A hand dropped abrupt as iron on Rachel's shoulder; it might have been a bolt from Heaven...Helen was upon her" (330). DeKoven reads this bizarre, dreamlike sequence "as the fall into the sexualized, Oedipal family," employing "the powerful [modernist] overdetermination of the dream and of language...a mysteriously violent and sexual encounter."⁴⁷ In DeKoven's Freudian reading, this strange encounter becomes the apotheosis of the marriage plot the novel has circled around up to this point. Within moments, the tourists make their way into the village in which Woolf stages Rachel's encounter with the native women, familial domesticity sitting cheek to jowl with imperial exoticism.

The glancing encounter between the tourists and the villagers focuses the novel's circulating themes on a handful of quiet observations:

Stepping cautiously, they observed the women, who were squatting on the ground in triangular shapes, moving their hands, either plating straw or in kneading

⁴⁷ DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*, 130.

something in bowls. But when they had looked for a moment undiscovered, they were seen, and Mr Flushing, advancing in the the centre of the clearing, was engaged in talk with a lean majestic man, whose bones and hollows at once made the shapes of the Englishman's body appear ugly and unnatural. The women took no notice of the strangers...As they sauntered about, the stare followed them, passing over their legs, their bodies, their heads, curiously not without hostility, like the crawl of a winter fly...Seeking each other, Terence and Rachel drew together under a tree. Peaceful, even beautiful at first, the sight of the women, who had given up looking at them, made them now feel very cold and melancholy. (331-332; ellipsis mine)

This encounter, which Mr. Flushing promised as the climax of the voyage upriver, proves to be disappointing, even to him and his wife, who wonder if their purchases are really old, fearing they betray a European influence.⁴⁸ Helen is concerned that they “have ventured too far and exposed themselves” (333), and Hewet asks, to Rachel's agreement, “Well...it makes us seem insignificant, doesn't it?” (332). His question points in the right direction but doesn't get to the heart of the matter: this moment of colonial encounter does not offer a widened perspective, but only reinforces the masculine, metropolitan prerogative which Rachel was initiated into moments earlier.

Furthering these exotic tropes, the sense of unreality remarked upon throughout the novel, particularly on the upriver voyage, is intensified; as Kuehn describes it, “While ‘the women’ and ‘the strangers’ are engaged in an act of observation...gazes cross to the

⁴⁸ DeKoven goes so far as to call the village scene “anticlimactic,” particularly as it follows the Oedipal scene with Hewet, Rachel, and Helen. *Ibid*, 131.

point that it can almost no longer be determined who gazes upon whom and when.”⁴⁹ The indigenous women’s gaze threatens European subjectivity; it reverses Hewet’s earlier gaze upon Rachel’s body, turning the Europeans into objects. Wollaeger reads this encounter within the context of the rage for colonial picture postcards in the first decades of the twentieth century, writing that, “Postcards featuring native women often operate as a form of colonial denigration that reinforces normative values at home.”⁵⁰ Woolf, normally skeptical of such domestic norms, nonetheless fails to offer the subversive identification between Rachel and the indigenous women that the novel sets up:

On one hand, insofar as the narrative equates Rachel and the native women, patriarchal and colonial oppression coincide to produce a critique of colonialism.

On the other hand, by transforming the native women into a mere backdrop for Rachel’s inner drama, Woolf partially reproduces the imperial hierarchy the novel otherwise attacks.⁵¹

Wollaeger accounts for the failure of this scene in novel’s larger struggle against imperial hierarchies, but Woolf does not *partially* reproduce the masculine prerogative of imperialism; her narrative is entirely in its sway. Here the novel foregoes its innovative blurring of reality to settle on a picture postcard representation of colonial otherness. Woolf, unable of escaping the grasp of metropolitan perception that reads these indigenous women not as potential subjects of identification, instead offers them as primitive types whose otherness, shaped by the demands of southern alterity, serve as foils to the repressive social situation Rachel has just been initiated into by Helen and

⁴⁹ Kuehn, “*The Voyage Out as Voyage In*,” 144.

⁵⁰ Wollaeger, “Woolf, Postcards, and the Elision of Race,” 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 66.

Hewet. The utopian possibility represented by the voyage and the contact with indigenous life, instead of the supposed highlight of the trip, is foreclosed, fatally: following this, the novel reaches its anticlimax in Rachel's prolonged illness and death. In short, the novel begins to unravel at the point it makes its most utopian gesture.

In Rachel's final moments, she returns to visions of submersion similar to the frightful dreams and hallucinations that attended her the night after Richard Dalloway's assault. Although in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf does not write her way out of the trap of bourgeois marriage as she would eventually do in *To the Lighthouse*, her bold narrative experiments resume in her portrayal of the subliminal sufferings Rachel has undergone in her near-death nightmarish visions. By the same token, southern alterity reasserts itself in the trope of death brought by tropical infection. As I turn now to another novel which seeks to present alternatives to bourgeois marriage in a rarefied setting, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I emphasize again Simon Gikandi's observation that colonial-era European novels set in Africa create encounters with "the other [as] represented through the imposition of a frame of reference and set of categories that preceded its discovery."⁵² Although set in South America, *The Voyage Out* likewise relies on these tropes to determine the "discovery" of indigenous life late in the novel. Despite Rachel's own educational and cultural underdevelopment, she exists in a milieu that carries too many of these assumptions for her to truly foster identification with the indigenous women. In short, southern alterity forecloses the possibility that Rachel might see something of her attenuated situation in the villagers; instead, we are left with the ultimate specter of tropical, colonial otherness: death.

⁵² Gikandi, "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism," 32.

3.4 Hurston's Folkways

Zora Neal Hurston's primary emphasis as a writer lay in giving voice to the rural black community from which she emerged and would later study as an anthropologist. Whether in her fiction, essays, or anthropological studies, Hurston emphasizes folkways above all else. Because of this focus, her work was largely set in the U.S. south, and later the Caribbean, which brought it into an ongoing conversation over the authority of the African American voice in black-authored writing of the 1920s and '30s. The question was, in part, a regional one: the Harlem Renaissance, the primary black Anglophone literary movement of the time, sought to forge a "New Negro" movement that emphasized urban modes of life.⁵³ Folklore therefore held a strange place in the Renaissance: given the relatively high number of recent arrivals in Harlem who hailed from the south or Caribbean, the potency of folkways could not be ignored in the cosmopolitan Harlem scene. Furthermore, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, often considered the opening salvo of the Renaissance, explicitly draws upon rural southern black life. While roundly praised as an aesthetic breakthrough, by virtue of its setting it was also thought to value the primitive and exotic over the urban and familiar. Yet, as David Levering Lewis writes in his classic study of the Renaissance, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, *Cane* "distilled the essence of a racial twilight in which transplanted Africa was a dying rustle...rather than a meteorological forecast...it was an imagistic lighting up of the

⁵³ I characterize the Harlem Renaissance as the "primary black anglophone literary movement of the time," but it was hardly the sole one; in fact, the foundations of black internationalism were being laid at the same time, both within and outside the Renaissance. For more on that, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003).

future.”⁵⁴ *Cane*, in other words, folds an impressionistic evocation of rural black existence into the rise of industrialism and modernity which threatened to eclipse it, a perspective which spoke to the ambitions and hopes of the artists, critics, and scholars who populated Harlem in the 1920s.

The acclaim for *Cane* and its portrayal of black folkways opened the door for Zora Neale Hurston: the acceptance of her early short story “Drenched in Light” by the Harlem journal *Opportunity* encouraged her to submit her story “Spunk” and her play *Color Struck* to the publication’s 1925 contest, both winning prizes and providing Hurston an immediate profile. As Robert Hemenway writes, “Less than five months after she introduced herself in the *Opportunity* offices, Zora Hurston found herself honored as one of the prominent talents in the new movement in the black arts.”⁵⁵ At the same time, Hurston’s choice of material pointed to the contradictory treatment of rural black folkways in the Renaissance. When Alain Locke compiled his edited collection *The New Negro* that same year, he included “Spunk” alongside fiction and poetry by Toomer, and poetry by Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Arna Bontemps, writers all who sought to give voice to rural black life. Locke’s introduction to the volume, however, revealed the movement’s ambiguous relationship with such material, instead crediting recent black advancements in part to northward migration: “In the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed.”⁵⁶ Hurston’s work eschewed this emphasis on urban transformation in favor of an aesthetic which sought to explore and

⁵⁴ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, (1981; New York: Penguin, 1997), 69.

⁵⁵ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977), 20.

⁵⁶ Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro*, Ed. Alain Locke (1925; New York: Touchstone, 1997), 6.

enhance the originality and dignity of southern black life, which also raised questions about its relationship to modernism.

Prior to the emergence of Hurston, the most notable treatment of southern alterity by a black woman among Harlem Renaissance writers was Nella Larsen's acclaimed debut novel, *Quicksand*. Telling the story of the misunderstood and deeply unhappy Helga Crane, *Quicksand* follows Helga as she leaves her teaching post at a Tuskegee-esque institution for the supposed freedom of New York and Denmark. Finding nothing but bitter disappointment, she stumbles into a revival service and agrees to marry and return south with the minister, the Reverend Pleasant Green. Shortly thereafter, she realizes that she is trapped again, but this time burdened by several childbirths which leave her increasingly weak and listless, dreaming of an escape she knows she can no longer carry out. Of the many quicksands in Larsen's novel, the south looms large for its lifeless pull on Helga's desires and cosmopolitan spirit. Larsen's configuration of southern alterity as something that cannot be escaped will find echoes in the fourth chapter, but here I bring it up to demonstrate the stark difference between *Quicksand*, the dominant portrayal of the plight of a black female character in the south by a Harlem Renaissance writer, and Hurston's folkloric treatment of the similar theme, which proved controversial both within the Renaissance and on through the 1930s.

While the Harlem Renaissance brought Hurston her initial success, the bulk of her mature writing occurred after it had sputtered out; by the time *Their Eyes Were Watching God* appeared in 1937, the tentative and sometimes contradictory heterogeneity of the

Harlem Renaissance had been abandoned in favor of a social realist-inflected agenda.⁵⁷ This shift opened Hurston's work to further criticism; if in the 1920s her work was insufficiently modern, in the '30s it was insufficiently realist. This line of critique, most prominently illustrated by Richard Wright's review of *Their Eyes*, found conservative political implications in her work. While acknowledging that "Miss Hurston can write," Wright accuses her of "voluntarily" continuing "the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater...the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh."⁵⁸ This review did not signal the death knell of her career – her best sales and highest profile attended the 1942 publication of her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* – but nevertheless the rift opened by Wright's hostile review, along with the rapturous reception accorded his books *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, contributed to Hurston's dwindling reputation in the 1940s and shaped the direction of the production and reception of African American literature away from Hurston's aesthetic strategies. The rift was defined by the question of representation, and the corollary issue of language, specifically dialect. What in Hurston's work is a rich tradition of folk originality to be mined for aesthetic expression becomes for Wright little more than a

⁵⁷ While Hurston did indeed write against the social realist tradition which dominated African American literature in the late 1930s, Michael North finds that her description of "Negro expression" in her contribution to Cunard's *Negro* anthology owes something to two important precursors, W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, "which is both an anthology of essays and an anthology of spirituals, a collection of miscellaneous pieces that aspires to be a collective portrait of a people," and Jean Toomer's *Cane*. North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 185.

⁵⁸ Richard Wright, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 17.

capitulation to the white demand for black entertainment, a double sin to Wright's way of thinking because of its supposed voluntariness.⁵⁹

Hurston's reception, both before her fall into obscurity and after her revival in the 1970s, colors the understanding of her work. This crux, much like the earlier one defined by Wright, is opened up not just by her extensive use of folklore but her regional emphasis: Hurston set her writing almost uniformly in the rural south and the Caribbean, and her concept of blackness was intrinsically tied to these regions. Southern alterity is therefore the primary condition of her life and work. Acknowledging this does not shield her work from critique, but it complicates the notion that her writing was insufficiently modern or mere minstrelsy. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, often understood as the story of one woman's search for self-fulfillment in a space and time outside of history, in my reading places Janie's quest against a backdrop of southern alterity that influences not merely her development, but also the milieu she lives in: the rural black south, the all-black town of Eatonville, and the Everglades. In each setting, Janie navigates a series of expectations placed upon her by the authority of powerful characters (Nanny, Logan Killicks, and Jody Starks, most notably). It is finally on "the muck" of the Everglades, which Hurston configures as a quasi-utopian transregional black space, that Janie finds a measure of the fulfillment she seeks. Even here, southern alterity remains a devastating force which forces her to fall back on herself for survival as she loses Tea Cake in the novel's dénouement.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ This review opened a long-debated critical rift in black literature, one which Wright seemed to win with the acclaim that greeted the publication of *Native Son* in 1940, but which he would find himself on the other side of with his exile from the U.S. and turn to existentialism in his 1953 novel *The Outsider*.

⁶⁰ Brent Hayes Edward's account of nascent black internationalism centers on "metropolitan France" as "one of the key places where African Americans, Antilleans, and

This reading requires a revised understanding of southern U.S. literature; older regional models do not suffice. The interpretation of Hurston's work as ahistorical or backward depends on a perspective beholden to the tropes of southern alterity itself. Older models of southern literature depended on the Agrarian notion of a cohesive southern community, typically (though not exclusively) valuing white male authors; Scott Romine, among others, rightly calls such notions of community a fantasy.⁶¹ Likewise, Patricia Yaeger's "reconstruction" of U.S. southern women's writing challenges the occlusion of race and gender that marked older models, producing thereby a revisionist account that turns away from community to instead read southern literature as "about moments of crisis and acts of contestation, about the intersection of black and white cultures as they influence one another and collide."⁶² Yaeger's work possesses affinity with postcolonial notions of cultural hybridity and more accurately accounts for the social conditions that create southern alterity than older regional models, and so proves fertile ground for positioning Hurston within the U.S. southern canon.

The understanding of Hurston's creative engagement with southern alterity also requires a reconsideration of southern modernism alongside the revisionist accounts of Yaeger and Romine. While eschewing the southern exceptionalism common to understandings of the region, Barbara Ladd argues that any reading of southern literature must include the "patriarchal and paternalistic foundations of southern ideology" that,

Africans were able to 'link up,'"; while Hurston never travelled to France, her work in Haiti along with her portrayal of the international community on "the muck" suggests that her work and thought possesses its own black internationalist perspective. Hayes, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 3.

⁶¹ Scott Romine, *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1999), 1ff.

⁶² Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 38.

while “not unique to the South...were made explicit and instrumentalized in a slave economy that subjected southern women (black and white, rich and poor) and African American men to a disciplinary regime in which some were spiritualized and others imagined as animals,”⁶³ a reality that *Their Eyes* fully acknowledges in Janie’s quest for self-determination. Furthermore, Ladd argues that dating southern modernism from the end of World War I ignores its true origins in “modernity itself (industrialization, the growth of the ‘machine,’ as so many writers of the era put it, and the concurrent growth of the state) that is responsible for the rise of modernism.”⁶⁴ By shifting our understanding of Hurston’s engagement with southern modernity, the modernism of her work comes into focus: rather than a chronicler of ahistorical rural black folkways, she becomes a modernist literary figure who fully acknowledges the modernization of the communities she writes about, as Tiffany Ruby Patterson argues.⁶⁵ In short, Hurston’s folk emphasis does not need to be uncoupled from her modernism; rather, because of southern alterity, they are mutually constitutive.

Language presents another area in which folk materials and the modern meet in Hurston’s work. “Negro expression,” as Hurston called it, holds a central place in her work and its conception of regional and racial difference. Hurston’s anthropological field work focused primarily on folktales, and she frequently repurposed her research for her

⁶³ Barbara Ladd, *Resisting History: Gender, Modernity, and Authorship in William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2007), 13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁵ Tiffany Ruby Patterson writes of Hurston’s “past present,” a condition of southern black rural life under the strain of modernization that Hurston chronicled in her tales of “Hurston’s folk: turpentine and sawmill workers in Florida’s naval stores industries, workers in phosphate-mining industries, migrant workers in agricultural camps, and residents of an all-black town in Florida in the early twentieth century.” Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005), 7.

fiction. Among her several contributions to Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology, Hurston included an essay entitled "Characteristics of Negro Expression," which reads almost as a modernist manifesto. While the confines of Cunard's encyclopedic anthology necessitated brevity, Hurston nevertheless distills years of research, fieldwork, and thought into the piece, which deserves a standing alongside recognized milestones of high modernist theory and practice such as T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Wyndham Lewis' *Blast* manifesto. Hurston's argument for the originality of African American expression turns on a deceptively simple observation that echoes across her work:

It is obvious that to get back to original sources is much too difficult for any group to claim very much as a certainty. What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas...So if we look at it very squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.⁶⁶

Hurston's claim that originality emerges from a creative repurposing of pre-existing materials compares favorably with another expression of modernism's indebtedness towards the past, Eliot's argument for the "mythical method" of James Joyce's *Ulysses* as an aesthetic template for the development of modernism.⁶⁷ Crucially, however, Hurston acknowledges the specific cultural conditions undergirding African American expression: cultural displacement from the dominant white order. Casting an eye to the forces that

⁶⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings: Mules and Men, Tell My Horse, Dust Tracks on a Road, Selected Articles*, Ed. Cheryl A. Wall, (1934; New York: Library of America 1995), 838. Ellipsis mine.

⁶⁷ T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Ed. Frank Kermode (1923; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 178.

have shaped black life in the New World, Hurston describes her own ethnographic and aesthetic orientation while suggesting a powerful direction for the further development of black literature. Furthermore, Hurston understands the social position held by blacks as a defining force in their particular mode of expression.

By configuring black expression and social space as mutually reinforcing, Hurston's use of language offers a worthwhile comparative point with Woolf's own linguistic experiments in *The Voyage Out*. Woolf's use of voice also speaks to social conditions and stratifications: while shifting registers and stream-of-consciousness would become more pronounced in Woolf's later work, her debut novel prefaces this subsequent experimentation in its juxtaposition of Rachel's timid blankness against the authoritative voices of Richard Dalloway and Helen Ambrose, whose imperious fulminations and concerned maternal conventions, respectively, produce jarring shifts in the narrative.

Woolf's experimentation engenders an ambiguity which shapes not just early modernist aesthetics but the ambivalence towards colonialism, as discussed above. Nick Montgomery's examination of Woolf's use of language in *The Voyage Out* sketches how the novel moves "through and out of the discursive vapidness of colonial rhetoric and the paternal word and toward a reinstatement of the maternal voice."⁶⁸ Particularly in the upriver voyage sequence, Montgomery finds a "singular dissolution or loss of affect" of imperial rhetoric. His acknowledgment that Woolf's narrative strategies result from the European encounter with primitive alterity accords with my reading: Woolf, in his words, breaks from authority to produce "the progressive disintegration of meaningful utterance,

⁶⁸ Nick Montgomery, "Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice: Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no.1 (2000): 35.

the incipient collapse of the symbolic order, and the creeping incapacity of the spoken word to carry meaning between one human subject and another.”⁶⁹ In short, Woolf’s use of ambiguity and fragmentation challenges the totalizing language of imperialism, even as she reproduces its colonial logic in the encounter with the indigenous women.

Similarly, Molly Hite focuses on Woolf’s experimental use of “a narrative strategy of withholding or presenting conflicting tonal cues” not only as a method of circumventing conventional authorial guidance, leaving “readers...uncertain about how they are supposed to feel and judge.”⁷⁰ Montgomery and Hite highlight the novel’s experimentation, but by the same token, they also reveal that Woolf’s aesthetic strategy makes possible the novel’s capitulation to exotic tropes when Rachel encounters the indigenous women in the interior village. For Woolf (like Conrad and, in his own way, Chesnutt), southern alterity is a condition of colonialism, whereas for Hurston it is the reality that she writes and lives under. It is not surprising then that while both engage in modernist language experiments, the purpose and overall effect is remarkably different.

While Hurston at times infuses her use of the vernacular material in her fiction with a latent romanticism, *Their Eyes* does not reify an easy sense of folk authenticity. Despite the evaluations of Wright, Sterling Brown, and others, Hurston uses folklore to both acknowledge and challenge southern alterity, pointing toward a mode of black existence in a largely hostile south. Southern alterity, for Conrad and Woolf, depends on both colonialism and the presence of people of color, that element which so attracts and repels them. For Hurston, on the other hand, southern alterity emerges from the

⁶⁹ Ibid, 47.

⁷⁰ Molly Hite, “The Public Woman and the Modernist Turn: Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* and Elizabeth Robins’s *My Little Sister*,” *Modernism/modernity* 17 no. 3 (2010): 524-525.

conditions people of color are forced to live under, which can be resisted in part through figurative language.

3.5 Janie Finds a Voice

One of the curious aspects of a novel ostensibly concerned with its protagonist in search of her own voice is how little of it there is to be found. For Hortense Spillers, this is partly the result of Hurston's use of the vernacular: "Janie is stuck in the limitations of dialect, while her creator is free to make use of a range of linguistic resources to achieve her vision."⁷¹ In Spillers' reading, Janie's fictional agency becomes the price to be paid for Hurston's own expression. To be fair, Hurston's use of a frame narrative, which shifts from Janie's first-person narration to an authorial third-person voice, complicates the matter of who exactly is speaking.⁷² At the same time, the power of Janie's voice speaks to the repercussions of silence in a male-dominated community in ways Spillers' reading does not account for.

Community in *Their Eyes* takes its first significant form in the town of Eatonville, where Janie Crawford sets out after a disappointing first marriage to begin a promising new life with a bold and dynamic new husband, Joe Starks. Jody, as he prefers to be called, replaces the expectation of domestic servitude expected by her first husband, Logan Killicks, by treating her instead as a trophy who is to be silent and demure in public. While Jody rises to the position of mayor through his aggressive leadership, he

⁷¹ Hortense Spillers, "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love: Three Women's Fiction," 116.

⁷² Amanda Bailey describes the complications of the novel's frame narrative: "It seems the central issue is not that the speaking voice of Janie does not exist...The problem originates at the novel's end, when the reader comes to realize that through the course of her reading, Janie has been simultaneously speaking the same story to Pheoby. In other words, a reader's reading of the novel and Janie's oral narration to Pheoby exist in a shared time and space which are nevertheless inaccessible to one another." Bailey, "Necessary Narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *The Comparatist* 40 (October 2016): 324.

relegates Janie to working his store. Her confinement over the years ends with her publicly mocking him after he upbraids her for cutting a customer's plug of tobacco incorrectly. Jody launches into a lengthy complaint that he ends by observing that Janie is getting old and therefore less desirable. Her response cuts to the heart of his pride and vanity with a suggestive verbal performance:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it, Dat's uh whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round her and put out a lot of brag, but 'taint nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life.
(238)

Janie's public rebuke of Jody draws on the primary resource available to her, the one Jody explicitly forbids: language. Similar to Hurston's description of the uses of metaphor in "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Janie undercuts Jody's masculine preening with a series of metaphors emphasizing her still vital femininity against his withered masculinity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls this moment "truly the first feminist critique of the fiction of the authority of the male voice, and its sexism, in the Afro-American tradition."⁷³ Sam Watson, a denizen of the store's porch, gasps from shock and delight at the verbal sparring: "Great God from Zion!...Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnight" (238). Illustrating Gates' point, Sam's surprise arises from Janie's self-insertion into a discourse primarily reserved for men. Jody does not take Janie's outburst as

⁷³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Ed., (1988; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 222.

another round of “playin’ de dozens” but rather as the shattering of an illusion that has heretofore propped up his sense of self:

Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul’s daughter had done to David. But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing...There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless. And the cruel deceit of Janie! Making that show of humbleness and scorning him all the time! (239)

Hurston’s narrative strategy brings the low-simmering tensions of the marriage to a boil and sets up Jody’s death, but it also demonstrates her considerable ear for the intricacies of black folk expression: Hurston uses this material not, as Wright would have it, in the service of minstrelsy, but rather to illustrate the constitutive role this expression plays for the community of Eatonville. Nor is Janie hamstrung by the supposed limitations of folk dialect, as Spillers argues. Her verbal sparring resembles “playin’ de dozens,” the mocking social ritual common to the store’s porch, but she also publicly expresses the agency which she has long stifled at the request of Jody. Janie’s former illusion that she had it made with Jody has long ago given way to the realization that his expectations have kept her from the boisterous, socially constituting conversation on the store’s porch.

Jody’s refusal to allow Janie’s participation in the porch banter effectively separates her from the community. Earlier in the novel, Janie tells Jody, “Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too!”, but he responds that “They just think they’s thinkin’. When Ah see one thing Ah understand ten. You see ten things and

don't understand one." Janie registers the impact of Jody's casual cruelty to her: "Times and scenes like that put Janie to thinking about the inside state of her marriage," the narrator describes:

The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. So she put something in there to represent the spirit like a Virgin Mary image in a church. The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired. (232)

The conflict between Jody's image of their marriage and Janie's results in her shifting the focus of their relationship away from the private, eroticized space of the bedroom to the semi-public, semi-communal space of the parlor, ready to perform domesticity and "shake hands whenever company came to visit," but not much else. Jody prescribes her a communal role even as he effects her rupture from the community itself, and Janie's realization of and acquiescence to his imposed order registers both her realism and her disappointment in the marriage. An uneasy parallel to her previous marriage to Logan Killicks, the "good man" that Nanny sets up Janie with, emerges: although respectable – churchgoing, a relatively prosperous farmer, and boasting the only pump organ in any black person's home in the county – Janie objects because her vision of him "was desecrating the pear tree" that symbolizes her romantic and sexual awakening (185). Nanny wants Janie to have "protection" more than Logan Killicks himself (186). Desire has no place in Nanny's world, understandably; her life has been marked by the damage of white male desire. Now, some years later, Janie finds herself safely ensconced in the

community's esteem by virtue of her mayoral husband, but equally as alienated as she was in her previous marriage. Just as Logan Killicks desecrates her vision of the pear tree, another floral metaphor expresses her relationship with Jody: "She wasn't petal open anymore with him" (232). The disappointment of her marriage with Jody represents the first utopian failure of the novel.

Janie's situation – maintaining a seemingly proper relationship from the community of Eatonville while actually estranged from it – intertwines with her search for a voice. Her public humiliation of Jody, driven by the necessity of the moment rather than a result of deliberate self-fashioning, is a turning point that leads indirectly to the freedom she finds later in the novel. It also creates a communal rift that the novel foreshadows in the opening chapter: as she makes her return to Eatonville, derisive comments emanate from the town's porches:

"What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?– Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?– Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?– What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?– Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?– Thought she was going to marry?– Where he left *her*?– What he done wid all her money?– Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs– why she don't stay in her class?–" (175-176)

These are the voices of the community, the voices of the folk, that Hurston so often champions, but here instead of offering support and confirmation of Janie's self-determination, they proclaim her estrangement. Hurston elsewhere uses folk voices to suggest the incongruity of Janie's headstrong attempts to realize her own desires, most

notably in Nanny's monologue describing her rationale for marrying Janie off to Logan Killicks:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out...So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. (186)

Nanny reasons that in a world controlled by white men, the only recourse for Janie to avoid heartbreak and backbreak is to find "protection" with a sober, responsible man like Logan Killicks, but as Margaret Cullen writes, such a "traditional African American rural Christian foundation" cannot suffice for a headstrong young woman entranced by the sensuous charms of the natural world such as Janie.⁷⁴ Nanny's voice represents an older community shaped by the enervations of enslavement and the failure of Reconstruction. Janie's resistance springs less from her inability to comprehend the social situation created by those forces than their perceived irrelevance to what she imagines her own situation to be.

Their situations are not as different as Janie thinks: Tiffany Ruby Patterson situates Nanny's discourse in conditions that were of paramount importance to freed African Americans in the rural south:

Logan Killicks has land, the cornerstone of freedom in the Reconstruction South.

But the protection Nanny seeks for Janie cannot be achieved through land alone.

⁷⁴ Margaret Cullen, "Modernism in the Muck: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *We Speak A Different Tongue: Maverick Voices and Modernity 1890-1939*, Ed. Anthony Patterson and Yoonjoung Choi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 173.

Nor can Killicks be allowed to exercise manhood in the larger society. He chooses a solitary existence and views Janie as little more than a slave, someone he literally hitches to his plow...In the post-Reconstruction South, black people sought autonomy and dignity in community, not in solitary existence. Killicks misses the point, adopting a solution to Jim Crow that is destructive to the spirit.⁷⁵

The community that Logan Killicks eschews, Jody embraces; both alienate Janie. Patricia Stuelke argues that *Their Eyes*, rather than “offering strategies for surviving the inevitable alienation of modernity” instead “challenges the narrative and historical trajectory of modernization.” She takes Nanny’s metaphor – “us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways” – as encompassing “the dislocation of the African diaspora,” one only intensified by the rootlessness that accompanied Emancipation and the failure of Reconstruction to achieve any manner of parity for the newly freed.⁷⁶ As Patterson observes, the only antidote to this rootlessness is community, but with Janie’s first two husbands circumscribing her involvement in community, she turns instead to finding her voice as a way to develop self-determination. Nanny acknowledges the realities of life for African Americans under southern alterity and seeks to provide for Janie the only way she can imagine, but Janie desires a better and different life, which places her at odds with the community.

Their Eyes portrays Janie’s search for a voice, southern black community, and folklore as overlapping concerns, not discrete entities. Accounts which read Hurston’s use of folklore as primarily celebratory misread her work; the range of uses to which

⁷⁵ Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*, 118. Ellipsis mine.

⁷⁶ Patricia Stuelke, “Finding Haiti, Finding History in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” *Modernism/modernity* 19, no. 4 (November 2012): 760.

Hurston could put folk expression emerge simply by juxtaposing the communal talk of the store's porch with the murmuring voices at the start of the novel, voices that measure Janie's separation from Eatonville. Furthermore, *Their Eyes* plays folk expression against the free indirect discourse of the primary narration throughout. The novel's layering of voices creates an ever-shifting narrative center that at times threatens the stability of the text. Gates' influential reading of *Their Eyes* describes the novel as a "speakerly" text that uses "the metaphor of double-consciousness as the prerequisite to becoming a speaking subject." The novel's narrative strategy then becomes "the rhetorical analogue" to this doubled, inside-outside scheme: "Free indirect discourse...reflects both the text's theme of the doubling of Janie's self and that of the problematic relationship between Janie as a speaking subject and spoken language." This "bivocal utterance" informs both the novel's "speakerliness," and renders the novel's vocal shifts as a distinctively African American expressive form.⁷⁷ Gates' reading uses Du Bois' concept of double consciousness to fold Hurston's use of folklore into a robust consideration of the novel's aesthetics and social content. Gates' primary interest in *Their Eyes* lies in its applicability to his theory of the lineage of folklore and oral narration in African American literature to African stories and practices. His reading, while fully cognizant of the political conditions that underlie that literature, leaves aside the question of Hurston's immediate social and political context. This aspect of Hurston's work has often been overlooked, or made a target for critique; for instance, Hazel V. Carby criticizes what she calls "Hurston's discursive displacement of contemporary social crisis in her writing."⁷⁸ She

⁷⁷ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 223.

⁷⁸ Hazel V. Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1990), 76.

frames Hurston's work as a third way solution at a time when questions of folk representation were dominated on the one hand by the Harlem Renaissance's quest to craft an authentic black literature and, on the other, by the Soviet school of social realism. Hurston's focus on rural folk "constructed a discourse of nostalgia for a rural community,"⁷⁹ particularly when read against the social transformation and displacement that undergird Langston Hughes' portrayal of the black proletariat. Furthermore, by virtue of her academic training, "Hurston could not entirely escape the intellectual practice that reinterpreted and redefined a folk consciousness in its own elite terms,"⁸⁰ but instead reproduces the "romantic and, it must be said, colonial imagination" that marked the study of anthropology at the time.⁸¹ By contrast with Carby's historically-inflected approach, Barbara Johnson interprets Hurston's narrative strategies as deconstructive, "constantly dramatizing and undercutting... inside/outside oppositions, transforming the plane of geometry of physical space into the complex transactions of discursive exchange."⁸² As these three influential, roughly contemporary readings of Hurston show, her recuperation was fraught with the literary critical concerns of the time. At a moment marked by the pioneering work of black studies scholars and deconstruction both, is Hurston's use of folklore to be understood as a subverting or liberating gesture, or as a *volkish* romanticizing of rural black life?

Hurston's portrayal of black southern life derives its power from her close study of language in her fieldwork, as well as her own childhood experiences in Eatonville.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 77.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 76.

⁸¹ Ibid, 80.

⁸² Barbara Johnson, "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 130.

Hurston was concerned with questions of authenticity, as seen in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” where she makes the surprising but likely accurate claim that authentic spirituals have never been performed for white audiences. Similarly, her anthropological work was motivated at least in part by a concern regarding the authenticity of previously collected folklore, carried out almost exclusively by white field researchers. The concept of authenticity carries heavy baggage after poststructuralism; Hurston’s own argument for the creative artificiality of “Negro expression” anticipates these later theoretical complications. Nevertheless, she remains cognizant of the gap between black culture as she has lived and documented it and the racist distortions placed upon it in mainstream American culture. This does not, however, mean that Hurston was not susceptible to the latter. Michael North questions the exoticist tropes of Hurston’s famous essay, “How It Feels to be Colored Me”:

The shift from spear-shaking savage to miscellaneous brown bag is a shift from primitivism to modern, ironic, cultural relativism, to the role that James Clifford describes so well as that of the contemporary anthropologist. It seems to enclose the savage and defuse it by suggesting that it is no more authentic than anything else in the brown bag. And yet there is something lost in this process, some vigor and enthusiasm at the very least. And it is hard to invest much cultural pride in a jumble of items randomly thrown into a shapeless bag. Hurston’s dilemma, which was the same as that faced by [Claude] McKay and [Jean] Toomer, was not so much to resolve the contradiction between these two choices as to figure out why they were so often the only choices available.⁸³

⁸³ North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 179.

North's lengthy discussion posits this dilemma as central to the work of modernist African American writers who used folklore in creating their own work. How influential is the writer's own subject position? Hurston's insider status as a black woman researching and writing about rural black communities cannot entirely overcome the questions of representation that her portrayal entails, as North observes. How far removed from the "spear-shaking savage" are her portraits of Tea Cake, Stew Beef, Sop-de-Bottom, Bootyny, Motor Boat, and other denizens of the muck?

North demonstrates how Gates' observations regarding Hurston's use of free indirect discourse in *These Eyes* "neither resolves nor celebrates division but restages on another level the whole intriguing problem of Hurston's life and work," expressed particularly by "How It Feels to be Colored Me."⁸⁴ North sees major Harlem Renaissance figures such as Alain Locke as attempting to overcome the inherent division between modernism and black folk expression, a distinction which Hurston's emphasis on the "imitative" aspect of black culture as described in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" also seeks to overcome. In North's account, Hurston claims that "precisely because [black expression] is already imitative that it cannot be further imitated. It is precisely the self-conscious awareness, the ironic indirection, of black art and language makes it original and impossible to mimic."⁸⁵ Hurston's emphasis on dialect is in fact a primary component of her work's modernism.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid, 180.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 182.

⁸⁶ As North writes, "The dialect that James Weldon Johnson ceremonially buried in 1922 died a well-deserved death, but the dialect that Johnson himself used, the characteristic "Negro expression" that Hurston defined and that both Toomer and McKay struggled to put into their works, has exerted a profound influence, determining the course of literature written in English...Literary modernism in English, whether it be dated from *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*," from Stein's *Three Lives*, from *The Waste Land*, or even from *Spring*

The question of the meaning of Hurston's folkloric materials in *Their Eyes* cannot be separated from Janie's quest to find a voice. Just as the novel's use of shifting voices stands as one marker of its modernism, so does its insistence on Janie's development as a subject. That development is shared by author and character: as Nellie McKay argues, the novel is strongly autobiographical,⁸⁷ making Hurston's own idiosyncratic thoughts on culture and politics of paramount importance to Janie's development. For instance, Hurston tells us that Janie's would find the store "a pleasant place if only she didn't have to sell things. When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of the thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice" (215). When she does venture to talk, Jody disapproves – "She was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others" (218) – but when she praises him for setting free Matt Bonner's yellow mule, Hambo praises her as "a born orator" (221). While deeply desirous to participate in the talk on the store's porch, she acquiesces to Jody's wishes: "The years took all the fight out of Janie's face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul. No matter what Jody did, she said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and how to leave some"

and All, could not have arisen without the example of dialect. Thus a stigmatized and despised language transformed the literature of one century and prepared the way for the literature of another." While I am not convinced that any of the works North lists are the origin point of modernism, I agree with his account of the centrality of dialect to modernist literary expression, particularly in my claim of the importance of Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" as a kind of modernist manifesto. North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 195.

⁸⁷ Specifically, Nellie McKay argues that "the novel is autobiographical on two levels. First in a continuation of one of the oldest traditions in fiction, Janie tells us the story of how and why her life came to be in the place that it is; second, we also know that Hurston invested this narrative with the joy and pain of her own experiences of female development and romantic love, familiar conventions in women's narratives." McKay, "Crayon Enlargements of Life': Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography," in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 51.

(236). Although I think McKay's claims for the novel's autobiographical elements press the issue too far, she is correct that Janie's attempt to articulate her own perspective carries something of Hurston's own struggles to make her voice heard both in the worlds of literature and anthropology. McKay correctly argues that while Hurston's narrative techniques represent her

conscious intentions to preserve intrinsic folk forms and values as a vital part of the Afro-American personal identity...she did not think that in order to be part of the group, one was compelled to sacrifice individuality and freedom from intragroup oppression. As she did in her own life, she permitted her heroine the independence to make decisions, achieve voice, and speak her life as an individual distinct from her community.⁸⁸

The very individuality that McKay credits to both author and character exists as part of Hurston's own life story as much as it does her art. Inasmuch as Hurston's work cannot be separated from the southern alterity that she lived and wrote under, it cannot be separated from her negotiations with the larger cultural milieu she wrote from – and against.

3.6 Southern Alterity On and Beyond the Muck

The final third of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* mostly takes place on “the muck” of the Florida Everglades, where Janie and Tea Cake go to work as seasonal laborers. Like the other settings in the novel, whites are mostly absent, but its population on the muck is transnational and multiracial. At the same time, this section is the novel's longest sustained engagement with whiteness: first, two white men with rifles appear in

⁸⁸ Ibid, 57.

the wake of the hurricane's devastation to compel Tea Cake and others "to clear the wreckage in public places and bury the dead" (313). Social relations outside of the novel's largely black spaces are shown as the conscripted workers are instructed to bury the whites in cheap pine coffins and everyone else in mass graves. Moreover, after Janie has killed Tea Cake in self-defense, she enters the uniformly white milieu of the justice system. Not only are the judge and jury all white, but the trial attracts whites from the area as well:

Three hours in jail and then they set the court for her case. The time was short and everything, but sufficient people were there. Plenty of white people came to look on the strangeness. And all the Negroes for miles around. Who was it didn't know about the love between Tea Cake and Janie? ...And twelve more white men had stopped whatever they were doing to listen and pass on what happened between Janie and Tea Cake Woods, and as to whether things were done right or not. That was funny too. Twelve strange men who didn't know a thing about Tea Cake and her were going to sit on the thing. Eight or ten white women had come to look at her too. (326)

The sudden intrusion of whiteness into the novel upsets the previous focus on black communities and their inner workings, as well as the utopian possibilities of the muck, which depends on both the multinational black community gathered there as well as the relatively loving (compared with her previous relationships) marriage Janie and Tea Cake enjoy. Prior to this, whiteness existed on the margins of the novel's communities, but in this section, the power relations which structure the world Janie lives in are revealed in their fullest form. Readings of *Their Eyes* which accuse Hurston of being uninterested in

or seeking to escape the problems of southern black life often fail to reckon with the novel's clear-eyed, albeit brief, encounter with whiteness.⁸⁹

The courtroom scene has drawn criticism for, among other things, effectively silencing Janie. Although she testifies in her own defense, the narrative voice takes over, telling readers that she “tried to make them see” (328) in favor of a direct presentation of her words. Rachel Blau DuPlessis remarks upon the curious silencing of the black observers of the trial and the privileging of the white workings of power, writing,

the whites have gotten off easier than is plausible by virtue of the commanding stature with which Hurston has invested her hero/ine, but also (possibly) because of Hurston's own charitable asocial attitude towards the constitutive nature of prejudice which allows her to depict Janie as a superior force who can (as Hurston argues for herself in her autobiography) transcend racism.⁹⁰

DuPlessis' reading of the trial scene evokes the cultural conservatism of Hurston's politics; the white men who attend the trial and sit in judgment of her on the bench and in the jury both “contain and disempower the rage of the black male community” even as they are “brought to a realization of the deep meaning of [Janie and Tea Cake's]

⁸⁹ Hurston's portrayal of flooding joins other contemporary works by Richard Wright and William Faulkner, as Susan Scott Parrish observes (232). Writing of the Mississippi Flood of 1927, she observes that “in terms both material and cultural, the Delta flood zone was fully enmeshed in a contemporaneous global skein...In the decades before the flood, then, Euro- and African Americans had gradually transformed a natural disturbance-maintained regime, characterized by periodic overflow, into a massive hydraulic mechanism...that, when breached, could cause catastrophic damage.” That Hurston chose to portray transnational black community on the muck indicates a globally-oriented perspective on so-called “natural” disasters that sits favorably alongside Parrish's account of the engineered crisis of the Mississippi Flood, at least partially the result of international cotton trade. See Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017), 11.

⁹⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston,” *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 103.

marriage...by the power of Janie's own testimony."⁹¹ In this reading, the cultural conservatism that accompanies the black separatist aesthetics of the novel seemingly bleed into the novel's primary scene of confrontation with white legal and cultural power.

Janie's loss of voice during the trial persists as one of the thorny interpretive cruxes of the novel's convoluted narrative strategy. While her silence rightly disturbs in no small part because it occurs within the narrative itself, the sudden reversal of social relations in this scene demonstrates yet again that Hurston does not glibly celebrate black folk community at the expense of a proper acknowledgment of the power dynamics of a white supremacist social order. Just as the novel's folkloric approach acknowledges southern alterity as the condition under which rural and small-town black life occurs, so here the power of the justice system reveals white supremacy as one of the constitutive realities of southern alterity. Despite her conservative politics, the courtroom scene demonstrates that Hurston does not acquiesce to white power in *Their Eyes*. A consideration of Hurston's deft evocation of the socially structuring regime of white supremacy causes the charge of the novel's supposedly ahistorical celebration of black folkways to wilt.

While I do argue against such readings, by the same token there is no escaping the specter of Hurston's politics; like Janie's silence in the courtroom, they disturb. At the time she wrote *These Eyes*, Hurston's politics were idiosyncratic and unsystematic, but by the 1950s her tendency toward conservative black nationalism would harden into a strident anti-communism. Hemenway's biography of Hurston is symptomatic of a euphemizing tendency in scholarly discussions of her politics, particularly in the years of

⁹¹ Ibid.

her rediscovery. Only fully approaching the subject directly in his final chapter, Hemenway does along the way describe the odd fit of Hurston's position in the 1920s and '30: "In an assimilationist era, when black intellectuals stressed the similarities between the races, Hurston proudly affirmed the cultural differences."⁹² Hurston's valuing of "the personal over the theoretical," alongside her skepticism of "the excessive rationality behind the materialism of American life," shaped her politics; in "forcefully affirm[ing] the humanistic values of black life," he writes, "she asserted early arguments for black cultural nationalism."⁹³ In short, Hurston's cultural politics placed her at odds with black intellectuals of her own time and anticipated later developments in black cultural thought, and yet in the 1950s, her tendency towards contrarianism resulted in a hard-right turn. How much did this development owe to Hurston's pioneering cultural work in the 1930s?

Hemenway for his part finds the sources of Hurston's turn towards anti-communism and her support of Robert Taft's 1952 Presidential campaign in her earlier thought.⁹⁴ Despite the insufficiency of Hemenway's discussion of Hurston's politics, his description of her emphasis on lived experience over theory in service of a black nationalist agenda offers another way of thinking about the *volkish* tinge Carby finds in *Their Eyes*. Carby does not expressly address fascism in her essay, but her concern about the impact of Hurston's anthropological training on the question of subaltern representation evokes the political climate of the 1930s. Hurston's ethnographic approach anticipated developments in social science that sought to undo metropolitan perception in

⁹² Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 162.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 213.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 329-337.

favor of the validity of subaltern communities,⁹⁵ but it should be recognized that her latent romantic (and somewhat utopian) tendencies towards the folk are not at odds with her later espousal of conservatism. While a wide gulf separates Hurston's valorization of black folkways from the cynical *volkish* politics of Fascism and National Socialism, the political tensions that haunted the 1930s may well have influenced her McCarthyite paranoia in the 1950s.⁹⁶ Hurston's espousal of conservatism in her last decade should not be taken as the only possible outcome of her earlier ideas, but Eric Sundquist's observation that "the liminality of her own authorial and professional voice bears an important resemblance to the liminality of her characters' voices" offers one way of thinking about the relationship between Hurston's putative black nationalism in the '30s and her conservatism in the '50s.⁹⁷ Hurston relished the consternation her singular perspective often gave other black intellectuals, and her anti-communism was consistent throughout her life.

Other, less prominent socio-political realities of the 1930s influenced her work: at the same time the rise of authoritarian nationalism in Europe caught the world's attention, the U.S. was quietly winding down a nearly two-decade military occupation of Haiti. Hurston spent a great deal of time in Haiti in the 1930s, drafting *Their Eyes* in a feverish seven weeks while there on a research trip. Raphael Dalleo argues for the significance of

⁹⁵ "Her attempt to distinguish black culture from white forecast the direction of much subsequent research; in the last thirty years the social sciences have begun to systematically collect the data that Zora Hurston indicated was there all along." Ibid, 331.

⁹⁶ For a cogent discussion of how Hurston's anti-communist statements in the 1950s have been too easily read back into her work published in the 1930s, see Sondra Guttman, "No Tomorrow in the Man': Uncovering the Great Depression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Arizona Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (Autumn 2007): 94.

⁹⁷ Eric J. Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1992), 54.

the oft-overlooked U.S. occupation, which he credits as influencing both the cultural output and politics of the Caribbean in the 1930s and the representation of race in U.S. literature.⁹⁸ The following chapter will discuss the position of Haiti within the U.S. imaginary in greater depth, but here I pause to consider the place of Haiti's occupation in *Their Eyes*. Although Hurston does not directly mention Haiti in the novel – save perhaps for Nanny's cryptic comment, "Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power" (186) – Derek Collins finds ample examples of Haitian influence on *Their Eyes*, not least through Hurston's study of Vodou. He writes, "Hurston's contact with Vodou, and with the mythology and folklore of the Haitian Iwa, or pantheon deities, provided essential background material for the novel as a whole."⁹⁹ Furthermore, Collins argues that Janie's story parallels that of the Iwa love goddess Ezili Freda: not only did Hurston write about Ezili Freda more than any other Iwa deity in her collection of Haitian folklore, *Tell My Horse*, but Janie's love relationships and the tragedy of Tea Cake's death mirror the erotic but unfulfilling romances of Ezili Freda.¹⁰⁰

Alongside the parallels between Janie and Ezili Freda, Hurston draws on the historical ties between Haiti and the U.S., according to Patricia Stuelke: she finds in *Their Eyes* a palimpsestual "flood of layered and imbricated histories, U.S. narratives that contain images and traces of Haiti, which themselves call up and re-produce Haiti's history of decolonization and imperial occupation even as they script U.S. versions of the

⁹⁸ Raphael Dalleo, *American Imperialism's Undead: The Occupation of Haiti and the Rise of Caribbean Anticolonialism* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2016), 2, 71.

⁹⁹ Derek Collins, "The Myth and Ritual of Ezili Freda in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti, and Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ed. La Vinia Delois Jennings (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2013), 52.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 52-63.

same story.”¹⁰¹ In Stuelke’s reading, Nanny’s story of her existence during the Civil War “manufactures irreducible traces of the U.S. occupation of Haiti,” particularly in the way in which her daughter Leafy’s rape at the hands of her schoolteacher “mirrors the sexual violence committed against Haitian women by U.S. Marines,” after which both Leafy and the women of Haiti were portrayed as “promiscuous and unstable.”¹⁰² These readings change the terms of the debate regarding Hurston’s portrayal of black folk life: against those critics who see *Their Eyes* and Hurston’s work in general as ahistorical, Stuelke argues that the novel recovers black women’s lived experience, reaching beyond facile understandings of the novel’s folk materials to advance an historical engagement with the realities of southern alterity.

To be sure, Hurston rarely foregrounded such explicitly historical and political considerations in her writing of the 1930s. Having been supported early in her career by a white patron and always aware of a white readership, Hurston may have soft-pedaled the potentially radical implications of her folkloric material, as she did in the published version of her autobiography.¹⁰³ While Collins’ argument about Hurston’s creative use of Haitian folklore in her creation of Janie’s story fits within her larger practice of repurposing her anthropological fieldwork in her fiction, Stuelke’s refashioning of *Their Eyes* into a critique of U.S. imperial power reads between the lines a touch too much. While her observation that Hurston’s “palimpsestual narration disrupts any totalizing,

¹⁰¹ Patricia Stuelke, “Finding Haiti, Finding History in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” 758.

¹⁰² Ibid, 761, 763.

¹⁰³ Hemenway goes into great detail the impact that white patronage and her awareness of a white audience and white editorial concerns had on Hurston’s work, particularly her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In particular, see his discussion of the excised passages from *Dust Tracks*, in *Zora Neale Hurston*, 283 ff.

linear narrative of U.S. nationalism or modernity” correctly describes the novel’s attitude towards history, it leaves open the question of black nationalism and *volkish* politics I have raised.¹⁰⁴

A reconsideration of Hurston’s historical sense offers a way out of this seeming impasse. Although Hurston did not position her work as explicitly emancipatory, there is a long history of what Paul Ortiz calls “emancipatory internationalism” in the hemispheric struggle for liberation that stretched from the Haitian Revolution to the 1930s.¹⁰⁵ Ortiz describes the anti-imperialist politics of emancipatory internationalism as seeking to envision a way of life free from antebellum U.S. exceptionalism. Hurston’s work, less explicit than the 19th century examples Ortiz provides, nonetheless builds upon these early iterations of black national consciousness to embrace the transnational community of the muck. Furthermore, Hurston’s travels across the U.S. south and Haiti in search of black folklore were deeply informed by the connections pioneered by African Americans in the nineteenth century by writers like Martin Delaney, whose radical novel *Blake* I discuss in the Introduction.

The utopianism of the “emancipatory internationalism” Ortiz identifies can be found in the transnational community of the Everglades, which expands Janie’s perception: “To Janie’s strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new” (280). Just prior to Janie and Tea Cake’s arrival on the muck, they had been in Jacksonville, the first urban area Janie encounters. While she experiences some of the

¹⁰⁴ Stuelke, “Finding Haiti, Finding History in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” 764.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Ortiz, “Anti-Imperialism as a Way of Life: Emancipatory Internationalism and the Black Radical Tradition in the Americas,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 141.

vagaries of urban living in Jacksonville, it is not the city, but rather the muck that enlarges her horizon. As the other workers begin to arrive, the narrative voice takes in a variety of humanity not found in Eatonville:

They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. All night, all day, hurrying to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient ears on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. (282)

This expansive description, as suggestive of the alienation of modernity as anything emanating from the metropole, focuses the energy of transience away from the urban to an agricultural milieu. Furthermore, among these numbers are a contingent of Bahamans, who Janie comes to appreciate and befriend after most laborers depart at the end of the season:

So Janie began to look around and see people and things she hadn't noticed during the season. For instance during the summer when she heard the subtle but compelling rhythms of the Bahaman drummers, she'd walk over and watch the dances. She did not laugh the "Saws" to scorn as she had heard the people doing in the season. She got to like it a lot and she and Tea Cake were on hand every night till the others teased them about it. (288)

Despite the poverty of most of the transient workers, this outpost of migrant labor, a central site of southern alterity in the U.S., turns out to be an ideal place for Janie to

incorporate herself into a dynamic, transnational black community, albeit one reflective of the conditions that created economic hardship not just in the south, but across the greater Caribbean.

While the scenes on the muck are often understood as the culmination of Janie's fated love affair with Tea Cake, they also complicate Hurston's supposed anti-historical romanticizing of the folk. Writing against Carby's claim that Hurston ignored the displacement of the Great Migration, Martyn Bone argues that Hurston was not only well aware of the economic migration of black laborers to the north but also to the deeper south of Florida, which experienced a "widely promoted land boom" in the 1930s.¹⁰⁶ Bone historicizes Hurston's seemingly pastoral and romanticized portrayal of "the muck" to suggest her understanding not only of intraregional but transnational black migration, offering a portrait of Hurston's work that stands against critical evaluations that focus on her ahistorical representation of black community. Similarly, Sondra Guttman argues that Hurston's political voice has been obscured in discussions of her work from the 1930s. Rather than an "apparently 'timeless or 'mythological' story of Southern black 'folk,'" *Their Eyes*, read instead "through the distinctive historicity of the African American literary tradition illuminates both a historically sound portrayal of exploitative labor conditions for working-class black Americans and a protest against them."¹⁰⁷ Hurston's tendency to romanticize black folk life stands alongside her portrayal of the social and political context of black life in the 1930s south; clearly, whatever utopian tendency her romanticism had was tempered by a clear-eyed vision of the material conditions that

¹⁰⁶ Martyn Bone, "The (Extended) South of Black Folk: Intraregional and Transnational Migrant Labor in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *American Literature* 79, no. 4 (December 2007): 763-765.

¹⁰⁷ Guttman, "No Tomorrow in the Man," 92-3.

shaped rural black life. Similar to the courtroom scene's grappling with the reality of white supremacy, the space of the muck reflects the lived experience of itinerant black southern laborers. If this does not rebut the accusation of romanticism in her work, it at least complicates it.

The meaning of the south for African Americans had been contested long before Hurston set pen to paper. Bone's essay offers a rejoinder to attempts to recast Hurston's work as convergent with southern agrarian literary models, closing off one dominant way of understanding her material as folk romanticization.¹⁰⁸ But what of Sterling Brown's 1936 review of *Mules and Men*, where he argued that Hurston's "socially unconscious" characters displayed little of the bitterness that accompanies the privations of southern existence?¹⁰⁹ Surely these "easy going and carefree" characters found in both Hurston's anthropological work and her fiction validate Wright's criticism of them "swing[ing] like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which Americans like to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears."¹¹⁰ Wright and Brown's contemporary criticisms of Hurston do not foreclose a possible convergence between her work and that of the Southern Agrarians, the major force in southern letters at the time. They do, however, suggest by implication the stakes of the Washington-Du Bois debate. W.E.B. Du Bois, the light-skinned New Englander, ventured into the "Black Belt" of the south in order to recover a sense of the folk that owed little to Booker T. Washington's emphasis on vocational training and seeming acquiescence to white power. His attempt to wrest control of the black southern narrative from Washington set the stage for the utilization of

¹⁰⁸ Bone, "The (Extended) South of Black Folk," 757.

¹⁰⁹ Qtd. in Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 219.

¹¹⁰ Ibid; Wright, "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 17.

folk materials by Harlem Renaissance authors such as Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Hurston, even if Du Bois himself did not always approve of the results.

Hurston's work sits uneasily in the lines drawn by Washington and Du Bois: her academic training and intellectual achievements reflect Du Bois' concept of the "talented tenth," but her unabashed regard for southern black folkways and willingness to collaborate with white publishers and benefactors suggest something of Washington's own conception of black self-determination. *Their Eyes* alludes to the Washington-Du Bois debate in a conversation between Janie and Mrs. Turner, a restaurant owner who "like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable – Caucasian characteristics for all" (293). Mrs. Turner does not think much of Booker T. Washington. Janie asks, "Booker T.? He wuz a great big man, wusn't he?", to which Mrs. Turner responds:

"'Spoused tuh be. All he ever done was cut de monkey for white folks. So dey pumped him up. But you know whut de white folks say 'de higher de money climbs de mo' he show his behind' so dat's de way it wuz wid Booker T....He didn't do nothin' but hold us back – talkin' 'bout work when de race ain't never done nothin' else. He wuz uh enemy tuh us, dat's what. He wuz uh white folks' nigger.'" (290-291)

It is tempting to read Hurston's own struggles with the Washington-Du Bois debate in this exchange, but Paul Ortiz's concept of emancipatory internationalism offers an alternative framework to this intra-U.S. clash. Mrs. Turner's restaurant is overturned in an ambiguous fracas that Tea Cake both seems to be eager to stop and yet participates in, perhaps as a kind of revenge for her skin color prejudice; in the following chapter, we find that the Bahaman workers are "drawn into the American crowd" by the friendship of

Janie and Tea Cake (300). The muck, despite their peripatetic comings and goings of laborers with the agricultural season, coheres into a transnational community of black labor that both respects the actual migratory patterns of black workers, thereby offering a portrait of folk life outside the bounds of the Washington-Du Bois debate. Thus does the muck, however briefly, possess a potent vision of transnational black utopia.

For all her single-minded iconoclasm, however, Hurston owed little to the influence of any school or single thinker; as Bone argues, her novels *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* resist neo-Agrarian readings by virtue of their portrayal of the black economic migration of the 1920s and '30s. Far from Carby's criticisms that Hurston's work ahistorically and insufficiently reckons with the changing circumstances of black southern life, Bone finds that "Hurston depicts the South – especially south Florida – not as a nostalgic site of rooted rural community but as an unstable, liminal locus increasingly defined by intraregional and transnational flows of capital and labor."¹¹¹ For all its utopian promise, southern alterity exists on Hurston's muck, but she resists essentialist white understandings of the backwardness of southern black life. The novel valorizes southern rural black community in part to bypass essentialist notions – whether those of white agrarians or black nationalists – in favor of a vision of transnational black community.

My reading of the muck as symptomatic of southern alterity even as its denizens strive to transcend its limitations prompts a new understanding of the hurricane that effectively destroys the community and with it, Tea Cake. Hurston's own experience of the hurricane dramatized in *Their Eyes* occurred while she was also experiencing an

¹¹¹ Bone, "The (Extended) South of Black Folk," 758.

intellectual breakthrough. While collecting folklore in Florida and Nassau in September and October 1929, Hurston “began to see links between Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean folklore.”¹¹² During the same trip, she survived a major hurricane in Nassau (which also impacted Florida). The novel’s portrayal of life on the muck symbolically intertwines her experience of the hurricane’s destructive force and her pioneering discovery of the cultural networks that drew the black U.S. south and the Caribbean together. What Paul Gilroy would later call an “outernational, transcultural reconceptualisation” that he termed the black Atlantic, Hurston dramatized in Tea Cake and Janie’s parting from Motor Boat amidst the raging hurricane.¹¹³ “Good bye, then, Motor,” Tea Cake says. “Ah wish you all de luck. Goin’ over tuh Nassau fuh dat visit widja when all dis is over,” to which Motor Boat responds, “Mah mama’s house is yours” (308). This small moment, suggestive of larger circum-Caribbean connections, envisions however briefly a utopian black community with the potential to survive disasters, natural and otherwise.

The hurricane also illustrates the destructive potential of southern alterity. *Their Eyes* famously opens with a metaphor illustrating the differences between men and women, using “ships at a distance” to mark the gap between masculine and feminine experience. Ostensibly offering a theory of gender, Hurston also evokes the most crucial method of transportation for New World blacks. Gilroy uses the image of ships to guide his discussion of the cultural circulation that marks the black Atlantic in his influential

¹¹² Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 127-128.

¹¹³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge: Harvard UP 1993, 17.

study,¹¹⁴ and although Hurston's reference serves a different stated purpose, she draws from the same well of imagery. In this regard, southern alterity brings about the novel's ending. Tea Cake, forced to deal with the hurricane as best he can, given the lack of viable options for his and Janie's escape, loses his life, and Janie's taking of that life subjects her to the vagaries of the justice system. The horizon she pulls in "like a great fish-net" (333) at the end of the novel returns to the seafaring images of its opening; this horizon expands beyond the bounds of the nation-state to encompass the black circum-Caribbean. In the next chapter, I turn to images of Haiti in the U.S. imaginary to consider how southern alterity operates beyond the immediate region, but it needs to be said that Hurston imaginatively undertook this perspective on her own in the 1930s.

¹¹⁴ "I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point." Ibid, 4.

CHAPTER FOUR: A DEEPER SOUTH: HAITI IN THE U.S. SOUTHERN LITERARY
IMAGINATION

4.1 Rebellion in the Air

In the Summer of 1800, a group consisting largely of enslaved people in and around Richmond, Virginia planned a rebellion. Lead by Gabriel, a literate, enslaved blacksmith of the Brookfield Plantation in Henrico County, he and his co-conspirators across the Tidewater region expected as many as a thousand enslaved people to join, as well as eventually poor whites, Quakers, and expatriated French citizens. Setting out on the night of 30 August, the rebellion never managed to take off: their actions delayed by monumental rains and subsequent flooding, all was lost when two co-conspirators alerted their master, Mosby Sheppard. In the fallout, at least twenty-seven men were tried and hanged by the Commonwealth. Gabriel briefly eluded capture by sailing down the James River to Norfolk on the schooner *Mary*, only to be given up for the reward money by another slave on board. While tried and hanged along with his fellow co-conspirators, to the end, he refused to explain himself to the authorities, many of whom blamed the twin Jacobin influences of the French and Haitian Revolutions.¹

In his 1936 novelization of Gabriel's Rebellion, *Black Thunder*, Arna Bontemps captures the panicked white planter class response to the uprising in a brief, private conversation between Governor James Monroe and a young assistant. The assistant tells the Governor of "a strong impression that it comes of a too hasty resumption of

¹ This capsule history of Gabriel's Rebellion draws on Douglas R. Egerton's exhaustive history *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1993).

commercial relations with the revolutionary government in San Domingo,” to which Monroe replies:

By the very nature of things in our state, the very number of blacks and the personal trust that is imposed in so many of them, we are left exceedingly vulnerable to this sort of hostility...who is going to tell us the extent of our actual danger? Who knows exactly how far reaching this thing is? What Negro can you point to and say definitely he is not involved?²

This tête-à-tête between Monroe and his assistant is not the first time that Bontemps references the Haitian Revolution in his novel; indeed, Gabriel and his fellow conspirators explicitly draw inspiration from it for their undertaking. He also portrays the awareness white Virginian elites had of the Revolution’s power to stir restless slaves to action. This fear, attendant from the moment the first escapees from Saint-Domingue arrived in Virginia in 1793, was exacerbated by the rumors that abounded upon their arrival; many brought their slaves with them and rival accounts were widespread.³ At least one Richmond newspaper at the time suggested that the ideas of Toussaint L’Ouverture, the great leader of the Haitian Revolution, if not directly influential upon Gabriel’s Rebellion, were in the air.⁴

The exact details of the rebellion, like so much of the lives of enslaved people, remain sketchy, primarily derived from newspaper and court documents. Because of this, the precise nature of Gabriel’s thinking regarding the events in Saint-Domingue cannot

² Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, in *Harlem Renaissance: Four Novels of the 1930s*, ed. Rafia Zafar (New York: The Library of America, 2011), 714. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

³ Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 199.

⁴ *Ibid*, 200.

be ascertained, but official reaction took its influence for granted. Duncan Faherty observes that the “fixation on St. Domingue as the wellspring of all slave unrest inflected American reactions to domestic problems,” even as they paradoxically maintained a belief in the fundamental docility of the enslaved population.⁵ Furthermore, as Julius S. Scott documents, the uprising in Saint-Domingue that eventually resulted in the colony’s liberation and the founding of Haiti took place against an incredible flow of goods, people, and information throughout the greater Caribbean and the coastal U.S.⁶ The fictional conversation between Madison and his assistant in *Black Thunder* not only reflects the political and social environment against which Gabriel’s Rebellion unfolded, it underscores Bontemps’ authorial intention to connect the conspiracy with the larger black Atlantic struggle for freedom and self-determination.

Gabriel’s Rebellion has not enjoyed the notoriety afforded to those of Nat Turner or Denmark Vesey, let alone the Haitian Revolution, but its contemporary impact was significant. Prior to the rebellion, slaves like Gabriel, a literate blacksmith allowed to pursue work away from his master’s plantation for his own material gain, enjoyed a modicum of freedom little associated with the plantation system elsewhere. Such illusory liberties primarily served the needs of the planter class, but in the wake of the rebellion, new punitive laws were put into place that ended these social arrangements, thereby

⁵ Duncan Faherty, “The Mischief That Awaits Us’: Revolution, Rumor, and Serial Unrest in the Early Republic,” in *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, and Geographies*, ed. by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael Drexler (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2016), 73.

⁶ “Examining the rich world which these mobile fugitives inhabited – the complex (and largely invisible) underground which the ‘mariners, renegades, and castaways’ of the Caribbean created to protect themselves in the face of planter consolidation – is crucial to understanding how news, ideas, and social excitement traveled in the electric political environment of the late eighteenth century.” Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind*, 4.

confirming the brutal coercion of the slave system and shattering the paternalist myth.⁷ Virginia's white elites recognized the existential threat of the rebellion, both to their lives and their social order, and responded with force and terror.⁸ While each slave rebellion brought the eventual end of the peculiar institution closer, in the short term, the action of Gabriel and his co-conspirators entrenched the existing order and influenced the early forays of the U.S. into imperialism.

The unprecedented agency seized by the enslaved in the Haitian Revolution inspired an existential fear in the young U.S. republic, making Saint-Domingue an avatar of southern alterity in the white imaginary. While U.S. involvement in the Caribbean stretches back before the founding of the nation to the colonial period, the nascent republic's imperial designs meant that the islands to its south caught the eye of people like Thomas Jefferson.⁹ Other Caribbean islands, notably Cuba and Puerto Rico, suffered more direct involvement by the U.S. in the nineteenth century, but Haiti had long held a place in the national imaginary by the time U.S. Marines landed in Haiti in 1915 to

⁷ Paternalist arguments for slavery became more widespread much later than the historical setting of *Black Thunder*, but are relevant for the ways in which they were refashioned and deployed to argue against Reconstruction, and later to defend segregation. For an overview of pre-Civil War paternalist arguments for slavery, see Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016), 160-63.

⁸ In his study of Gabriel's rebellion, Douglas R. Egerton writes of how the whites failed to understand the basic liberties the conspirators desired and instead believing "that the bondment wanted not justice but retribution: their wives and their daughters." While early Virginia laws took for granted the "impure white sexual desires [of] black men," Egerton states conclusively that no evidence supports such "racist fantasies." See Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 78.

⁹ Eric Williams, in his history of the Caribbean, points out that the "United States was the only power interested in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century," and that Thomas Jefferson dreamed of an "independent federation of all the Caribbean islands." Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean* (London: André Deutsch, 1970), 409.

commence a nearly two-decade long occupation. But a profound paranoia spread across the U.S. even shortly after the Haitian Revolution, as Eric Williams relates in a particularly telling incident: in Charleston, authorities refused “on account of his colour” the entry of “a young native of Saint-Domingue,” despite his service under Lafayette and alongside George Washington in the American Revolution. Furthermore, Williams writes of Jefferson’s apprehension at possible “repercussions of the Saint-Domingue slave revolution, which precipitated a slave uprising in his native Virginia” (presumably Gabriel’s).¹⁰ After becoming President, Jefferson sought to isolate Haiti and pushed Congress to end trade with it, eventually signing a bill into law that suspended trade entirely from 1806-1810; by the time trade resumed, Haiti’s economy was too feeble to make a dent in U.S. shipping. Powerful southerners congratulated themselves on a serious blow against black self-government.¹¹ Haiti’s underdevelopment and instability, which the Marines were ostensibly dispatched in 1915 to alleviate, resulted in part from U.S. policy stretching back to the wake of the Revolution.

In this chapter, I consider Haiti’s position in the U.S. imaginary through two historical novels published in 1936, two years after the end of the Marines’ occupation of the island: William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Bontemps’ *Black Thunder*. Although markedly different, Faulkner’s tale of poor white mountaineer turned plantation owner Thomas Sutpen and Bontemps’ fictionalization of Gabriel’s revolt both insist on the abiding centrality of slavery for U.S. history while evoking Haiti as a shadowy, yet necessary counterpart to the U.S. south. Bontemps portrays Gabriel as inspired by the San

¹⁰ Ibid, 270.

¹¹ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion*, 168-172.

Domingo Revolution, particularly the figure of Toussaint, while Thomas Sutpen's sojourn in Haiti enables him to acquire the twin necessary resources to carry out his "design": money and slaves. Furthermore, both Bontemps and Faulkner use the novel form to interrogate modernity: they evoke Haiti to raise questions concerning colonialism, slavery, and race – all constituent elements of modernity.

Alongside these currents of history flow the ideas that influenced the Haitian Revolution and Gabriel's Rebellion: the French Revolutionary slogan of "liberté, égalité, fraternité." Toussaint and the other revolutionary enslaved took the meaning of this slogan deadly seriously. Although the slave revolt of 1791 that eventually became the Haitian Revolution did not begin as an organized political movement seeking to establish an independent nation-state, events in France brought about the rebelling Haitians' adoption of its revolutionary slogan in a dramatic and consequential way.¹² In short, the revolutionaries seized upon its potential, adopting it as their watchword and making it the motto of the Republic of Haiti in 1804. Given their circumstances as the former enslaved, now embarking on the project of the first free black nation-state in the Western Hemisphere, their embrace of already-existing revolutionary ideals seems inevitable. As David Scott puts it, "Toussaint and his colleagues were conscripts – not volunteers – of modernity."¹³ Thrust into a social order and political situation not of their choosing, they

¹² Jeremy D. Popkin observes that "there are important questions about whether the insurgents, prior to the journée of June 20, 1793, had expressed an 'unequivocal and unwavering commitment to universal emancipation based upon natural human rights'" (10); rather, the unfolding of the Haitian Revolution and the political situation in France paralleled each other in surprising ways to bring about an adoption of universal human rights that extended to the emancipation of the enslaved of St. Domingue. See Popkin, "Introduction," *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 1-22.

¹³ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 19.

adopted the French slogan and made it their own, pushing it to its radical conclusion through emancipation and black self-determination culminating in a new nation-state.

Bontemps picks up this thread in *Black Thunder*. The novel paraphrases newspaper reports that make explicit this association: “[Gabriel] was now at large with hundreds of followers, and his shadowy figure standing on the summit of a twilight hill recalled the savage uprisings in San Domingo that put the slaves in the masters’ saddles” (730). Bontemps’ rebels, conscripts of modernity just as the Saint-Domingue enslaved were, strike against an unjust social order for their freedom as revolutionary ideas swirl around them. Faulkner’s Sutpen, on the other hand, evokes the darker side of modernity; entering Jefferson with a band of slaves and a reluctant French architect, he hews his “design” out of a hundred square miles of Mississippi frontier recently acquired from Native Americans. The revolutionary energies of the Haitian revolutionaries are nowhere to be found in Faulkner’s novel; Haiti, which the novel suggests is where Sutpen acquires the experience and resources necessary to achieve his design, proves to be the source of his undoing in the form of his mulatto first wife and mixed-race son, “the bastard blood that threatened him,” in Edouard Glissant’s phrase.¹⁴ Jennifer Rae Greeson’s description of the U.S. south in nineteenth century thought as “embody[ing] both sides of the disavowed binary” of “monarch/subject, master/servant, empire/colony,” ideas that are thought to describe every society *but* the U.S., proves relevant for Haiti as it emerges as a site of impossible binaries, embodying both enslavement and freedom.¹⁵ Bontemps and

¹⁴ Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara Lewis and Robert C. Spear (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 110.

¹⁵ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010), 3.

Faulkner's engagement of the paradoxical positioning of the "deeper south" of Haiti reveals the vexed and troubling position it held in the 1930s.

4.2 Slavery and Enlightenment in the Western Hemisphere

Recovering the meaning of the Haitian Revolution prompts a reconsideration of the Enlightenment as a world-historical generative force. One of the first writers of the twentieth century to take up the Haitian Revolution as a locus for black thought and politics, C.L.R. James, did so with explicit reference to the Enlightenment: not only was he concerned with connecting Toussaint L'Ouverture to the Abbé Raynal's influential abolitionist writing,¹⁶ he positioned the events in St. Domingue as part of Marx's revolutionary locomotive of history, stretching from the Bastille to Boukman and beyond.¹⁷ James' account not only shapes twenty- and twenty-first century understandings of the Haitian Revolution, but speaks to larger historical entanglements: after the Haitian Revolution, the specter of the Enlightenment hangs over the New World as an apophatic reality.¹⁸ Having inspired, with its emphasis on liberty and individual

¹⁶ We know now, of course, that the Abbé Raynal compiled much of the work, with French philosopher Denis Diderot responsible for perhaps a third of the work, particularly the passage that C.L.R. James credits as inspirational to Toussaint. Sunil M. Agnani's reconsideration of Enlightenment anticolonial thought argues for the centrality of Diderot's contributions. Relevant to my argument, Agnani writes of Diderot's strikingly contemporary "awareness that modernity arrives with colonialism and is thereby tainted in a manner that is quite different from the experience within Europe." Agnani, *Hating Empire Properly: The Two Indies and the Limits of Enlightenment Anticolonialism* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), 35.

¹⁷ "Revolution, says Karl Marx, is the locomotive of history. Here was a locomotive that had travelled at remarkable speed, for in April 1792, not yet three years after the fall of the Bastille, the white Patriots in Port-au-Prince were being besieged by a composite army of royalist commandants, white planters, brown-skinned Mulattoes, and black slaves, none of them constrained by all for the time being free and equal partners." C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (1938; New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 109.

¹⁸ Sunil M. Agnani observes that Toussaint's deft "synthesis of political strategies and concepts from West Africa and Europe...produced an outlook with a profound

sovereignty, the American and French Revolutions, Enlightenment ideas were taken up in the unthinkable revolution of Saint-Domingue. While few of even the most radical Enlightenment thinkers gestured towards such universal liberation, their adoption in Saint-Domingue illustrated the contradictions of slave-owning societies such as the U.S.

Toussaint and his fellow revolutionaries did not merely adopt Enlightenment ideas wholesale, even those most intimately connected with the French Revolution. Paul Gilroy's positioning of the black Atlantic as a "counterculture of modernity" offers another way of thinking about black liberation and the Enlightenment. Gilroy's sweeping argument posits an integrated understanding of the "complex interpenetration" of black life in the New World and the European ideas that shaped it: "The intellectual and cultural achievements of the black Atlantic population exist partly inside and not always against the grand narrative of Enlightenment and its operational principles."¹⁹ The achievement of the revolutionaries of Saint-Domingue can be understood to rest on a similar inside-outside strategy; for instance, Toussaint led the rebellion against the enslavement of the European-established plantocracy, while at the same time drawing on French revolutionary principles to shape his constitution. Laurent Dubois observes that Toussaint's constitution embeds a type of social contract that would prove influential for post-independent Haiti, embodying a "political classic claim...about the responsibility of citizens to support and sustain their nation" that draws upon "previous policies of

entanglement and imbrication with the revolutionary languages of Europe, and it was thereby an emblem for [C.L.R.] James of an anticolonialism that was not purely and *reductively oppositional* at its outset[.]” Such complex negotiations amongst multiple ideas and identities, in Agnani's telling, influenced both James' understanding of himself as a "black European" and his focus on the contradictions of Enlightenment in *The Black Jacobins*. Agnani, *Hating Empire Properly*, 179-80.

¹⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 48.

Republican France and Republican Saint-Domingue.”²⁰ Although Toussaint among the emancipated stands as unique for his literacy and interaction with radical Enlightenment ideas, his encomium to “Be but virtuous and you will be Frenchman and good citizens” made political liberty comprehensible to the masses of Saint-Domingue.²¹

Still, even among committed opponents of slavery in Europe there existed contradictions arising from Enlightenment ideas themselves.²² These contradictions were not just embedded in European abolitionist efforts, but in the conditions of modernity itself. Susan Buck-Morss observes that French thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others “idealized indigenous colonial populations with the myths of the noble savage” but ignored slavery as such.²³ Whatever distinctions these thinkers wanted to maintain was swept away in the French Revolution, in which “the various meanings of slavery became hopelessly entangled when they came up against fundamental contradictions between revolutionary developments in France and developments in the French colonies without.”²⁴ Slavery was both a fully modern institution and a standing reproach to the ideas of modernity as expressed in the Enlightenment. In such an intellectual environment, the Haitian Revolution crystallized this inherent contradiction

²⁰ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2004), 245.

²¹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 205.

²² “Indeed, Enlightenment antislavery had many contradictions. Those who accepted the immorality of slavery also often accepted racist ideas about Africans, and many writers accepted that slavery was wrong in principle but was a necessary evil whose benefits ultimately outweighed its disadvantages, both for the Europeans and Africans ‘saved’ from ‘barbarism.’” Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 72.

²³ Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000), 828.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 833.

by vindicating the Enlightenment ideals of the French revolutionaries while challenging the supremacy of European thought and the colonial order.²⁵

The enslaved of Saint-Domingue's audacity was to enact for themselves what Immanuel Kant describes in his essay "What is Enlightenment?": "A man may postpone his own enlightenment, but only for a limited period of time. And to give up enlightenment altogether, either for oneself or one's descendants, is to violate and to trample upon the sacred rights of man."²⁶ What Kant referred to as "mental nonage" was embodied reality for the enslaved of Saint-Domingue; they dared to imagine Kant's emphasis on freedom and rationality encompassed their physical enslavement. Their collective action upended the symbolic order than helped to keep them in place, as Simon Gikandi writes:

[T]he specter of blackness haunted all attempts to elaborate and valorize the discourse of modern freedom, and by the middle of the eighteenth century, when the order of slavery came to be seen as the central cog in the machinery of commerce and the wealth of nations, blackness...had come to represent what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, writing in a different context, have called "the rock bottom of symbolic form."²⁷

²⁵ "For almost a decade, before the violent elimination of whites signaled their deliberate retreat from universalist principles, the black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue surpassed the metropole in actively realizing the Enlightenment goal of human liberty, seeming to give proof that the French Revolution was not simply a European phenomenon but world-historical in its implications...Events in Saint-Domingue were central to contemporary attempts to make sense out of the reality of the French Revolution and its aftermath." Ibid, 835-36.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?", in *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Peter Gay (1784; New York: Touchstone, 1973), 388.

²⁷ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011), 5-6.

Slave rebellions particularly challenged European colonial powers and their practice of “slavery in absentia.” Saint-Domingue’s revolutionary impact was felt across the old European colonial powers, especially the French, while the slave rebellions of 1831-32 in Jamaica were a major force behind Britain’s decision to pass the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 (though the lessons of San Domingo were not lost on them). The situation in the U.S. differed. In the early nineteenth century, having recently achieved independence from Britain, the U.S. was not yet the colonial power it would become, and the proximity of plantation owners to their enslaved in the U.S. did not allow for the “slavery in absentia” Gikandi describes.²⁸ The slave-holding south instead navigated this physical proximity by creating a symbolic separation. In search of a solution to this seemingly intractable problem, the south maintained a symbolic quarantining of culture from the enslaved, even as the revolution in Saint-Domingue and other slave rebellions threatened this mechanism in the minds of the planter class.²⁹

This separation of the enslaved from European culture acknowledged, at least tacitly, the influence of radical Enlightenment ideas on Toussaint and the power of the revolution itself. James, as already stated, makes this explicit in *The Black Jacobins*; similarly, Bontemps weaves French Revolutionary concepts into *Black Thunder*. This recourse to Enlightenment thought is itself a condition of the modernity the enslaved had

²⁸ The question of when the U.S. became a colonial power, or more precisely, an empire, remains fraught. I use “not yet” to emphasize two things: that the U.S. would become a colonial power, and that in the early nineteenth century – the time of the Haitian Revolution and Gabriel’s Rebellion – it was not yet. While various dates have been proposed – 1898, the year of the Spanish-American War, or 1848, the end of the Mexican-American War – I prefer 1803, the year of the Louisiana Purchase, particularly because the heavy losses incurred by the French in the waning years of the San Domingo Revolution made U.S. expansion possible.

²⁹ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, 30.

been thrust into. David Scott, in his challenging study of *The Black Jacobins*, reads against the grain to offer a tragic account of the conventional story of liberation from freedom that undergirds James' study and much postcolonial theory as well. It is a controversial argument, one that is admittedly pessimistic about and resistant to both presentist accounts of the Haitian Revolution and the potential of emancipatory politics in general.³⁰ Although I am skeptical of Scott's political pessimism, his removal of *The Black Jacobins* from "the conventional field of concerns about Africa and resistance that have framed its reading and criticism" to argue instead "that the relevant questions are those posed in terms of the problem of modernity" offers a suggestive way of thinking about the relation of Saint-Domingue to the Enlightenment.³¹ In short, his notion of Toussaint and others as conscripts of modernity takes the stories of slave rebellion and resistance portrayed by James and Bontemps from the periphery of modernity to its center.

In reading the modern conception of power – which Scott rightly observes "has been concerned precisely with systematically transforming the very *conditions* in which life as a whole is organized"³² – into the story of Saint-Domingue, his work revises understandings of modernity such as that of Paul Gilroy's: "Like these stories of alternative black Atlantics, the 'alternative modernities' line of argument is constructed in

³⁰ Philip Kaisary offers a counter to Scott's avowedly pessimistic account; against Scott's claim that "the political potential of decolonization has long since been dead and that all that remains for us today is the aestheticized delectation of 'tragedy,'" he places "Peter Hallward's defense of a 'politics of prescription,'" which emphasizes a forward-looking vision of "resistance and critique" that draws on anticolonial movements of the 1940s and '50s. Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints* (Charlottesville: The U of Virginia P, 2014), 9-10.

³¹ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 105-6.

³² *Ibid*, 117.

such a way as to issue a narrative of subaltern agency because its objective is to displace a story of submission with a story of resistance.”³³ The actions of enslaved people do not thereby form a counterculture of modernity, as Gilroy would have it, but are constitutive of modernity itself. Referencing James’ 1963 appendix to *The Black Jacobins*, “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro,” Scott makes his contention plain:

For James, the Caribbean begins in modernity. This is its founding; it begins in the ordering structure of power and reason that constitutes colonial modernity. The Caribbean, in other words, is not merely modern; it is modern in a fundamentally inaugural way. And it is this inaugural modernity, he suggests, that lends to the Caribbean its distinctive (perhaps distinctively paradoxical) character.³⁴

Toussaint, in this account, is the paradigmatic black intellectual, conscripted into modernity and, in turn, building a revolution from it. As a result of the plantation’s place as the “fundamental institution” shaping modernity, James’ account thereby becomes not merely a story of “revolutionary consciousness and organization...but the building up of a story of modern civilization.”³⁵ Scott shifts Gilroy’s black Atlantic thesis by placing the culture and experience of the enslaved in the center of modernity, as opposed to a countercultural understanding. What both point to, dialectically, James captures in his evaluation of Toussaint’s rhetoric of liberty: while Toussaint “could find the language and accent” of the French Enlightenment thinkers, “in one respect he excelled them all...[he] could defend the freedom of the blacks without reservation, and this gave to his

³³ Ibid, 114.

³⁴ Ibid, 125.

³⁵ Ibid, 126, 129.

declaration a strength and a single-mindedness rare in the great documents of the time.”³⁶ Inextricably tied to modernity, the legacy of black culture and thought in the western hemisphere is *both* center and counterculture, a major driver of world-historical force marginalized at the same time by white power. These dynamics play out in Bontemps and Faulkner’s handling of Haiti.

Faulkner’s Unenlightened South and His Postwar Reception

Faulkner, unlike Arna Bontemps and C.L.R. James, engages little with the Enlightenment as such. Never interested in formal schooling,³⁷ Faulkner read widely and unsystematically, particularly under the tutelage of his friend Phil Stone.³⁸ The influence of Faulkner’s reading, particularly Shakespeare and Greek and Latin classics, can be found throughout his oeuvre; despite his antipathy towards school, Faulkner steeped himself in the literature that marked the learning of gentlemen of his youth. While the fruit of this labor made it into his fiction through theme and allusion, he never engaged in a sustained interaction with the major thinkers or ideas of the Enlightenment. Despite

³⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 198.

³⁷ Faulkner began to rebel against the social expectations of formal schooling around his twelfth birthday, according to biographer Joel Williamson: “During the summer and fall of 1909, just as he turned twelve and entered the sixth grade, Billy Faulkner began to change in ways that would make him very different both from his brothers and other young men of the leading families of Oxford. He began to skip school, dodge work, and perpetuate practical jokes.” Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 163.

³⁸ “In 1914, in Billy’s sixteenth summer, Phil Stone appeared. For two years he lived in Oxford and proved himself a steady ally and faithful friend of Billy who responded fully, hungrily to the attention of the aristocratic, Ivy League-educated, and voluble young man. They were together virtually daily, and for hours at a time. Phil became Billy’s tutor in literature, grammar, and music. Moreover, it was with Phil and other men in the Stone family – not Murry Falkner – that Billy went hunting in the Delta in the big woods along the Tallahatchie River. Like Phil, he affected a pipe, and, like the Stones, a generally lusty and genteel attitude towards alcohol. It was almost as if Billy had decided, at last, that if he could not be a Falkner like his father or grandfather, he would be a Stone like Phil.” *Ibid.*, 178.

this, after the Second World War, Faulkner became an avatar of humane letters among living American writers.

Faulkner's eminence is conventionally understood to begin with the publication of *The Portable Faulkner* – edited by Malcom Cowley and published by Viking in 1946 – and secured by his reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.³⁹ His celebrated acceptance speech, in which he claimed that “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself...alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about,” celebrated a postwar humanism embattled by the twin revelations of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb.⁴⁰

It is easy enough to say that man is simply immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things.⁴¹

³⁹ “Malcom Cowley's 1946 *Portable Faulkner*, with an introduction that forcefully argued for the writer's significance, began the redefinition of Faulkner, a process accelerated by what [Lawrence] Schwartz calls ‘the new literary consensus’ between the New Critics and the New York Intellectuals, whose ascendance solidified the cultural dominance of ‘literary elitism and liberal anti-Communism.’” Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015), 124-25.

⁴⁰ William Faulkner, “Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature,” in *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters: Updated, with Material Never Before Collected in One Volume*, Ed. James B. Meriwether (1966; New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 119.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 120.

While not Faulkner's most original writing, it sets the template for his post-1950 career as an ambassador of U.S. culture and humanistic values. As Greg Barnhisel chronicles in his book *Cold War Modernists*, Faulkner was a key participant in postwar U.S. cultural diplomacy, which prominently used artistic and literary modernism to spread its message. Faulkner's Nobel address was a signal aspect of these efforts, and his "prestige among foreign writers made him a powerful cultural ambassador."⁴² Despite this reception, the Faulkner of Cold War cultural diplomacy, as Lawrence Schwartz argues, bears slight resemblance with the pre-*Portable Faulkner* gothic artist.⁴³

Although the instrumental uses to which Faulkner was put in the postwar era served the needs of the Cold War U.S. foreign policy, his reception in the 1950s also owed something to what Mark Greif calls in his eponymous book "the age of the crisis of man." In Greif's account, the wealth of writing that appeared after 1933 to plumb the depths of this crisis were concerned above all with a "fear...that human nature was being changed, either in its permanent essence or in its lineaments for the eyes of other men."⁴⁴ Amidst this backdrop, Faulkner shifted from being a writer valued for "Gothic horror, excitement, degeneracy, disintegration, Southern violence," particularly by European readers and critics, to a humanist writer engaged with the great questions enthralling the postwar American landscape. Greif credits this in large part to Cowley's introduction to the *Portable Faulkner*, which "made Faulkner's work a vast historical and social mediation in the values of the South and, ultimately (he suggested), on the values of

⁴² Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists*, 126-27.

⁴³ Lawrence Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1988).

⁴⁴ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), 3.

America,” which lead “other critics [to] pick out for themselves aspects of Faulkner’s books that were (and still are) recognizably great – even if they were becoming great now for their *humanism* and tradition, rather than their nihilism and fragmentation.”⁴⁵

Faulkner was taken up by such postwar critical luminaries as New Critic pioneer Cleanth Brooks and Leslie A. Fiedler, among others.⁴⁶ It is a different postwar critic, lesser known yet no less penetrating in her evaluation of Faulkner than Brooks and Fiedler, who properly situates Faulkner in both the discourse of the crisis of man and the Enlightenment: Olga W. Vickery.

According to Greif, the intellectuals concerned with this crisis felt it “to be a legacy of the Enlightenment, which had failed them and, if fixed, could save them...Often they called out in anguish for the creation of a new ‘humanism,’ which they meant in its loosest sense: a respect for the human being, a measuring of all actions and behaviors by the individual human scale, humane mores, humaneness, and humanity.”⁴⁷ Vickery’s critical volume of Faulkner’s novels (initially published in 1959) is profitably read in light of this postwar anxiety. She not only interprets his individual novels, but argues in a stroke similar to Cowley’s introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* for what she called “the grand pattern” of Faulkner’s oeuvre. To this end, her chapter entitled “The Definition of Man,” where she finds a “crucial distinction between the social and moral distinction of [man’s] nature” in Faulkner’s work, provides a template for thinking about

⁴⁵ Ibid, 117-18.

⁴⁶ Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1990); Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Revised Ed. (1960; New York: Stein and Day 1966).

⁴⁷ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, 22.

Faulkner in light of the concerns that the Cold War U.S. theologian Reinhold Niebuhr typified as “the nature and destiny of man”:

In short, the social definition of man predetermines the individual’s response to experience by creating an expectation of conformity to certain codes which govern the behavior of each social unit. The moral definition forces man to assume responsibility for recognizing and enacting his own moral nature.⁴⁸

It would be easy to ascribe Vickery’s concerns here to the general postwar crisis of man, as Greif defines it, if her reading of Faulkner’s milieu wasn’t so concerned with class, the plight of women, and the position of black people in the south.⁴⁹ This pioneering cultural approach reflects both the concerns of the discourse Greif outlines, as well as her reading of Faulkner in light of the promises of American egalitarianism, however unevenly applied it may have been. However, Vickery bridges the gap between concerns over the definition and understanding of man and the Enlightenment that Faulkner seemed unconcerned by in her prescient reading of his work as positioning the individual moral actor against social expectation and constraint. She adds to the “familial pressure on individuals” that of “the church and the law,” adding that the latter “are not identified with the religious and moral impulse of mankind.”⁵⁰ Faulkner, in other words, positions the individual actor against a whole host of pressures, both familial and societal, that constrain the individual’s ability to act as a free moral agent: “The individual is thus born into an imposing system of myths and rituals, all of which exert their coercive pressures on him. They inevitably become barriers between man and truth since they force him to

⁴⁸ Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*, Revised Ed. (1959; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1964), 282.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 284, 287, 289.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 290.

react to his experience in terms of cliché responses.”⁵¹ Southern literary criticism has for so long been attracted to situating itself among the “myths and rituals” that it has achieved the status of cliché, but Vickery, writing against the unstated but felt backdrop of the Civil Rights movement, hits upon the straightjacketing nature of southern culture that often finds its way into Faulkner’s work of the 1930s.

Although this discussion of Faulkner’s postwar reception stretches the temporal focus of this chapter a little out of bounds, it adds to my account of southern alterity. At a time when the U.S. was committed to the ideological fight against the Soviet Union in word if not in deed, Faulkner served a need created by the contradictions of the U.S., which celebrated liberty while at the same time devaluing the status of African Americans through Jim Crow, a situation not unlike that of the post-Haitian Revolution U.S. discussed above. Faulkner, a southern white writer of recognized genius willing to acknowledge the south’s complicity in the nation’s racial inequalities (to a point), offered a piece of the puzzle of postwar U.S. life that other celebrated modernists, such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, could not. Faulkner becomes therefore an avatar of the midcentury intellectuals’ quest for a “re-enlightenment,” in Greif’s phrase, but by the same token, this use of Faulkner reveals the limitations of this understanding of Enlightenment.

In this regard, the gothic aspects of Faulkner’s prewar work also serve a need for a deeply anxious postwar nation. Leigh Anne Duck’s grounds her account of Faulkner’s “haunted plantation” in “gothic tropes” that are “mobilized to represent individuals’ anxieties as they perceive that the temporal uniformity in which they wish to believe is

⁵¹ Ibid, 292.

fissured by both substantial cultural differences and by uncontrollable psychological responses.” This “provided Faulkner an analytic tool through which to investigate ideas of southern collective memory,” but the individualism inherent in gothic tropes proves to “believe the idea that his characters participate in a shared white southern cultural identity.”⁵² Faulkner’s work, in other words, threatens the sense of a collective (white) southern cultural identity, suggesting instead of a psychically integrated white south the decay of that very identity. That this chronicler of white southern alterity could prove so valuable to midcentury intellectuals in their quest to recover an Enlightenment-tinged account of “man” reveals the irony inherent in postwar American cultural self-conception, but it also offers the chance to reconsider the Enlightenment-grounded challenge to the U.S. social order inherent in the work of Bontemps. What he and Faulkner share – an account of the repercussions of the plantation order that echo into the twentieth century – is also what separates them. The plantation in Faulkner is a dead-end, a symbol of the dissolution of southern white identity; in Bontemps, the plantation is the fertile ground for resistance to this very soul-destroying order itself, which replicates itself into the twentieth century through Jim Crow. That the former rose to prominence in the postwar era while the latter suffered critical neglect surely speaks to the racial politics of the 1950s, but it also arises from the south’s necessary alterity within the U.S. The plantation, to paraphrase Jeremy Wells, had become nationalized: no longer merely a regional site of production, it served a symbolic function for a post-Civil War nation anxious about industrialization, race, gender, class, and nationality.⁵³ Similarly,

⁵² Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006), 147.

⁵³ Jeremy Wells, *Romances of the White Man’s Burden: Race, Empire, and the Plantation in American Literature, 1880-1936* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2011), 4.

Faulkner's un-Enlightened gothic plantation took up a surprising place in the post-WWII landscape.

4.4 Up from (Poor) Whiteness

Absalom, Absalom! and *Black Thunder* are both concerned with the legacy of the plantation, a legacy related to the south's broader position within the nation-state. For most of the twentieth century, southern literary studies lingered under the influence of the Nashville Agrarians' 1930 collection *I'll Take My Stand*; although not a book of literary criticism, its influence on southern studies was not unlike that of F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* on postwar American Studies: that is to say, generative and field-defining. The Agrarians' near-uniform focus on whiteness and the loss of the plantation order gave southern studies a melancholy orientation, as Jon Smith correctly observes.⁵⁴ Faulkner, that melancholy chronicler of the south's many losses, assumes a central place in this taxonomy. Faulkner's staked out a gradualist position on Civil Rights and integration (as expressed through his character Gavin Stevens in his 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust*), and along with his resistance to northern meddling, proved potent for the postwar south, which the historian James C. Cobb characterized as "the south of guilt and shame."⁵⁵ While less demonstratively concerned with Civil Rights in the 1930s, Faulkner's prewar output more accurately captures the south's debased position within the nation.

⁵⁴ Jon Smith, *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 2013). See in particular Chapter 1, 29-43.

⁵⁵ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 188-9.

Something of the region's freakish position is captured in the curious requests of Quentin Compson's Harvard classmates to "*Tell about the South.*"⁵⁶ Quentin and his Canadian roommate Shreve McCannon attempt to do just that though reconstructing the story of Thomas Sutpen. Using as their template the accounts Quentin hears from Rosa Coldfield and his father Jason, they establish the basic facts: Sutpen arrives, seemingly out of nowhere, to Jefferson in 1833 with a group of "wild" slaves and a French architect in tow, intending to found a plantation. They work backward and forward from that in search of a satisfactory account of his rise and fall. The novel's proliferation of narrative voices works against the notion of a unitary south, instead implicitly asking *What south?* and *Which story?* Barbara Ladd notes that at Harvard in 1910, Quentin's presence as a southerner would have generated unusual interest: the end of Reconstruction restored the south's racial hierarchies and returned blacks to a "semislave status," but "the return of the white South to a marginal status with respect to a national mission imagined in terms of its capacity to transcend history" accompanied it.⁵⁷ The novel acknowledges the south's marginality, but despite his classmates' requests for him to tell "*What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*" (145), *Absalom* recognizes that the south's enduring associations carry beyond the Gulf and the Mason-Dixon. Sutpen's period in Haiti between his departure from the Tidewater plantation of his youth and his arrival in Jefferson proves consequential for both his rise and fall in Quentin and Shreve's retelling of his story. This expansion of the geographic

⁵⁶ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, in *Novels 1936-1940*, ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (New York: The Library of America, 1990), 145. Italics original. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

⁵⁷ Barbara Ladd, *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1996), 31.

boundaries of what is called “south” renders Haiti as Mississippi’s uncanny other, a spectral presence within *Absalom* that emphasizes the continuity and difference between the two places. Just as the U.S. south exists within and without the national imaginary as an “internal other” in Jennifer Rae Greeson’s phrase, Haiti serves as the plantation south’s – and by extension, the nation’s – external other, a counterpoint to the south’s marginal status within national boundaries.⁵⁸

The symbolic ordering of otherness described here, setting the north against south, and the south against Haiti, turns on a hierarchy similar to that of the plantation. Challenges to these hierarchies typically result in violence and bloodshed, which is the primary point of agreement between *Absalom*, *Absalom!* and *Black Thunder*. Sutpen attempts a number of challenges to the plantation order, culminating in his son Henry’s murder of Charles Bon. Behind this lie two significant failures: the teenaged Sutpen’s rejection by a house slave at the front door of the Tidewater plantation he grows up on, and Sutpen’s first marriage to a mixed-race daughter of a Haitian landowner. Sutpen realizes that only mastery will allow him to successfully challenge the plantation order, but this leaves his design at risk through his mixed-race son, Charles Bon. The twin shadows of miscegenation and incest thereby lay over Sutpen’s design.

John Irwin’s Freudian interpretation of Henry’s murder of Bon suggests one way of understanding this conflict, but Michal Bibler’s reading argues instead for the determinative nature of masculine social relationships within the plantation order.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South*, 1.

⁵⁹ “Of the many levels of meaning in *Absalom*, the deepest level is to be found in the symbolic identification of incest and miscegenation and in the relationship of this symbolic identification both to Quentin Compson’s personal history in *The Sound and the Fury* and to the story that Quentin narrates in *Absalom, Absalom!*” John Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975), 25.

Bibler writes that the “homo-ness between white men depends upon the persistent inequality of blacks, poor whites, and women.” He continues:

Faulkner’s novel suggests that the change in power relations between white and black men after the Civil War makes any homo-ness between white men impossible because the new social order also effects a change in the structure of white masculinity...In the post-Civil War South, all forms of masculine difference must be suppressed or denied in order to protect white male superiority...⁶⁰

The most significant same-sex relationships in the novel – that Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen, as well as Quentin and Shreve – though impossible to consummate as Bibler observes, paradoxically subvert and reify plantation hierarchies, but ultimately collapse in the dissolution of the plantation order. Sociability itself – same-sex or otherwise – fails with Henry’s murder of Charles and Quentin’s suicide (portrayed in *The Sound and the Fury*). Quentin and Miss Rosa discover a dying Henry in the shell of Sutpen’s plantation house, along with Sutpen’s illegitimate mixed-race daughter Clytie and Jim Bond, the mentally disabled grandson of Charles Bon. Bond, whose communication is limited due to his disability, stands alone as the sole survivor of the fire that consumes the decayed remnants of the plantation house. Bibler’s focus on the shifting dynamics of masculinity post-Civil War points towards the plantation’s trans-regional associations, which underwent its own transformation in the nineteenth century.

⁶⁰ Michael Bibler, *Cotton’s Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2008), 63, 65. Ellipsis mine.

Bond therefore becomes an avatar of these changes. While his disability could suggest the degeneracy of the plantation's destruction, Hortense Spillers' reading of Bond as a literary descendant of Caliban places him instead within the "impossible and impassable history" of the black Atlantic; "with 'Africa,' 'Europe,' and 'African-America' coursing his veins, [he] abrupts the 'return' that Sutpen wished to repress altogether."⁶¹ These enduring associations remain even as the plantation house is destroyed (or, in other instances, made into a museum), part of a network originating in southern colonies stretching from Jamestown to Florida to the West Indies.⁶² What Spillers calls Bond's "US/African/European/Americanity"⁶³ draws the Caribbean back into the history and culture of the U.S. plantation south.

Faulkner penned his own mythologized accounts of Mississippi's history elsewhere in his oeuvre, and Haiti serves a similar function in *Absalom, Absalom!*⁶⁴ Though no longer subjugated by direct colonial rule at the time in which the novel is set, Haiti suffered under a lack of recognition by the governments of the U.S. and Europe for

⁶¹ Hortense J. Spillers, "Who Cuts the Border? Some Readings on America," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 333.

⁶² Peter Hulme writes how the textuality of the Caribbean extends from "John Smith's 'rescue' by Pocahontas...to Robinson Crusoe's plantation," making "The Caribbean...the tropical belt defined ecologically or meteorologically, rather than astronomically, as, say, the most suitable area for growing the 'tropical' crops of cotton, tobacco, or sugar; or it is the best of American coastline that lay within range of that other and equally frightening characteristic phenomenon, the hurricane." Faulkner's Mississippi falls comfortably within Hulme's schema. See Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797* (1986; London: Routledge, 1992), 4-5.

⁶³ Hortense Spillers, "Who Cuts the Border?," 326.

⁶⁴ Faulkner does not, in *Absalom, Absalom!* cover Mississippi's colonial and pre-state past as extensively as he does in such stories and novels as "A Justice," "Red Leaves," *Go Down, Moses*, and the first part of *Requiem for a Nun*, yet it serves as a necessary and important backdrop to the story of Thomas Sutpen.

much of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ The U.S.'s suspension of trade with Haiti during the administration of Thomas Jefferson furthered Haitian alterity and contributed to the later obscuring of historical relations between the two nations. Haiti's otherness in *Absalom* evokes this history, which makes the importance of Sutpen's Haitian sojourn for his plantation mastery difficult to see for many of the narrators. That Sutpen is thought to arrive in Jefferson from nowhere suggests Haiti's debased position in the U.S. In actuality, Sutpen acquires in Haiti the knowledge and materiel – wealth, slaves, and a captive French architect – necessary to fulfill his design in the frontier lands of Mississippi, thereby illustrating Spillers' point that the "triangular trade" tied together "a third of the known world in a fabric of commercial intimacy so tightly interwoven that the politics of the New World cannot always be so easily disentangled as locally discrete moments."⁶⁶ This intimate colonial reality undergirds Sutpen's design even as the narrators continually defer the reality of this relationship.

This submerged history creates an uncanny Haiti in the novel. As John Carlos Rowe piquantly observes, Sutpen moves from seventeenth-century Jamestown to Columbus' fifteenth-century Hispaniola, thereby tracing backward the history of New World conquest and enslavement to encompass "not just Southern slaveholders but all descendants of those European conquerors and slave traders" in an "uncanny" narrative.⁶⁷ Sutpen's appearance in Jefferson in 1833 is likewise uncanny: the town's residents initially perceive him as having arrived "out of no discernible past and acquired his land

⁶⁵ The question of whether the Haiti in the novel is post-revolutionary remains open, which will be discussed later; certainly, Sutpen's period in Haiti (sometime between 1820-1833) is in the post-revolutionary period.

⁶⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, "Who Cuts the Border?," 327.

⁶⁷ John Carlos Rowe, *Afterlives of Modernism: Liberalism, Transnationalism, and Political Critique* (Hanover: Dartmouth CP, 2011), 90.

no one new how and buil[t] his house, his mansion, apparently out of nothing” (9). In lieu of knowing his actual past, the people of Jefferson fashion a chthonic account of Sutpen. Certainly “his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect” (6) suggest all manner of wild, unspeakable origins to the curious onlookers. They perceive something devilish in his unhomeliness, unknowingly correct in their assessment: Sutpen’s ignominious origins as a poor white of the mountains of what would become West Virginia indeed leaves him bereft of a “real” home.⁶⁸ The Heimlich/Unheimlich distinction in Freud’s account of the uncanny expresses a difference-in-proximity well-suited to Sutpen. Along with the knowledge, wealth, and slaves necessary to the founding of Sutpen’s Hundred, he also acquires in Haiti a mixed-race family that undoes his design. Sutpen founds his plantation and starts a second, equally ill-fated family, in Mississippi, but Haiti as much as the Civil War (with its attendant loss of slave labor) frustrates Sutpen’s design. The central role played by Haiti in Sutpen’s drama must therefore be obscured, for the uncanny similarities between it and the plantation south are not comprehensible to the whites of Jefferson.

Haiti’s incomprehensibility turns primarily on race; although no trace of the Haitian Revolution makes its way into *Absalom*, its history and status as the only free black republic in the Western Hemisphere bars its inclusion in the southern understanding

⁶⁸ As Hortense Spillers observes, Quentin’s understanding that Sutpen was born in West Virginia when it had not yet achieved statehood allows us to “surmise that Sutpen ‘comes from’ nowhere that an early US map would have articulated,” bears weight on the fact that the novel refuses to name Haiti, instead “plant[ing] symptoms of it, as if they name itself were a postponed expectation, just as that mountainous region of Virginia, where Sutpen was born, will come to be called *West Virginia*.” See Spillers, “Who Cuts the Border?” 10, 12. Italics original.

of the plantation. In spite or because of this, race is central to Sutpen's story, as Thadious Davis remarks: "A synopsis of the Sutpen legend without the inclusion of the Negro is a story without motivation or significant meaning."⁶⁹ Again, mirroring relations between the circum-Caribbean plantation system that the postbellum south sought to disavow, race works to widen the circle of the south's associations. *Absalom* demonstrates, perhaps more clearly than any other Faulkner text, that "the Negro is an abstract force confounding southern life both past and present even while, paradoxically, stimulating much of that life and art"; in other words, the "abstract force" of the Negro stimulates Faulkner's art and Sutpen's design alike.⁷⁰ Race is central to Sutpen's self-fashioning: he becomes aware of his poor white identity in his family's move from the western Virginia mountains to the Tidewater plantation. Journeying south and east, they are gradually incorporated into civilization: "doggeries and taverns now become hamlets, hamlets now become villages, villages now towns and the country flattened out now with good roads and fields and niggers working in the fields while white men sat fine horses and watched them" (186-87). Sutpen's life is a series of transitions from wilderness to civilization and back, with racial difference taking on new and important dimensions at each turn.

As a lower-class white, the son of tenant farmers, Sutpen is barred from the front door of the Tidewater plantation home by an enslaved butler, who tells him to go back door to deliver his father's message to the master. Sutpen conceives of his design seemingly instantaneously following this disorienting plunge into racial hierarchy, but his initial subversive impulse eventually transform to comply "with the existing social order

⁶⁹ Thadious M. Davis, *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983), 182.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 181.

and the prevalent moral order” of the south, as Davis writes.⁷¹ Out of the deep shame of his encounter with the slave butler, he experiences a rupture, as Spillers argues, discovering that he “is marked...by the ‘discovery’ of ‘race,’ or more pointedly, by the striking news that he ‘has’ ‘race.’”⁷² Sutpen takes the rupture as an insult: within the stratified plantation order of the Tidewater, he cannot approach the front door of the mansion, and is in fact turned away by one who should be his inferior, if the hierarchical logic of race is taken at face value. Sutpen leaves the plantation that night, plunging south beyond the U.S. border and into the Caribbean. Haiti provides fertile ground for his self-refashioning: as Davis observes, the correspondence of his design with the stratified plantation order of both the south and the Caribbean enable Quentin and Shreve’s reconstruction of his story to be one with “the progress of southern history.”⁷³ Sutpen’s journey ties U.S. southern history and circum-Caribbean history together.

Through Sutpen, *Absalom* ruminates on the figure of the “new man” or the “American Adam.” Descended from Crèvecoeur’s colonial Farmer James and Tocqueville’s account of the early Republic (as discussed in the Introduction), this figure was taken up and codified at the dawn of American Studies through the work of scholars such as Henry Nash Smith and R.W.B. Lewis. According to Smith, this figure of prelapsarian innocence primarily emanates from New England, influencing the mindset

⁷¹ Ibid, 185.

⁷² Hortense Spillers, “Who Cuts the Border?”, 329-30. Spillers suggests a comparison between Sutpen’s experience of race and W.E.B. DuBois concept of “double consciousness,” a particularly apt delineation of the construction and experience of race that is created both in Sutpen but also what Thadious Davis emphasis on the figure of the Negro in Faulkner.

⁷³ Thadious Davis, *Faulkner’s “Negro”*, 185.

of the western settler more than the southern model.⁷⁴ Lewis' account attributes an optimism to the post-War of 1812 American mind that seems free of regional sectionalism, but inasmuch as there is a regional dimension, it is firmly in New York and New England.⁷⁵ In other words, for these pioneering American Studies scholars, too much tropicity (following Jennifer Rae Greeson's *Our South*) and too much history adheres to the southern planter for him to fully be this new American man. Sutpen's story partially accords with this conception: he *is* "innocent" in ways similar to Lewis' account of the nineteenth-century American Adam. Furthermore, his time in Haiti both undercuts and confirms Sutpen's Americanness. As John T. Matthews argues, Sutpen's "'innocent' 'mistakes' about his West Indian situation exemplify an extensive cultural apparatus dedicated to preserving masterly innocence in new-world colonial Souths, and US imperial innocence in the postcolonial world."⁷⁶ In short, Sutpen participates in the radical innocence of the new American man while simultaneously possessing southern alterity by virtue of his circum-Caribbean associations. *Absalom* therefore rejects, or at least complicates, the radical refashioning of (white) human nature that lies at the heart of the American experiment and was so enthusiastically taken up again by the scholars of the Cold War.

⁷⁴ Henry Nash Smith claims that the agrarian archetypes in the U.S. emerge primarily from the "pastoral literature" of "the South," and "that of the Northwest in the myth of the garden of the world with the idealized Western yeoman as its focal point. The Southern social ideal owed nothing to Western experience." Although this latter point may be technically true, the settling of the West was indeed deeply influenced by the social, cultural, and political order of the U.S. south, as established throughout this study. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1950), 151.

⁷⁵ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955), 13-28.

⁷⁶ John T. Matthews, "Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back," *American Literary History* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 239.

Sutpen's classed and quasi-racialized status as a poor white makes him something of an outlier among the plantation gentry: he lives rough at Sutpen's Hundred prior to his marriage, in a plantation house lacking windows, and even after his marriage he continues to engage in brutal hand-to-hand combat with his slaves. All the same, as I have already observed, his plan to subvert the plantation order by becoming a planter only serves to reify it. He moves, in other words, from a marginal status to the symbolic center of southern power and influence. Sutpen thereby ascends the ladder of class by virtue of his whiteness; the true threat to his design comes not through his poor white origins but through his disastrous first marriage, and the consequent specter of blackness – what Thadious Davis calls “Faulkner's Negro.” At each turn in his story, no matter how confused the multiple narrators of *Absalom* may be about its details or its meaning, lies the power and authority of whiteness. By widening the geographic range of the south's enduring associations to encompass both the bastion of northerness that is Harvard and the ultimate avatar of southern alterity that is Haiti, *Absalom* testifies to the central organizing and power-wielding reality of whiteness.

4.5 The Creolized Plantation and the Threat of Miscegenation

While *Absalom, Absalom!* revises American self-conception through its portrayal of the plantation order, colonialism, and slavery, it does so through an account of southern alterity that encompasses the south in a wider circum-Caribbean context. Mary Lou Emery identifies Edouard Glissant's notion of the matrix of the plantation as one of four versions of Caribbean contramodernity.⁷⁷ As Emery writes, the formations of

⁷⁷ Mary Lou Emery, “Caribbean Modernism: Plantation to Planetary,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger with Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 49.

modernity crucial to the plantation order are “continually repressed in modernity’s received history.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, an unspoken source of the uncanny U.S.-Haitian relationship is creolization, a way of characterizing colonial subjects subsequently lost in the post-Revolutionary U.S. Reflecting on this disavowed term, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon writes, “Indeed, the term ‘creole’ points to a colonial history that unsettles the structuring racial divide of black versus white in America insofar as it names a history of geographical dislocation and non-nativity in which both whites and blacks participated.”⁷⁹ The narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* continually repress and defer discussion of Sutpen’s time in the West Indies as part of their larger disavowal of creolization and colonial history Dillon identifies. These deferrals only draw attention to Haiti’s shadowy presence, however. Quentin and Shreve’s reconstructed account of Sutpen’s time in Haiti builds upon what was initially relayed to Quentin by his father, which was relayed to him by his father, which was relayed to him by Sutpen as they hunted the escaped French architect. The recursive Sutpen legend nevertheless omits the years between Sutpen’s departure from the Tidewater plantation and arrival in Jefferson, save for his time in Haiti. However, even that is sketchy: apart from the mixed-race family he founds and later puts aside, the only other details of Sutpen’s time in Haiti is the anecdote of his successful suppression of a slave rebellion.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “The Secret History of the Early American Novel: Leonora Sansay and Revolution in Saint Domingue,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 40, no. 1/2 (Fall 2006-Spring 2007), 96. It should be noted that Dillon’s revisionist account of early American literature expressly argues against the early American Studies scholars referenced in the previous paragraph, such as F.O. Matthiessen and R.W.B. Lewis, who periodized the start of a distinctive U.S. literature with the so-called American Renaissance. Dillon argues for the creole-inflected early work of writers such as Leonora Sansay, a tradition that *Absalom, Absalom!* has more in common with than the writers of the Renaissance, save perhaps Herman Melville.

Although historically implausible as slavery was abolished following the Haitian Revolution, Sutpen's single-handed defeat of a brewing slave rebellion provides him his first experience of mastery.⁸⁰ Prior to this, Sutpen's only understanding of plantation dynamics comes from his experience on the Tidewater plantation, which upsets his understanding of racial hierarchy. Sutpen tells General Compson that he conceived of his design the very day he was rebuffed from the front door by the enslaved house servant, his discovery the plantation economy's dependence upon self-reinforcing nature of racial and class hierarchies:

He had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room. (187)

Sutpen's new understanding of the "difference between white men and white men" sparks a series of personal developments, making his story a kind of *bildungsroman*.⁸¹

⁸⁰ As Richard Godden observes, Faulkner's chronology here is faulty: in 1827, the year of this suppressed rebellion, "There were neither slaves nor French plantations on Haiti" (685). Setting that aside, Sutpen learns a valuable lesson about power of white supremacy, albeit this time as agent, rather than subject; why Faulkner decided to elide the revolutionary history of Haiti remains an open question, but Godden suggests that Faulkner chose the only site of successful slave revolution in order to "characterize the plantocracy as a class who suppress revolution" (689). See Godden, "*Absalom, Absalom!*, Haiti, and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions," *ELH* 61, no. 3 (Autumn 1994), 685-720.

⁸¹ This accords with Jed Esty's account of the modernist *bildungsroman* as breaking with earlier conceptions that tied the fate of the protagonist to models of national progress. As he argues, "To freeze and stylize youth is to write the novel of modernity as permanent revolution. It gives a new kind of symbolic justice to the open metanarrative of globalization; put otherwise, it announces the growing obsolescence of national allegory as a device for inscribing European nation-state formation as the end of history. Without the moralizing time of the soul-nation allegory, the *bildungsroman* becomes the story of modernity's unfinished project condensed into the trope of endless youth." Esty,

First, he comes to understand the economy of class and race underlying the snub at the plantation house's front door. Knowing that "*there aint any good or harm either in the living world that I can do*" (197; italics original) to the enslaved servant he meets there, he begins to think of forms of revenge other than murder. As he explains years later to General Compson: "If you were fixing to combat them that had the fine rifles, the first thing you would do would be to get yourself the nearest thing to a fine rifle you could borrow or steal or make, wouldn't it?...But this aint a question of rifles. So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (196-97). Without the prestige and benefits rendered by class, Sutpen lies beyond the master's knowledge; he feels himself under the heel of the master's slave.

Quentin expresses surprise and wonder at Sutpen's simple declaration of his next action: "He just said, 'So I went to the West Indies,' sitting there on the log with Grandfather while the dogs still bayed the tree where they believed the architect was" (198), without so much as a mention of the logistics of how an ignorant, semi-literate mountain-bred youth could find his way to Haiti. His insufficient explanation is that he'd had just enough schooling "to realize that they would be most suitable to the expediency of my requirements" (199). Sutpen's design needs money, and he recalls from his schooling that in the West Indies poor men "became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as that man was clever and courageous" (200). Sutpen's design requires "land and niggers and a fine house," so to that end he marries in Haiti a woman named Eulalia, the daughter

Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 27.

of a French planter. When Sutpen discovers that she is part black, he puts her aside “like eleventh and twelfth century kings did,” explaining euphemistically to Gen. Compson: “I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside” (199). In Mississippi, he marries into a respectable family of the merchant class – a step down from the logic of plantation ownership, but a step up by the logic of whiteness, a move demonstrating Sutpen’s evolved sense of the relative values of class and racial superiority. The irony that Sutpen fails to grasp, or outright denies, is that the son of his first marriage is the engine of his design’s demise.

Sutpen’s acquisition of mastery in Haiti proves to be a necessary but insufficient aspect of his design. Geography and intimate family relationships work together here: Haiti’s liminality means it cannot be the staging ground for his plantation, and his subsequent realization that he has founded a black family likewise frustrate his design. Sutpen presumably realizes that his design can only by returning to the U.S. and re-founding his family; western Mississippi, still a frontier in early nineteenth century, serves as a worthy staging ground. The uncanny returns in the figure of Charles Bon: the mere presence of the mixed-race son of his aborted first marriage is threat enough, but Bon intends to marry the white daughter from his second marriage, Judith. The full telling of this particularly obscure element of the shadowy Sutpen legend falls upon Quentin and Shreve. As Matthews observes, much of what has been conveyed previously to Quentin by his father and Rosa Coldfield is marked by their “willful refusal” to fully

reckon with Sutpen's past in Haiti.⁸² This "interested lack of attention"⁸³ obscures both Sutpen's origins and disavows any relation between the south and the Caribbean, while also obscuring Bon's participation in the story. To consider the possibility of miscegenation and incest lies beyond the imaginative abilities of those who relay Sutpen's story to Quentin. In short, Jason Compson and Miss Rosa's refusal to see Haiti as Mississippi's other turns on the same staggering innocence of whiteness that Sutpen personifies.

Unlike the shattered Miss Rosa and the ironic Jason Compson, Sutpen's innocence allows him to remain focused on his design even as Emancipation frees his enslaved laborers. Mastery dependent on slavery turns out to not be an essential component of Sutpen's design; as Thadious Davis asserts, the Negro is an "abstract force" in *Absalom*. This abstractness allows Sutpen to carry on, just as Emancipation was not the end of black subjugation in the south. Despite the threat of incest and miscegenation represented by Bon, Faulkner seems mostly uninterested in the "pathological" formulation of black southern masculinity that Riché Richardson finds at work in novels such as Thomas Dixon's *The Klansman*.⁸⁴ This does not mean that Thomas and Henry Sutpen will not react with violence at the possibility of

⁸² John T. Matthews, "Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back," 255-56.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 257.

⁸⁴ Riché Richardson argues that the figures of "Uncle Tom" and "the black rapist" are "historical ideologies" that have "established foundations for a hermeneutics of black masculinity in the region as pathological, which continued to be evident in the twentieth century in such contexts as the military, black-liberation discourse, and aspects of popular culture. Furthermore, it illustrates how constructions of the black male body as pathological in the late nineteenth century were in effect recast in the first decades of the twentieth century in several contexts." Richardson, *From Uncle Tom to Gangsta: Black Masculinity and the U.S. South* (Athens: The U of Georgia Press, 2007), 4

miscegenation; their reaction to this potential union evokes the trope of the “black rapist” Richardson identifies.⁸⁵ But this is exactly the point: *Absalom* takes up the theme of the white south’s pathology. The Negro is an abstract force in the novel part because they are perceived by its characters either as a support for traditional societal orderings or a threat to them.

As much as miscegenation threatens Sutpen’s design through the potential union of Bon and Judith, Sutpen himself raises its specter through his aborted first marriage to Eulalia Bon, which determines Sutpen’s failure more than the Civil War.⁸⁶ Walter Benn Michaels correctly observes that Sutpen’s true design is not necessarily to be a planter but to establish a dynasty.⁸⁷ Miscegenation more than incest puts the lie to Sutpen’s pretensions. Furthermore, while *Absalom* critically reckons with the south’s plantation past, Sutpen is hardly a representative figure of this order. Unlike the landed gentry that

⁸⁵ Conversely, this trope may in fact be interpellated into the Sutpen narrative by Quentin and Shreve, as they are the ones who imagine Charles Bon saying to Henry Sutpen, “I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister.” [citation needed] If so, this aspect of their dual narrative evokes distinctly post-Reconstruction anxieties, fueled by the cult of southern white womanhood. See chapter one, “The Blight of Southern Womanhood,” in Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1985), 8-35.

⁸⁶ I am indebted to John Burt for some of my thoughts here. In discussion, he pointed out that Bon played the card of incest before he played the card of miscegenation, because the former would imply the latter, and the latter would be the true source of rupture in the southern/plantation order. At the same time, Eulalia Bon is never firmly established as mixed-race in the novel; indeed her “identity” as much as it exists is due to Shreve’s interventions in his reconstruction with Quentin of Sutpen’s story.

⁸⁷ “It is this ambition, as he puts it, to ‘correct the past,’ that John Irwin has suggested links *Gatsby* to Sutpen. We see it in Faulkner’s ability to make Sutpen put down a rebellion that has already succeeded; we see the necessity for it in *Gatsby*’s recognition that you can make a lot of money and still be Mr. Nobody from Nowhere. For if what Sutpen wants is to ‘establish a dynasty’ to have ‘descendants,’ what *Gatsby* needs is to be something more like the inheritor of a dynasty - he needs to *be* a descendant.” Walter Benn Michaels, “*Absalom, Absalom!*: The Difference Between White Men and White Men,” in *Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Robert W. Hamblin and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2003), 146.

makes up the the Tidewater plantations such as the one he flees, he appears in Jefferson “almost phoenix-like, full-sprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time” (61), at least according to Mr. Compson’s rendering of the town’s reaction. Sutpen’s conceals his origin from almost everyone, but the details he reveals in conversation with General Compson both deny and confirm the rumors. Sutpen’s ignominious poor white roots in West Virginia mean that, in a sense, he does rise from nothing. However, that nothing is quite concrete and specific: the nothingness of a poor white from the mountains only means something in the context of the plantation order, which itself structures racial difference. In this regard, Sutpen’s discovery of the “difference between white men and white men” underlies his entire design, not only by his awakening to the power of class and race on the Tidewater plantation, but also through his abandoned mixed-race family. In Michael’s description,

Faulkner...defeats Sutpen’s class ambitions by racializing them. Insisting that Sutpen’s “design” transcend the desire for slaves, money, house, and wife – insisting, that is, that slaves, money, house, and wife be merely instrumental to “descendants,” to the ambition to “Found a Family”...Faulkner makes the blackness of that grandson into the failure of the design.⁸⁸

Sutpen fails to achieve his design, therefore, not because of the end of the plantation system after 1865, but because of the implications of miscegenation. Without a white male descendant, the design cannot succeed: the necessity of a white male descendant becomes more significant after the Civil War and Reconstruction, which Barbara Ladd points out, reinforced pre-Civil War racial codes while also increasing anxiety around the

⁸⁸ Ibid, 147.

figure of the mulatto.⁸⁹ Unlike most mixed-race people in the U.S. south, who largely resulted from forced master-slave relationships, Sutpen's mixed-raced progeny arrive from points further south, outside (yet tied to) the U.S., not the result of an illicit but tacitly condoned sexual contact between master and slave, but of a mixed-race marriage in a place historically more tolerant of such racial boundary crossings (and with more nuanced racial boundaries). Particularly in light of the post-Civil War emphasis on the "one-drop rule," Sutpen's first marriage presents a problem. As Michaels suggests, it is this introduction of black blood into the Sutpen line that frustrates his design, which is dependent upon legitimate descendants, not merely land and wealth.

In his account of Faulkner's legacy, Edouard Glissant writes: "Under the conditions of this society (unmitigated belief in White supremacy) there exists this fault, which is not interesting except in one sense: it measures what reversals must occur in sensibilities before new alliances – the new experience of the Relation – can become deliberate."⁹⁰ Under the shifting narrators and stream-of-consciousness of *Absalom, Absalom!* lies the disavowed historical relationship between Haiti and the U.S. south. While Faulkner does not limn the dynamics of this relation as Glissant does, he nevertheless points to the ugly truth that implicates the southern plantation in a larger system beyond the borders of the United States. Turning now to Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, I will argue that a different but equally powerful challenge to the plantation

⁸⁹ "It is around this figure [the mulatto] that writers of the era construct powerful and resonating dramas of national and racial identity – white writers through dramas of retaliatory segregation and (many) black writers through dramas of failed integration." Barbara Ladd, *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner*, 140.

⁹⁰ Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 95.

order in that novel insists in a more direct way than *Absalom* on the enduring associations between Haiti and the U.S. south.

4.6 Revolutionary Blackness

In *Black Thunder*, the French printer M. Creuzot loses himself in thought about what it could mean that the “blacks are whispering...Could these tamed things imagine liberty, equality? Of course, he knew about San Domingo, many stories had filtered through, but whether or not the blacks themselves were capable of that divine discontent that turns the mill of destiny was not answered” (651). Creuzot believes the blacks too docile, “without the necessary faculties” for discontent and revolt – incapable of the abstract thought necessary to theorize liberty, in other words. As he slowly comes to realize that the blacks in and around Richmond are planning something, he worries for the repercussions for himself, his fellow Frenchman, and his friend Alexander Biddenhurst, all considered (rightly or wrongly) Jacobins by many in Richmond. The atmosphere of the novel suggests the paranoia and revolutionary thought that marked the summer of 1800:

No Federalist paper, wishing to win votes, missed an opportunity to hurl the anathema of that dreaded word *Jacobin* into the air. They didn’t bother to analyze or define carefully. They were glad to have the public catch the misleading implications they had succeeded in putting into the term: redistribution of wealth, snatching of private property, elevation of the blacks, equality, immediate and compulsory miscegenation. (653)

The election of 1800 was sufficiently contentious to drive many to fear that the nascent republic was on the verge of collapse, split, or civil war, but this passage also captures

something of the jangled conditions under which Bontemps wrote the novel. Given his frustrating experience teaching at a conservative, religiously affiliated prep school in Alabama, the turmoil created by the nearby Scottsboro case, and Bontemps' own research into slave narratives at the library of Fisk University, it does not surprise that contemporary concerns made their way into the published version of *Black Thunder*.

In a preface written for the 1968 reissue of the novel, Bontemps recounted the conditions under which he conceived of and wrote the novel. Having left Harlem in the early 1930s for a teaching position in Huntsville, Alabama, Bontemps found the oppressive religious atmosphere of the school, as well as the pressures exerted by virtue of the ongoing Scottsboro case, too much.⁹¹ The large number of books Bontemps received via post raised the suspicions of the school's headmaster, but it was his friendship with Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance figures perceived as radicals by the conservative Seventh Day Adventists who administered the school that raised the most eyebrows. The school cautiously sought to remain neutral regarding the Scottsboro case, and Bontemps' associations threatened that supposed tranquility. Following the headmaster's request that Bontemps burn his most inflammatory books⁹² as a sign of his repudiation of radical politics, Bontemps departed from what he called

⁹¹ Bontemps, in his 1968 preface to the reissue of *Black Thunder*, writes: "Two stories dominated the news as well as the daydreams of the people I met. One had to do with the demonstrations by Mahatma Gandhi and his followers in India; the other, the trials of the Scottsboro boys then in progress in Decatur, Alabama, about thirty miles from where we were living." See "Introduction to the 1968 Edition" in Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt: Virginia 1800* (1936; Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), xxiv.

⁹² Among the offensive titles: W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows*, John W. Vandercook's biography of the Haitian King Christophe, *Black Majesty*, and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. See Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana: A Biography of Arna Wendell Bontemps* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 77.

“perhaps the world’s worst school” in a letter to Countee Cullen, as soon as he was able.⁹³ Bontemps and his large family spent an uncomfortable year at his father’s house in Watts, where he managed to complete a draft of the novel.

The seeds of *Black Thunder* were planted while he was still in Huntsville: during a trip to Fisk University ostensibly undertaken to escape the on-campus tensions and visit old friends, Bontemps discovered “in the Fisk Library a larger collection of slave narratives than I knew existed,” which he “begin to read almost frantically.”⁹⁴ While he knew he wanted his second novel to concern a historical slave rebellion, Bontemps took pains to choose the right one.⁹⁵ “Three historic efforts at self-emancipation caught my attention and promptly shattered piece of mind,” he wrote: Denmark Vesey’s, Nat Turner’s, and Gabriel’s.⁹⁶ The last of these struck him as the proper vehicle to express what was then roiling in his mind: “Gabriel’s attempt seemed to reflect more accurately for me what I felt then and feel now might have motivated slaves capable of such boldness and inspired daring. The longer I pondered, the more convinced I became... [His rebellion] was, it seemed to me, a more unmistakable equivalent of the yearning I felt and which I imagined to be general.”⁹⁷ Bontemps weaves the plantation, eighteenth-century revolutions, early U.S. print culture and legal discourse, the folk religion of enslaved people, and Enlightenment ideas into a historical novel that also reflects his thinking about contemporary events such as the Scottsboro Boys trial and the wider civil rights

⁹³ Quoted in Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana*, 76.

⁹⁴ Arna Bontemps, “Introduction to the 1968 Edition,” xxvi.

⁹⁵ Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana*, 81.

⁹⁶ Arna Bontemps, “Introduction to the 1968 Edition,” xxvi.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, xxvi-xxvii.

movement of the 1930s, Gandhi's movement in India, and burgeoning anti-colonial sentiments in Africa.⁹⁸

Bontemps' strikingly modern portrayal of Gabriel's Rebellion imaginatively supersedes the limited historical documentation that was then available to him. The novel's repeated nods to the Saint-Domingue Revolution further collapse the novel's historical and contemporary concerns. The U.S. ended its military occupation of Haiti the same summer that Bontemps was drafting the novel in Watts. *Black Thunder* also anticipates C.L.R. James' intervention in *The Black Jacobins*, published two years later: both writers approached neglected and misunderstood historical examples of black resistance with their eyes firmly on then-current civil rights and anti-colonial struggles.

Bontemps relied on a wide range of source material in crafting his novel. The invocation of Saint-Domingue in *Black Thunder* reflects knowledge Gabriel would likely have had; his ability to sell his labor beyond the plantation brought him into contact with a wide swath of Richmond's working class, and in 1800, Virginia was perhaps the only southern state not restricting entry for formerly enslaved Saint-Dominguans.⁹⁹ Eric Sundquist argues that Bontemps linking of Gabriel's Rebellion to the Saint-Domingue Revolution sought to add historical context to contemporary black revolutionary struggles

⁹⁸ Arnold Rampersad's illustrates in his introduction to the 1992 reissue of *Black Thunder* how Bontemps' politics shifted left in the early 1930s. Rampersad credits Bontemps' research into slave narratives at Fisk as the primary factor in his radicalism, but he also argues that Bontemps discovered a link between the "revolutionary social and political goals [of] the 1930s" and the "radical egalitarian philosophy and activism of the French Revolution - the Jacobin tradition," which helped inspire the Haitian Revolution. Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction to the 1992 Edition," in Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt: Virginia, 1800* (1936; Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), xi-xii.

⁹⁹ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 46 ff.

across the globe.¹⁰⁰ Along with the historical elements, Jane Campbell's attentive reading of *Black Thunder* demonstrate that Bontemps also used romance and the oral tradition in his novelization of the slave experience.¹⁰¹ The historical, the literary, and oral tradition inform Bontemps' presentation of Gabriel's Rebellion.

Furthermore, Bontemps' use of official documents to inform his imaginative recreations do not merely provide verisimilitude but foster a sense of racial and class consciousness. The politically fraught Presidential election of 1800 created tension between the French and the U.S. citizens in the bustling city of Richmond, which was further stoked by white fear after Gabriel's Rebellion was discovered. Court documents, newspapers, and even personal letters appear throughout *Black Thunder*; the novel begins by recounting what Virginia Court records had to say about the rebellion and continues to thread official documents and letters throughout. Bontemps describes how newspaper accounts helped spread fear after the rebellion's discovery: "Meanwhile the young nation gasped and caught its breath, trembled with excitement. Fanned by newspaper tales and swift rumors, its amazement flared." Bontemps includes newspaper excerpts describing the enslaved revolutionaries' "frightful," "murderous" weapons, portraying them as "secret[ing] themselves in the woods," and speculating that "French principles of liberty

¹⁰⁰ Eric Sundquist observes the folding of history into the contemporary that Bontemps achieves in the novel: "What Bontemps specifically adds to the historical context, that is to say, is an invocation of *black* Revolutionary inspiration, a narrative strategy that at once puts Gabriel's plot on a more complex - and no doubt historically accurate - plane while at the same time setting aside its impracticality. By linking Gabriel's rebellion to that in San Domingo, Bontemps asks us to understand that the achievement of its actual objectives, in this case implausible, need not be the only measure of 'success' in slave resistance." Eric J. Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 112.

¹⁰¹ Jane Campbell, *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History* (Knoxville: the U of Tennessee P, 1986), 14-15.

and equality have been infused into the minds of the Negroes.” He quotes from a private letter describing the rebellion as “a subject *not to be mentioned*” (712). Bontemps’ inclusion of concerns regarding “French principles of liberty” suggest that elites were concerned about repercussions beyond the threat to the plantation order.

The novel also engages Enlightenment ideas in addition to black revolutionary thought. The political revolutionary Biddenhurst is shown reading from Voltaire’s poem commemorating the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which may have killed as many as 50,000 people and shook the optimism of many Enlightenment thinkers. In his preface to the poem, Voltaire explains that he writes “against the abuse of the new maxim, ‘whatever is, is right.’”¹⁰² Voltaire had satirized this sentiment from Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* before writing this poem, but here he affirms more directly his position, that “with all mankind that there is evil as well as good on the earth.”¹⁰³ Bontemps inserts into the novel eleven of the most despairing lines from a poem brimming with earnest questions regarding the nature of good and evil: “Ourselves we never see, nor come to know./This world, this theatre of pride and wrong,/Swarms with sick fools who talk of happiness.../Seeking a light amid the deepening gloom...” (654).

The quotation from Voltaire closes the fourteenth chapter of the first part of the novel, provocatively entitled “Jacobins.” At the head of the following chapter, Bontemps quotes in full another significant text of the latter half of the 18th century, Toussaint L’Ouverture’s declaration of 29 August, 1793:

¹⁰² Voltaire, “The Lisbon Earthquake: Author’s Preface,” in *The Portable Voltaire*, trans. Tobias Smollett, ed. Ben Ray Redmond (New York: The Viking Press, 1949), 558.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 559.

BROTHERS and FRIENDS: I am Toussaint l'Ouverture; my name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken to avenge your wrongs. It is my desire that liberty and equality shall reign. I am striving to this end. Come and unite with us, brothers, and combat with us for the same cause. Your very humble and obedient servant, TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE *General for the Public Welfare*. (655)

In this juxtaposition of Voltaire and Toussaint, the novel places Gabriel's Rebellion within two eighteenth century streams, the Enlightenment and the Saint-Domingue Revolution, thereby imbuing what could be seen as a failed, regional slave rebellion with the revolutionary energies of the moment. This contextualization implicitly argues for the world-historical significance of black revolution, regardless of scale. Not content to merely historicize, Bontemps writes with twentieth-century international revolution in mind, both in the novel and the 1968 preface.¹⁰⁴ The novel's dialectical treatment of past and present, local and global movements for freedom serves not just a black nationalist revolutionary spirit, or an Enlightenment humanist one, but instead offers a view of history in its full complexity, acknowledging both the overlap and disjunctions that occur.

The treatment of the French Revolution's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity in *Black Thunder* illustrate this point. Gabriel's awareness of the French revolutionary slogan comes from overhearing a conversation between Biddenhurst and Creuzot, in

¹⁰⁴ Bontemps explains this at some length in his preface to the 1968 reissue of *Black Thunder*: "At the age of thirty, or thereabouts, I had lived long enough to become aware of intricate patterns of recurrence, in my own experience and in the history I had been exploring with almost frightening attention...If time is the pendulum I imagined, the snuffing of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s career may yet appear as a kind of repetition of Gabriel's shattered dream during the election year of 1800. At least the occurrence of the former as this is written serves to recall for me the tumult in my own thoughts when I began to read extensively about slave insurrections and to see in them a possible metaphor of turbulence to come." Bontemps, "Introduction to the 1968 Edition," xxi-xxii.

which Biddenhurst says, “the whole world must know that [classes] are not natural distinctions but artificial ones. Liberty, equality, and fraternity will have to be won for the poor and the weak everywhere if your own revolution is to be permanent. It is for us to awaken the masses.” Bontemps describes the effect of these words on Gabriel:

They were all just words, but they put gooseflesh on Gabriel’s arms and shoulders. He felt curiously tremulous...Here were words for things that had been in his mind, things that he didn’t know had names. Liberty, equality, frater – it was a strange music, a strange music. And was it true that in another country white men fought for these things, died for them?...So they had noticed the blacks whispering, had they? (610)

This moment deftly refuses the oft-repeated canard that knowledge of the French Revolution inspired Gabriel and his comrades. While these words inspire Gabriel, they only speak to desires that he already had, thereby revising and enlarging their scope. William Scott observes that Gabriel’s rebellion stands as an act of mediation, one which creates “a new kind of meaning – specifically that associated with keywords of the Enlightenment like ‘liberty,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘fraternity’ – out of acts of political and linguistic mediation, or what I shall refer to here as translation.”¹⁰⁵ Scott’s attention to “translation” describes Bontemps’ dialectic appropriation of French revolutionary ideals to serve the needs of black revolution.

Bontemps was not the only black intellectual thinking along these lines in the 1930s. C.L.R. James’ landmark history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*,

¹⁰⁵ William Scott, “To Make up the Hedge and Stand in the Gap’: Arna Bontemps *Black Thunder*,” *Callaloo* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 523.

staked a similarly dialectical claim for the significance of that most momentous of slave rebellions. James' revisionist history seeks to reinscribe and expand of the concept of Enlightenment, placing Saint-Domingue on the world-historical stage alongside the French Revolution. James marvels at the fact that "in April 1792, not three years after the fall of the Bastille, the white Patriots in Port-au-Prince were being besieged by a composite army of royalist commandants, white planters, brown-skinned Mulattoes, and black slaves, none of them constrained by all for the time being free and equal partners."¹⁰⁶ James, moreso than Bontemps, holds these strains in dialectical tension, but both *Black Thunder* and *The Black Jacobins* emphasize the world-historical significance of slave rebellions in service of a vision of black revolution at a time of flux for global civil rights movements.¹⁰⁷ Both Bontemps and James argue for the centrality of the Haitian Revolution not only to subsequent moments of black resistance, such as Gabriel's rebellion, but also for revolutionary politics at large. In short, *Black Thunder* and *The Black Jacobins* advance a vision of revolutionary struggle that provides Haiti a central place in world history that few in the 1930s were willing to grant. Both texts revise history: James writes to counter the marginal place accorded to the San Domingo Revolution, while Bontemps draws on a vast archive of slave narratives and oral histories, one virtually untouched by historians and forgotten by the historical consensus of the time. In evoking these alternative histories and neglected archives, Bontemps and

¹⁰⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 109.

¹⁰⁷ The dialectical tension of *The Black Jacobins* is more thoroughgoing than *Black Thunder* in part because James was the more thoroughgoing Marxist, but also because the socio-political situation in San Domingo and France was more complex than that in Virginia in 1800. Nevertheless, as I will show, the two works reveal striking similarities in their dialectical approach.

James self-consciously write against the conception of Haiti as the avatar of southern alterity, which often serves to deny the agency of blacks, enslaved or free.

Bontemps and James engage what Anthony Bogues describes as the “two archives” of Haiti, which offer rival views of the meaning and significance of the revolution:

One archive was about the “horrors” of St. Domingue; the other archive concerned the Haitian Revolution and the regeneration of the African world and therefore was about possibility in the midst of a dominant system of colonial racial slavery...Horrors and regeneration are not separate sides of the same coin. Certainly there is a dialectical relationship between them produced by the same source – the Haitian Revolution – but the archives of horrors and of possibility mark two distinct spaces in the history of Haiti as an idea.¹⁰⁸

The work of Bontemps and James adds to the latter archive, but each are cognizant of the former. Aware of the profound fear the specter of revolting slaves engendered in white society, both writers insist on the dignity of those who rebelled, the nobility of their enterprise, and their world-historical significance. Following the work of the Warwick Research Collective, which defines “‘world literature’ as *the literature of the world system* – of the modern capitalist world-system, that is,” both *Black Thunder* and *The Black Jacobins* can be understood as works that situate their subject matter in the wider context of the world system.¹⁰⁹ Both view slavery as a product of this system, and

¹⁰⁸ Anthony Bogues, “Two Archives and the Idea of Haiti,” in *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: History, Textualities, Geography*, ed. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael Drexler (Philadelphia: U of Penn Press, 2016), 315.

¹⁰⁹ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature*, Liverpool: Liverpool UP 2015, 8.

resistance to it becomes therefore a global or world event. Understanding how the circulation of bodies, commerce, and especially news influenced Gabriel's Rebellion is central to my reading of *Black Thunder*.

4.7 The Currents of Gabriel's Rebellion

A set of comparatively lax enslaved labor practices specific to 1800 Virginia, allowing enslaved artisans such as Gabriel to enjoy wide movement and relative freedom, enabled Gabriel's conspiracy. These slaves were often "hired out" by their masters, some of them for just a few days or a season, others for longer periods. Gabriel, being a blacksmith, counted in this number.¹¹⁰ This relative autonomy of those enslaved who worked under this system, along with the ability to make their own money, led to attempts to restrict it by law, but prior to the rebellion, such laws were "unenforceable and unenforced."¹¹¹ The whites' fears, however, were not irrational or misplaced, as Douglas Egerton writes:

These restrictive laws were designed to do more than merely retard the growing economic autonomy of blacks. They were created to curtail the dangerous labor relations between bond and free, black and white. But they failed utterly...close ties were forged between free and unfree blacks – and even unskilled whites – under the pressure of common discrimination.¹¹²

In time, "a working-class subculture emerged."¹¹³ Although not ostensibly political, this close urban association provided black artisans like Gabriel the opportunity to encounter a variety of perspectives and news than the plantation allowed. As the historical record

¹¹⁰ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 24 ff.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 25-6.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 29.

¹¹³ *Ibid*.

suggests, Gabriel's exposure to news regarding the revolutions of France and Saint-Domingue likely proved crucial for his political development; *Black Thunder* explicitly credits Gabriel's rebellion in part to his contact with Jacobins as well as news of Saint-Domingue.

Gabriel's movement in and around the city of Richmond, while narrower in scope, mirrored a circum-Atlantic culture of circulation that was increasingly important to the economy of Virginia and the nascent U.S. As Edward Bartlett Rugemer writes, the Anglo-Atlantic world of the nineteenth century shared "a culture, a history, and a religious heritage that flowed from their shared experience in the British Empire."¹¹⁴ Although San Domingo, having been colonized by the Spanish and French, was a bit removed from the Anglo-Atlantic, it was caught in the same net of West Indian trade as the rest of the Caribbean and the early U.S. While Madison's discussion with his secretary about the reopening of trade with San Domingo in *Black Thunder* only hints at the situation, there were a number of ebbs and flows in trade between the U.S. and the West Indies, particularly after the Revolutionary War. In 1783, Britain banned U.S. shipping to the West Indies, although the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars soon forced the British to resume trade between the West Indies and the U.S. In 1817, then-President James Madison signed a Congressional Act that banned foreign vessels from countries prohibiting the entry of U.S. vessels in retaliation for the British breaking off West Indian trade again after the War of 1812.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 17.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-6.

This was the economic and political situation between the U.S. and Caribbean when the enslaved in Saint-Domingue started their rebellion in 1791. The impact on the U.S. was immediate, as was its response: as Rugemer chronicles, the Washington administration initially supported refugee slaveholders financially, whereas the Adams administration was “quite favorable to the rebels. American merchants supplied Toussaint’s regime with much needed provisions and materiel,” and even went so far as to offer limited military support. Jefferson’s administration, however, shifted away from this policy, eventually “cut[ting] off commerce with independent Haiti in 1806...”¹¹⁶ The most significant impact, however, was the publication of Bryan Edwards’s *Historical Survey of the French Colony of St. Domingo* in 1797. Although not printed in Philadelphia until 1806, it codified attitudes already in place in the U.S. regarding the Haitian Revolution, becoming “the standard proslavery interpretation of the Haitian Revolution through the antebellum period,” as Rugemer writes:

Edwards argued that the *Amis des Noirs*, the French abolitionist society, was entirely responsible for the insurrection in Saint-Domingue. Over time, Edwards’s interpretation translated into a general theory of insurrection that implicated abolitionist agitation in the origins of slave rebellion. As the movement to abolish slavery became increasingly radical, in Britain and then the United States, a series of rebellions or plots in the West Indies and the American South demonstrated to slaveholders that Edwards’s thesis was correct.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 42-3.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 43-4.

Although the events of *Black Thunder* predate the appearance of Edwards' book, planters had long feared the possibility of a slave revolt, which the events in Saint-Domingue only heightened. More to the point, the connection made between "abolitionist agitation" and slave revolt made in Edwards' book influenced not just slaveholders in the antebellum South but continued to shape understandings of black resistance and revolt in the U.S. well into the twentieth century. In short, the racist logic that saw potential slave revolts everywhere was transformed over time into the racial paranoia that characterized the Scottsboro case, one of the key contemporary contexts for *Black Thunder*.

The paranoia surrounding the Scottsboro case was evoked by one of the most vile racist tropes in existence, the black rapist. As Riché Richardson writes, the post-Emancipation black rapist myth was in many ways the "obverse" of Uncle Tom. As opposed to that clichéd vision of black docility and servitude, the black rapist myth was "rooted in...perverse scripts of the black masculine body and sexuality":

It was a myth that cast black men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and construed them as inherently lustful and primitive. It was rooted in the growing panic about racial intermixture in the South that emerged after slavery ended, reflected the region's obsession with protecting white womanhood to ensure the purity of the race, and served as a primary rationale for lynchings in the region. This myth in part drove the media fascination with the famous Scottsboro incident in 1931...¹¹⁸

Bontemps does not ignore black masculine sexuality in *Black Thunder*, particularly through relationship between Gabriel and Juba, but he studiously avoids the figure of the

¹¹⁸ Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South*, 3-4. Ellipsis mine.

black rapist.¹¹⁹ Instead, he offers a different trope; as Kirkland C. Jones observes in his biography of Bontemps, Gabriel is “modeled after the traditional ‘bad nigger’ stereotype,”¹²⁰ which Richardson argues “functioned as a prevailing trope in signifying black masculine insurgency by the turn of the [twentieth] century[.]”¹²¹ Importantly, Richardson observes that the “bad Negro,” as a figure shaped by southern black folklore, “counterbalanced the dominant contemporary white-supremacist ideology of the black rapist.”¹²² *Black Thunder*, in other words, marshals the figure of the “bad Negro” from southern black folklore explicitly against the white-supremacist trope of the black rapist. The substitution of a figure of resistance in place of a negative, racist trope carries particular urgency in the wake of Scottsboro, much like Chesnut’s use of the “bad Negro” in *Marrow of Tradition*, Josh Green, reflected the tensions caused by the Wilmington Massacre.

Just as the novel rebuts the myth of the black rapist, it likewise maintains a clear-eyed view of the forces driving white paranoia. Gabriel’s Rebellion compounded the fear

¹¹⁹ *Black Thunder* does contain a moment of sexualized black masculine violence: in a strange sequence, the simple-minded Criddle waits outside the cabin of a poor white father and daughter. Bontemps writes that he “derived an unaccountable pleasure from the thought of thrusting it through the pale young female,” who “reminded him of a certain indentured white girl in town” who eventually “woke up one morning with a chocolate baby.” Criddle then remembers the point of his mission – “Anything what’s equal to a gray squirrel wants to be free. That’s what kind of business this here is” – and turns his thoughts away from sex. Bontemps does use fairly explicit phallic imagery in his description of Criddle’s killing of the father: “He held his sword arm tense; the scythe blade rose, stiffened, stiffened and remained erect.” However, the passage also likens his killing of the man – the only killing by a member of the rebellion in the novel – to the hog-killing that Marse Prosser often asked Criddle to carry out. The sequence is worth remarking upon for its wrestling with the trope of the black male rapist, but in the end remains a frustratingly ambiguous moment at odds with the primary emphasis of black revolution in the novel. Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, 680-81.

¹²⁰ Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana*, 81.

¹²¹ Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South*, 36.

¹²² *Ibid.*

engendered by Saint-Domingue, thereby shattering the notion of black servility and docility. This demystification served as an excuse for the brutal repression that followed: in its aftermath, at least twenty-seven slaves were hanged, enough to concern Jefferson and other planters that perhaps justice had crossed over into the realm of revenge.¹²³ Similarly, the plight of the Scottsboro Boys, driven by the same racist fears that undergirded the official response to Gabriel's Rebellion, added to southern "exceptionalism" within the national imaginary. This is not the exceptionalism of John Winthrop's "city on the hill," but instead what Leigh Anne Duck calls the "problem South." As she writes, accounts of the south which celebrate its "tradition" fail "to address its incongruity with liberalism"; that is, the implicit racism of the southern "tradition" stands at odds with the national imaginary, one of "democracy and change." This opens the door, she argues, for the othering of the south.¹²⁴ The Scottsboro trial was understood within the juxtaposition of the "problem South" against the "enlightened nation," a distinction at the very core of southern alterity. Bontemps' novel makes explicit the lineage from the antebellum rebellion he fictionalizes to the contemporary context from which he writes.

Despite the "two somewhat conflicting shifts" that Duck identifies as occurring in the discussion of southern culture over the course of the 1930s, which she describes as "a sharpened perception of a dangerous southern difference and an increased desire for

¹²³ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 92-3.

¹²⁴ "Concomitantly, when national discourse has acknowledged the conflict between southern conservatism and national democracy, it has typically done so in ways that localize this conflict - a "backward South" and a modern or "enlightened nation"; such models fail to incorporate a conceptual structure for assessing an ongoing conflict between prominent cultural and political models of national affiliation." Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region*, 3.

greater interregional understanding,”¹²⁵ the trope of southern alterity nevertheless explains how events such as the Scottsboro case served to keep the south at a geographical and spiritual remove from the rest of the country even as some sought understanding or reconciliation. *Black Thunder* does not argue against the “problem south,” which would be a stretch anyway after Bontemps’ experiences in Alabama, but instead redeploys the notion to emphasize the black resistance to white supremacy. The “problems” of the south, in the nineteenth as well as twentieth centuries, were not just found in the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, poverty, poor education, and economic underdevelopment, but also the forms of black resistance to the social order. Although primarily stoked by such chimerical phenomena as the myth of the black rapist, it should be noted that revolts such as Gabriel’s likewise fueled white fears.

Many planters believed that the enslaved, by virtue of their supposed simplemindedness and basic docility, could not conceive of revolting, let alone carrying one out without outside ideas and assistance. The novel navigates this by portraying the French revolutionary slogan and the Bible as confirming Gabriel’s deepest desires, alongside the model of emulation provided by Toussaint. *Black Thunder* furthermore portrays white revolutionary ideas through Thomas Callender, a character based on the historical James Thomson Callender, a “notorious scandalmonger” who was briefly supported financially by Thomas Jefferson. At a fractious moment in the history of the U.S., when sedition trials regarding the Federalist issue were becoming the norm, Callender’s pamphlet *The Prospect before Us*, “its rhetorical excesses...extravagant even by the standards of the decade,” provoked a storm even in states’ rights-supporting

¹²⁵ Ibid, 80.

Virginia. Despite Jefferson's support, Callender was found guilty.¹²⁶ Bontemps's renders Callender as a passionate Scottish poet who turned to prose only after he discovered that "the verses were second-rate and [...] the fire demanded prose." The "tired young man" who visits Callender in his cell tells him, "They are saying you caused it, sir... The insurrection of the blacks. One hears no name so often as Callender." Callender responds by calling the accusation "Federalist cant" and proclaiming, "No Democrat would have been fool enough to encourage a thing that could only help the opposition." In light of the fact that the Federalists "make a campaign use of the disturbance," Callender volunteers to write a piece clearing himself of involvement (715-16). The novel's inclusion of the political unrest caused by the Presidential election in the summer of 1800 places Gabriel's Rebellion within the national political context, accurately reflecting the knowledge Gabriel would have had through the close contact between white and black communities in Richmond.¹²⁷ Gabriel nonetheless seemed mostly unconcerned with the contentious national election both historically and in the novel; his primary political inspiration, at least to Bontemps' way of thinking, was Toussaint and the Saint-Domingue Revolution.

4.8 Chains Mental and Physical

The disconnect between the idea of universal freedom lodged in the Enlightenment and the continuing existence of chattel slavery is well-remarked upon, but another consideration of the particular rhetoric of Enlightenment's promise of freedom suggests the urgency and validity of Bontemps' engagement with such ideas in the novel.

¹²⁶ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 36-7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 39-40.

The yoke of mental nonage may be thrown off through the exertion of the intellect, as Kant describes in “What is Enlightenment?”, thereby freeing the subject from the “self-appointed guardians of the multitude,” but this metaphor acquires a sinister tone in light of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹²⁸ Kant anticipates Hegel’s master/slave dialectic in his use of the bondage/freedom metaphor, and while the peculiar institution may haunt his account of enlightenment in this essay, it remains unstated. What is only felt here becomes a central philosophical problem as both the Enlightenment project and the institution of slavery continued to develop.¹²⁹

The reality of slavery, easily navigated in the metropolitan centers of colonial power, had to be safeguarded in the U.S. south due to the proximity of free whites and enslaved blacks. While Enlightenment ideals promised universality, such notions had to be ignored or redeployed for planters and other white subjects to maintain slavery. Simon Gikandi writes that “the question of inequality and natural rights had to be changed or modified to enforce racial distinctions while maintaining class differences...Set as a powerful figure of difference, the word *Negro* would also function as the most visible mark of social distinction, connoting debased status and ‘non-freedom’ for those who bore it.”¹³⁰ While Gabriel is introduced to French revolutionary principles in Creuzot’s print shop, freedom in the novel is not limited to the injection of Enlightenment ideas. Old Bundy’s deathbed scene suggests the yearning for freedom was also tied to folk

¹²⁸ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”, 385.

¹²⁹ I am deliberately ignoring Kant’s complex and fascinating argument against slavery in *Metaphysics on Morals* (1797), as well as his statements on race, in particular *On the Different Races of Man* (1775) for the purposes of clarity and economy of argument. A fuller account of Kant’s thinking on race and slavery would necessitate an engagement with these works, but my main focus remains on Bontemps’ use of Enlightenment ideas in the service of black liberation.

¹³⁰ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, 160-1.

religion. In the midst of a prayer vigil for the dying man, he and Gabriel talk about freedom. Gabriel, standing apart from the group, head lowered, responds to Bundy's questioning:

“Thinking again. It's all like we been talking. You know.” “H'm. I was aiming to die free, me. I heard tell how in San Domingo –” “Listen, old man. You ain't gone yet.” “I don't mind dying, but I hates to die not free. I wanted to see y'-all do something like Toussaint done. I always wanted to be free powerful bad.” “That you did, and we going to do something too. You know how we talked it, you and me. And you know right well how I feel when my head's bowed low.” (623)

Soon after this, Bundy responds to the mourners' question how the preacher's sermon on “Moses and the chillun, David and the Philistines” made him feel, “Amen, boy. Bound to be free. You hear me? Bound to be free” (624). Bundy's hopes are tied up in religion, while Gabriel stands apart from such hopes, literally. Recalling William Scott's reading of freedom in the novel being felt in the body, Gabriel stands “above the others with hands on his hips and head bowed sorrowfully” (623). Gabriel does not participate in prayer, and though he attends a Bible lesson later, his scriptural interpretation owes itself primarily to the desire for black self-determination and freedom. His position during the prayer vigil at Bundy's bed indicates not only his ambivalent relationship with slave religion – head bowed, but in sorrow, not prayer – but also his defiance.

The various ways Gabriel, Bundy, and the mourners navigate sorrow suggest not just a range of affective response, but also an interiority that depictions of enslaved people have typically disavowed. Campbell's reading of the novel's mythic and oral elements correctly emphasizes the occasional stereotypical or one-dimensional

character.¹³¹ While these mythic elements do tend to flatten some characters, *Black Thunder* doesn't ignore interiority, particularly in the character of Gabriel. The emphasis on the body discussed above comes into play again: the "chorus of moaning voices" use their bodies to express their sorrow, suggesting an interiority at play beneath the affective response. For all his mythical elements, Gabriel's interiority is straightforwardly novelistic, as typified by Georg Lukács: "The novel tells of the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence."¹³² By Lukács strictures, Gabriel is a quintessentially novelistic character. In this way, *Black Thunder* extends novelistic subjectivity to characters that are typically treated as archetypes or stereotypes in the European novel (as suggested already in readings of *Heart of Darkness*, *The Voyage Out*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*). Bontemps, unlike some earlier African American novelists, did not merely imitate European literary conventions, but blended them with the "mythic" black elements, derived from folklore, that Campbell identifies.

The exclusion of black subjectivity in the European novel reflects the denial of enslaved peoples' subjectivity. Virginia in 1800 was sustained by slave labor, which depended upon the refusal to accord those laborers recognition, legally and philosophically, as human beings. Ian Baucom in *Specters of the Atlantic* argues that this denial of slave subjectivity was necessitated by the relationship between the slave trade and transatlantic capitalist accumulation. Through the lens of the *Zong* massacre of 1781,

¹³¹ See Jane Campbell, *Mythic Black Fiction*, 9, 16-17.

¹³² Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (1920; Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 89.

Baucom reveals the inextricable links between transatlantic capitalism (in particular insurance) and the slave trade. The status of slaves as property is not the whole story: the Liverpudlian businessmen who underwrote the ship's ill-fated voyage with loan money thereby treated slaves "not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest bearing money."¹³³ Baucom describes this transformation of slaves from commodity to money status as "at once obscene and vital to understanding the full capital logic of the slave trade."¹³⁴ More to my point, this denial of the ontology of slaves' humanity, necessary because otherwise they could not be understood properly as property and money, implicates the Enlightenment understanding of humanity.

Portraying black subjectivity, as Bontemps does in *Black Thunder*, goes against the grain of not just the novel, but modernity itself. Baucom argues that Granville Sharp, in his testimony regarding the *Zong* massacre, does not just "bear witness" to that singular monstrosity, but to the "coming of the contemporary; the institution and reign of a long-twentieth-century culture of speculation and its abstracting, subject-cancelling protocols; the rise and spread of a globalizing finance capital."¹³⁵ Baucom describes the politics of abolition outlined in Sharp's testimony as one "of ascriptive melancholy, of

¹³³ "They were not just selling slaves on the far side of the Atlantic, they were lending money across the Atlantic. And, as significantly, they were lending money they did not yet possess or only possessed in the form of the slaves. The slaves were thus treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money. They functioned in this system simultaneously as commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system: deposits made at the moment of sale and instantly reconverted into short-term bonds." Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 61.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 177-8.

unsurrenderable attachment.” This “politics of cosmopolitan interestedness,” as Baucom styles it, directs itself towards the human, but this reveals its double-mindedness.¹³⁶

For the humanity to which the Euromodern witness...has attached itself over the course of the past 250 years is, in fact, dual. It is both a singular and historically particular humanity in extremis, a humanity apprehensible to its aggrieved observers as what I will be calling a melancholy fact of history, and a humanity apprehensible as a speculative idea and a speculative (and regulatory) ideal, a humanity grounded in natural law and natural right, an abstract humanity called into existence by the discourses of the rights of man and of human rights.¹³⁷

Baucom further writes that the “singular humanity” characterized by “eighteenth- and nineteenth-century circum-Atlantic politics of witnessing...thus alternates with (and sometimes exchanges itself for) the humanity which Enlightenment, liberalism, and neoliberals have adduced from a discourse of rights.”¹³⁸ Baucom spins his argument out from the *Zong* massacre to take in the whole (Western) discourse of humanity, rights, property, and law that persists into the present. For the purposes of this study, Baucom’s sweeping historical overview solidifies the connections between British colonialism and the U.S. south that I argue help to codify southern alterity as not merely a regional or even U.S.-specific condition, but a constitutive globalizing force.

Black Thunder dramatizes the dual view Baucom identifies in the gap between Gabriel’s expressed desire for freedom and the rights-based discourse of Biddenhurst. After the slave revolt makes Richmond unsafe for him, Biddenhurst flees to Philadelphia,

¹³⁶ Ibid, 179-80.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 180.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 180.

where he reads newspaper accounts that tell “of Gabriel’s sober, thoughtful face, his obsession for the same romantic dream that was the lasting creed of the poor, the unwanted, the world over” (730). By contrast to what he perceives as Gabriel’s romantic vision, Biddenhurst sees his modest efforts in assisting fugitive slaves as a more sober, Enlightenment-inflected task: “An unimportant young lawyer, a foreign-born citizen of a great city that new him hardly at all, Mr. Biddenhurst felt that this small contribution to the cause of freedom and equality in the large, cheerfully rendered, justified in some part a life that otherwise meant but little to anyone now” (731-2). Bontemps writes that “there was melancholy in the thought, too,” making Biddenhurst another of Baucom’s melancholy witnesses, continually returning in his conversation with Creuzot to injustice of poverty, slavery, and class conditions.

This scene not only illustrates how Biddenhurst’s view of humanity vacillates between melancholy witness and the abstractions of rights and justice, but also suggests how melancholy witness subtly distorts Biddenhurst’s view of Gabriel in particular. He might think Gabriel’s dream romantic, but Gabriel expresses his desire for freedom in the terms of the Enlightenment (liberty, equality, fraternity) and biblical witness, not romanticism. While William Scott argues that Gabriel “translates” the Enlightenment principles overheard in Creuzot’s print shop, his novel scriptural interpretations are, on the other hand, the “*creation* of a new kind of meaning,” in Scott’s words, as well the articulation of a slave epistemology that leads to action:

“It say so in the book, and it’s plain as day,” Gabriel said. “And, let push come to shove, He going to fight them down like a flock of pant’ers, He is. Y’-all heard what he read. God’s aiming to give them in the hands of they enemies and all like

of that. He say he just need a man to make up the hedge and stand in the gap. He's going to cut them down his own self. See?" (636)

As Scott argues, words are not merely signifiers for the slaves in the novel, but things that are "capable of producing physical, i.e., real material effects in the world."¹³⁹ Gabriel's scripture interpretation transforms the words of the text into a mandate for the revolt. Significantly, in Gabriel's understanding, the work is God's; Gabriel and his men¹⁴⁰ act merely to carry out God's work.¹⁴¹ Even as liberty, equality, and fraternity inspire Gabriel's imagination, the vision of agency he articulates here differs from Biddenhurst's earlier declaration, "It is for us to awaken the masses." The masses, at least enough of them in Gabriel's mind, were already awake: Old Bundy's desire for freedom, for instance, exists independently from the ideals of the French Revolution.

The intersection of slave epistemology and French revolutionary concepts reinforce Gabriel's sense of a preexisting community among the enslaved of Virginia.

¹³⁹ William Scott, "To Make Up the Hedge," 528.

¹⁴⁰ I use the phrase "Gabriel and his men" deliberately, since his vision of fraternity is explicitly masculine, as Michael Bibler argues: "As homo-ness names a sense of social egalitarianism that stems from the realization of sexual sameness, the imagined nature of Gabriel's community joins together every putatively redeemable individual as equal 'brothers' in a new society that resists the hierarchical reification of difference." This even applies to the only significant woman to join the revolt, Juba: "As Juba participates in the uprising, her gender identity becomes more and more of a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. She undergoes a queer transformation of gender and sexuality that Gabriel tries to correct by forcing her out of the rebellion and back into a more typically feminine role. By doing this, Gabriel ends up repudiating all heterosexual relations, as well." Bibler, *Cotton's Queer Relations*, 217, 219.

¹⁴¹ Suzanne Lane describes how Gabriel's appropriates scripture for his own purposes: "By conjuring a wrathful God through the repetition of this ritual incantation, Gabriel leads his fellow slaves to transform themselves from passive victims of the masters to active participants in a divine order...Gabriel uses the words of the Bible in a conjure ritual that is meant to transform the social order into a greater accord with the divine order, the natural harmony for which the earth, the water, the thrashers, and the living spirits of former slaves still call." Lane, "Black Thunder's Call for a Conjure Response to *American Negro Slavery*," *African American Review* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 591.

Bolstered by the figure of Toussaint and the community that united behind his leadership, Gabriel is confident in his ability to muster support from other plantations. Michael Bibler observes that Gabriel's realization that whites in France fought for liberty, equality, and particularly fraternity opens his eyes, causing him to recognize "the need to think not for the individual, but for the community as a whole."¹⁴² Gabriel's nationalistic rhetoric is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's imagined communities thesis: Bibler writes that Anderson's definition of "a nation is a community that is limited and imagined,"¹⁴³ making political borders less important than the capability of the imagination to embrace brotherhood (masculinity suffuses Gabriel's fraternal vision to the point of near-exclusion of women in Bibler's reading of the novel). Extending their sense of community, the rebels choose to spare the French because their "antislavery sympathies," arising not out of "a common ancestry" but a "shared philosophy."¹⁴⁴ *Black Thunder* reflects the community focus of black nationalism while gesturing beyond it to wider, cross-racial sympathies.

What I have called slave epistemology cannot be sundered from the status of the enslaved as modern subjects, or "conscripts of modernity" in David Scott's phrase. Even the most sympathetic Enlightenment thought struggled to conceive of enslaved people as modern subjects;¹⁴⁵ conscripts of modernity they may be, but as Gikandi reminds us, "Within the culture of modernity, slavery always appears to be anachronistic."¹⁴⁶ This anachronism did not keep the reality of slavery out of the work Enlightenment thinkers,

¹⁴² Michael Bibler, *Cotton's Queer Relations*, 212-13.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁴⁵ See Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 195-212.

¹⁴⁶ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, 4.

as Kant's slavery/bondage metaphor in "What is Enlightenment?" indicates. Kant's contention that the public's enlightenment, "if only given freedom," raises the question: who is to give them freedom?¹⁴⁷ For Kant, one path lies in the freedom granted by a benevolent monarch who would not follow the church's teachings too closely. Gabriel's revolt stands as a counter-example, one which Kant could not conceive of, in which subjects anachronous to but conscripted within the taxonomy of modernity dare to seize freedom for themselves. Where Kant claims enlightenment follows freedom, Bontemps' novel stands this on its head: Gabriel's own enlightenment drives his fight for freedom. Importantly, Bontemps does not portray Gabriel as unenlightened prior to overhearing the conversation in the print shop. As Bibler observes, the ideals of the French Revolution express what the slaves already felt, and Gabriel "is appropriating the terms of that model to empower further his preexisting vision of black freedom."¹⁴⁸ Their desire for freedom, and their appropriation of French revolutionary ideals, threaten the Enlightenment worldview that discounted their subjectivity in the first place.

By portraying his characters as modern subjects, however displaced or disaffected, Bontemps draws a through-line from eighteenth century subjectivity, through slave rebellion, to contemporary civil rights struggles. Reminiscent of Baucom's use of Giovanni Arrighi's concept of a "long twentieth century," Bontemps telescopes the historical context of the novel to ground the civil rights struggle of the 1930s in the history of slave revolt.¹⁴⁹ Eighteenth century conceptions of subjectivity, premised on individuality, autonomy, and interiority, could not conceive of a place for the slave; in

¹⁴⁷ Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?", 385.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Bibler, *Cotton's Queer Relations*, 217.

¹⁴⁹ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 22-31.

fact, as Gikandi argues, it was never just about slavery, but race.¹⁵⁰ Emancipation, by this token, could not be enough to give freed slaves subjectivity. Instead, that freedom had to be fought for. Bontemps' account of Gabriel's struggle anticipates this insight: he knows that black self-determination depends upon their wresting it from the powers that maintain their servility. During Gabriel's recounting to Juba of Toussaint's letter, he imagines the note that he will draft, proclaiming the freedom of the slaves and encouraging them to join him in the struggle for freedom. Importantly, Gabriel calls himself "gen'l" for the first time while dictating this imaginary note. Seized by that thought, he puts "on his shiny boots, his frock-tailed coat and his varnished coachman's hat. It was all very important when you really thought it over" (705-06). Scott reads this moment as Gabriel's body, in the clothes of the "gen'l," bridging the gap between liberty in the abstract and the real desire of the slaves to be free.¹⁵¹ Gabriel embodies the authority of Toussaint because he knows it to be important for the revolt to have a leader, a figure to rally around, but even more importantly, here he attempts a rapprochement between the idea of freedom and its reality. Gabriel's assumption of the mantle of "the gen'l" provides the ill-fated revolt a leader while also giving him the very thing slavery denies him: a sense of modern individuality and subjectivity. To this point, Gikandi writes that one of the paradoxes "of having slavery in the midst of a culture of freedom" is that slaves' desire for liberty and willingness to fight for it "was propelled by the need

¹⁵⁰ "The subject of modernity was a subject who could act freely...However, if subjectivity was premised on the capacity for individual autonomy and self-reflection - the ability to say I - then the slave, defined as socially dead or as chattel, would have no such status in theory or discourse. And by extension or implication, the African, whether free or enslaved, could not have the capacity for sense and sensibility that was a precondition for understanding." Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, 224.

¹⁵¹ William Scott, "To Stand in the Gap," 533.

to assert the supremacy of human rights.”¹⁵² Slave revolts put the rhetoric and principles of human rights to the test, acting on the universal validity of French and U.S. revolutionary principles while also indicating the ways in which those principles’ implementation fell far short of their promise, excluding the enslaved. Rebellious slaves both challenged Enlightenment principles and championed them, as Gabriel’s bold self-fashioning as the “gen’l” embodies.

Not all slave revolts relied on Enlightenment rhetoric and categories (particularly Nat Turner’s), but those that did suggest that uneven development went hand-in-hand with the institution of slavery. A paradox exists between the necessarily uneven development of capitalism and the universal promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity. As the Warwick Research Collective writes, “Capitalist modernisation entails development, yes – but this ‘development’ takes the forms also of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development.”¹⁵³ Inasmuch as the totalizing effects of capitalism are never evenly applied, so the universalism inherent in Enlightenment ideas – in particular, those of the French Revolution – are therefore also uneven. Ellen Meiksins Wood observes that the France of the Revolution was a largely rural, non-capitalist society, and the universalism of the revolutionaries, including the bourgeoisie, was aimed at the privilege of the aristocratic class.¹⁵⁴ She writes: “For all its limitations, this was an emancipatory universalism – which is, of course, why it could be taken up by much more democratic and revolutionary forces.”¹⁵⁵ Wood follows this with

¹⁵² Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, 88.

¹⁵³ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 13.

¹⁵⁴ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*, London: Verso 2017, 183-5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 187.

a comparison of the conditions of France and England, but a more effective line could be drawn to the Saint-Domingue Revolution, which embraced this democratic and revolutionary potential more fully than any other revolution of the age. On the other hand, Bontemps' marshalling of the rhetoric of French Revolutionary principles in *Black Thunder* insists on their necessary but insufficient presence in black rebellion. In this regard, Toussaint's significance to Gabriel as a model of revolution is particularly important: Gabriel's self-fashioning as the "gen'l" as opposed to president or king suggests a democratic impulse. According to C.L.R. James, despite the misreading of some of his officers as an appeal to a form of African kingship, Toussaint's declaration of 29 August was an appeal to liberty:

Nothing was further from Toussaint's mind [than kingship]. Though allied to the Spaniards he continued boldly to rally the blacks on the slogan of liberty for all...He uses the prestige of his position as general of the armies of the [Spanish] King, but he calls on the Negroes in the name of liberty and equality, the watchwords of the French revolutions, of which royalty was the sworn enemy. Neither would help his aims, so he was using both.¹⁵⁶

Bontemps' novel, like James' history, sees the Saint-Domingue Revolution as an inspiration to the struggle for black liberation. Likewise, both see the French revolutionary struggle as intimately connected with the happenings in Virginia and Saint-Domingue, respectively. For both writers, black liberation is global, crossing geographical, ideological, and even racial boundaries, uprooting claims of kingship in favor of a democratic notion of self-determination.

¹⁵⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 126.

The Black Jacobins serves as a crucial intertext for understanding the complex interplay of Enlightenment, colonialism, and slavery that run through this chapter. James has been accused of writing a “great man” history in *The Black Jacobins*, both for his focus on Toussaint as well as his dependence on Enlightenment thought.¹⁵⁷ These critiques suggest that James strives mightily to square the circle in writing a Marxist great man history influenced by Enlightenment thought, a seemingly quixotic undertaking. While James is as committed as Marx to an ideologically informed historical method, he acknowledges at the outset of *The Black Jacobins* the ambiguity that will emerge from his wrangling with the facts of the San Domingo Revolution, as opposed to a theory of the individual’s role in history. The ambiguity may stem from what George Ciccariello-Maher calls Toussaint’s failure: contrasted with the realization of the formerly enslaved

¹⁵⁷ Edward Said argues that for James, the “world of discourse inhabited by natives in the Caribbean...in the 1930s was honorably dependent upon the West,” that James addressed himself to a world he considered his own, even if it “excluded, to some degree subjugated, and deeply disappointed” him. Brian Meeks writes that James’ “honest reading of the San Domingo revolution, his own sensitivity to the colonial and, critically, racial questions, carry him to the verge of severance with the marxist canon” and that “he elevates the individual and agency to levels unprecedented in classical marxism.” The centrality of Toussaint to *The Black Jacobins* leads to an “effacement of the people” according to Paul B. Miller, “an unavoidable consequence of a method which is literary in form while employing categories from the Enlightenment.” Uniquely, George Ciccariello-Maher credits James for “draw[ing] out Toussaint’s errors more fully than any other account,” this “despite his own initial objectives” in celebrating Toussaint, who Ciccariello-Maher argues was “on a very concrete level...a *failure*.” And Philip Kaisary suggests that although “James’s emphasis on representing Toussaint as a ‘great man’...was to prove a magisterial means by which to vindicate black agency in history, it is a technique that stands in contradiction to the text’s celebrated values.” See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 246, 248; Brian Meeks, “Re-Reading *The Black Jacobins*,” *Social and Economic Studies* 43, no. 3 (September 1994): 81; Paul B. Miller, “Enlightened Hesitations: Black Masses and Tragic Heroes in C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*,” *MLN* 116, no. 5 (December 2001): 1073; George Ciccariello-Maher, “‘So Much the Worse for the Whites’: Dialectics of the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2014): 23-4; and Philip Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination*, 30.

masses that Napoleon was ready to grant the restoration of slavery, Toussaint maintained an “uncritical embrace of the universal as immediately accessible,” opposing not just discrimination but “any form of racial identity that interfered with the establishment of formal equality in the here and now.”¹⁵⁸ Such an approach, although philosophically laudable by James’ reckoning, failed as a strategy. At the same time, James writes against scholarly consensus that misrepresented colonialism, enslaved peoples, and the Saint-Domingue Revolution itself.¹⁵⁹ It is this body of thought, with its misreadings, aporias, and institutional racism that James and Bontemps both challenge and seek to overcome through their revisionary accounts.

Inasmuch as James wrote with an eye to the coming liberation movements in Africa, his purpose in *The Black Jacobins* differs little from Bontemps’ in *Black Thunder*: to create in Ed Krzemienski’s words, “a usable African American history that encompassed, rather than ignored, the institution of slavery for use in the burgeoning black protest movement.”¹⁶⁰ James’ avowed political purpose does not lessen the value the work as history or theory, but it colors interpretation all the same. If James seemingly cannot let go of an attachment to great man history by placing Toussaint at the center of his narrative, perhaps he makes this choice for political purposes. Early in *The Black Jacobins*, James portrays Toussaint obsessively reading Abbé Raynal’s *Philosophical and Political History of the Establishment and Commerce of the Europeans in the Two Indies*, “a book famous in its time” which “came into the hands of the slave most fitted to

¹⁵⁸ George Ciccariello-Maher, “So Much the Worse for the Whites,” 25.

¹⁵⁹ James writes forcefully: “A venal race of scholars, profiteering panders to national vanity, have conspired to obscure the truth about abolition.” C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 51.

¹⁶⁰ Ed Krzemienski, “Bontemps’s *Black Thunder*,” *Explicator* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 42-3.

make use of it.”¹⁶¹ The *Two Indies*, particularly for an Enlightenment work, unsparingly criticized colonialism and slavery; the passage James portrays Toussaint as reading claims that abolition requires a “courageous chief” who will “come forth and raise the sacred standard of liberty.” By linking this passage with Toussaint, James places the mantle of the radical Enlightenment upon Toussaint in a manner that bears comparison to Gabriel hearing Biddenhurst and Creuzot discussing the French Revolution in the print shop. In both instances, each man’s leadership is galvanized by the words and ideas of radical Europeans. Although these two moments could be read as ceding the ground of radical black resistance and revolution to European ideas, both scenes echo the famous passage in Augustine’s *Confessions* in which a disembodied voice instructs Augustine to “take it and read,” which leads to his conversion to Christianity. This moment, subsequently central to the European culture of letters, comes from an African. The roots of these conversion narratives turn out to be not European, however much Augustine’s work laid the ground for the modern European concept of subjectivity.

James writes as a self-consciously Enlightenment figure himself, thereby finding the revolutionary potential inherent in the Abbé Raynal’s history part of his own intellectual identity. The passage in question, actually written by Denis Diderot, is described by Sunil M. Agnani as “a testament to and key document in the prehistory of the modern concept of globalization, in that it envisions both a global form of hegemony and gives inklings of global forms of counterdominance that were to emerge.”¹⁶² James writes with an eye to this global situation. While the British and French bourgeoisie

¹⁶¹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 24-5.

¹⁶² Sunil M. Agnani, *Hating Empire Properly*, 45.

created a world-system built upon slavery, colonization, and trade, the “internal stresses and intensifying external rivalries” were the opportunities required for the Haitian revolutionaries to act. Indeed, the significance of Saint-Domingue only makes sense within a global economy: by 1789, almost half of the world’s supply of sugar and coffee came from Saint-Domingue, “the most extreme example of the slave-based society that Europeans had created throughout the Americas.”¹⁶³ This unprecedented prosperity was the justification of the continued existence of Saint-Domingue as a French colony, driven by slave labor.¹⁶⁴ The colony is therefore a microcosm of the modern, global force of colonialism, which along with Enlightenment ideas gave birth to the notion of southern alterity that helped constitute the colonial powers from which the U.S. descended.

The portrait of Haiti drawn by Bontemps and James differs, in its historical and intellectual context, from that of Faulkner’s, in which Haiti is the shadowy other of the U.S. south. However, all three authors reckon with the U.S.’s disavowal of the island following the Revolution. In *Absalom*, the shared conditions between Caribbean colonies such as Haiti and the U.S. south are disavowed even as they are inescapable, whereas in Bontemps and James’ accounts, Saint-Domingue is a site of black revolution against an oppressive colonial order and an inspiration for future forms of resistance. Although these Depression-era accounts of the enduring legacy of Haiti differ, all three authors testify to its continued relevance to a western hemispheric order that continues to reckon with the legacy of colonialism, slavery, race, and modernity as it looks to a questionable future.

¹⁶³ Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 26.

¹⁶⁴ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 45.

The difference, however, can be measured effectively by the conclusion of the two novels. Shreve tells Quentin:

I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont quite be in our time and of course as they spread towards the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. (311)

This rather ironic defense of miscegenation as the future reality of the Western hemisphere turns upon Shreve's bitter observation that "it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it?", even though there is "One nigger Sutpen left" (310). The vision of a future race descended from a mentally disabled archetypal figure, who will "bleach out again" back into whiteness both speaks to the moral failure of the whites who practiced slavery and (forced) miscegenation, while disavowing their creative potential beyond reproduction.

Faulkner's conclusion looks to a certain (if dubious to Quentin and Shreve) future. Bontemps, on the other hand, concludes *Black Thunder* with Gabriel's execution and the sale of Juba on the auction block. William Scott observes that the invocation of "gooseflesh" comes only twice in the novel: in Gabriel's affective response to the words "liberty, equality, fraternity," which "put gooseflesh on Gabriel's arms and shoulders," and in the conclusion. Although Bontemps sexualizes Juba throughout the novel, her near-nakedness on the auction block does not read as sexual, but defiant: "Her feet were bare. Her clothes were scant. And there was something about her figure, something about

the bold rise of her exposed breasts, that put gooseflesh on a man. But her look was downcast, bitter, almost threatening” (813). The physicality of “gooseflesh” makes manifest both Gabriel’s yearning for freedom and Juba’s defiance in the face of its loss; as Scott writes, “Bontemps goes so far as to identify revolutionary words with actual bodies – particularly the bodies of Gabriel and Juba.”¹⁶⁵ Subtly, Bontemps connects the Enlightenment ideals Gabriel overhears in the print shop with the body, reinforcing the affective, physical power of black revolution again at the novel’s conclusion.

Enlightenment values purport to be universal, but *Black Thunder* insists that Gabriel and Juba physically embody the desire for freedom in a way Enlightenment thought fails to. Although not as open-ended as the ending of Chesnut’s *Marrow of Tradition*, Bontemps looks to a similarly unrealized future in which the promise of black resistance and liberation can achieve their potential in contrast to southern alterity.

¹⁶⁵ William Scott, “To Make Up the Hedge and Stand in the Gap,” 528.

CHAPTER FIVE: CALIBAN GOES TO THE CITY

5.1 The Fateful Voyage North

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Haitian Revolution successfully overthrew enslavement and colonial subjugation in the western half of the island of Hispaniola, but this was not by any stretch the end of European or U.S. hegemony in the region. The global geopolitical response to Haitian independence was mixed: while the House of Commons voted to end the slave trade in the British empire just over three years following Dessalines' declaration of Haitian independence on the first day of 1804, this resulted in neither the end of slavery nor British imperial expansion. Furthermore, Haiti itself was punished in 1825 when France imposed reparations so heavy that they were not fully paid off until 1947, and while the U.S. did intermittently continue trade with Haiti, it did not formally recognize the nation until 1862. The "unthinkability" of the Haitian Revolution, in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's phrase, meant that the global dynamics of trade, enslavement, and race long after the establishment of Haiti continued to tilt in favor of regional and global powers.¹

If in the previous chapter Toussaint Louverture emerges as the exemplary figure of Caribbean resistance to European imperial rule, in this chapter Caliban comes to the fore as his literary counterpart. While Toussaint becomes something of a literary figure in C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*, the literary invention of Caliban stretches back to the seventeenth-century foundations of modernity and colonialism. In this regard, the

¹ "Indeed, the contention that enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom - let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom - was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants...The Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened." Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 73.

widespread adoption of Caliban as a figure of Caribbean literary modernism by such writers as George Lamming, Aimé Césaire, and Roberto Fernández Retamar serves a similar function as does James' interest in Toussaint: in short, both serve as symbols of resistance and revolt. Yet, Priyamvada Gopal warns against a too-quick adoption of the "well-worn 'Caliban' model" to explain colonial resistance, having "been generalized beyond recognition and its original historical usage."² With that warning in mind, I here evoke Caliban in the same way I understand these Caribbean intellectuals to have done: not as a taxonomy of various forms of colonial dispossession, enslavement, and alienation, but as a way of breaking into history. Therefore it does not surprise, considering that these writers hail from the Spanish, French, and Anglophone Caribbean, that each takes up Caliban for slightly different purposes. Nevertheless, their revisionary treatments of the figure surpass the scope of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to instead convey a perspective similar to what Edward Said calls "*the voyage in*," that "interesting variety of hybrid cultural work" which surpasses Hegel's "unilateral" vision of history. "*The voyage in*" sees history, not running "from east to west, or from south to north," but instead one in which "the weapons of criticism have become part of the historical legacy of empire."³

Said's willingness to upset the apple cart of Eurocentric notions of historical progress might tempt the decontextualized treatment of Caliban Gopal warns against, but the resistance to teleological progress embedded in his notion of "*the voyage in*" is key to this chapter's treatment of southern alterity. In saying that Caliban serves as a way of

² Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019), 5.

³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 244-45. Emphasis his.

breaking into history, I mean that their refashioning of this distinctively European literary character allows Lamming, Césaire, and Retamar to recapture and reconfigure the very grounds upon which southern alterity is conceived. As Retamar acknowledges, the symbol of Caliban “is not entirely ours...it is also an alien elaboration, although in this case based upon our concrete realities. But how can this alien quality be entirely avoided?”⁴ This “alien quality” is the very stuff of the postcolonial condition; each of these writers approach Caliban as subjects who are to one extent or another interpellated as postcolonial, if only in the sense that they came after the moment of colonial subjugation. The significance of Caliban-as-symbol flows directly from this, illuminating the historical and cultural dimensions of colonialism and its afterlives. By the same token, Caliban’s allure for these writers surpasses the merely metaphorical to embody political and historical interventions into both dominant narratives of history and the geopolitical order. It cannot be said that these writers all share the same political ends, but the protean nature of Caliban-as-symbol speaks to the general and widespread condition of southern alterity in the period when intellectuals and writers from the global south made their initial forays into the metropole.⁵ This chapter takes up that movement from south to north, thereby reversing the geographical orientation of the first chapter.

⁴ Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, trans. Edwin Baker (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989), 16.

⁵ Gopal, writing of the “Asian and black intellectuals and campaigners resident in London of the 1930s,” observes that “it is necessary to push beyond variants of Shakespeare’s ‘Caliban’ as a generic symbol for these figures...Something more interesting was going on during this moment of discernment, in which black campaigners and intellectuals found themselves undertaking a different kind of journey to Caliban’s.” This, in her estimation, “was their own sense of self, individual and collective,” and it is in this spirit that I engage Caliban in this chapter. Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, 330-31.

I do briefly allude to Caliban in my previous chapter's citation of Hortense Spillers' provocative association of that figure with Jim Bond in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Here I argue that Caliban moves from the plantation-limit of Faulkner's novel to the metropole in Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Both novels portray characters moving from sites of southern alterity (Dominica and the U.S. south) to the metropole (London and New York), but once there unhappily find themselves raced, classed, and constrained by their southern identity. In short, the southern alterity of Rhys and Ellison's protagonists adheres to them as they move from south to north, from periphery to center.

These novels therefore complicate the paradigmatic voyage of my study, found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. However, the logic of Marlow's voyage is *not* reversed: instead of escaping southern alterity to find the supposed order of civilization in the metropole, Rhys' Anna and Ellison's nameless protagonist instead find themselves alienated from a cultural and political order that classes or races them already upon their arrival. As unto the unhappy Helga in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, instead of the expected freedom of the north these characters find themselves stuck in the quicksand of southern identity even as they try to negotiate or shed it entirely. More to the point, these novels anticipate global developments in the post-World War II world that would lead to the Civil Rights and anticolonial movements, or in other words that moment when the pressures of southern alterity erupted in the metropole and shaped the political and social order of the second half of the twentieth century. At roughly the same midcentury point that these forces irrupted in the power centers of the global north, the north scrambled to reconsolidate its hegemony through anticommunism and the emerging neoliberal

economic order.⁶ I offer by way of conclusion to both the chapter and this study as a whole a coda that reads Tayeb Salih's 1969 novel *Season of Migration to the North* as summary of how southern alterity points towards the postcolonial global order that emerges around midcentury.

In previous chapters, my argument has been that the global modernist novel reveals the centrality of southern alterity to the modern order. Here I argue that the geographical stratification implied in the concept of southern alterity goes beyond regional borders to shape the experience of southern subjects wherever they may find themselves. Indeed, the very forces that constitute southern alterity — economic underdevelopment, degraded racial and class relations, cultural markers — operate in similar ways where southern subjects are perceived as such in the metropole. In this regard, southern alterity extends across the borders that supposedly contain it to become a globalized phenomenon. These characters, in other words, discover that combined and uneven development obtains in the metropole as much as it does in their southern homes.

In taking up and extending Caliban-as-symbol to understand the novels discussed in this chapter, I also note that not all of the characters discussed here experience southern alterity in the same way: not all are men, not all are black. While keeping the racial and gender differences between Rhys' and Ellison's protagonists clearly in view, I nevertheless argue for the insight Caliban provides into the southern alterity: mainly, that its matrix incorporates various identities, not always equally but nevertheless comprehensively. As Édouard Glissant writes of his concept of the Relation, its

⁶ For a recent study of U.S. efforts to violently squash nascent left-wing efforts in the so-called Third World, see Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass-Murder Program that Shaped Our World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

trajectories move in three stages: 1) “from the Center towards the peripheries,” 2) “from the peripheries towards the Center,” and the final stage:

In a third stage the trajectory is abolished: the arrowlike projection becomes curved. The poet’s word leads from periphery to periphery, and, yes, it reproduces the track of circular nomadism; that is, it makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery.⁷

Glissant’s trajectory, abolishing the very notion of center and periphery, illustrates the inner tension found in Rhys’ and Ellison’s work. Neither novel overcomes or “abolishes” the center/periphery binary, but the different journeys they both portray reveal the porousness of the boundary lines demarcating these regions. Even as their protagonists are unable to escape their individual predicaments, their journeys point towards the moment when the narrator of Salih’s novel finds himself in the immaculate English gentlemen’s library that Mustafa Sa’eed has secretly placed in his Sudanese home. There east and west, north and south find themselves uncomfortably cheek-by-jowl, capturing centuries of European imperial conquest while acknowledging the global order that stretches down to into our present. While Caliban does not leave the island at the conclusion of *The Tempest*, I extend the possibility of what might happen if he did through my exploration of the journeys of the protagonists of Rhys and Ellison’s novels.

5.2 Of Cannibals and Caliban

This chapter continues the established pattern of this study, tracing how literary modernism is shaped by and responds to the condition of southern alterity. In this regard,

⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997), 28-9.

the figure of Caliban situates the history of the Caribbean, a key site of southern alterity and literary modernist invention, from virtually the first moment of colonial conquest under Columbus into the modernist period. In this light, the interest shown in Caliban-as-symbol by a handful of twentieth-century Caribbean modernists and intellectuals, at the moment when formerly colonized emergent nation-states sought to situate themselves in the world and imagine their political futures, makes sense for my study. Caliban stands in for a significant dimension of southern alterity, illuminating its ideological formation as rooted in the “discovery” of the New World. As Lamming straightforwardly writes, “Caliban is a condition.”⁸

Even in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, we see intimations of this condition as Caliban puts the lie to Prospero’s supposedly humane education, which he claims has dispossessed him of his home:

This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak’st from me. When they cam’st first,
Thou strok’st me and make much of me, would give me
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less
That burn by day and night; and then I loved thee,
And showed thee all the qualities o’th’ isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile –
Cursed be that I did so!⁹

⁸ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960; Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1992), 111.

⁹ William Shakespeare. *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 1.2.334-343. References are to act, scene, and line.

The play's ambivalence towards Caliban inspired the character's postcolonial revisions: although he embodies the effects of colonial conquest in the New World, he ends up a comedic-tragic figure in spite (or because) of his wrathful but ultimately impotent challenge to Prospero's authority. Seen in retrospect, Caliban-as-symbol evokes the intervening centuries of colonization. Of course, Shakespeare did not approach race with the valence it was soon developed: while Miranda refers to Caliban's "vile race" (1.2.361) in *The Tempest*, this likely refers "less to Caliban's skin colour than to his breeding, in the twin sense of his (bastard) lineal descent and his lack of civilized decorum," in the words of Jonathan Gil Harris.¹⁰ Having said that, the origin of the emergent modern ideological formation of race can be grasped in the play's distinction between "civilization" and the non-civilized.

European understanding of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere, far from being monolithic, seemingly vacillated between the charge of cannibalism and the myth of the "noble savage." As Peter Hulme argues, the association of indigenous Caribbeans and cannibalism was established in Columbus' account of his voyage to the New World.¹¹ As discussed in my reading of *Heart of Darkness*, cannibalism in time

¹⁰ Jonathan Gil Harris, "Shakespeare and race," *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Margreta de Graza and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 202.

¹¹ Hulme observes in *Colonial Encounters* that the term "canibales," directly related to the "practice of eating human flesh" appears for the first time in Columbus' *Journal* (17). Hulme argues that Columbus' writings draw on two discourses: one Orientalized, going back to Marco Polo; the other a discourse of savagery drawn from Herodotus, a "hegemonic" discourse that "provided a popular vocabulary for constituting 'otherness' and was not dependent upon *textual* reproduction" (21, emphasis his). It is through these strains, as well as Columbus' understanding of Genoese commerce, that the term "cannibal" comes to be associated with the Carib natives, thereby creating a new discourse by which Europeans will understand the inhabitants of the New World: "The words 'carib' or 'canibal' are now being used consistently with the ever-present and unqualified gloss 'those who eat men.' And those whom the Spaniards consider as 'caribes' have

came to be attributed to the Africans during the high colonial period. While the “noble savage” myth informed European understanding of indigenous Americans, it did not extend to the African and Indian colonized. One of its early iterations, and an influence on Shakespeare’s Caliban, is Michel de Montaigne’s essay “Of Cannibals.” Montaigne seems to defend the noble savage against the charge of cannibalism, but by doing so reveals the paternalistic double-mindedness of the accusation. He equivocatingly writes:

I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from which I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice... These nations, then, seem to me barbarous in this sense, that they have been fashioned very little by the human mind, and are still very close to their original naturalness.¹²

Befitting an early European humanist, Montaigne attempts to rationalize cultural difference through what we would call relativism. His considerable effort to humanize the indigenous Caribbeans aside, the notion of the “noble savage” nevertheless contributes to the emergent conception of southern alterity. Quite unlike Orientalism, which as Said observes, situates “knowledge of the Orient” in the “thorough study of the classical texts,”¹³ the early European observers of the indigenous peoples of the New World had only voyagers’ first-hand reports upon which to build their arguments. The understandings that resulted would prove remarkably durable despite subsequent discoveries that often put the lie to these early assessments. Despite notable

demonstrated a capacity for resistance” (41). Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: European and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797* (1986; London: Routledge, 1992).

¹² Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2003), 85.

¹³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Ed. (1978; New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 79.

counterexamples, particularly (as discussed in my second chapter) the pioneering anthropology of Franz Boas and its influence on Zora Neale Hurston's work, the "noble savage" buttressed southern alterity through its devaluation of the culture and subjectivity of indigenous Americans and the African enslaved who were imported to provide a laboring underclass in the New World.

Properly speaking, the concept of the "noble savage" predated Montaigne's essay. As influential as it was to subsequent European thought, it was not uncontested in the Enlightenment period.¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau made much of this figure in his rejoinder to the Enlightenment *philosophes*. His critique of European colonialism depended on his juxtaposition of the "noble savage" with the rapacious colonizer, as Mark Hulliung argues:

How annoyed and displeased [the *philosophes*] must have been with Rousseau, who when praising the Indians at the expense of the civilized Europeans was careful to cite Montaigne as his source, the same Montaigne all the philosophes regarded as one of their own but ahead of his time. Whatever the misdeeds of the Indians, the savages were the very picture of unspoiled goodness compared with the Spaniards who raped the Americas.¹⁵

While Rousseau found the indigenous American a useful figure for critiquing both European colonialism and the emerging Enlightenment notion of society, his invariably

¹⁴ "One especially significant instance of the proliferation of noble savagery can be traced to Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* (1503), a letter that became one of the most popular essays on the New World in the sixteenth century." Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 14.

¹⁵ Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994), 52.

paternalistic view suggests the inescapability of hegemonic colonialist discourse for even the most critical European thinkers of the time.

Whether praising or pillorying the “noble savage,” European writers tend to either outright deny or efface the possibility that these subjects possessed a culture prior to colonialism. In this regard, even the most generous among them tended to lapse into paternalism, as Sankar Muthu makes clear:

This nearly acultural understanding of New World peoples leaves the work of the creation and maintenance of these societies largely to fortune and nature. The role of climate, a key category in the analysis of human diversity not only in Montaigne’s time but through the Enlightenment period, was central to his understanding of the role of fortune in helping to bring about and to maintain savage societies.¹⁶

As discussed in previous chapters through the work of Roxann Wheeler and Jennifer Rae Greeson, climate has long been one of the primary factors in metropolitan fashioning of southern identity, from the inauguration of the plantation system and transatlantic slavery forward to the modernist era. The importance of climate for Montaigne’s understanding of the “noble savage” in early modernity and that figure’s afterlives in our own time indicates the development of European views of global south culture – or lack thereof. The acultural conception described by Muthu only grew more dominant with the importation of enslaved West Africans into the New World.

Against these foundational discourses, twentieth-century Caribbean intellectuals took up the figure of Caliban to articulate their own distinct relationship to modernism.

¹⁶ Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 17.

Césaire's play *A Tempest* recontextualizes Caliban by drawing on the intervening centuries of colonialization, enslavement, and liberation since Shakespeare, presenting a Caliban who learns the lessons of *Négritude*. After telling Prospero that "from now on I won't answer to the name Caliban," saying that it's an "insult," Prospero responds, "Cannibal would suit you, but I'm sure you wouldn't like that, would you?"¹⁷ Directly revising the passage from Shakespeare quoted above, Césaire's Caliban connects Prospero's "humane" education to his need for exploitative, extractive, colonized labor:

You didn't teach
me a thing! Except to jabber in your own language so
that I could understand your orders: chop the wood,
wash the dishes, fish for food, plant vegetables, all
because you're too lazy to do it yourself. And as for
your learning, did you ever impart any of *that* to me?
No, you took care not to.¹⁸

If Shakespeare implies Prospero deceives Caliban by teaching him the words for sun, moon, and plants in exchange for his guidance around the island, Césaire makes explicit the relationship between education and colonial dehumanization: "All your science you keep for/yourself alone, shut up in those big books."¹⁹ Caliban's straightforward anger in Shakespeare — "You taught my language, and my profit on't/Is I know how to curse" (1.2.366-7) — in *A Tempest* becomes a shrewd awareness of the knowledge he has been denied. The political and cultural shifts from the first decades of the seventeenth century

¹⁷ Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*, trans. Richard Miller (1969; New York: TCG Translations, 2002), 20.

¹⁸ Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*, 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

to the mid-twentieth century emerge clearly as the cannibal gives way to the black political subject in rebellion in Césaire's reimagining.

Glissant's capacious concept of the Relation offers a Caribbean-derived account of global modernity somewhat different from Césaire's, one less indebted to notions of black nationalism that some critics of *Négritude* level at that movement.²⁰ Arguing that "*The Tempest* is not a tragedy but a heroic/historical drama," Glissant sees that a "decolonized Caliban occupies this expanse and challenges Prospero's projective legitimacy" as a hero through both "the individual ardor of lyricism and the collective practice of politics."²¹ Glissant's uses his concept of the Relation to illustrate how Caliban challenges the preeminence of Western literary forms such as myth, epic, and tragedy. Against the otherness inherent in the foundational discourse of cannibalism, Glissant draws us through the intervening history to undo hierarchies of self and other,

²⁰ One could say that in the place of black nationalism rooted in Caribbean identity in *Négritude*, Édouard Glissant's Poetics of Relation is undergirded by a rhizomatic conception that finds "each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (11). In direct opposition to the millennia of "otherness" that Peter Hulme says emanates from Herodotus, Glissant puts forth a concept that relates self and Other through a dismantling of the center/periphery model so crucial to Western modernity. Beverley Ormerod writes that for Glissant, the "simple black-white opposition" of *négritude*, "a reaction to white cultural supremacy," gives way to "an undramatic acceptance of this fact and a willingness to move forward naturally along Caribbean — that is, culturally mixed — lines" (368). Similarly, J. Michael Dash claims that Glissant, "aware from the outset of the double threat of a placeless totalization on one hand and a blind romanticizing of difference, on the other," opts to invest "place with an opacity that would ensure a totality that was a non-centrist web of relations, not totalizingly homogenous but fraught with the tensions of diversity" (108). Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*; Beverley Ormerod, "Beyond 'Négritude': Some Aspects of the Work of Édouard Glissant," *Contemporary Literature* 15, no. 3 (1974): 360-369; J. Michael Dash, "No Mad Art: The Deterritorialized 'Déparleur' in the work of Édouard Glissant," *Paragraph* 24, no. 3 (2001): 105-116.

²¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 54.

center and periphery to offer instead a rival account of modernity that, as Beverley Ormerod writes, moves along necessarily “culturally mixed” Caribbean lines.²²

Glissant’s alternative, Antilles-centered account of modernity accords with Hulme’s definition of the Caribbean, following Immanuel Wallerstein, as “a coastal and insular region that stretched from what is now southern Virginia in the USA to the most eastern part of Brazil.”²³ Whether through the lens of *Négritude*, the Relation, or Wallerstein’s World-Systems Theory, each argues for a Caribbean that encompasses a wide region marked by its suitability for growing such crops as cotton, tobacco, and sugar, as well as its susceptibility to that singular climatological phenomenon, the hurricane. Rather than adjudicating the correctness of these accounts, I emphasize that in each of them the global south of both imagination and reality extends beyond conceptual boundaries to encompass a wider frame of reference than European understandings afford them. Just as supposedly separate geographical regions like the Caribbean and the U.S. south closely share agricultural and ecological conditions, supposedly disparate literary texts such as *The Tempest* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also prove related to one another.

The strains of history, geography, and culture I draw together should not become lost in an undifferentiated mass; likewise, the political differences between the Atlantic and Gulf Coast U.S. and the revolutionary formation signified by José Martí’s “Our America” must also be distinguished. To that end, Roberto Fernández Retamar’s essay “Caliban: Notes Towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America” faces this issue

²² Beverley Ormerod, “Beyond *Négritude*,” (368).

²³ Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 4.

directly from a distinctively post-Revolutionary Cuban Marxist perspective. Recalling the question posed to him by a leftist European journalist — “Does a Latin-American culture exist?” — Retamar in his essay limns the deep residue of colonialism inherent in the question itself:

The question seemed to me to reveal one of the roots of the polemic and, hence, could also be expressed another way: “Do you exist?” For to question our culture is to question our very existence, our human reality itself, and thus to be willing to take a stand in favor of our irredeemable colonial condition, since it suggests that we would be but a distorted echo of what occurs elsewhere. This elsewhere is of course the metropolis, the colonizing centers, whose “right wings” have exploited us and whose supposed “left wings” have pretended and continue to pretend to guide us with pious solicitude – in both cases with the assistance of local intermediaries of varying persuasions.²⁴

The journalist’s question unwittingly echoes Prospero’s justification of Caliban’s bondage due to the latter’s lack of enculturation, as well as the threat of mixed-race offspring, a psychological fear that stalks dominant discussions of cultural difference in the West (to wit, observe any contemporary discussion of undocumented migration in the U.S.). Caliban might use the language he has been taught to curse Prospero, but his humanity is one of the “distorted echoes of what occurs elsewhere” that Retamar describes. The situation today, whether in the guise of liberal paternalistic “concern” or right-wing neo-colonialism, bears similarities with, respectively, southern paternalism during the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and contemporary free-market

²⁴ Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, 3.

globalization under the rubric of spreading freedom, a logic deeply indebted to the 3C's (Christianity, civilization, and commerce) of the high imperial period. To take just one instance, consider the shift from the U.S.'s Good Neighbor Policy under Franklin Delano Roosevelt to anti-Castro Cold War aggression, which persists today.²⁵

To return to my comments about race in *The Tempest*, while its modern formation is not yet properly articulated in Shakespeare's play, another view of the human was emergent at that time. As Silvia Federici writes, the most "ideal embodiment" of the new person issues from the "Reformation and the rise of the mercantile bourgeoisie...is the Shakesperean Prospero...who combined the celestial spirituality of Ariel and the brutish materiality of Caliban."²⁶ This new configuration of the human had wide-reaching and not entirely coherent effects; in the previous chapter I observed the cruel irony of the Enlightenment's account of freedom developing as staggering numbers of enslaved West Africans and their descendants labored to create the fortunes of the global north. Against this backdrop, the "unthinkable" Haitian Revolution thrust forth a rival account of human freedom. Sylvia Wynter evocatively draws Caliban into this picture:

This Caliban, transformed at night before the fire, talking, singing, involved in ritual and religion which was still arranged around a spiritual altar of African gods, created the culture out of which the Haitian revolution, fused into an equally revolutionary European cultural tradition, sprang.²⁷

²⁵ For an account of how literary movements tracked alongside and responded to these governmental and institutional shifts, see Harris Feinsod, *The Poetry of the Americas: From Good Neighbors to Countercultures* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017).

²⁶ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 133-34.

²⁷ Sylvia Wynter, "We Must Learn to Sit Down and Talk About a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism: Part One," *Jamaica Journal* 2, no. 4 (1968), 28.

The Caliban that Wynter envisions holds fragments of African spiritual and cultural practice alongside those developed by the enslaved on the New World plantation, both within and against the European values that were likewise fragmentally adopted. From this cultural *mélange* emerges the realm of postcolonial Caribbean writing; if “Caliban is a condition,” as Lamming writes, so his “history — for he has a most turbulent history — belongs entirely to the future.”²⁸ This future engaged the creative energies of the Caribbean writer, as shaped by their particular history, culture, and material conditions, in the development of a distinctive Caribbean modernism.

From this develops what Simon Gikandi describes as an “irruption into modernity” in *Writing in Limbo*. While for Gikandi Lamming owes too much to “the traditional uncertainty of modernism and modernity,” his argument regarding the “revisionary” modernism of Caribbean writers gets to the significance of Caliban for both their self-conception and their understanding of the larger global forces that shape them:

My basic premise, then, is that Caribbean writers cannot adopt the history and culture of European modernism, especially as defined by the colonizing structures, but neither can they escape from it because it has overdetermined Caribbean cultures in many ways. Moreover, for peoples of African and Asian descent, the central categories of European modernity — history, national language, subjectivity — have value only when they are fertilized by figures of the “other” imagination which colonialism has sought to repress.²⁹

²⁸ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, 107.

²⁹ Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992), 3-4

This Caribbean modernism acknowledges the “tug of both Europe and Africa,” by which the “Caribbean imagination is sustained.”³⁰ Whether termed Caribbean or Black Atlantic, I avoid describing this modernism as alternative because, whether or not they would have agreed, the ethos of “make it new” developed by the practitioners of high modernist literary practice is realized in the work of writers and thinkers like Césaire, Lamming, Wynter, Retamar, Glissant, and others, including the novelists considered in this chapter.³¹ Viewing the distance charted here from Montaigne’s “noble savage” to Retamar’s Caliban offers an only slightly reductive summation of the centuries-long arguments regarding the nature of the non-European subject. In this regard, the use to which postcolonial Caribbean writers put Caliban is part and parcel of the “irruption into modernity” Gikandi describes: the “colonial anxiety” they experience “enables a narrative of liberation in the colonizer’s language.”³² Emerging from the ragged legacy of the destructive imposition of modernity, southern modernism offers not an alternative to its high European counterpart, but rather a new backdrop against which the global dynamics of modernity are viewed more completely. The view from the south both

³⁰ Ibid, 10.

³¹ Gikandi does posit the Caribbean “irruption into modernity” as a kind of aesthetic alternative to high modernist models, comparing the “process of creolization” to the “narrative strategy and counter-discourse” that moves “away from outmoded and conventional modes of representation associated with colonial domination and colonizing cultural structures” (*Writing in Limbo*, 5). Following the concept of combined and uneven development and the modernist stricture to “make it new,” I view Caribbean modernism as not as an alternative to but a counter-development within modernism tout court. Buttressing my view is the early and fruitful collaboration between so-called Commonwealth writers and British modernists who were sincerely interested in globalizing Anglophone modernism; for more on this, see Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 1-37.

³² Ibid, 11.

completes and transforms modernism, positioning it as the global system it has always been.

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to Rhys and Ellison's novels to demonstrate how their characters navigate their respective metropolitan destinations of London and New York in light of the southern attachments they cannot escape. By way of the modern evolution of the human and the rival symbol of Caliban just discussed, these novels help complete the portrait of southern alterity expressed in the modernist novel that this study addresses.

5.3 What the Plantation Ledger Measures

Plantation fiction is haunted by many things: slavery, the southern aristocracy, class, the lash, the threat of miscegenation, and in its more gothic iterations, spectral figures themselves. Among these ghosts I include the powers of quantification that drive modernity through capital accumulation. The previous chapter discusses Ian Baucom's work in demonstrating how quantification shapes the emerging modern world through the number-keeping practices of trade, enslavement, insurance, and so forth. The plantation, the central colonial institution in the Caribbean, both exists because of these powers of quantification and extends them out into the world; the abstraction of numbers belies a reality as destructive for those caught in its crosshairs as it was central to building the modern world.

The plantation is one of the signal institutions of modernity, not least for the techniques of bookkeeping and accounting that governed its day-to-day operations. By virtue of its geographical remove from Europe, the plantation's centrality to the development of European wealth has long been effaced. Indeed, this is a key building-

block of southern alterity. Eric Williams' monumental study of 1944, *Capitalism and Slavery*, revised traditional notions of Western development to instead establish a more comprehensive account of global dynamics by arguing for the new market established by slavery and the plantation:

The importance of the discovery of America lay not in the precious metals it provided but in the new and inexhaustible market it afforded for European commodities. One of its principal effects was to "raise the mercantile system to a degree of splendour and glory which it could never otherwise have attained to." It gave rise to an enormous increase in world trade. [The quote is from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.]³³

Williams demonstrated this relationship, to the near total lack of interest of scholars for decades after. Regardless of debates on the precise origins of modernity and capitalism, the tremendous economic engine of the plantation should be understood as central to these global developments. Baucom for his part boldly posits that the "long twentieth century runs from the mid-eighteenth century through the 'present'...Its time consciousness is hauntological."³⁴ Baucom's evocation of the Derridean hauntological suggests that modernity consists of spectral accumulations stretching back to its origins, which both predate and constitute the present; as Derrida gnomically writes, "it spectralizes."³⁵ Such a formulation provides insight into the haunting presence of the plantation in a novel such as *Voyage in the Dark*.

³³ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1994), 51.

³⁴ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 30-31.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge 1994), 63.

The plantation in *Voyage* exists solely in Anna's memory; by displacing the few plantation scenes from the narrative unfolding, the novel reinforces the already-haunted nature of the plantation in a post-slavery economic order. Anna does speak directly of her plantation home in Dominica in one scene, amidst an otherwise bantering conversation prior to an assignation with her lover Walter. To his offer of a drink, Anna selects whisky, saying that it is "in my blood...All my family drink too much,"³⁶ recalling to herself a memory of her drunken Uncle Bo offering some strong punch to her father. Walter responds, "You're a rum little devil, aren't you?" (52). "Oh, I always was rum," Anna says, before drunkenly confessing, "When I was a kid I wanted to be black...I'm the fifth generation born out there, on my mother's side" (52). Then, discussing the relative beauty of Dominica versus England, Anna interjects: "I saw an old slave-list at Constance once" (52). As happens so often in the novel, stream-of-consciousness memories from Anna's home intrude on her narration; in this instance, the plantation ledger bleeds into a conversation between her father and her stepmother Hester:

...Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant. The sins of the fathers Hester said are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation – don't talk such nonsense to the child Father said – a myth don't get tangled up in myths he said to me...

"All those names written down, I said. "It's funny, I've never forgotten it." (53)

Anna continues to mix memory alongside her conversation with Walter as it carries on, until he takes her upstairs.

³⁶ Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 51. Subsequent excerpts cited parenthetically.

As Walter guides her to bed, Anna's childhood desire to be black and her fascination with the plantation ledger merge in a repeated assertion: "I'm a real West Indian,' I kept saying. I'm the fifth generation on my mother's side" (55). What it means to be a *real* West Indian for Anna seems bound to the number of generations she can tie matrilineally to her family's presence on the island. As with the data of the plantation ledger, which Anna describes as "in columns – the names and the ages and what they did and then General Remarks" (52), the authenticity of her West Indian identity functions only when legitimized by the number of creole generations she belongs to. Although seemingly contradictory, the relationship between Anna's insistence on being authentically West Indian and her desire to efface her status as a white creole in favor of blackness reveals the novel's larger struggle with the question of identity shaped by colonization, one that subsumes race imperfectly in a larger cultural formation that the novel cannot quite grasp. The plantation ledger, and the figure of the human chattel encoded within, symbolize Anna's inner turmoil regarding her own identity and the question of race.

For a white creole on the island of Dominica, the question of identity was particularly fraught. Although clearly a member of the ruling class by virtue of her skin color, Rhys encountered "a mixture of things French and things English," with the French remaining dominant, as Teresa O'Connor writes.³⁷ O'Connor continues: "A white Creole and colonial of English and Welsh origins like Rhys most probably would have felt some confusion about which group to identify with," particularly considering that her

³⁷ Teresa O'Connor, *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels* (New York: New York UP, 1986), 16.

nominally Anglican family opted to educate her in a Roman Catholic convent school.³⁸ Nor were racial issues far from Rhys' mind; in one of the exercise notebooks in which she drafted the material that she drew on to write *Voyage in the Dark*, she "expresses her confusion and conflict" regarding her grandfather, a slaveowner, as well as her musings about his wife "who was described as Spanish."³⁹ As O'Connor observes, the theme of racial mixing remained central to Rhys' imagination, emerging in both her fiction and interviews.

Rhys conveys her experience of the complications of ethnicity, race, and identity in Dominica through Anna's conflicted attitudes towards blackness in the novel. Along with her childhood desire to be black, Anna — sometimes fondly, sometimes fearfully — recalls her family's black maid, Francine: "But I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white" (72). Against the rational order of the ledger and the fixed categories of race, Anna's desire to efface her whiteness expresses the conflicted position of the white creole. The irrevocably mixed social relations of the Caribbean, following Glissant, are not egalitarian, but rather hierarchical. Anna knows, however discomfortingly, that in Dominica she sits atop this hierarchy, but by the same token her experiences in England demonstrate that in that milieu her whiteness only gets her so far.

No longer atop the hierarchy in England, her interstitial position deepens the dissatisfaction she felt on Dominica and undergirds her identification with Maillote Boyd, even as her own sense of identity slips away from her as the novel progresses. Mary Lou

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 20.

Emery in her book *Jean Rhys at "World's End"* writes, "Through colonial exile, the marginality of Rhys's female characters multiplies."⁴⁰ Emery describes how white creoles find themselves "divided within the context of the islands' histories and cultures," torn between the shame of their ancestors' involvement in the slave trade and plantation life, desirous of identification with a black culture that can neither accept nor approve of them, and perhaps looking towards a "'mother' country" that has long ago disavowed them.⁴¹ In Emery's account of Anna's descent, she begins by occupying "a threshold position between black and white races," but ends up an "overdetermined Other" who is declassed and sexually exploited.⁴² While Anna's trajectory takes her from marginalization to the bare fringes of English society, that cannot justify her identification with Maillote Boyd. J. Dillon Brown calls this association "hardly credible, as Anna descends from the family who owned the girl, and her family's prominence and economic wellbeing on the island surely arise in part from its members' earlier status as slaveholders."⁴³ I find it difficult to establish Rhys' authorial stance on Anna's identification with Maillote Boyd from evidence in the novel itself, although Rhys was certainly aware of her own family's slaveholding past and not particularly proud of it. My interest lies less in determining exactly how genuine Rhys or her character's attitudes towards black Dominicans are than in seeing how southern alterity wends its way through Anna's experience. Having said that, Brown's discounting of Anna's "claiming the mantle of victim" in associating herself with Maillote due to "her own complicity with

⁴⁰ Mary Lou Emery, *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (Austin: U of Texas Press, 1990), 12.

⁴¹ Ibid, 13.

⁴² Ibid, 22-3.

⁴³ J. Dillon Brown, "Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys's Critical Discourse," *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 2 (2010), 575.

racial oppression on her home island” misses the mark considerably.⁴⁴ Certainly critics have been too quick to misattribute anticolonial attitudes to Rhys, as Brown is keen to establish, but the novel complication of identity reveals deep instabilities in the proscriptions placed upon a white creole in England.

The modernity of *Voyage in the Dark* arises not merely from its techniques of stream-of-consciousness and the layering of narrative voices, although it should be credited to Rhys that she developed a range of modernist literary expression independent from and in advance of the enshrinement of such approaches following the serialization of *Ulysses* beginning in 1918.⁴⁵ I also credit the novel’s modernity to its insistent interrogation of the very basis of identity that had been long solidified by the modern order, as illustrated in the figure of Caliban. The crux of southern alterity in *Voyage* comes in the tension between Anna’s yearning to escape her conflicted identity and the neat, orderly columns of the plantation ledger. In short, the formation of the southern subject requires not only the notion of cultural inferiority, but the rational order of the ledger as well; the former is measured against the latter. By virtue of this situation, the marginal identity ascribed to Anna in England is at once central to and apposite the modern order.

Faulkner, another white global modernist novelist writing in the afterlives of the plantation, also takes up the question of identity in light of the rationality of the plantation

⁴⁴ Ibid, 575-6.

⁴⁵ Rhys began drafting the material that became *Voyage in the Dark* around the start of World War One, after the dissolution of her stage career and a brief love affair that ended, echoing the ending of the novel, in a botched abortion. See Teresa O’Connor, *Jean Rhys*, 46ff.

ledger. In “The Bear,” Isaac McCaslin comes to repudiate his inheritance, the old family plantation, after he reconstructs the story told by the plantation ledgers:

To him it was as though the ledgers in their scarred cracked leather bindings were being lifted down one by one in their fading sequence and spread open on the desk or perhaps upon some apocryphal Bench or even Altar or perhaps before the Throne Itself for a last perusal and contemplation and refreshment of the Allknowledgeable before the yellowed pages and the brown thin ink in which was recorded the injustice and a little at least of its amelioration and restitution faded back forever into the anonymous communal original dust⁴⁶

Faulkner’s language here suggests that Isaac attaches some mythical or religious significance to the ledgers, but they possess no powers of atonement. While Isaac repudiates his inheritance as a direct result from the moral horror he discovers in the ledgers, this is no an act of restorative justice; as Olga Vickery writes, Isaac’s “withdrawal...is in reality an attempt to evade both the guilt of his forefathers and his own responsibilities.”⁴⁷ Isaac’s moral calculation makes him complicit in a type of white innocence that believes it can free itself from the implications of the plantation and slavery. Isaac’s recognition of the injustice inherent in rationality of the ledger does not lead to a vision of justice, but rather an evasion from the action necessary for any setting of the world to rights. The meaning of the ledger can be rejected, but for no larger moral significance beyond individual choice.

⁴⁶ William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (1942; New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 250.

⁴⁷ Olga Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*, Revised Ed. (1959; Baton Rouge: U of Louisiana P, 1964), 133.

“The Bear,” like *Absalom, Absalom!*, contrasts the natural order against modern development; just as the unnaturalness of Sutpen’s hubristic “design” curses the land and dooms Sutpen himself, so the rationalizing order of the ledger becomes a horror from which Isaac turns in disgust in favor of an “organic” view of nature adopted from the part-Native American Sam Fathers, who initiates Isaac into the hunt. But there is a flaw in his attempt to exchange the calculations of the ledger with the calculations of morality. Melanie R. Benson explains it thus:

If the Bear in its most prosaic interpretation represents nature, this tells us volumes about the birthright Isaac believes has been given him, supported and mentored by the mystical black Indian Sam Fathers. Ike means for his desire to appear exculpatory: with a convenient Indian ally resurrected from the obsolescence of his earlier vision, he seeks to emancipate nature from man’s proprietary claims; but the endeavor is deeply compromised by his tacit assumption that he has “inherited” the moral graces and the prey necessary to carry out the noble task.⁴⁸

Isaac’s romantic attachment to the land and the figure of Sam Fathers serves to reinforce his own white prerogative, in spite of the patina of indigeneity Fathers lends to Isaac’s self-conception. Indeed, Isaac’s self-redeeming investment in the “noble savage” figure belies the realities of the ledger. As Benson writes, “In the end, the novel’s mixed-race offspring suffer most for their detention within the governing priorities of the ledger.”⁴⁹ Isaac’s failure to imagine anything beyond repudiation not only rests on the same

⁴⁸ Melanie R. Benson, *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912-2002* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 2008), 45-46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 46.

discourse of noble savagery that created the figure of Caliban, it also fails to offer anything to those most constrained by the ledger's calculations.

Faulkner and Rhys adoption of stream-of-consciousness narration signals an irruption into modernity similar to but not identical to that described by Gikandi. For other writers, stream-of-consciousness articulates marginalized interiority: think of the protagonists of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, or the ongoing colonial situation undergirding *Ulysses*. Similarly, Sam Selvon includes a scene in *The Lonely Londoners* echoing Joyce in its stream-of-consciousness conveyance of black West Indian characters' first experience of a London springtime. While this technique allows for a wider range of representation than more directly conventional novelistic forms, Faulkner and Rhys deploy it in order to reckon with the rationality of the ledger through a supra-rational aesthetic strategy. Unable to fully express or deny the horrors encoded within the ledger, they instead diffusing them through modernist aesthetics.

5.4 The Curious Position of the White Creole

Both Benson's critique of Faulkner and Brown's critique of Rhys level a charge of complicity with the white supremacist order against Isaac and Anna, respectively. Certainly, a form of racial innocence undergirds Isaac's repudiation, largely due to his position as a landowner. Anna does not enjoy a similar class privilege; dispossessed and adrift in England, Anna's finds herself subtly racialized.

The effect of this racialization on Anna emerges in her meeting with her stepmother Hester. Uncle Bo, having been asked by Hester to put up half the money for Anna's return to Dominica, writes a letter explaining his refusal to do so on the grounds that Hester sold her deceased husband's property right after his death, leaving her

wealthy. Hester, taking this as a personal affront, launches into a torrid rant describing what she considers her ill-treatment and abuse. Feigning pity for Anna, “considering everything,” Anna places her accusation directly:

“You’re trying to make out that my mother was coloured,” I said. “You always did try to make that out. And she wasn’t.” “I’m trying to make out nothing of the kind. You say unforgivable things sometimes...I always did my best for you and I never got any thanks for it. I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not a nigger and of course I couldn’t do it. Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked — and still do.” (65)

Hester continues at considerable length, claiming that she always tried to do her best for Anna regardless of her behavior. As the scene ends, Anna recalls, “She always hated Francine,” and tried to send her away, despite Anna claiming, “when I was with her I was happy” (67). To Anna, Hester’s accusation of black or colored blood in her lineage comes from her stepmother’s deep discomfort with the too-close relations Anna enjoyed with the servants, particularly her favored Francine. Yet the accusation of a “sing-song” voice more fitting the black inhabitants of Dominica reflects Rhys’ own experience of prejudice upon her arrival in England; furthermore, a literary forerunner to the white colonial of questionable racial affiliation with a peculiar accent can be found in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, where the protagonist on the first page is described as “burned black as any native,” speaking “the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song,” despite being “white – a poor white of the very poorest.”⁵⁰ Helen Carr writes

⁵⁰ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (1901; New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 3.

that Rhys “was not marked out as different by skin-colour as the majority of her fellow Caribbeans would be, but as soon as she spoke, her strong Caribbean accent identified her as alien.”⁵¹ The fear of white creoles as a debased race, prone to licentiousness and perhaps even inbreeding, created a situation where in England they “could no longer be regarded as wholly white, and certainly not as truly English.”⁵² Much like the prejudice experienced by light-skinned black characters seen in the novels of Nella Larsen, or the complications of miscegenation in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the attribution of debased or not-quite whiteness attributed to Anna in England functions as another specter of blackness threatening to sully the whiteness at the heart of colonial self-understanding.

This makes her a particularly apt target for exploitation, both sexually and economically, by characters as varied as her lover Walter, her landlord, and her business partner Ethel, who persuades her to participate in a shabby pseudo-prostitution as a manicurist. Indeed, in each of these situations the sexual and monetary economies are so bound up as to be indistinguishable from one another; Anna, aware of what is going on but not seeing much alternative, responds ambivalently. At times she enjoys herself, but at other times she lashes out, as in her reaction to overhearing herself dismissed by her old chorus-line compatriot Laurie and the American businessman Joe as “only a kid” (124). Little sense can be made of Anna’s mercurial temperament or decision-making unless one considers her impossible position: racially ambiguity does not declass her, exactly – English class structure isn’t that fungible – but she doesn’t fit neatly into a class position either. As Carr observes, her “dubious occupation” as a manicurist in Ethel’s

⁵¹ Helen Carr, “Jean Rhys: West Indian Intellectual,” *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, ed. Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 100.

⁵² *Ibid*, 101.

massage parlor causes her to slip “further out of the respectable middle classes into the interstices of the English class system, neither one thing nor the other; an anomaly.”⁵³

The path taken by a character like Sutpen in *Absalom*, in which his Caribbean experiences only redound to his benefit and enable his upward mobility, are foreclosed to Anna.

Both the vagaries of the English class system and the plantation ledger utilize rigid and quantifiable reason to position subjects within social relations, with one significant difference: whereas ambiguous Anna’s class position arises from her inability to fit anywhere neatly in a system, the ledger knows exactly what to do with its subjects. Benson argues that the logic of quantification creates a psychological lack in much twentieth-century U.S. southern literature:

For southerners, the numerical fetish emerges to signify a sense of loss and desire at the same time that it dooms them to the essential emptiness of this modern narcissism, a material and psychological yearning and a loss that can never be compensated.⁵⁴

This feeling of yearning and loss is akin to the simultaneous looking-towards and occlusion I read in Faulkner and Rhys’ encounters with the ledger. Even keeping in mind the major difference in organizational schema between class and race I have just mentioned, the Enlightenment-derived rationality inherent in both classifications takes part against the backdrop of a larger, global hierarchical order. Benson does not eschew this rationality by raising the Freudian discourse of fetish and narcissism, desire and lack,

⁵³ Ibid, 102.

⁵⁴ Melanie R. Benson, *Disturbing Calculations*, 13.

but rather provides a map to understanding Anna's experience of southern alterity. These are the "structures of attitude and reference," following Said, that both result from and make possible the condition of southern alterity. Like the rational order of the ledger, its effects are combined and uneven, experienced differently by characters based on their social position, yet nevertheless taking part in a shared set of conditions. This is why Anna's identification with Maillote Boyd both makes sense while being so fundamentally misguided.

Emerging from the same plantation cultural matrix, the social relations encoded in the identities "white creole" and "black" share an instability owing to their fundamentally contested status. Noting this shared cultural background should not be taken to imply notions of equality which cannot obtain in a society based on a hierarchical racial taxonomy. Rather, I am thinking of Glissant's Relation: in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, Glissant writes that Faulkner "wants to draw attention to the stunning and apparently impossible connection, which in poetics we call the Relation, between all these people – Whites, Blacks, and Indians – caught in the system's trap."⁵⁵ The point is that the impossibility of this connection, not unlike the unthinkability of the Haitian Revolution, unfolds within the very modernity that has created the difference that such revisionary accounts seek to scramble and undo. Barbara and Karen Fields, in their discussion of the U.S. plantation order, observe that "slavery was not a minor exception by the central organizing principle of society," further remarking that inequality "was applicable not only to relations between slaveholders and slaves, but also to relations between men and

⁵⁵ Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (1999; Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2000), 73.

women and between the planter elite and the non-slaveholding majority.”⁵⁶ Although the situation for a white creole like Anna was complicated by imperialism and the class system, a similar logic governs her experiences between both white and black in Dominica and the white creole and the English. The mystifying ideological formation that the Fields sisters refer to as “racecraft,” in other words, surpasses their primary area of inquiry, the U.S., to instantiate an entire mode of social relations that mark the plantation matrix across the global south and the imperial center of England. After all, from a circum-Caribbean perspective, the term “white creole” could plausibly describe many characters in Faulkner’s fiction and white southerners in general, even if they lack that self-conception.

The instability of racial and class relations engendered by the plantation goes to the heart of the instability of modernity itself. By the very act of bringing the racial other into close proximity with hegemonic whiteness through enslavement, colonialism renders its proscribed identities ultimately untenable. Far from destroying these social identities, however, that instability fundamentally reinforces racial hierarchies in ways that are increasingly irrational and labyrinthine, but for that reason must be policed. Note that the scene in which Anna admits that Francine dislikes her because she is white, quoted above, begins with her escape from the hectoring of her stepmother. “When she wasn’t working Francine would sit on the doorstep and I liked sitting there with her” (71). Anna’s realization of Francine’s deeper attitudes intrudes upon her enjoyment of the simple pleasures of Francine’s companionship; while wishing she could convey her

⁵⁶ Barbara J. and Karen E. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 143-4.

hatred of her own whiteness, Anna thinks, “Being white and getting like Hester, and all the things you get — old and sad and everything” (72). Shortly after this Anna “got fever and...was ill for a long time,” and in her feverish state she, in Hester’s words, “talked about cats and a great deal about Francine.” Anna says, simply: “It was after that she started disliking Francine so much and saying she ought to be sent away” (73). Anna’s childhood proximity to Francine threatens Hester’s sense of propriety; she has seemingly internalized the British fear that the white creole had “gone native,” related to the insufficiently white status of creoles in England described by Helen Carr.⁵⁷ Likewise, consider Ethel’s comments after she and Anna see a film together, describing a character as having the “soft, dirty way that foreign girls have...and English girl wouldn’t have done that” (109). As with so many of the novels considered in this study, whiteness is here reinforced as a bulwark against the instability of identity that threatens the modern social formation, whether by foreigners generally or non-whites more specifically. At the moment that Glissant’s Relation seems to break into this order, the trap of its social relations spring shut.

As much as this order alienates and victimizes Anna, she also derives her basic attitude towards racial difference from it. Her confessions of attraction to blackness sit uncomfortably alongside her bristling response to Hester’s accusation of racial impurity. Anna does not draw from some kind of before-the-fact iteration of Glissant’s Relation, but rather fetishizes blackness for what she feels it to contain in contrast to her sense of lack as a white creole. In one of her several moments of illness in the novel, she reminds herself: “*This is England, and I’m in a nice, clean English room with all the dirt swept*

⁵⁷ Helen Carr, “Jean Rhys: West Indian Intellectual,” 101-2.

under the bed” (31, emphasis in original). She thinks, recalling a similar illness in Dominica and the care she received from Francine:

I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there, and I watched her hand waving the fan backwards and forwards and the beads of sweat that rolled from underneath her handkerchief. Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad. (31)

On the one hand, her alienation from her whiteness comprehensibly expresses her cruel treatment at the hands of Hester and the various characters in England who mock, exploit, and abuse her. As Terri Mulholland writes, caught between England and her memories of Dominica, “Anna hovers in the threshold space of identity,” lacking a secure sense of self within the boundaries that poorly contain her.⁵⁸ For Mulholland, the ambiguous identity Anna shares with many of Rhys’ protagonists speaks to the straitjacketing “conventional structures of identity, such as class and race...and traditional female roles” that they exist “outside” of.⁵⁹ Mulholland captures this dimension of Anna’s “threshold” identity, but this account does not account for her fetishization of blackness.

The question I am getting at relates not merely to Anna’s attitudes regarding race but also her own ambiguous racial status in the eyes of others. The novel accepts the biological construct of race as a given, but not unquestioningly: by portraying Anna’s conflicted attraction to blackness and her racialized status in the eyes of others, *Voyage* evokes a crux lying at the heart of southern alterity. The same modern order that reifies race as a scientific category likewise instantiates southern alterity. In this regard, the

⁵⁸ Terri Mulholland, “Between Illusion and Reality, ‘Who’s to Know’: Threshold Spaces in the Interwar Novels of Jean Rhys,” *Women: A Cultural Review*, 23, no. 4 (2012): 452.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 454.

affective quality of southern alterity — perhaps most ably viewed in the novel in the mixed-race status attributed to Anna by Hester and the chorus-girls who call her “the Hottentot” (13) — is matched by Anna’s own affective stance towards race: “Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad.” Even as Anna wishes to be other than cold and sad, she cannot be warm and gay: even if those characters attributing blackness to her were correct, it would not change things for her. More even than sadness, the primary condition Anna describes in the novel is coldness. The gulf between her desire and her reality cannot be bridged.

Could Anna’s interminably bound position be why Kenneth Ramchand, in his introduction to Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, calls *Voyage in the Dark* as “our first Negritude novel, the story of a young girl from the islands adrift in a mean and savage city”?⁶⁰ The first generation of West Indian novelists such as Selvon and Lamming expressed something akin to the alienation and anomie of Rhys’ protagonists, especially those in *Voyage* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Lamming writes of the effect of recognition on the West Indian’s sense of self-identification:

No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in foreign territory. It was only when the Barbadian childhood corresponded with the Grenadian or the Guianese childhood in important details of folk-lore, that the wider identification was arrived at. In this sense, most West Indians of my

⁶⁰ Kenneth Ramchand, “An Introduction to this Novel,” in Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956; Harlow: Longman Caribbean Writers, 1985), 3.

generation were born in England. The category West Indian, formerly understood as a geographical term, now assumes cultural significance.⁶¹

The great, perhaps the sole, advantage of the Windrush generation over Anna's alienation was that they were able to create a community in England that offered some measure of racial solidarity, or at least identification, amidst the everyday forms of racism and discrimination they faced. For Anna, white-skinned but with a tell-tale accent, and bereft of a larger expatriate community, her struggle is her own.

As I have already noted, critical assessments of Rhys as an anticolonial writer misunderstand the nature of her work. There can be no doubt, however, that her assessment of England in *Voyage* is withering; several of her other novels and stories also subject Continental Europe to similar opprobrium. Delia Caparoso Konzett argues that Rhys dismantles European culture through “stressing on the one hand the fate of a white, outmoded, nineteenth-century Europe and, on the other hand, the increasing dehumanization to which all modern culture is subject.”⁶² In Konzett's estimation, Rhys' writing is neither wholly postcolonial nor entirely “Anglo-modernist”; her writing career took place entirely in Europe and she was not influential among Caribbean writers until after her rediscovery with the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.⁶³ Thus, Ramchand's description of *Voyage in the Dark* as “the first Negritude novel” is more prescriptive than descriptive, geared more to a historicized canon than a map of influence. At the same time, Konzett argues, Rhys achieves “a task of postcolonial demythologization of identity

⁶¹ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, 214.

⁶² Delia Caparoso Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms: Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Dislocation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 129.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 132.

and humanity” that neither reifies Europe nor defends colonized non-whites, but rather deploys white creole identity to undermine white European identity.⁶⁴

In Rhys’s work it is no longer the moral failure of a dominant white European culture alone that creates the social and cultural inadequacies of colonial and racial oppression. Instead, the very notion of Western humanism and morality, as Rhys attempts to show, contains within its liberal discourses of emancipation the structural elements of social oppression. Rhys’s modernism, in this sense, reflects the structural contingencies and binarisms on which discourses of belonging and displacement, majority and minority, social privilege and deprivation are construed.⁶⁵

In this reading, Rhys articulates a vision of humanity opposed to the concept of Enlightenment subjectivity taken up both here and in the previous chapter. Konzett concludes that in the cultural displacement experienced by Rhys’ protagonists, “white European culture is represented as merely another ethnic discourse and no longer granted its privileged position.”⁶⁶ I have sympathy for Konzett’s account of Rhys’ project; certainly the ethnic dimension of her novels, particularly texts like *Voyage*, destabilize Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity rooted in European identity. At the same time, the portrayal of race in *Voyage* gives pause for how it reinscribes the very southern alterity experienced by its protagonist. Anna, in other words, embodies aspects of both sides of the color line; the question is how she does so.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 131.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 133.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 166.

Rhys' aesthetics provide a partial answer to the question. Throughout this study I have shown how the fantasy of cross-racial identification enabled white modernist writers to challenge Victorian and Edwardian aesthetics through the representation of exoticness. Michael North, as discussed earlier, describes the “[I]ngusitic imitation and racial masquerade...so important to transatlantic modernism because they allow the writer to play at self-fashioning.”⁶⁷ Rhys anticipated modernist literary innovations in the notebooks that became *Voyage*, but her proper introduction to modernism came through her time in the Left Bank, specifically her involvement with Ford Madox Ford. Peter Kalliney accounts for the shifting racial attitudes in Rhys' work by situating her as a Left Bank modernist who represented that subculture through what Ford identified as an “underdog/minority figure.”⁶⁸ Kalliney furthermore observes that Anna's belief that “[b]eing black is warm and gay, being white as cold and sad” relies “on common modernist fantasies” regarding the “more colorful lives” of blacks who “aren't weighed down by the cares of the world like the white bourgeoisie.”⁶⁹ Anna's story could plausibly be read as a failed attempt to fashion a stable sense of self against those who would deny it to her; certainly Hester uses her veiled accusation of Anna having black ancestors as an excuse to rescind any financial support. As Kalliney observes, it is entirely possible for a fourth-generation creole such as Anna's mother to have black ancestry; Anna's vehement refusal of this notion cuts against her stated desire to be black, allowing her to “[have] it both ways.”⁷⁰ In a different context, Hortense Spillers

⁶⁷ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 11.

⁶⁸ Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 230

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Peter Kalliney, 231.

writes in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”: “The notorious bastard, from Vico’s dispatched children, to Caliban, to Heathcliff, and Joe Christmas, has no official female equivalent.”⁷¹ Spillers explicates an “American grammar” rooted in the material and familial depravations of the black body in the New World, but her observation that these narratives configure “‘ethnicity’ as a scene of negation” seems particularly relevant to the destabilizing and elusive presence of race in Rhys’ novel.⁷² Anna may not be a “bastard” in the sense Spillers uses, but her ethnic status as a white creole opens her to the charge of illegitimacy nonetheless through the specter of possible black ancestry. Anna wants to have it both ways by positioning herself as a type of bastard or orphan, to become the “official female equivalent” to Caliban.

The limits and potentialities of Caliban-as-symbol can be grasped in Anna’s equivocal desires. On the one hand, this desire, as in her identification with Maillote Boyd, is patently ridiculous. On the other hand, Anna’s displacement is no less real despite her errant fascination with blackness. The opening pages of the novel find Anna attempting to narrate the difference between growing up in Dominica and her current situation in England. At times of great insecurity, she admits to focusing her attention back to the colorful street scenes in Dominica:

It was funny, but that was what I thought about more than anything else – the smell of the streets and the smells of frangipanni and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup, and incense after funerals or Corpus

⁷¹ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 204.

⁷² *Ibid*, 205.

Christi processions, and the patients standing outside the surgery next door, and the smell of the sea-breeze and the different smell of the land-breeze. (7-8)

In this passage, Anna blends together a remarkable range of aromas, tastes, and sights. Curiously, although she had just prior remembered with seeming affection the sights, sounds, and smells of black women selling fishcakes (“Salt fishcakes, all sweet an’ charmin’, all sweet an’ charmin’”), in her memories of “the savannah” the only humans recalled are those waiting for surgery, who presumably did not possess the finest aroma. Little more is said concerning them, leaving them as ciphers or specters of death – an appropriate enough reference considering the novel’s ending, and even more so considering Rhys’ original and preferred conclusion. That tidy bit of foreshadowing aside, Anna’s kaleidoscopic vision of Dominican life keeps its nameless black residents at arm’s length. Most of Anna’s encounters with people on Dominica are strained or fraught in some way, but for all that she retains a genuine sense of the island as her home in a way that England cannot be: “Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times, England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together” (8). Anna’s dissatisfaction with England results as much from the alienation she experiences as a white creole than due to its radically different climate and environment.

In Rhys’ original ending, Anna dies from a botched abortion procedure, but her publisher’s editor lobbied for a more positive conclusion that leaves Anna’s fate in question. As Elaine Savory observes, while the revised ending pleased her editor, “it isn’t really positive at all, and can still be read as a subtle suggestion that Anna’s spirit and

will to live are broken.”⁷³ According to Savory, Rhys’ preferred ending rambled on at length, revealing more about her parents’ deaths than in the published novel. Although a strict comparison between the two endings cannot be made without recourse to Rhys’ composition notebooks, Savory reports that a fragment of Anna’s memory made it from the notebooks into the published ending. This memory recalls the sights and smells of the novel’s opening, with an important difference: whereas the opening recalls the bright, sun-swept Dominican street scene of an ordinary day, the ending evokes the ritual celebration of the Masquerade:

I was watching them from between the slats of the jalousies – they passed under the window singing – it was all colours of the rainbow when you looked down at them and the sky so blue – there were three musicians at the head a man with a concertina and another with a triangle and another with a chak-chak playing There’s a Brown Girl in a Ring and after the musicians a lot of little boys turning and twisting and dancing and others dragging kerosene-tins and beating them with sticks – (185; emphasis in original)

Rhys proceeds to describe the elaborate masks worn by the celebrants, and the whole scene is preceded by her parents discussing the appropriateness of the Masquerade, providing context for an earlier moment in the novel in which Anna admits her fear of black non-Christian religion: “Obeah zombis soucrians – lying the dark frightened of the dark frightened of soucrians that fly through the window and suck your blood” (163).

⁷³ Elaine Savory, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 53.

Anna's fascination with blackness fights with the revulsion towards it modeled by her family.

This memory of the Masquerade, while suffused with black cultural expression, nevertheless evokes a European-inflected adoption. As Mary Lou Emery writes in her 1990 book-length study of Rhys, "Rhys's novels place carnival scenes and allusions to the carnival alongside events and metaphors of European theater as a challenge to the colonizing culture, as an alternative vision of community, and as a counter-worldview..."⁷⁴ Twenty-one years later, Emery revised this account, incorporating developing notions of global modernist studies that saw colonialization as less indebted to the then-fashionable hybridization theories than to notions of combined and uneven development. Emery therefore shifts her emphasis from the carnivalesque to the plantation: "That the estate in Anna's dream lies in ruins suggests the decline of the planter class in the Caribbean, and it also gestures towards a history of labor politics in which Rhys's family was closely involved."⁷⁵ Emery writes elsewhere in this later reading of the novel that Anna recognizes that Maillotte Boyd's labor was crucial for the flourishing of her own family only after her own humiliating experiences as a laborer in England.⁷⁶ The differences between Emery's two readings certainly reveal developments in modernist studies, but more specifically they illustrate the importance of a writer like Rhys to my account of global modernist literature.

Rhys, once considered a minor or marginal figure in European modernism, becomes central to a revisionist framework that seeks to move from the outside inward,

⁷⁴ Mary Lou Emery, *Jean Rhys at "World's End,"* 4.

⁷⁵ Mary Lou Emery, "The Poetics of Labor in Jean Rhys's Global Modernism," *Philological Quarterly*, 90, no. 2/3 (2011): 174.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

thereby taking account of material and social relations within the modernist novel. In this light, we can read the grievously ailing Anna's recollections of the Masquerade as a moment of cross-racial hybridity, or we can uncover the social relations of race that undergird Anna's experiences. Or we can do both. Indeed, the indeterminacy that stalks Anna's navigation of racial and class boundaries throughout the novel reveals a larger condition of modernity that normalizes northern whiteness, whether rural or metropolitan, against the irregularities of southern existence. The institutional realities of colonialism, slavery, and the plantation create the circumstances that find a young white creole in Dominica peering through the jealousies to watch that island's black inhabitants gleefully celebrating the Masquerade; these same institutions likewise create the circumstances that find that same woman recalling that instance as she lies recovering from a botched abortion in a London flat. The condition of southern alterity converges with and frustrates attempts to parcel out these moments as discrete occurrences, instead rendering them as both discrepant and conversant within a condition of combined and uneven development that leaves traces throughout the global modernist novel.

5.5 The Errant Bildungsroman

Despite the outward abandonment during the Enlightenment era of religiously inflected teleological models in favor of humanistic notions of progress, developmental logic continued to shape European and U.S. self-understanding, as well as their imperial projects, into the twentieth century.⁷⁷ Development encompasses both local and global

⁷⁷ I say this advisedly, knowing that much of the U.S.'s self-conception emerged from what Max Weber called the "Protestant ethic," and certainly latter-day U.S. foreign policy has taken an at times explicit inspiration from evangelical Christianity. Having said that, I believe the basic point stands. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (1905; New York: Penguin, 2002).

conditions, bolstering the basic “us vs. them” logic of modernity, in the process creating southern alterity through the characterization of southern spaces as under- or even mis-developed. The presence of narratives of development in the novels considered in this study therefore does not surprise: secular development narratives underpin the bildungsroman from its emergence through its modernist revisions as identified by Jed Esty. What Esty calls the “gendered suspicion of allegorization” in *Voyage in the Dark* plays into the two types of allegory he identifies in *Unseasonable Youth*: the “broken allegory,” in which the tether between the individual and the collective is severed, and the “collective allegory,” in which individuals maintain a synecdochal relationship with the collective but no longer in the service of narratives “moral or historical progress.”⁷⁸ *Voyage* fits Esty’s account of the anti-developmental modernist bildungsroman; as Anne Cunningham writes, the novel contains a “trope of circularity,” failing “to progress in a linear manner,” instead containing a “pervasive” feeling of “senseless repetition.”⁷⁹ Cunningham calls *Voyage* “a failed bildungsroman,” and her reading establishes failure as a central theme of the novel, driven by the “tropes of fragmentation, the split-self, and the problems...[created] due to gender and race-based hierarchies...”⁸⁰ If the modernist bildungsroman calls into question the developmental logic of Western conquest and colonialism, Rhys’ novel illustrates a particularly cogent aspect of this critique due to her view of Dominica from the perspective of one whose family took part in its deliberate underdevelopment.

⁷⁸ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 24.

⁷⁹ Anne Cunningham, “‘Get on or Get Out’: Failure and Negative Femininity in Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 2 (2013): 375.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 376, 382.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Peasants and Capital* takes Dominica as a test-case in demonstrating the continued relevance and importance of the peasantry for a global economic order that long ago shunted such conceptualizations aside as relics of a pre-industrial time. In his account, Dominica becomes an exemplary case of the unevenness of industrial development: the island's dominance by mostly uninhabitable volcanic mountains makes it particularly ill-suited for wide-scale industrial agriculture, resulting in a persistent peasant class that he admits confounds the modern order that had supposedly consigned the peasantry to history. He writes: "What we have in Dominica and the rest of the Caribbean may thus be a unique historical record of peasantries emerging socially and physically after the penetration of a peripheral area by the West, an area in which no reference can be made to a past within the past[.]"⁸¹ In other words, the persistence of a peasant order in Dominica should force us to revise hegemonic notions of global development; in maintaining a large peasant class, Dominica slips outside of modern time altogether. What is more, Trouillot finds a contradiction at the heart of "New World slavery": "the very same profit motives which made the plantation and ideal unit of production for the commodities aimed at the world market acted against its institutionalization as a coherent unit for the production or consumption of food by the enslaved labor force."⁸² What seems a minor point regarding regional food production actually forces us to revise regnant accounts of the plantation economy that participated in building the modern world. Although Rhys' novel does not mount such a critique, it nevertheless converges with Trouillot's account of the Dominican economy through its

⁸¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 21.

⁸² *Ibid*, 72.

anti-developmental narrative and picture of Dominica as an island populated either by the decadent class descended from the plantation masters and owners or the blacks who serve as their servants or as peasants.

Similarly, *Voyage* converges with the Victorian obsessions with cleanliness and purity described by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather*. In a chapter arguing for British soap advertisements as an imperial synecdoche, she writes: “If imperialism garnered the bounty of cheap cotton and soap oils from coerced colonial labor, the middle class Victorian fascination with clean, white bodies and clean, white clothing stemmed not only from the rampant profiteering of the imperial economy but also from the realms of ritual and fetish.”⁸³ Anna, while at lunch with Hester just before they discuss the letter from Uncle Bo, notices some advertising copy on the back of the newspaper, which reads: “What is Purity? For Thirty-five Years the Answer has been Bourne’s Cocoa” (58). Emery reads this ad copy in light of the sexual impurity imputed to Anna by Hester and others, drawing on Victorian laws such as the Contagious Diseases Acts and social movements like the Purity Crusades and the Social Hygiene Movement: “The ideology of purity joints millennia of patriarchal silencing of women’s sexual experience in Anna’s repetition of and inability to complete the ad slogan,” she writes, referencing Anna’s obsessive mental return to the ad copy throughout her meeting with Hester.⁸⁴ As already noted, Hester’s censoriousness extends from Anna’s questionable morals to the taint of black ancestry; the “purity” of Bourne’s Cocoa plays off of the twining sexual and racial impurity in Hester’s accusations towards Anna. As Klaudia Lee observes, the novel’s

⁸³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 211.

⁸⁴ Mary Lou Emery, *Jean Rhys at “World’s End”*, 98.

discourse of dirt and cleanliness reflects Anna's status as a white creole; for one thing, some manner of pollution adheres to Anna's otherwise white presentation in the eyes of the purity- and cleanliness-obsessed English. Notions of purity and impurity do not map cleanly onto schemas of development, but nevertheless the anti-developmental nature of Rhys' "failed bildungsroman" calls notions of purity, racial or otherwise, into question.

The two novels in the forefront of my argument in this chapter, *Voyage* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, fit the broad outlines of the modernist bildungsroman in their ironic portrayal of education and development. Both Anna and Ellison's protagonists are initiated into a bitter education that parodies Eurocentric notions of progress mediated by institutions of learning; measured against the bourgeois standards such institutions appeal to, the protagonists of these novels do not progress upward linearly, but rather degenerate into conditions imputed to them by southern alterity.

As the remainder of this chapter turns from considering the white creole Anna to the unnamed black protagonists of Ellison's *Invisible Man* and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the question of race emerges again. *The Tempest* never explicitly states that Caliban is black; rather, race has been imputed to him by virtue of his degraded humanity, the suggestion of cannibalism, and his enslaved status. In other words, the "blackness" of Caliban is at least in part a function of the negative characteristics historically attributed to enslaved Africans and their descendants. The protean nature of Caliban's many iterations makes him therefore not just a symbol of blackness, or enslavement, but more generally southern alterity. Revisionist accounts of Caliban seek to engage not just the character's convergence with dominant characterizations of blackness, but also his implied existence beyond Western notions of

developmental time. Similarly, Ellison and Johnson's protagonists find themselves within a developmental logic that alienates them even as they seek to overcome it by mastering its codes. Even as the racial characterization of Rhys' Anna cannot converge with that of Ellison and Johnson's protagonists, their shared southern alterity and existence outside developmental time create the grounds for my comparative readings of these novels. In short, I am arguing that my account of southern alterity subsumes but does not efface questions of race; southern figures of any race are configured as outside Western developmental time by southern alterity, albeit unequally. In all cases, southern alterity imputes certain values to characters configured as southern generally. In the instance of characters perceived to possess blackness, that imputation becomes more acute. Indeed, as I will show, the moment of black awareness for Ellison and Johnson's protagonists demonstrates the unevenness of southern alterity's effects on the black, as opposed to the white, southern subject.

5.6 The Primordial Moment of Black Awareness

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna recalls her strict education in the convent school, but one moment in particular, although taking place outside of the classroom, likely refers to the tutelage of her instructors. In fact, the passage reads as though taken directly from a textbook:

The Caribs indigenous to this island were a warlike tribe and their resistance to white domination, though spasmodic, was fierce. As lately as the beginning of the nineteenth century, they raided one of the neighbouring islands, under British rule, overpowered the garrison and kidnapped the governor, his wife and three children. (105)

The passage goes on like this a while longer, reflecting the charge of indigenous savagery that Peter Hulme, among others, establish as central to white understanding of the Caribbean. Where exactly Anna obtained this information does not matter so much as what it conveys. Within this pedagogical framework, Anna either lies outside the history of the island's inhabitants or is meant to identify with the children of the governor assaulted by the Caribs. Either way, the effect is to reinforce her exceptionalism, her whiteness setting her apart from most Dominicans.

By contrast, consider the primordial moment of black self-awareness described by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in blue sky and great wandering shadows.⁸⁵

Whereas Anna strives by circumlocution to articulate her position within whatever context she finds herself in – whether public or domestic, in Dominica or England – Du Bois suffers no such confusion. Rather, the moment his white classmate refuses his Valentine's card because of his black skin, it becomes clear not only who he is, but exactly where he exists within social relations. This is the origin of his concept of “double consciousness,” that “sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...”⁸⁶ Du Bois' moment of life-altering insight in the elementary school classroom

⁸⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Modern Library, 2003), 4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

proved paradigmatic for subsequent generations of black writers who saw the connection between education and racial awareness. This portrait suggests both convergence and departure from Anna's recollection of her education. Anna's education does not inaugurate her into double consciousness as described by Du Bois; rather, Anna must wait until her time in England to learn what it means to be the other within modernity.

The primordial scene of black self-awareness, conversant with the educational apparatus of the post-Civil War U.S., takes us both back to Caliban ("You taught my language, and my profit on't/Is I know how to curse") and forward to the black literary texts of the twentieth century. James Weldon Johnson fictionalizes the Du Boisian moment in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in the scene where the teacher requests "all of the white scholars to stand for a moment." The protagonist, theretofore unaware of his non-whiteness, dutifully rises only for the teacher to say, "You sit down for the present, and rise with the others." Sitting down "dazed," leaving school in a "stupor," the white boys mock "Oh, you're a nigger too," while some black children say, "We knew he was colored."⁸⁷ This realization, as in *Souls*, disillusiones the protagonist. In an effort of recuperation, both Du Bois and the Ex-Colored Man turn to expressions of African American vernacular musical culture to structure their reflections on this moment, although the "sorrow songs" which Du Bois uses in *Souls* are of less interest to the Ex-Colored Man than the more sophisticated and organized expression of ragtime.⁸⁸ At

⁸⁷ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, ed. Jacqueline Goldsby, Norton Critical Edition (1912; New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015), 11. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

⁸⁸ Eric Sundquist observes that the Ex-Colored Man's memory of his mother playing spirituals on the piano "recomposes a central scene in *The Souls of Black Folk* with saccharine irony...the 'melody without words' sung by the protagonist's mother in *The Autobiography*...marks not the equivocal access to a racial past but rather an alienation

either rate, both Du Bois and the Ex-Colored Man are keen to demonstrate that far from the suggestion that black Americans are without culture, they in fact possess a particularly generative and modern one, typified in music.⁸⁹

Music therefore stands in Du Bois and Johnson against the alienation of the institutional moment of forced black self-awareness. By contrast, what we know of Anna's education in *Voyage* reinforces her sense of whiteness as oppositional to black and native Caribbean inhabitants; her alienation in England results from the jolt of non-whiteness or non-Englishness attributed to her by others.⁹⁰ In each of these texts, the protagonists experience a rupture in their self-conception, the complexities and contradictions of race or ethnicity frustrating standard Western developmental logic. Similarly, Ralph Ellison's nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man*, at the start of the chapter in which he describes the battle royale and his subsequent award of the scholarship, says:

from it." Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992), 16-7.

⁸⁹ Julie Anne Naviaux argues that Johnson's Ex-Colored Man lingers over his deeply affective reaction to Singing Johnson and John Brown "to redefine what constitutes valuable culture via his claim that anyone who does not shed a tear [at their performance] must have a heart of stone." Naviaux, "A Distinctly American Performance in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *CLA Journal* 59, no. 4 (2016): 383.

⁹⁰ The notion of Englishness as opposed to blackness has a long, but not uncomplicated history. Ian Baucom observes that Englishness has been adopted to "avow and disavow the British Empire," with "Englishness...emerg[ing] as at once an embrace and a repudiation of the imperial beyond." Likewise Simon Gikandi observes that this attempt to sever the colonial past from the imperial center has "failed...nationalism cannot seriously be considered to be the alternative to imperialism that it was once thought to be...". See Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 7; and Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 7.

It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!⁹¹

Who is this “everyone else” who realizes that they are no one but themselves? Is Ellison’s narrator referring to white Americans, allowed as they are to grasp their individuality without the burden of racialized consciousness, or is the narrator so naïve (a charge to which he admits) as to not grasp the lessons that Du Bois and Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man* obtain in their childhood? In fact, the narrative of *Invisible Man* is littered with moments in which its protagonist *should* but *fails* to be initiated into double consciousness; that is, until the cacophonous concluding moments of his narrative before being driven underground consolidate the novel’s many lessons into his final realization of invisibility. Is this purely naivete, or rather is Ellison ironically riffing on the primordial moment of blackness enshrined in Du Bois’ childhood scenario?

Michael Trask’s reading of the novel places the Invisible Man’s education front-and-center in its account of his development. The midcentury university’s Deweyan emphasis on experience as a pedagogical tool created what Trask calls the “‘syllabus of experience’...a curricular revision whose goal was both to elevate experience as a category of interpretation and to sever experience from claims to self-evidence.”⁹² For the Invisible Man, whose most extensive educational experience in the novel take place at a fictionalized Tuskegee Institute, the dominant “syllabus of experience” is tempered by the realities of race, as well as the particular history of HBCUs with their “vexed position

⁹¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 13. Subsequent citations in parenthesis.

⁹² Michael Trask, *Camp Sites: Sex, Politics, and Academic Style in Postwar America* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013), 2.

within the history of segregation.”⁹³ Nevertheless, as Trask argues, despite being expelled from college, Ellison’s protagonist never fully separates himself from it:

That Invisible Man...is not quite capable of leaving the school that expels him is evidenced both by his mastery of the school’s habits of pretending and by the persistence with which he measures his groundlessness in terms of a sardonic invocation of the hallowed figures in the American pageant (Franklin, Edison).⁹⁴

Unsurprisingly for the most famous literary creation of a black novelist named Ralph Waldo Ellison, the weight of white precursors and expectations lay heavy upon the Invisible Man even as he tries to make his own way in the world.

If naivete clings to the Invisible Man through his secondary education, his moment of inauguration into the lessons of the color line comes while driving Mr. Norton past the old slave cabins and towards the fateful interview with Jim Trueblood. Norton relates to the protagonist how he came to be involved in the college:

“Slavery was just recently past. Your people did not know in what direction to turn and, I must confess, many of mine didn’t know in what direction they should turn either. But your great Founder did. He was my friend and I believed in his vision. So much so, that sometimes I don’t know whether it was his vision or mine...” (30).

The meaning of the bitter lessons the Invisible Man eventually finds himself thrust into are present already here in Norton’s words: he tells a story of recently enslaved people who, save a visionary black Founder ably assisted by influential, wealthy white northern

⁹³ Ibid, 37.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 36.

backers, are finally able to chart a course. The Invisible Man seems in the moment to understand the necessary fiction of this story but is too clever by half to yet grasp it. Fully committed to what Trask calls the “cynical reason” of “midcentury school culture,” he fails to realize that “academic style is just another *version* of ideology, replete with its own dogmatic content[.]”⁹⁵ Ellison ironizes the layers of ideology and performance at play in the careful game his protagonist should be playing with Norton. He plays it well at first, listening to his school’s patron’s interminable philosophy of racial uplift, his pompous claim that “your people were somehow closely connected with my destiny” (32), and his encomiums to read Emerson. The moment they come upon the old slave cabins, however, the Invisible Man is thrust into a primordial awareness of blackness as consequential as those in Du Bois and Johnson.

Norton asks, surprised, “Is that a *log* cabin?” (36; emphasis in original). To the Invisible Man’s response that it was built during slavery, Norton replies, “I would never have believed that they were so enduring. Since slavery times!...the human stock goes on, even though it degenerates. But those cabins!” (37). Ellison stages his protagonist’s initiation into the primal scene of blackness not in the elementary school but in the afterlives of the plantation, paradoxically both near to and far from the site of academic style and sensibility. Christopher G. Diller observes that Ellison here draws on the sentimental style of Harriet Beecher Stowe and other nineteenth-century novelists; Diller writes that Ellison “ground[s]...and...elaborate[s] his ongoing analysis of racism by positing sentimentality as a psychological coping mechanism that enables white

⁹⁵ Ibid, 41. Emphasis his.

Americans to live with their ethical schizophrenia.”⁹⁶ Norton not only embodies this mixture of sentimentality and “ethical schizophrenia,” but buys wholly into southern alterity in his comment about the “human stock[‘s]” degeneration. As Diller and others point out, Ellison stages this scene with reference to Stowe’s portrayal of slave cabins; he writes, “Norton’s confusion about the sudden appearance of a relic of ‘slave times’ neatly figures his inability to read the racial present...”⁹⁷ This inability (or unwillingness) to mark the convergence between “slavery times” and the present functions as part of Norton’s investment in his ameliorative project. Furthermore, it ironizes Ellison’s evocation of sentimentality: the harrowing tale of incest that Trueblood conveys horrifies the ailing Norton and leads to the Invisible Man’s expulsion from the college.

Ellison’s protagonist learns at least two key lessons from the Trueblood episode: the limits of white philanthropy and the masquerade that the college’s president Bledsoe knowingly engages in to keep the institution running. The Invisible Man curses Trueblood under his breath as he drives Norton away: “You no-good bastard! *You* get a hundred-dollar bill!” (53; emphasis in original). In the fateful encounter with the veterans at the Golden Day, as Diller writes, “Ellison elevates Norton from a regional to a national symbol of racial paternalism,” foreshadowing the protagonist’s own journey out of the region northward.⁹⁸ As in other novels considered in this study, so in *Invisible Man*: the very boundaries separating region and nation obscure their inherent relation. Yet there remains something inescapably southern about the Trueblood episode; as Riché Richardson writes, the fascination that whites in the novel have with Trueblood “is

⁹⁶ Christopher G. Diller, “Signifying on Stowe: Ralph Ellison and the Sentimental Rhetoric of *Invisible Man*,” *MLQ* 75, no. 4 (2014), 488.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 499.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

steeped in lingering stereotypes of a hypersexed, rapacious black masculine body in the southern mind and highlights white-supremacist ideologies of black sexuality.”⁹⁹ Norton, with his more mannerly New England sensibility, does not share this fascination, but he nevertheless “rewards” Trueblood’s degeneration, philanthropy being the only solution he can imagine for any social ill. Or, as Barbara Foley writes more succinctly, “Trueblood is Norton’s political unconscious.”¹⁰⁰

Even as the novel frustrates north-south demarcations, many of its characters nevertheless acknowledge and even use it to their own advantage. Thus the second lesson the Invisible Man learns: Bledsoe’s canny awareness of how he must play both sides of the color line. “My God, boy! You’re black and living in the South – did you forget how to lie?” (107) Bledsoe asks while confronting the Invisible Man about the day’s events. “Instead of uplifting the race, you’ve torn it down...I gave you an opportunity to serve one of our best white friends, a man who could make your fortune. But in return you dragged the entire race into the slime!” (108). Bledsoe admits that he plays the part the school’s white supporters expect from him; it helps maintain their support, thereby increasing his control over the school. Bledsoe’s performance raises an interesting parallel with the performative camp sensibility Trask finds in the midcentury academy, a crucial step in the “gradual disillusionment of its true-believer protagonist,”¹⁰¹ but even more bitterly, the Invisible Man experiences the sting of a racial slur from Bledsoe’s mouth: “It was as though he’d struck me. I stared across the desk, thinking, He called me

⁹⁹ Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 2007), 123.

¹⁰⁰ Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph’s Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 173.

¹⁰¹ Trask, *Camp Sites*, 41.

that...That, I thought, noticing the throbbing of a vein that rose between his eyes. *He called me that*" (107). As consequential as Du Bois' classmate's refusal of his Valentine, or Johnson's Ex-Colored Man's confrontation with his own assumed whiteness, the Invisible Man has his blackness thrown in his face by another black man, from a place of authority, with a slur.

In Esty's account of the modernist bildungsroman, the form's inherent instability is thrown into crisis as "the thematics of uneven development attached increasingly to metropole-colony relations within the global frame rather than to urban-rural relations within the national frame."¹⁰² The relevance of schema's for a novelist like Rhys, who comes to the metropole not from rural England but a peripheral colony, is apparent, but what of Ellison's protagonist, who moves internally within the nation-state from the black rural south to the urban north? Similarly, what of Johnson's Ex-Colored Man, who boomerangs from south to north to south to north to Europe to south to north at last, firmly choosing to pass for white upon his final arrival in New York? Ellison and Johnson's novels fit much of Esty's modernist bildungsroman mold, save the British colonial perspective; once again in this study, we find an intra-U.S. dynamic that mirrors global conditions created by colonialism.

The city-within-a-city of Harlem, the black metropolis, was shaped by uneven development when compared with much of the rest of Manhattan, a neighborhood in a city not unlike the south's relation to the rest of the U.S. Part of the development of black Harlem resulted from the influx of southern U.S. black migration in the early years of the

¹⁰² Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 7.

twentieth century, straining the neighborhoods of the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill.¹⁰³ Between the attendant increase in population and the resulting tensions with the Irish, the center of gravity for black New York gradually shifted uptown. This did not mean that southern transplants were welcomed with open arms. In many instances, they were treated much as white hayseeds or rubes were when they migrated north to cities like Detroit and Chicago: as wide-eyed, gullible, unsophisticated. At a drugstore lunch counter, the server sizes up the Invisible Man, saying “I’ve got something good for you,” rattling off a southern-fried “special” as he “leaned over the counter with a look that seemed to say, There, that ought to excite you, boy. Could everyone see that I was southern?” (135). The Invisible Man has by now discovered the sting of prejudice issuing from the mouth of a fellow black man, but this encounter, while less caustic, contains its own kind of venom. Kenneth Warren observes that “the last thing [the Invisible Man] hoped would follow him on his journey north” is his southernness, but at the same time discovers that “his southern habits and inclinations are something other than badges of humiliation,” a key step on his “journey of self-discovery.”¹⁰⁴ As Warren points out, Ellison insisted on the basic southernness of African Americans throughout his work.¹⁰⁵ Ellison’s concern here, arising from his rejection of Marxism, is a renewed understanding of African Americanness (or, in Ellison’s terminology, the Negro) as rooted in a common identity. Any coherent Negro culture requires therefore a basic sense of southernness as

¹⁰³ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (1981; New York: Penguin, 1997), 27.

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 65.

¹⁰⁵ In fact, what Warren calls “Ellison’s ongoing commitment to the idea of the Negro’s southernness” emerges, at least in part, from his insistence that “the Negro [is at] the heart of American culture.” *Ibid.*, 64-5.

inherent to black identity. Ellison's emphasis on cultural coherence lead him to the peculiar argument that, despite the degradations of white supremacy in the south, "it had not succeeded in squelching the idea of a culture among black Americans," in Warren's words.¹⁰⁶ For these attitudes, Ellison was often branded as a conservative or reactionary during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and '70s, a charge not without merit.

If there indeed is something conservative about Ellison's emphasis on southernness as necessary to the understanding of a cohesive black U.S. culture, this does not place him entirely in the camp typified by, say, Zora Neale Hurston. After the Invisible Man takes refuge in Mary Rambo's boarding house, she tells him "It's you young folks what's going to make the changes...And I tell you something else, it's the ones from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns" (194). Mary Rambo articulates a black southern consciousness the opposite of nostalgia-inflected portraits of happy, dutiful slaves and lazy sharecroppers. For her, the fight comes from living memory of the horrors of segregation and white supremacy. Mary, like Trueblood, is one of Ellison's folk characters, but not possessed of the same consciousness of Trueblood. Rather, she articulates something closer to the narrator's grandfather, who tells him on his deathbed:

I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days...Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you til they vomit or bust wide open. (13-4)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 64.

For the Invisible Man, these words “became a constant puzzle,” one that he felt he was carrying out even as he was successful. “And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it” (14). The grandfather “knows the fire and ain’t forgot how it burns,” much to the consternation of everyone else in the family.

These themes – the implicit southernness of African Americans and the notion of a folk consciousness – converge in *Invisible Man* and Johnson’s *Autobiography*. Both novels turn on the understanding of black U.S. culture as fundamentally rooted in the south. As mentioned above, one of the signal aspects of white Euro-U.S. modernity has been the persistent questioning of the very notion of indigenous or black people having a culture; both Ellison and Johnson insist that they do, but as with virtually every aspect of black existence in the U.S., the path is strewn with pitfalls. Houston A. Baker, Jr. describes the narrator of Johnson’s *Autobiography* as “a black man of culture recording the situations and attitudes that have succeeded in driving him underground, to a position the larger society might define as criminal.”¹⁰⁷ Note that by “culture,” Baker here means the dominant Euro-U.S. white culture, not black folkways; the novel, in his words, “is the confession of one of the ‘talented tenth’...it offers the rehearsal of a ‘soul on ice’ who draws substance from a world that could not recognize his true character nor sympathize with his longings.”¹⁰⁸ That these themes also lie behind the Invisible Man’s journey is Baker’s point in this essay. Both protagonists value folk culture but also stand apart from it, often finding it puzzling, much as the Invisible Man and others associated with the college stand apart from Trueblood.

¹⁰⁷ Houston A. Baker, Jr. “A Forgotten Prototype: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Invisible Man*,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 49, no. 3 (1973): 38.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 439.

Johnson's Ex-Colored Man approaches the folk culture of the south after his encounter with a white pianist in Berlin who takes his ragtime music and makes it "classic" through the application of European musical techniques. In that moment, the Ex-Colored Man realizes he must return to the well-spring, as it were: "I could think of nothing else. I made up my mind to go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in my inspiration first-hand" (74). His millionaire patron asks him directly "What kind of a Negro would you make now, especially in the South?", arguing that he could "imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured and refined colored man in the United States" (76). While the millionaire's prediction eventually comes true, the Ex-Colored Man's initial journey through the south finds him enjoying the charming company of the folk he meets and stays with and thrilling to the music of "a Negro congregation under the spell of religious fervor," claiming that "the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro" (95). His repudiation of his blackness only comes after he experiences the "great wave of humiliation and shame," both for his membership in "a race that could be so dealt with" and "for my country" (98), following his horrified spectatorship at a lynching. Quite the opposite of Mary Rambo's assertion, his memory of the fire and how it burns turns the Ex-Colored Man precisely against the kind of transformative movement for which she hopes.

The southernness thesis of blackness advocated by Ellison crumbles to ash in the Ex-Colored Man's experience; by virtue of his ability to pass, he opts not to live as Caliban but to take his place, with some regret, as "an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money" (110). How exactly readers are meant to take all this

remains unclear; by virtue of the narrative frame, Johnson removes straightforward accounts of authorial intent. Critics have turned to the musical content of the novel, as well as Johnson's own successful career as a song lyricist, to account for the novel's aesthetic effects: A. Timothy Spaulding uses ragtime's nature not just as a musical expression but an entire culture industry to argue that "achieving a sense of identity for the narrator...necessitates a strategic response to limited (and limiting) definitions of race and cultural expression."¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Rebecca Bechtold draws attention to the novel's staging "as a musical performance" which "directs its audience to a musical subtext that paradoxically evokes the racial stereotypes of a blackface minstrel stage if only to demonstrate the ease in which such racial translations...can, and should, occur," resulting in "a uniquely new African American aesthetic in its formal integration of a musical and literary dual-aesthetic."¹¹⁰ What I draw attention to here is the potential for music in both of these accounts to explain the peculiar position of the Ex-Colored Man; drawing on the south largely as an "educated, cultured and refined colored man," in the words of the millionaire, he positions black folk culture as a repository for development by a sophisticated artist such as himself with one foot in two worlds.

Similarly, the protagonist in *Invisible Man* sits somewhat apart from the folk materials in the novel. Trueblood, the "quintessential trickster" in Baker's tour-de-force reading of that scene's folk elements, represents everything that the Talented Tenth

¹⁰⁹ A. Timothy Spaulding, "The Cultural Matrix of Ragtime in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *Genre* 36 (2004): 226.

¹¹⁰ Rebecca Bechtold, "playing with fire': The Aestheticization of Southern Violence in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *Southern Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2011): 31-2.

eschewed.¹¹¹ The contradiction inherent between folk materials of the black south and the aspirations of the Talented Tenth originates in *The Souls of Colored Folk*, but Ellison's novel suggests similar tensions in the Washingtonian project in its setting of the Trueblood scene on the outskirts of a fictionalized Tuskegee Institute. Baker's argument in his reading of the Trueblood narrative is that Ellison's "distinction between folklore and literary art...collapses," revealing not just the contradictions between Ellison's aesthetics and his critical apparatus, but also "what might be called the public and private commerce of black art in America."¹¹² Baker's argument illustrates the importance of reckoning with the vernacular or folk cultures of black U.S. expression, not just for this chapter's argument regarding the protean symbol of Caliban, but for my larger claim regarding the nature of global modernism and southern alterity. In a later work, Baker revised his account of black modernism as rooted in the cultural ferment of the Harlem Renaissance to instead "turn south again" and consider the plantation. If, he argues, "mobility in public" is one of his "key concerns" in this revisionist account of black U.S. modernism, then "the reason there have been only few and brief windows of black modernism is denoted and connoted in the United States by the single word *plantation*."¹¹³ For my purposes, this combination of immobility and the plantation illustrates the enduring significance of Caliban as a figure not just of revolt against racism, colonialism, and enslavement, but also as a figure bound by the very forces that he rebels against.

¹¹¹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), 184.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 175.

¹¹³ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 83-4.

In this light, the question of folk culture stands as a synecdoche for Caliban's bound condition and rebellious nature. The desire to refine or transform folk materials through modernist innovation, illustrated by Du Bois and Johnson, engages the cultural dimension of a larger political project of racial uplift and self-determination. For Ellison, of a later generation and a more conflicted political orientation, the presence of folk materials acknowledges the southernness of African Americans even as it represents an insufficient horizon. Barbara Foley illustrates in her book *Wrestling with the Left* how Ellison traded the specificities of left-wing political struggle for a putatively universalist humanism.¹¹⁴ Ellison's break with the left came before his emergence as a public figure, unlike Richard Wright, whose departure from the CPUSA necessitated lengthy public explanations and can be registered in his novelistic output. In his dramatization of narrator's time in the Brotherhood, Ellison suggests the continued relevance of black U.S. history in the symbol of Brother Tarp's leg chain, which recalls the chain Bledsoe keeps on his desk. The novel literalizes Caliban's bound condition in these symbols (even as it ironizes them in the distance between Tarp's actual imprisonment and the purely symbolic function of Bledsoe's chain), but folk culture possesses an affective dimension in the novel as well. In short, Ellison's use of folk materials in the novel not only registers a split between his aesthetic and critical practice, or between his erstwhile leftism and adoption of liberal humanism, but in his understanding of what constitutes African American culture itself.

¹¹⁴ "Invisible Man is read as testimony to Ellison's maturation; the novel's repudiation of leftist authoritarianism and scientism and its embrace of democratic pluralism and epistemological ambivalence exhibit not just its protagonist's development from ranter to writer, but the increasing sophistication of the text's creator as well." Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 4-5.

No moment in the novel demonstrates the affective component of folk culture more than the yam scene. Wandering through a cold Harlem winter, the Invisible Man encounters “an odd-looking wagon, from which a stove pipe reeled off a thin spiral of smoke that drifted the odor of baking yams slowly to me, bringing a stab of swift nostalgia” (199). The Invisible Man describes remembered scenes of yam-eating back home that convey a sense of pure delight, and upon biting into the first yam he purchases that day, the suffusion of nostalgia spills over into an attitude of defiance.

I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom – simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that...(200)

The Invisible Man moves from nostalgic delight, to feelings of freedom, to defiant fantasies of confronting Bledsoe in the lobby of the Harlem Men's House and “whipping out a foot or two of chitterlings,” and shouting, “Bledsoe, you're a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels!” (201). The Invisible Man's revenge fantasy turns on an accusation of hypocrisy, drawing out the distinction between Bledsoe's outwardly composed nature and a secret desire to enjoy the foodways and folkways of the black rural south, a hypocrisy the narrator himself feels free of in that moment of relishing the yam. Rushing back to the yam-seller, he requests two more, telling him, “They're my birthmark...I yam what I am!” However, after saying to himself that he would no longer feel “ashamed of the things I have always loved,” he bites into one and

finds an “unpleasant taste...it had been frost-bitten” (202). The simple enjoyment of a hot-battered yam sends the Invisible Man into paroxysms of delight, revenge, and self-acceptance, before coming to an ambiguous resolution as his second helping proves inedible.

The yam scene is the novel’s least complicated portrayal of the power and enjoyment folk culture can provide, but even here larger concerns scramble the Invisible Man’s moment of unfettered pleasure. On the one hand, the scene illustrates the stigma of southern alterity; as Riché Richardson writes, the Invisible Man’s “reluctance and embarrassment as he buys a yam suggests that deeply entrenched internecine stereotypes and prejudices against black rural southern were equally – if not more – intense in the urban North.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, the “invisibility...[of] the narrator is also refracted across a range of subject positions,” including black southerners in any location.¹¹⁶ The Invisible Man’s shame echoes the shame the Ex-Colored Man feels witnessing the lynching; just a few pages prior, he has been thrilling to the authentic expression of black religious folk music. Shame likewise accompanies the Invisible Man as he comes across the elderly southern couple about to be evicted from their Harlem brownstone.

The yam scene represents the Invisible Man’s reintegration into, indeed his “growing oneness with the migrant folk from whose vernacular traditions he has to this point separated himself,” in Foley’s words.¹¹⁷ But, as she also observes, the yam seller is not some vestigial holdover from a simpler time; “selling yams is not a folkish vocation but his way of surviving in the informal economy on the fringes of crisis-beset

¹¹⁵ Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South*, 144.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹¹⁷ Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 240.

capitalism.”¹¹⁸ Just as the economic order the yam salesman lives within undercuts his putative folk purity, so the Invisible Man’s acceptance that “I yam what I am” is undercut by the reality of the eviction that he stumbles upon. The elderly couple, the Provos, are on the street with all their belongings surrounding them in heaps. Ellison’s description of the bric-a-brac accumulated over two long lives is too lengthy to quote, but contains many touching symbols of loving family relationships, such as a greeting card with the words “Grandma, I love you,” alongside such baubles as a rabbit’s foot. What proves truly affecting for the Invisible Man, however, is a document. Here I quote at length:

I turned away, bending and searching the dirty snow for anything missed by my eyes, and my fingers closed upon something resting in a frozen footstep: a fragile paper, coming apart with age, written in black ink grown yellow. I read: FREE PAPERS. *Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859. Signed: John Samuels. Macon.....*I folded it quickly, blotting out the single drop of melted snow which glistened on the yellowed page, and dropped it back into the drawer. My hands were trembling, my breath rasping as if I had run a long distance or come upon a coiled snake in a busy street. *It has been longer than that, further removed in time,* I told myself, and yet I know that it hadn’t been. I replaced the drawer in the chest and pushed drunkenly to the curb. (206; emphasis an ellipsis in original)

Any facile celebration of black folkways that the Invisible Man entertained moments before crumbles in light of this starkly affecting reminder of the history and social reality that undergirds the formation of that very folk culture. This moment constitutes a journey

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 241.

in itself, from “searching the dirty snow” for the papers caught in a “frozen footstep,” the realization of which sends the Invisible Man into an anxiety-ridden denial that such history could be so proximate to his own moment.

His memory is driven back to images of his parents, who are otherwise largely absent from the narrative; as Foley observes, the effect is to remind readers that the Invisible Man is not just from the south but that he has relations “still trapped by Jim Crow.”¹¹⁹ The scene bears comparison with the climactic lynching of Johnson’s *Autobiography*; whereas the Ex-Colored Man’s shame is wholly individual as the only black spectator, a crowd of black Harlemites gather to witness the pathetic eviction. “The South is very much alive in the North,” Foley writes, a statement that could easily stand as an epigraph for this chapter.¹²⁰ Each of these novels illustrate the persistence of the global south in the metropole; Caliban can journey to the city, but the cultural forces and social formations that determine his existence at home will continue to shape his subjectivity in ways as new as they are strikingly familiar.

The sharp realization of the historical proximity of slavery encoded in the freedom papers the Invisible Man stumbles upon spurs him to his first moment of spontaneous oratory in the novel; now miles away from his speech after the battle royale, he begins to address the crowd. What he has grasped, perhaps unconsciously, in that moment is nothing less than the logic of the plantation ledger, here symbolized not by the neat rows of bookkeeping that rationalized the enslavement of human chattel, but by the

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 242.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

papers of manumission. The documents may be different, but the same logic applies.

“Take it all, hide that junk!” the Invisible Man proclaims.

Put it back where it came from. It’s blocking the street and the sidewalk, and that’s against the law. We’re law-abiding, so clear the street of the debris. Put it out of sight! Hide it, hide their shame. Hide *our* shame! (213; emphasis in original)

In this moment of spontaneous sidewalk oratory, the Invisible Man becomes a kind of Caliban; they taught him language, and his profit on it (like a good modernist) is he knows how to ironize. Calling for “law-abiding” behavior, he spurs the crowd to action, reversing the juridically lawful but morally dubious act of eviction. By this impressive display, the Invisible Man is recruited for his career in the Brotherhood. This next stage in his journey takes us into the crucible of mid-century McCarthyism and the origins of the Civil Rights movement; here, we depart from the Invisible Man amidst his temporary triumph over the conditions of southern alterity on a Harlem sidewalk.

CONCLUSION. SOUTHERN ALTERITY ISN'T GOING AWAY

One of my aims in this study has been to reorient regionalism in literature. The scholars associated with the New Southern Studies I cite throughout – Jennifer Rae Greeson, Leigh Anne Duck, Scott Romine, Riché Richardson, Jeremy Wells, Amy Clukey, Jon Smith, as well as important forbearers like Thadious Davis and Houston A. Baker, Jr. – have been insisting on this for some time now. What I have sought to do is bring that conversation to bear more directly on how global modernity is conceived. Despite efforts of scholars (many cited in this study) on both sides of this divide, for whatever reason the convergence between these two areas of study has arrived belatedly and incompletely. I hope my effort here contributes in some fashion towards closing that gap.

I do not want to suggest that the discrepancy between these two scholarly conversations echoes or mirrors the core/peripheries divide of global modernist and postcolonial studies, but I do want to return to that divide for a moment to consider again Raymond Williams' trenchant account of metropolitan perception. For Williams, the "general conditions" of the metropole proved decisive for its development of modernism, particularly "in its direct effects on form."¹ As much as émigré artists helped shape literature and culture in the imperial core, falling back on "the only community found to them" in the swirling reality of the metropolis, "a community of the medium; of their own practices," what resulted from that often served to discount the very peripheries these artists emerged from.² In other words, the literature engendered by artists' contact

¹ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), 45.

² Ibid.

with the metropole decisively shaped not just their work, but the reception and understanding of their work. For this reason, Williams asserted that one must look outside metropolitan spaces to take its full measure as a catalyst for the development of modernism. It is in that spirit that I have taken up the vital literatures of the U.S. south and the Caribbean alongside more traditionally metropolitan writers – although, as I have shown, even the relationship of a Conrad or a Woolf to the metropole is not simple. Metropolitan perception therefore contains a paradoxical movement, one that centers the metropole as a source of cultural formation while at the same time undermining its geographical limitations and pretensions to centrality.

By observing this, I do not mean to offer a blithe account of literary reception that celebrates a diverse canon while leaving aside the very real conditions that made that diversity possible. Take, for instance, Faulkner: as Pascale Casanova observes, his canonical acceptance upholds a center/periphery model of world literature because, as she writes, “Faulkner, like the great writers of Latin America, was consecrated in Paris.”³ Casanova’s argument absolutely depends on the metropole’s power not only to colonize, but also to create big-L Literature, particularly for those works emanating from the periphery. Any account of global modernism that does not acknowledge the reality of the imperial regime as one that both colonizes the periphery and makes possible the emergence of regional and colonial writers simply does not take the full measure of the global order that dominated the Global South at the turn of the twentieth century. As Williams writes, the metropole “was the place where new social and economic and

³ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Cambridge: Harvard UP 2004), 125.

cultural relations, beyond both city and nation in their older senses, were beginning to be formed: a distinct historical phase which was in fact to be extended, in the second half of the twentieth century, at least potentially, to the whole world.”⁴ The condition of combined and uneven development characterizes modernity in its social, political, economic, and literary forms.

It is for this reason that I name southern alterity as the central concern of my argument; the novels covered by this study all, in one way or another, engage with that condition. Many were written under that condition. Although no one idea can be the key that unlocks universal understanding, I consider southern alterity a sufficiently capacious but also specific enough concept to illuminate the relationships between center and periphery, core and region, that these novels explore. In this regard, I take Jessica Berman’s explorations of ethical dimensions of modernism as an alternative configuration to global modernist models that seek to enlarge the canon for ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual inclusion without confronting the challenges of these alternative literary formations. “The ethical demands of alterity,” she writes, can stage an “ethical event between writers and readers that responds to, intervenes in, and changes its rhetorical and social situation.”⁵ By eschewing static canons in favor of dynamic processes, her global perspective draws attention to “new literary and political synergies that might have looked incorrect, dissonant, or out of time in relation to the old modernist canon.”⁶ This understanding, harnessed to metropolitan perception, emphasizes the continued relevance of modernism for literary and cultural studies, limning the contours

⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, 44.

⁵ Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics and Transnational Modernisms* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), 6.

⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

of uneven development that mark both literary forms and the lived reality of modern subjects. In other words, modernism's response to modernity exists not solely within the historical memory of European enclaves, but offers instead a picture of global cultural, aesthetic, and political formulations which remain in flux.

Tayeb Salih's 1966 novel, *Season of Migration to the North* stages much of what I have just described in its narrative. An unnamed narrator returns to his small Sudanese village on the Nile after years of study in England, only to meet the mysterious Mustafa Sa'eed. This fellow colonial experienced an even more illustrious academic career in England, becoming an academic of renown while embarking on a series of risky and violent relationships with English women by flattering their notions of Orientalist fascination; he now lives a life of obscurity as a farmer and only explains himself to the narrator in fits and starts. Written at a time when many nascent nation-states were emerging from colonialism and attempting to establish their sovereignty often through the adoption of specifically pan-African socialist economies, Salih sought to write back to the empire by reconfiguring the foundationally modernist materials of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The Warwick Research Collective attributes a "startling and problematic critique of imperialism" to the novel that "proceeds through its establishment of an analogy between the insult and violence inflicted on subordinated peoples, on the one hand, and a degrading and death-driven heterosexual eroticism, on the other."⁷ There seems to be little invitation on the reader's part to engage in the kind of ethical identification that

⁷ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a new Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015), 84.

Berman outlines; indeed, even within the Sudan of the 1960s, there is a wealthy northern/impooverished southern divide that follows the lines laid down throughout this study.⁸ “Rather than valorise a zone between cultures,” they write, “*Season of Migration to the North* seems to us to throw into doubt whether such a zone is even feasible in the poisonous atmosphere of imperialism.”⁹ Against the rather bleak perspective the WReC finds in *Season of Migration*, Sarah Brouillette characterizes another work of Salih’s, the story “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid,” as a “fantasy designed to complement and reinforce emerging cultural policy mandates” an “example of the pervasiveness of a certain way of thinking; it explores, explains, and tries to justify the kind of subjective life that could find something like UNESCO’s production of world heritage sites useful.”¹⁰ Clearly, Salih in his work sought to navigate a course between the Scylla of imperialism and the Charybdis of metropolitan culture.

At the novel’s close, after Mustafa has disappeared into the Nile and his wife, married off to another man, has died in a violent confrontation that also leaves her new husband dead (in an uncanny echo of the very sexual violence Mustafa carried out years ago in England), the narrator is given possession of the late man’s estate. Entering the mysterious locked room in Mustafa’s otherwise conventional Sudanese house, the narrator discovers a pristine English gentleman’s library:

Good God, the four walls from floor to ceiling were filled, shelf upon shelf, with books and more books and yet more books...What a fool he was! Was this the action of a man who wanted to turn over a new leaf?...I raised the lamp and found

⁸ Ibid, 86.

⁹ Ibid, 91. Emphasis theirs.

¹⁰ Sarah Brouillette, *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019), 13, 70.

that the whole floor of the room was covered with Persian rugs...A fireplace – imagine it! A real English fireplace...on either side of the fireplace were two Victorian chairs covered in a figured silk material...¹¹

The narrator's first impulse is to burn the library, in fact the whole house, to the ground, but he becomes too engaged in further uncovering the story of Mustafa Sa'eed from the bits of writing, portraits, and immaculate collection of English-language volumes the room holds.

Although the narrator does not explain why he chooses to extinguish the fire he has started on one of the rugs to instead comb through the detritus of Mustafa's life, I suggest that he pauses because of an awareness that burning this exquisite English gentleman's library in the middle of a Sudanese house would cut too close to the bone; it would be the symbolic destruction of his own British education and Sudanese heritage. At the same time, he senses the incorrectness of this shrine when viewed seen against his own life. As Aamir R. Mufti describes it, "Salih attempts to condense in this extended image...*the immense library that is the humanistic culture of the modern West* and the fate within it specifically of those forms of historical difference that come marked with the non-Western or non-European origins of the languages in which they are produced."¹² The narrator finds himself pulled in impossible directions because of the afterlives of a global imperialist order that he had given little thought to before his encounter with Mustafa Sa'eed.

¹¹ Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (1966; New York: New York Review Books, 2009), 112-113. Ellipsis mine.

¹² Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016), 152. Ellipsis mine. Emphasis his.

Salih's task therefore is to inscribe the impossibility of this condition, and his solution is to portray an impossible expansive English library camouflaged as just another room in an otherwise unexceptional Sudanese dwelling. Mufti describes "this remarkable passage" as "point[ing] to...*a generalized condition of culture in the contemporary world.*"

We see now the enormity of the problem: the non-Western text is available to us only within this immense library – "in English," in Salih's resonant words, that is, in translation, assigned its place as "Oriental" text-object within the architecture of the Western "universal" library...The passage thus offers an allegorical rendering of the wider struggle to achieve *historically* validated social and cultural forms and opposed to fantasies of authenticity."¹³

Part of Mufti's larger project is to uncover the Orientalist assumptions of world literature; in this manner, I return to George Steiner's observation, quoted in the Introduction, that Goethe's *weltliteratur* embodies a kind of market-thinking. Although Salih may elsewhere in his oeuvre have attempted to forge some kind of rapprochement between the pressures of postcolonial nationhood and the imperialism-by-other-means of world cultural institutions such as UNESCO, the drama of *Season of Migration to the North* illustrates the attempt of so-called peripheral writers to forge a sense of artistic vision within the confines of a culture that was in some manner true to their place of origin even as it was forced to confront the realities of imperialism.

What the reality of imperialism means for the development of peripheral literatures only begins to make sense in light of metropolitan perception: without

¹³ Ibid. Ellipsis mine. Emphasis his.

colonialism, without the global force of capitalism, the work of, for instance, George Lamming would be starkly different. Writing of the West Indian intellectual's migration, after the Second World War, to London – of which he was an early, and exemplary, participant – Lamming argues that

the novelist was the first to relate the West Indian experience from the inside. He was the first to chart the West Indian memory as far back as it could go. It is to the West Indian novelist – who had no existence twenty years ago – that the anthropologist and all other treatises about West Indians have to turn.¹⁴

While it is true – and Lamming likely would not argue the point – that the reception of West Indian literature, its very ground of production, in fact, is dependent upon the West Indian novelist's migration from the Caribbean to London, this fact neither reifies metropolitan perception nor effaces the view from the colonies. Rather, it implicitly argues for the specific historical, social, and political formation that made such migration necessary, while at the same time insisting on the absolute authority of the West Indian novelist's view of their own culture and homeland. In other words, the importance of the metropole for access to publishing and an audience does not inherently speak to the superiority of the center. Rather, the very colonial hegemony that the peripheral writer like Lamming both relies upon and resists through language creates the necessary conditions for West Indian literature. As Lamming observes, the great writers of the first decade of Anglophone Caribbean literature, "Mittelholzer, Reid, Mais, Selvon, Hearne, Carew, Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, Neville Dawes, everyone has felt the need *to get out*."¹⁵

¹⁴ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, (1960; Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992), 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 41. Emphasis his.

Lamming maintains that these writers would prefer to work in their home country, “[b]ut the pace is much too slow for the time in which we live,”¹⁶ a rueful acknowledgment of the colonial publishing hegemony of the post-World War Two era.

The British Nationality Act 1948 opened up citizenship to Commonwealth members, including the writers Lamming mentions, along with thousands of other migrants. Only a generation or so later, despite a handful of relatively minor immigration restrictions, popular resistance by white British citizens resulted in the British Nationality Act 1981, slowing the postwar flow of migrants to a trickle. As Ian Baucom writes, the passage of this act allowed “Parliament [to write] into law a bill designed to divorce England from its ‘overseas’ history, a law designed to defend the ‘island kingdom’ against its erstwhile empire.”¹⁷ In overturning hundreds of years of legal precedent that defined Britishness through a sense of place, the Act of 1981 “codified a theory of identity that sought to defend the ‘native’ inhabitants of the island against the claims of their former subjects by defining Britishness as an inheritance of race,” thus making legal the racism and discrimination long experienced by black migrants.¹⁸ Indeed, the shoddy treatment of members of the Windrush Generation, those who came over from Commonwealth countries between 1948 and 1971, continued into the 2010s with the British government’s attempt to deport many of them under the pretense that they lacked the proper migration documents – after they had destroyed thousands of landing cards.

Between the two Acts, incremental legal gestures limiting the flow of immigration were made, but perhaps the most decisive crystallization of the rising sentiment against

¹⁶ Ibid, 42.

¹⁷ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 7.

¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

the influx of black migrants to Britain was Enoch Powell's infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech. Defining Britishness along racial – as opposed to place-based – lines, Powell identified what Baucom calls the "failures of place," a curious formulation perhaps considering the "nostalgic celebrations of place that have also been a regular feature of New Right discourse in England over the past quarter century."¹⁹ More to the point, Powell's emphasis on race over place reinforces the collapse of metropolitan perception as definitive for that cultural formation called modernism. It is not coincidental that Powell's speech was delivered in 1968, the year of so much left-wing political unrest in the U.S., France, and elsewhere, and only two years after Salih published *Season of Migration to the North*. From a literary historical perspective, as Peter Kalliney observes, when it was advantageous to their own literary development, black colonial and postcolonial modernists adopted the rhetorical position of aesthetic autonomy held by the metropolitan modernists: "The hope that the field of literature and its practitioners would spurn the racial categories of the day, far-fetched as it may now seem, is precisely what late colonial intellectuals found appealing about midcentury cultural institutions that were accommodating new talent from around the world."²⁰ These strategic alliances, built on metropolitan notions of literary autonomy adopted by colonial intellectuals eventually ran its course – not coincidentally, around the time Powell made his speech.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid, 21.

²⁰ Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 7.

²¹ "I read the posture of disinterest and the discourse of aesthetic autonomy rather differently: white, metropolitan intellectuals began using it as a way to recruit new collaborators from the decolonizing world, while black, colonial writers could use it to renegotiate the terms of cultural trade." Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*, 31.

The inescapability of metropolitan perception for even the most peripheral modernist literatures remains, in large part because the colonial conditions that created this situation linger. Concomitantly, the rising prestige of world literature on publisher's lists throughout the latter half of the twentieth century down to the present testifies to the continued interest these works hold for metropolitan readers. While this assertion may seem to underline Casanova's argument that the metropole determines the place of individual works in the "world republic of letters," I instead suggest that paying closer attention to the dependent interpenetration of metropolitan and marginal literatures indeed reveals a singular modernity characterized by combined and uneven development. The origins of modernist literature lie a century or more behind us, and an argument for the continuance of that particular aesthetic formation would stretch even the most generous literary taxonomy to the breaking point. However, the conditions in which modernism emerged have not fundamentally transformed even after the upheavals of the 1960s and '70s. Indeed, modernity's expansion continues apace largely along the grounds set by the development of capital in the late eighteenth century. While modernism may continue on primarily through its academic institutional afterlives, the historical and cultural grounds of its emergence remain contemporary. Southern alterity remains a constituent reality in a globalized, twenty-first century world.

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